

Familiar Fields to Foreign Soil

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Three Rural Townships at War, 1914-1918

Jennifer Arthur-Lackenbauer, Peter Kikkert, and P. Whitney Lackenbauer



Printing facilitated by the Township of Norwich Municipal Heritage Committee

Norwich and District Museum & Archives
89 Stover Street North
Norwich, Ontario
N0J 1P0

South Norwich Historical Society
Otterville, Ontario
N0J 1R0

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Familiar Fields to Foreign Soil: Three Rural Townships at War, 1914-1918
/ Jennifer Arthur-Lackenbauer, Peter Kikkert, and P. Whitney Lackenbauer,
authors

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in electronic and print formats.

ISBN (pdf): 978-0-9684896-8-0

ISBN (paper): 978-0-9684896-7-3

1. First World War—Ontario—History. 2. First World War—Ontario—Oxford (County)—History. 3. Oxford (Ont.: County)—History. 4. World War, 1914-1918 – Canada. 5. Oxford (Ont.: County)—History—20th Century. 6. Norwich Township, Oxford County – History. 7. Norwich, Ontario – History. 7. Otterville, Ontario – History. I. Arthur-Lackenbauer, Jennifer, author II. Peter Kikkert, author III. P. Whitney Lackenbauer, author IV. South Norwich Historical Society, issuing body V. Norwich and District Museum and Archives, issuing body

Page design and typesetting by Jennifer Arthur-Lackenbauer

Cover design by Jennifer Arthur-Lackenbauer

This book is dedicated to the men and women of North Norwich, South Norwich, and East Oxford Townships who made the ultimate sacrifice in the Great War, and to those who served overseas or on the home front in support of the war effort.

Lest we forget

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Acknowledgments

From the onset, this book was intended to be a community project, and we are most grateful to the many people who helped us with the research and publication process. Over the last three years our research efforts have been enthusiastically assisted by the members of the South Norwich Historical Society, Norwich and District Museum and Archives, the Woodstock Public Library, the Oxford County Archives, and several local historians.

The unsung heroes of historical research are often the librarians, archivists, and members of historical societies who facilitate access to manuscript collections, letters, photos, and research notes. Janet Hilliker, the archivist in Norwich, spent many hours uncovering photos that help to provide readers with a visual sense of life in the townships during the war. Similarly, various members of the South Norwich Historical Society shared family stories and pointed us in the direction of letter and photograph collections. Patricia at Annandale house directed us to the pertinent holdings in their 'war room.' We are also grateful to the digitization programs of the Library and Archives Canada and the Canadian War Museum which make available high-resolution images that can be reproduced, not only heightening our awareness of national histories but of local ones as well.

We could not have achieved our aim of writing a history filled with local voices without the support of families and local historians who have retained and shared stories of the Great War. The late Ernie Gyori of Otterville, a great collector of local material history, and his wife Shirley generously passed along letter collections to us. Marie Avey passed on the soldiers' names that she and the late Stella Mott had collected from the newspapers and other local sources. We were fortunate that the Crabbe, Croxford, Holdsworth, Dickson, and Poole families donated their papers to the Norwich and District Museum and Archives so that the stories of William Crabbe, Fred Croxford, Aubrey Holdsworth, Joseph Leslie Dickson, and Bruce Poole can be brought to life with fulsome detail and first-person accounts.

We also draw heavily from Harold Adams Innis's memoir, which he wrote in 1952 prior to his death. We are grateful to Anne Innis Dagg for granting us permission to quote extensively from the typescript version prepared by her mother, Mary Quayle Innis, which was subsequently published in the *Canadian Journal of Communication*.

Our research benefitted tremendously from the deep local history expertise that resides in Norwich Township. Books by Stella Mott and other local historians provide essential foundations for further research, and the living history in our communities is equally valuable. Local historian Joyce Pettigrew of Otterville shared her unparalleled knowledge of the people and places of South Norwich township, as did Blanche Porchak of Holbrook and Marie Avey of Norwich. Jerry Turner of the Tillsonburg military history club passed on their relevant biographies. Keith and James Armstrong, who painstakingly compiled *The Maple Leaf Forever: A Short History from 1800 to Present of the Military Involvement of Old East Oxford Town-*

Acknowledgements

ship, graciously and generously shared research and photographs which brought to light East Oxford families' stories of the Great War. Laurel Beechy of Tillsonburg and Gary Surette from Brantford, local experts in their own areas, grounded our findings in oral history.

We also benefitted from expertise resident outside of the township. Many professors, mentors, colleagues, and friends have shaped our understandings of military history, war and society, and Canadian history during the Great War era, including (and certainly not limited to) David Bercuson, Terry Copp, John English, Geoff Hayes, Holger Herwig, Geoff Keelan, Ken McLaughlin, Michael Nieberg, Tim Travers, and Tim Winegard. We are most grateful to Michael Bechthold, one of Canada's finest military historians, for granting us permission to reproduce his elegant maps of the overseas battles in which the Canadians fought, thus allowing readers to follow soldiers from the townships as they participated in operations from Ypres to Mons.

Searching newspapers on microfilm and compiling a comprehensive database of information about local soldiers proved an arduous but rewarding task. Rebecca Arthur of Otterville volunteered many hours to digitally copying wartime editions of the *Norwich Gazette* and *Woodstock Daily Sentinel-Review* which yielded many of the stories and letters that appear in the book. A mere thank you seems completely unacceptable in light of her tremendous efforts, but we offer it with whole-hearted sincerity. Similarly, Kelly Pinnoy generously volunteered her time to help populate the master data list which we devised to keep track of soldiers' service numbers, date and place of birth, place of residence at time of enlistment, relations in the townships, occupation, dates of arrival in England and France, ranks, units, year and particulars of wounds or death, date of discharge, medals, battles in which individuals' served, correspondence in newspapers and references in newspapers, and miscellaneous notes. This database, which was indispensable to crafting narratives that integrate so many individual soldiers, would be much less complete without her efforts, and it will be available to researchers at the Norwich and District Museum and Archives in the near future. We also acknowledge the assistance of Emily Stowe Public School student Harrison Lackenbauer, who helped to identify preliminary information on some of the soldiers, and of University of Waterloo undergraduate research assistant Corah Hodgson who conducted some preliminary census work in the summer of 2017.

Researching is a pleasure. Writing is enjoyable. Editing is painful. We are most grateful to Gail Lewis of Otterville, a fountain of knowledge on the history of our community and of South Norwich more generally. Gail read through the penultimate version of the book, caught typographical and factual errors, and shared local photographs from her private collection. We cannot thank her enough for her enthusiastic support and passion for local history, and her encouragement throughout the publication process.

Family support also made this book possible. Ina and David Arthur provided critical feedback on early chapter drafts, as did Paul and Paulette Lackenbauer on the page proofs. Harrison, Rendall, and Pierce Lackenbauer patiently endured their

parents' sojourn into the early 1900's, as did Maria Kikkert as she and Peter made the transition from Simcoe to Toronto to Cambridge and then to Antigonish, Nova Scotia during the writing of this book.

We appreciate the many area churches and the Norwich Legion who keep the honour rolls of the Great War and whose members guide our reflection and memorialization each November during Remembrance Day services. We hope that this book will allow those who lay their poppies at the base of our local monuments to connect the names carved in stone with the lives of those who sacrificed all when their country called.

Last, but certainly not least, the Township of Norwich's Municipal Heritage Committee provided start-up funds for research travel and supplies to launch the project, and committee members selflessly gave up attending conferences in 2017 and 2018 to free up funds so that this book could be printed. We are grateful for the Township's ongoing commitment to local history, and we hope that this book makes a worthy contribution to its efforts to promote knowledge about our Township's storied past.

M. Douglas Schell to his Uncle William Schell, 2 February 1917
Letter from France, printed in the *Norwich Gazette*, 22 March 1917

“Only the other day I was sitting thinking of some of my recent experiences and comparing them with my life of a little over a year ago, at Old Clairmont. One gets accustomed to regarding such trivial things here as comforts, that a further comparison with what we would regard as real necessities at home, makes these necessities of home life seem very distant indeed. While at home I may have appreciated all I had access to but never as I do now.

By the time you receive this letter it may be on into the month of March. Spring will be approaching and with it the radious [*sic*] sunshine and the rain. You will be making your plans for the work that will soon begin. I can see it all so plainly, the brown fields with here and there a patch of yellow earth where the sun has dried some knoll more quickly than the rest. Then the meadows just turning green, a green that has a freshness which seems to almost thrill you with pleasure. The wheat which has been sown the previous fall will under the culturing influence of the warm sun begin to grow rapidly. The black and white cattle, so common in Oxford county, will soon be out in the fields, enjoying their first freedom after a long winter in the stables and adding an unequalled picturesqueness to the variegated landscape. I can see the long rolling hills to the west with farms here and there, the woodlands which seems to present a skimmer of green, so delicate you can hardly see it but still an indication of new life. As I think of these things I cannot help but long for a peep around the old farm and surrounding country I know

so well. It is also with the pictures brought to mind that I fully realize

that my home really meant to me. It takes privation to make us enjoy comfort, it takes sickness to make us fully appreciate good health, it takes hunger to make us enjoy a ‘well laden’ table, it takes danger to make us appreciate safety.

I think the value we put on these things may be measured by just the extent we have at some time been forced to do without them. In other words our valuation of the comforts and blessings which surround every good home is the measure of our past experience without them. The time when we are permitted to return to our homes will certainly be one of great anticipation to us all.”



Malcolm Douglas Schell
Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (Eastern Ontario Regt.)

Foreword

Writing from a muddy, war-torn battlefield in France in early 1917, Malcolm Douglas Schell contrasted his experiences as a soldier with his tranquil life back home in Oxford County. Born in 1895, Douglas grew up on a farm in Curries, East Oxford Township, attended a rural public school, and then completed high school in Woodstock before heading off to pursue an applied science degree at the University of Toronto. Answering the call to arms, he enlisted alongside his orphaned cousin Rueben Millyard (who had lived on the same farm as Schell after his parents' death) with the 5th University Company in late November 1915. Schell arrived overseas the following April and found himself in France with the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry that July. During the bloody Somme battles that fall he experienced his first taste of combat. He endured the stresses and strains of trench life, saw suffering and death, and looked ahead to an uncertain future. Through it all, Oxford County, far away across the Atlantic, remained his touchstone, a remote source of comfort and stability. His February 1917 letter, filled with references to home, affirmed his connection to loved ones through memories of what had been, updates on what was happening on the battlefield, and future hopes of reunion. It revealed Schell's optimistic and even idealistic view of Canada, providing both the soldier and those he had left behind with grounding as well as hope.¹ For men like Schell, home was about family and a sense of place.

The Great War (now popularly known as the First World War) had a transformative effect on Canadian society and, indeed, on the Western world. To some historians, it represents the end of the "long" nineteenth century and the dawn of a new era. In traditional narratives, it marked the Dominion of Canada's shift from colony to nation.² Although debates continue over whether it was a necessary struggle or a senseless slaughter, there is no question that the war cast a long shadow. Historian Tim Cook reminds us that:

The Great War of 1914–18 raged for four long years, directly killing some nine million on the battlefield and leading to the death of millions of civilians through starvation, disease, and genocide. The fighting left another twenty million soldiers wounded in body and spirit. The war remade Europe, destroyed old empires and carved out new nations, unleashed the power of communism, created the conditions for fascism, and in its dying embers provided the sparks for the Second World War.... From a nation of eight million, Canada saw more than 620,000 serve in uniform. Of those, the more than 66,000 killed during the war and in the immediate years following it cut a terrible swath across the country, while another 172,000 wounded veterans were a constant reminder, in scarred flesh, blinded vision, missing limbs, and lasting psychological trauma, of the ongoing cost of war.³

Cook suggests that three narratives have dominated our memory of the Great War: the war as a terrible and useless slaughter, the war as a nation-building event, and

the war as a divisive event. Were these narratives reflective of what people living in rural southern Ontario experienced, read about, and wrote about the war as it unfolded?

This book certainly serves a commemorative function, as the project was conceived in the context of the centenary of the First World War. In November 1914, Whitney Lackenbauer and Peter Kikkert gave a Remembrance Day talk to the South Norwich Historical Society in Otterville, Ontario, seeking to bring a local dynamic to understanding the global conflict. Intrigued by the intersections between local, national, and military histories, combined with the advent of the centenary of the Great War, the South Norwich Historical Society suggested that we might consider writing a book on Norwich Township and the First World War. The Norwich District Museum and Archives also supported our vision to tell a local story of the war that would intertwine domestic and overseas experiences, wherever possible using the words of those actually who lived them. We thought that this was a great idea, as did Jennifer Arthur-Lackenbauer, who agreed to support the project as a researcher, editor, and ultimately co-author. Arthur-Lackenbauer and Kikkert conducted an educational outreach project with students at Emily Stowe Public School in 2016 using letter collections and archival materials to personalize stories about local men and women who served overseas. This experience confirmed our desire to write a book that would offer both a comprehensive and accessible portrait of a rural Ontario community immersed in a global conflict.

We conceived this book as a work of local history exploring the war's impact on the three rural townships – East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich – that in 1914 comprised what is now Norwich Township. We quickly realized, however, that there are few narrative histories of rural Canadian townships' experiences of the Great War. While various historians have examined specific urban experiences,⁴ small, rural communities have received much less attention, with most treatments offering a “scrapbook” approach containing anecdotal biographies and newspaper clippings or merely furnishing lists of soldiers who participated.⁵ Our intent was to do something different.

“With few exceptions, Canadian historians remain divided between those who write the social and political history of the home front and those interested in what happened overseas,” historian Mark Humphries noted in a recent essay.⁶ If so, then this book serves as one of those exceptions, bringing the home front and battlefield literatures into dialogue – or, at the very least, lining them up to show their points of intersection. Sacrifices and hardships were not the sole preserve of the soldiers in the trenches.⁷ The experiences of local men (and a few women) serving overseas shaped both their lives and those of their families, friends, and neighbours at home. Conversely, local developments reported in letters to the soldiers overseas allowed them to maintain connections with everyone and everything they had left behind. We concur with historian Amy Shaw's observation that “only when we understand what the war meant, not only for the soldiers who fought it, but for the vast number who stayed home, will we truly have a sense of what it meant for the country to be at war.”⁸

Using first-person accounts and local newspaper coverage, we explore how residents of what is now Norwich Township made sense of a world war and their place in it. We do not intend to celebrate war, although we do highlight the ways that the people during the Great War described their experiences and sacrifices at the time. Historian Christopher Moore reminds us that our goal is “to empathize with the violence, danger, suffering, and loss experienced by individual Canadians caught in the war, regardless of its causes or consequences.” Although our chapters are filled with accounts of “a brave Canadian walking into the machine guns, and of the ones he left behind”⁹ (the sort of story that Moore denigrates), this was the nature of many stories in circulation during the war – stories that were disseminated through the local newspapers, Sunday sermons, at commemorative events, and in letters sent home from soldiers serving overseas. The participation of local men in the Canadian Corps, whose battlefield successes in 1917 and 1918 built upon a long and bloody apprenticeship that began when the First Canadian Division took to the field in Ypres in early 1915, was a subject of intense interest, celebration, and grief. At the time, most commentators considered soldier deaths essential contributions to the Canadian, British Empire, and larger Allied cause rather than wasted lives.

In a foreword to Barbara Wilson’s landmark book on Ontario’s wartime experience, former premier Bill Davis wrote that the First World War had a profound impact on the province:

In our social and economic history it marked the watershed between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The stimulus which the war gave to industry greatly accelerated the transformation of a rural, agrarian society into one in which the urban industrial element was becoming ever more predominant. In August 1914, Ontarians, like their fellow Canadians in other provinces, were inclined to regard the war as an adventure that would be over by Christmas, but they were greatly mistaken. The war lasted four long years and touched virtually every Ontario family. It heightened idealism and thereby promoted the success of a movement for prohibition; it radically altered the concept of women’s role in society; and it stimulated national pride; but it also stimulated baser emotions and radical prejudices that would be generally regretted once passions cooled. When the armistice finally came on 11 November 1918, probably few people realized how much the events of the past four years had changed them and their society. But the people of the province were intensely aware that they had participated in a national effort of greater magnitude than anything Canada had yet attempted, and as a consequence they shared a strong sense of national consciousness. They looked to the future with greater confidence in themselves, their province, and their nation.¹⁰

Davis focused on the urban Ontario experience, but he aptly noted that the war affected all Ontarians. The themes that he highlighted – from women’s changing roles, to the prejudices towards immigrants from enemy countries, to the calls for prohibition, to the pride that people took in their individual and collective contributions to the war effort – are evident in rural areas as well as in the cities.¹¹ While the former premier cast the Great War as a nation-building moment in Canada’s

history, from the rural townships' perspective it was also a community-building event. The war drew people together in new ways as they volunteered time, energy, and money to support the war effort, collectively awaited news of their loved ones overseas, and publicly shared their grief when community members were killed.

In what ways did rural and urban Canada experience the war differently? For much of the war, the federal and provincial governments placed heightened importance on food production to fuel the Allied cause in addition to pressuring families to supply sons for overseas service. Ontario nearly doubled its agricultural production of staples (such as wheat) in the first year of the war alone.¹² The competing pressures for farm labourers and military recruits would become one of the defining characteristics of the townships' wartime experience, generating intense debates about what constituted patriotic service in a rural Canadian context. Simmering agrarian discontent over the government's recruitment policies flamed into open protest when Prime Minister Robert Borden imposed conscription on the country in 1917, confirming that forcing men to serve in uniform not only divided English and French Canadians but rural and urban populations as well.¹³ These debates further strained people who had to make do with less while sacrificing more money, time, energy, and loved ones as the war went on.

While men playing their roles as soldiers and workers often dominate wartime narratives, our stories highlight how and why women also lay at the heart of the war effort.¹⁴ Historians often emphasize the non-traditional occupations that many women embraced during wartime (particularly munitions and other forms of urban industrial work in the cities), but Shaw explains that "non-combatant, voluntary, charitable, stay-at-home roles comprised the bulk of Canadian women's contributions to the dominion's war efforts between 1914 and 1918." Although this work was "celebrated at the time as a glowing testament to the worth and splendid patriotism of the women and girls who performed them, the humble tasks of knitting, bandage-rolling, and raising funds are overshadowed/lost in our cultural memory of the war."¹⁵ In the townships of Oxford County, women formed patriotic societies to produce goods required by the soldiers and raised funds in an almost endless cycle of lawn parties, bake sales, concerts, picnics, socials, fairs, and excursions. They also kept their eye out for unpatriotic activity and for neighbours who failed to contribute enough to the war effort (or to remain faithful to men serving overseas). Through it all, they worried about family members and friends serving overseas, wielded shovels and hoes while they assisted in the fields, and generally picked up the slack as the tempo of life changed for their homes and communities in the face of new demands and pressures.

The stories in this book represent our attempt to convey how the people of the townships responded to the war at the time – from the soldier in the muddy trenches of the Western Front, to the woman sitting in her kitchen knitting socks for him, the volunteer raising money for him, the farmer working long days in the fields to feed him, and the child anxiously awaiting his return. Pieced together, these stories form an intricate quilt that depicts just how deeply the war touched and transformed the townships and the people who called them home. These are stories

of tragedy, heartbreak and loss, but also of courage, kindness, volunteerism, and, perhaps above all else, perseverance.

Finding the Stories: Methodology and Sources

Like every history, our work builds upon the research of others. This book fits into a recent wave of scholarship that moves past high level histories of the war (focused on the contributions of empires and nation states) to explore the deeper realities and understandings that can emerge from the careful study of local responses and community contributions in particular times and places.¹⁶ Such studies yield significant insights into how different communities experienced the conflict, answered the calls for sacrifice on the home front, and maintained connections with combatants overseas, while illustrating how variables such as size, location, class and gender roles, and economics shaped local responses. These frameworks proved invaluable as we constructed home front narratives using newspaper stories from the weekly *Norwich Gazette*, Woodstock's *Daily Sentinel-Review*, and the *Tillsonburg Observer*, as well as archival materials from the Norwich and District Museum and Archives, Annandale National Historic Site, the Oxford County Archives, the Woodstock Public Library local history section, and private family collections.

We do not purport to offer new insights into the Canadian Expeditionary Force's experiences overseas, but seek to place the stories of local soldiers, artillerymen, stretcher bearers, nursing sisters, chaplains, airmen, sappers (combat engineers), and signalers into robust battle narratives. Accordingly, we are heavily indebted to the work of historians who have framed the military context of what was unfolding overseas: the benchmark work of official army historian G.W.L. Nicholson; popular historians such as Pierre Berton and Daniel Dancocks, who relied on personal accounts, letters, and diaries to paint heroic portraits of Canadians in battle overseas¹⁷; and academic historians over the last four decades¹⁸ who have explained the evolution of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) from an early cadre of amateur citizen-soldiers in 1914-15 to the professional, innovative, battle-hardened army of 1917-18. "The fifty months from August 1914 to November 1918," Desmond Morton suggests, "witnessed a remarkable transformation in almost everything that affected the soldiers" and the new tactics of 1918 "fitted Canadians like their well-worn tunics."¹⁹ Our descriptions of what local men and women experienced overseas has been particularly influenced by historians, like Morton and Tim Cook, who have taken the "soldier's-eye-view" of the war, ensuring that eye-witness accounts and personal experiences are not lost when discussing battles and campaigns that often involved armies numbering in the hundreds of thousands or millions.

Most importantly, we are indebted to the work of several local historians who began the painstaking task of tracking the soldiers who served from East Oxford, South Norwich, and North Norwich townships. Bill Powell collected basic service details of many men from Oxford County who were killed during the war for his book *Oxford Heroes: Lost but not Forgotten*. Keith Armstrong and his family dedicated countless hours to tracking down photographs and information about sol-

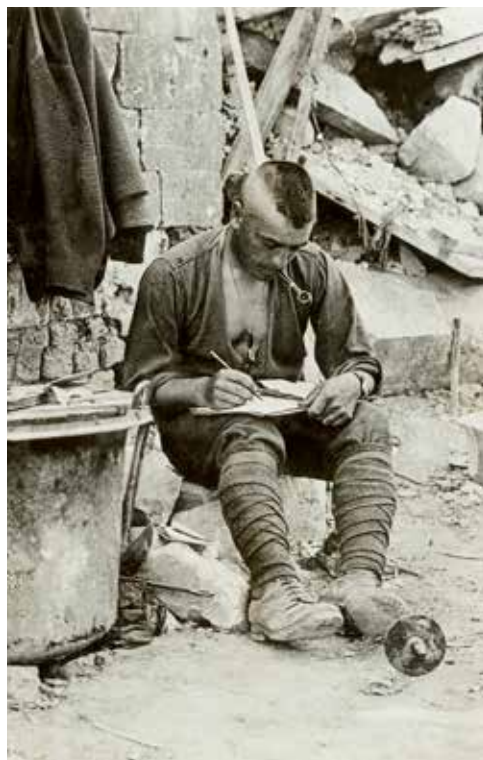
diers from East Oxford who served during the war, and published their findings in a helpful volume.²⁰ Stella Mott, a conscientious collector of “information, clippings, photos, research and testaments” of area residents, provided the local archive with lists of names from the Royal Canadian Legion and other memorials,²¹ while Marie Avey sifted through local newspapers and made notes when local soldiers were mentioned (all of which she generously shared with us).

While these existing lists proved a great help, we recognized early on that they were partial and incomplete. Much of our early work focused on finding the names of soldiers who enlisted from the townships – a task that continues to this day. Collating previously compiled lists of soldiers, scouring wartime issues of local newspapers for mentions of soldiers’ enlistment and service, and combing private and archival letter collections led us to question how to determine which soldiers were “from” East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich. Was it by birth, location of closest kin, place of residence, or place of enlistment – all reasonable delineations used in other studies? None of these variables alone were sufficient to encapsulate the experiences and impacts of war on the region. Soldiers who lived and enlisted elsewhere came home to their mothers to recuperate when injured. Boys who were born in Norwich but moved elsewhere left behind friends, aunts, uncles, and grandparents who anxiously awaited news and then shared the letters they received with community members who had watched them grow as children or young men. There were the men without longstanding family ties who chose to immigrate to or work in the townships, who may or may not have returned to the area after service, their names carved in stone the only trace that they ever resided in the community. The exodus of all these men to the battlefields of Europe was felt broadly and would have enduring effects on future generations. Thus, we chose to cast an expansive net to collect the stories of the men and women of North Norwich, South Norwich, and East Oxford townships during the Great War.

Writing a national or even large regional history allows an author to draw upon a wide range of sources and accounts to select their anecdotes. For historians adopting a local lens, accessing the stories of under-documented individuals and groups who served in the war, such as the men (and few women) from three rural townships in Oxford County, can be a challenging task. For the most part, the figures in this book were “ordinary” Canadians, unlikely to attract national attention or to pen memoirs.²² Of the local veterans, only Harold Innis and William Crabbe produced memoirs, and neither was published for a general audience.²³

Accordingly, the main primary source for this book are letters between soldiers overseas and their families and friends on the home front, many of which were reproduced in local newspapers so that the broader community could stay abreast of what “local boys” were experiencing. “Friends at home are receiving letters from overseas that are indeed good reading,” the *Norwich Gazette* noted on 7 November 1918. “Every missive from over there contains something interesting, something of what is in the hearts and souls of the boys who are in it.”²⁴ “Passion, sorrow, fear, and hope were all captured in print by weary, dirty soldiers who thought of their loved ones at home before exhaustion overtook them at night,” historian Tim Cook sum-

marized, offering “valuable insight into the mentality of Canada’s front line soldiers.”²⁵ While censorship limited what could be shared, these letters served to personalize the war for local residents, offering a more grounded view than the high-level and comparatively impersonal descriptions of battles contained in national or large regional newspapers. “To read the letters with empathy, to discern what they reveal about these young men in writing to their mothers and fathers, friends and family, wives and lovers back home, is to bridge not only a chasm of time but also the vast difference between their Canada and ours,” journalist Robert Sibley notes. “The letters, written while their authors crouched in front-line trenches, relaxed in the barracks canteen or recovered in hospital from battlefield wounds, provide a poignant glimpse of the hopes, fears, sorrows and longings of men at war.”²⁶



A Canadian soldier pens a letter home amidst the rubble of war

To fill in the individual soldiers’ and nursing sisters’ stories, we have relied heavily on individual personnel files generated by the military – now digitized and available online through the Library and Archives Canada (LAC)– which provide detailed demographic, medical, training, service, and other personal information for people who enlisted (either as volunteers or conscripts) during the war.²⁷ These files list when soldiers joined their units and when they deployed to France, allowing us to track down the war diaries for their units, also available through LAC. For those who died in service, the circumstances of death registers and other archival tools also proved indispensable.

Together, these sources have allowed us to piece together the wartime experiences of many local soldiers and civilians. Not every story could be told, however, and the experiences of many of the soldiers who fought overseas, women who volunteered in the patriotic societies, farmers who remained at home to till the soil, and families that lost loved ones remain to be explored. This book, like every other, offers only a partial reconstruction and interpretation of a rich and varied past. We hope that our narrative inspires others to carry on this work and bring to light more stories of men, women, and children whose lives were affected by the Great War and the events that shaped their communities, and our country, in the twentieth century.

Basic Military Terms

When some chaps are sitting around assuming to tell everyone what they know, as to what numbers constitute certain divisions of our army, remove your hat and then read the following to him.

- An **army corps** is 60,000 men.
- An **infantry division** is 19,000 men.
- An **infantry brigade** is 7,000 men.
- A **regiment of infantry** is 3,000 men.
- A **battalion** is 1,000 men.
- A **company** is 250 men.
- A **platoon** is 60 men.
- A **corporal's squad** is 11 men.
- A **field battery** has 195 men.
- A **firing squad** is 20 men.
- A **supply train** has 283 men.
- A **machine gun battalion** has 296 men.
- An **engineer's regiment** has 1098 men.
- An **ambulance company** has 66 men.
- A **field hospital** has 55 men.
- A **medicine attachment** has 13 men.
- A **major-general** heads the field army and also each army corps.
- A **brigadier-general** heads each infantry brigade.
- A **colonel** heads each regiment.
- A **lieutenant-colonel** is next in rank.
- A **major** heads a battalion.
- A **captain** heads a company.
- A **lieutenant** heads a platoon, below a colonel.
- A **sergeant** is next below a lieutenant.
- A **corporal** is a squad officer.

Source: "Put it in your Hat," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 11 April 1918.

Notes

- 1 James A. Wood, "BC Narratives of the Great War: Home, Home Away, Loss, and Hope," *BC Studies* 182 (2014): 182.
- 2 David Mackenzie, "Myth, Memory, and the Transformation of Canadian Society," in *Canada and the First World: Essays in Honour of Robert Craig Brown*, ed. David MacKenzie (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005): 3.
- 3 Tim Cook, "Battles of the Imagined Past: Canada's Great War and Memory," *Canadian Historical Review* 95, no. 3 (2014): 417.
- 4 See, for example, Ian Maclean Miller, *Our Glory and Our Grief: Torontonians and the Great War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); James Blanchard, *Winnipeg's Great War: A City Comes of Age* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010); Robert Rutherford, *Hometown Horizons: Local Responses to Canada's Great War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004); James Pitsula, *For All We Have and Are: Regina and the Experience of the Great War* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2008); and Terry Copp, *Montreal at War, 1914-1918*, <http://montrealatwar.com/>.
- 5 See, for example, Armstrong Family, eds., *The Maple Leaf Forever: A Short History from 1800 to Present of the Military Involvement of Old East Oxford Township* (self-published, 2011); and Grant Smith, *Norfolk Remembers the Great War, 1914-1918* (Stewart Publishing, 2015). See also the Letters Home book projects produced as part of the Norfolk Remembers campaign at <http://www.norfolkremembers.ca/books/>; the excellent digital history work of the Great War Centenary Association for Brantford, Brant and Six Nations at <http://www.doingourbit.ca>; and the Township of Zorra's website, Heroes of Zorra, which covers a broad range of the region's military history, at <http://www.heroesofzorra.ca/>.
- 6 Mark Humphries, "Between Commemoration and History: The Historiography of the Canadian Corps and Military Overseas," *Canadian Historical Review* 95, no. 3 (2014): 384.
- 7 Susan Fisher, *Boys and Girls in No Man's Land: English-Canadian Children and the First World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).
- 8 Amy Shaw, "Expanding the Narrative," *Canadian Historical Review* 95, no.3 (2014): 403.
- 9 Christopher Moore, "1914 in 2014: What We Commemorate When We Commemorate the First World War," *Canadian Historical Review* 95, no.3 (2014): 429.
- 10 William G. David, "Foreword" to Barbara Wilson, *Ontario and the First World War, 1914-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), vii.
- 11 Adam Crerar, "Ontario and the Great War," in *Canada and the First World War*, ed. Robert Craig Brown (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005): 230-271.
- 12 Crerar, "Ontario and the Great War,"; and W.R. Young, "Conscription, Rural Depopulation, and the Farmers of Ontario, 1917-19," *Canadian Historical Review* 53, no. 3 (September 1972): 301.
- 13 Mourad Djebabla, "'Fight or Farm': Canadian Farmers and the Dilemma of the War Effort in World War I," *Canadian Military Journal* 14, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 57-67; and Crerar, "Ontario and the Great War." In the first half of the war, farmers made up only 8.5% of recruits nationally, but 45.5% of conscripts in 1918 reported farming as their occupation. See Young, "Conscription, Rural Depopulation, and the Farmers of Ontario, 1917-19." Another tension that we discussed related to conscientious objectors like the Quakers, who opposed a fighting role on religious grounds. See Amy Shaw, *Crisis of Conscience: Conscientious Objection in Canada during the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009).

14 For studies on wartime philanthropy, voluntary contributions and the role of women in wartime mobilization, see, for example, Desmond Morton, *Fight or Pay: Soldiers' Families in the Great War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004); Margaret Elizabeth Frenette, "The Great War's Defeats: 'Doing Your Bit' on Thunder Bay's Home Front, 1914-1919" (unpublished PhD dissertation, Lakehead University, 1996); Tammy M. Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War, 1914-1918* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Matthew Hendley, *Organized Patriotism and the Crucible of War: Popular Imperialism in Britain, 1914-1932* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012); Bruce Scates, "The Unknown Sock Knitter: Voluntary Work, Emotional Labour, Bereavement and the Great War," *Labour History* 81 (2001): 29-49; Joan Beaumont, "Whatever Happened to Patriotic Women, 1914-1918?" *Australian Historical Studies* 115 (2000): 284-285; Margaret Darrow, *French Women and the First World War: War Stories of the Home Front* (Oxford: Berg, 2000); Sarah Carlene Glassford, "Marching as to War: The Canadian Red Cross Society, 1885-1939" (unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, York University, 2007); Melanie Oppenheimer, *All Work No Pay: Australian Civilian Volunteers in War* (Walcha, N.S.W.: Ohio Productions, 2002); Katie Pickles, *Female Imperialism and National Identity: Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); Susan R. Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France During the First World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); and Sarah Glassford and Amy Shaw, eds., *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service: Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland during the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012).

15 Shaw, "Expanding the Narrative," 401.

16 Pierre Purseigle, "Beyond and Below the Nations: Towards a Comparative History of Local Communities at War," in *Uncovered Fields: Perspectives in First World War Studies*, eds. Jenny Macleod and Pierre Purseigle (Boston: Brill, 2004), 95-123. For studies at the county or provincial level in Canada, see for example Wilson, *Ontario and the First World War*; Andrew Theobald, *The Bitter Harvest of War: New Brunswick and the Conscription Crisis of 1917* (Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions, 2008); and Adriana Davies and Jeff Keshen, eds., *The Frontier of Patriotism: Alberta and the First World War* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2016). For studies of remote and rural regions during the war, see Keith Grieves, "The Quiet of the Country and the Restless Excitement of the Towns: Rural Perspectives on the Home Front, 1914-1918," in *Rural and Urban Encounters in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Regional Perspectives*, ed. M. Tebbutt (Manchester: Conference of Regional and Local Historians, 2004), 79-97; Robert Rutherford, *Hometown Horizons: Local Responses to Canada's Great War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004); and John Herd Thompson, *The Harvests of War: The Prairie West, 1914-1918* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978). Such studies reflect historian Keith Grieves's conclusion that wartime experiences on the home front were not so "complete and universal that one monolithic historical narrative can serve the nuances of differences, which inhabited contemporary 'lived' representations of the nation at war." Grieves, "Quiet of the Country," 94. These local studies also reflect historian Jay Winter's call for studies that "describe the character of community life in wartime." See Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert, eds., *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin, 1914-1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3.

17 See, for example, Pierre Berton, *Vimy* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986); Daniel G. Dancocks, *Legacy of Valour: The Canadians at Passchendaele* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1986); Dancocks, *Spearhead to Victory: Canada and the Great War* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1987); and Dancocks, *Welcome to Flanders Fields: The First Canadian Battle of the Great War* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989).

- 18 See Tim Cook, *Clio's Warriors: Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011).
- 19 Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House, 1993), viii-ix.
- 20 Armstrong Family, eds., *Maple Leaf Forever*.
- 21 Ross Butler, "The Story of Norwich" (typescript, Woodstock Public Library, Local History section), 207.
- 22 Joseph Whiteside "Klondike Joe" Boyle (who owned a farm in East Oxford and lived much of his early life in Woodstock) became rich in the gold fields of the Klondike before heading over to Romania and Russia to leave his wartime mark, but his experience was hardly generalizable and his connections to East Oxford township were tangential by 1914. Accordingly, we did not include his story in this book. For more information on this fascinating figure, see Kim Beattie, *Brother, Here's a Man! The Saga of Klondike Boyle* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1940); William Rodney, *Joe Boyle: King of the Klondike* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1974); Stan Sauerwein, *Klondike Joe Boyle: Heroic Adventures from Gold Fields to Battlefields* (Victoria: Heritage House, 2003); Crina Bud, "Negotiating Romania's Destiny During the First World War: An Analysis of Joe Boyle's Diplomatic Strategies," *Northern Review* 44 (2017): 119-138; and Max Fraser, "Celebrating the Yukon's First World War Hero Joe Boyle: Queen Marie, Romania & Film," *Northern Review* 44 (2017): 101-117. Donald Matheson Sutherland, who went on to become the Minister of National Defence in the early 1930s, did not write memoirs.
- 23 In his masterful study *Death So Noble*, historian Jonathan Vance points out that memoirs of the Great War tend to be nostalgic, idealizing the front and yearning for the days when life was dangerous and uncomfortable "but was characterized by comradeship, selflessness, and egalitarianism, qualities that seemed all too rare in peacetime." The recollections of Crabbe and Innis do not fit this description. Harold Innis's letters and memoirs have attracted academic interest, but less for understanding his experience of the war on its own terms than in seeking to understand how it shaped a man who became one of Canada's (and the British Commonwealth's) most important scholars in history, political economy, and communications. See, for example, John Watson, *Marginal Man: The Dark Vision of Harold Innis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), and William J. Buxton, Michael Cheney, and Paul Heyer, eds., *Harold Innis Reflects: Memoir and WWI Writings/ Correspondence* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016). The chapters on Innis in Sandra Gwyn's elegant book *Tapestry of War: A Private View of Canadians in the Great War* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1992) are a key exception.
- 24 *Norwich Gazette*, 7 November 1918.
- 25 Tim Cook, "My Whole Heart and Soul is in this War': The Letters and War Service of Sergeant G.L. Ormsby," *Canadian Military History* 15, no. 1 (2006): 51.
- 26 Robert Sibley, "Christmas war letter - 1914-1915," *Ottawa Citizen*, 24 December 2014.
- 27 Library and Archives Canada (LAC), "Personnel Records of the First World War," <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/personnel-records/Pages/search.aspx>.

Acronyms

AWOL	absent without leave [permission]
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
CAMC	Canadian Army Medical Corps
Capt.	Captain
CEF	Canadian Expeditionary Force
CMR	Canadian Mounted Rifles
COTC	Canadian Officer Training Corps
Cpl.	Corporal
DCM	Distinguished Conduct Medal
D-Q	Drocourt-Quéant
GWVA	Great War Veterans' Association
HMHS	His Majesty's Hospital Ship
HMS	His Majesty's Ship
LAC	Library and Archives Canada
Lieut.	Lieutenant
Lt.-Col.	Lieutenant-Colonel
M.A.	Master of Arts
M.C.	Military Cross
MP	Member of Parliament (federal)
MPP	Member of Provincial Parliament
MSA	<i>Military Service Act</i>
NCO	non-commissioned officer
NDMA	Norwich and District Museum and Archives
NHA	National Hockey Association
NSB	National Service Board
OCA	Oxford County Archives
OFSC	Ontario Farm Service Corps
OPA	Oxford Patriotic Association
ORSA	Oxford Returned Soldiers' Association
POW	prisoner of war
PPCLI	Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry
Pte.	Private
RAF	Royal Air Force
RFC	Royal Flying Corps
RG	record group
RMS	Royal Mail Ship (British)
RR	rural route
Sgt.	Sergeant
SS	steam ship
UBC	University of British Columbia
UFO	United Farmers of Ontario
U.S.	United States
VD	venereal disease
vol.	volume
WPL	Women's Patriotic League
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

1 “The Very Garden of Ontario”

An Historical Tour of the Townships in 1914

The Norwich of today is situated in the very garden of Ontario. The country surrounding it is known to be one of the finest farming and dairy districts in the county of Oxford.

- Amelia Poldon, 1914

Historian David Lowenthal suggested that “the past is a foreign country” – a reminder that observers should not assume that historical actors in a given geographical space shared the same worldviews, opportunities, constraints, and priorities that we do today.¹ To understand the world that the rural and small town residents of Oxford County occupied in the early twentieth century, we must first acknowledge that it was not the world of the twenty-first century. When teacher and local historian Amelia Poldon painted historical portraits of East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich in the pages of the *Norwich Gazette* and *Woodstock Daily Sentinel-Review* on the eve of the Great War, she described changes that had occurred since the first pioneers had arrived in the region and subsequent generations built a prosperous agricultural region. Rather than offering generic summaries that painted the entire county in the same hues, Poldon’s historical vignettes emphasized the distinct cultures and identities that had formed in the various settlements and farming areas. Reading her work a century later, she also provides a strong sense of how East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich townships looked in 1914.

Using Poldon’s histories and community sketches from 1914 as a lens, this chapter introduces readers to the historical geography of what is now Norwich Township to provide context for the wartime experiences that follow. The men who served overseas during the Great War would share particular relationships and ideas of place that tied back to their farms and villages. Similarly, the roles and activities of women and men on the home front during the war continued pre-war patterns and established new ones. The following tour of the townships provides a glimpse of how settlement patterns in the region reflected the land itself, emerging economic opportunities, and transportation networks that shaped the formation of communities. Residents of today’s Norwich Township will be familiar with aspects of the geography, and in many cases with an enduring spirit of community pride that continues to animate local identities. Readers are also encouraged to remember a different time, when horses and buggies raced down roads without competition with automobiles; when steam trains chugged down long-gone rail lines that crisscrossed the townships; and when teams of men and horses worked to process the harvest (before self-propelling combines emerged on the scene). By the turn of the twentieth century, the townships’ residents had crafted an orderly society out of the

Ontario frontier, with productive farms and brick houses established on what had been rough clearings with hewn log houses. Like other Ontarians, “they embraced the arrival of new farm implements, of the railways and the products of the factory system and so helped along the inexorable change from a rural to an urban society,” historian W.H. Graham explained.² A mixed economy had replaced the single-crop wheat economy of the province’s earliest days, and towns and villages serviced local farmers as well as distant markets. On the foundations of their forebears, they had created a resilient, enduring, and often prosperous community in the townships that reflected their local demographic, geographic, and economic conditions.

Amelia Poldon was well situated to write histories of what is now Norwich Township around the time of the town of Norwich’s centenary celebrations in 1910. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, middle-class women often took a leadership role in recording early community histories and thereby shaping perceptions of the past,³ and Poldon’s educational background, interest in history, and civic spirit made her a natural narrator of her community’s past. Born in April 1846 in a home at the corner of Front and Church Streets in Norwich, Poldon’s father was the descendent of



Amelia Poldon

the pioneering Paulding family (her father adjusted his last name to Poldon) that emigrated from New York State to the Norwich district in the early nineteenth century. Amelia grew up amongst Norwich pioneers, preserved their old records, and learned their stories. After completing private school in town, she quickly obtained a teaching certificate and by 1870 was teaching in Norwich Public School and later at the Milldale school down the road. Although drawn away to teach at private colleges in Pickering and Oshawa, she eventually returned to Norwich to care for her widowed brother’s young family, fulfilling what she saw as obligations to her kin. Over the last third of her life, she became an active pillar of the community: advocating temperance and promoting women’s rights through the Women’s Christian Temperance Union; teaching Sunday school; fundraising for missionary societies, supply teaching for the local schools; writing papers for historical societies; and serving as a correspondent for the Woodstock *Sentinel-Review* newspaper. Working as the community librarian from 1905-12, she found time to write numerous articles on the early histories of North and South Norwich Townships, as well as the villages therein.⁴ Her rich descriptions of the lands, settlements, and people that comprised what is now Norwich Township provide a useful guide to lead us on an era-appropriate tour of the area.

Poldon’s histories, like most written in her lifetime, typically began with the arrival of the non-Indigenous pioneers from the United States and Britain in the early nineteenth century. This erased or downplayed a long Indigenous history throughout what would become southern Ontario. The Uren “prehistoric village,” discovered along Otter Creek on lot 8, concession 7 in South Norwich Township in

1920, shed new insights into the Neutral “Indians” (as First Nations were commonly labeled at the time) who had lived in the region centuries before Euro-Canadians arrived.⁵ “From the relics uncovered it is believed that these early inhabitants are home keeping, industrious, fairly well clothed and fed, gay at times, warriors when necessary, capable of cruelty, and showing some initiative, perseverance and love of beauty,” a sesquicentennial history of the area later offered. The Neutrals sought to balance their interests and trade with the Hurons to the north and the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy to their south and east (which explains the name given to them by non-Indigenous commentators). The seventeenth-century expansion of the Haudenosaunee across what is now southern Ontario, however, wiped out the Neutrals in 1652. By 1700 the Anishnawbe (Ojibwa) had defeated the Haudenosaunee and conquered most of southern Ontario, where they hunted and camped. This rich Indigenous history meant that, although the lands of what would become Oxford County did not boast a permanently-resident First Nations population that occupied particular parcels of land year round, it was criss-crossed by longstanding trails that First Peoples had used for centuries or millennia. “What a contrast can be visualized when one thinks of the [first] settlers travelling through the forest along blaze trails travelled by Indians and wild animals, instead of modern highways,” the sesquicentennial history reminded readers.⁶

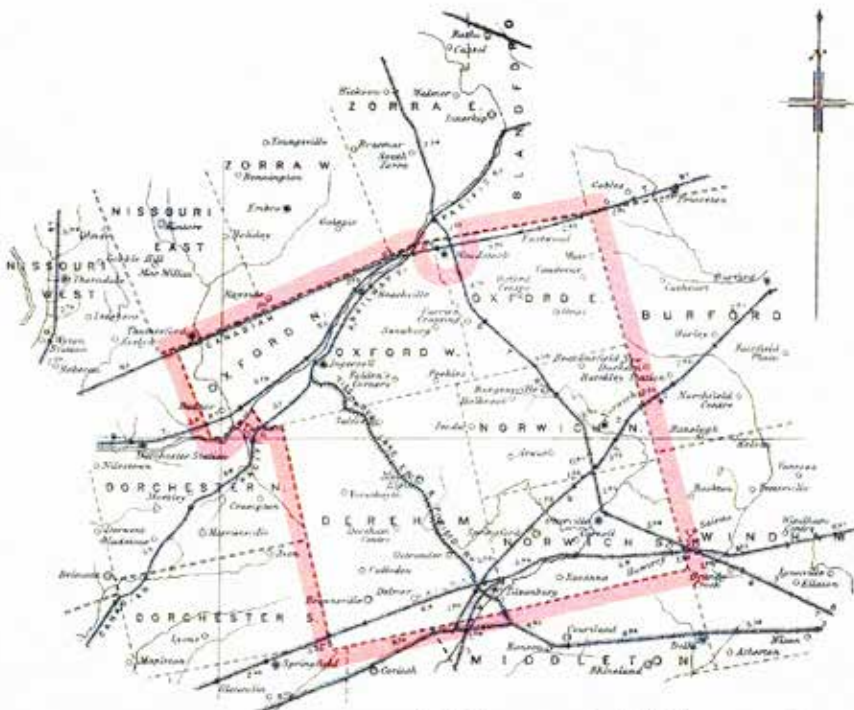
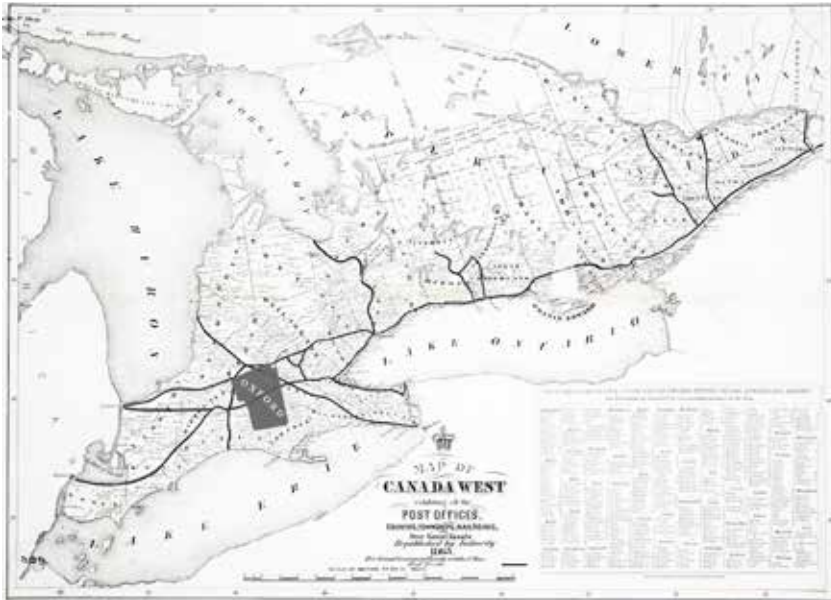
Non-Indigenous settlers left a different imprint on the white pine forests of the Norwich area. The British Crown and certain Mississauga peoples signed Treaty 3 (“The Between the Lakes Purchase”) in 1792, opening up the area to potential settlers. The following year, the first United Empire Loyalist arrived in the “Township of Oxford on the Thames” from Connecticut. “Being an inland county, Oxford was not open for settlement as early as those portions of southern Ontario which border on the Great Lakes, the Niagara peninsula to the east and the Detroit river settlements to the west,” Mabel Burkholder wrote in her *Short History of Oxford*. “The interior had to await the construction of roads through dense forests.”⁷ With the closest ports for trade and supply more than twenty-five kilometres from the southernmost boundary of the county, pioneers would face isolation and hardship in carving out a life for their families in what was still an untamed wilderness. “It is said that the Pilgrim Fathers of New England were the sifted wheat of the early colonists of United States, so the pioneers of Ontario may also be termed the sifted wheat of the early colonists of Canada,” Poldon described:

Many of them were [United Empire] Loyalists who emigrated from the United States after the War of Independence and through their loyalty to the British Government were willing to brace the dangers and to suffer the privations incidental to life in the woods of Canada. They left homes of comfort and luxury, were separated from their friends, a long distance from any post office, had to drive many miles to find a market or a store, no doctor nearer than twenty-five or fifty miles, and live on the scantest fare. The country was an unbroken forest with no roads, only occasionally a path made by the surveyor with a few blazed trees to indicate it; and the wolf, the bear and other wild animals were in abundance.⁸

The pioneer families' motives for immigrating to the region differed: Quakers seeking to create settlements that could live up to their ideals; Free Blacks seeking a safe haven; and United Empire Loyalists moving to British domain from northern New York State. In the early and mid-eighteenth century, these immigrants established varied settlements which emerged along the creeks and trails. Enterprising pioneers built mills to capitalize on white pine forests and flowing waters, laying the foundations for businesses and villages to come. Thus, the establishment of the many communities followed a similar tale: waterways prompted the establishment of a mill that enabled people to build log homes, attracting settlers who would painstakingly hew a farm from forest. In early histories, the strength of will and determination of an early settler (such as Peter Lossing who drew all of his friends and family to Norwichville) determined the growth or demise of these settlements. In other cases, the closure of a factory or a mill led to precipitous decline (as was the case with the small village of Cornell). Some early settlements grew to become prosperous villages and towns, while others decreased in size or disappeared altogether by 1914.

The political evolution of the district also reflected the form and pace of settlement, as well as broad trends towards representative government at various levels in British North America and eventually the Dominion of Canada. Upper Canada was established in 1791, and the following year the newly-created Norfolk County included the territory of present-day Oxford County. Six years later the "Township of Oxford on the Thames" was shifted to a new London District. That same year, the family of Zachariah Burtch arrived from New York State and built a log home at lot 18, concession 1, of what became East Oxford after it detached from West Oxford in 1820 (and is now part of the city of Woodstock).⁹ Norwich Township became part of the County of Oxford by an Act of Upper Canadian Parliament that came into force in 1800, and for the next half century it was a township consisting of twelve concessions, each one mile in width, with 28 lots of 200 acres in each concession.¹⁰ The population grew steadily, bringing in new settlers who formed a relatively prosperous agrarian community. Agriculture, dominated by wheat production, was flourishing by 1837 when popular frustrations about the ruling Family Compact's methods of land distribution and management led some Norwich residents to rebel against the elite clique of politicians and officials who ran the Upper Canadian government. Reformer Charles Duncombe from Oxford County raised two hundred rebels from Norwich Township who marched twelve miles to Scotland in Burford Township before learning that Loyalist troops (including some Six Nations men) were on their way to quash the uprising. Duncombe retreated to Norwich and the rebels dispersed. Arrests followed, and some of those who took up arms against the Crown were jailed and a few others hanged.¹¹

Although the uprising failed to achieve the democratic reforms that its leaders had sought, political changes eventually followed. The boundaries of Oxford County were established in 1850 with the implementation of the Baldwin Act, and a new municipal act gave townships expanded authority to manage their own affairs. Each of the townships elected their own reeve and deputy reeve, who would



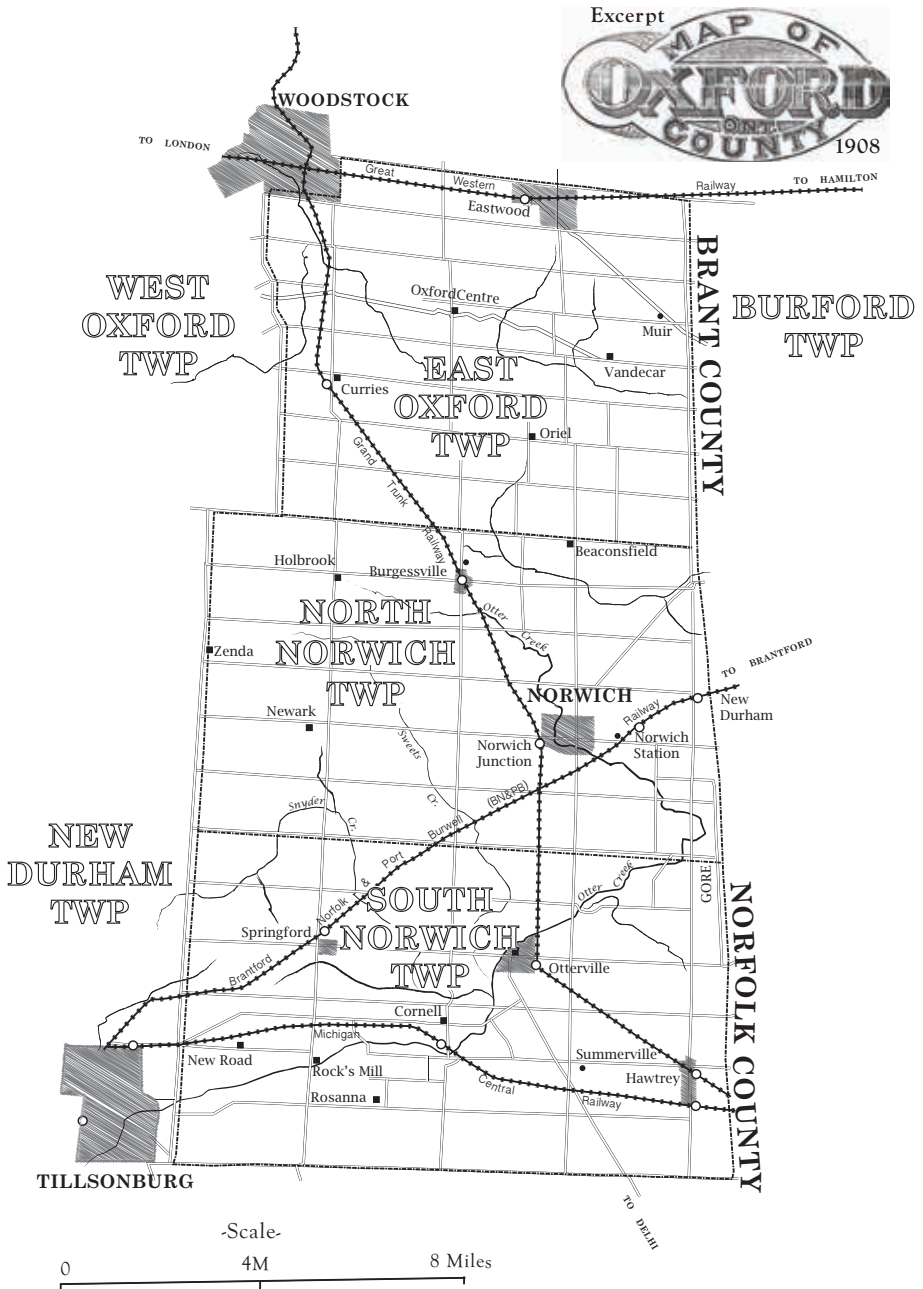
Electoral District of **OXFORD SOUTH (Ont)**

Map of Oxford County in Ontario, based on the "Map of Canada West: Counties, Townships and Railroads" 1863 (top). Map of the electoral district of Oxford South prepared for the 1911 census, circa 1909 (bottom).

meet with their counterparts periodically for Oxford County Council meetings in Woodstock to weigh in on regional matters and to ensure that their particular interests were represented. East Oxford Township was incorporated that year, and its first council raised taxes to build a township hall on lot 12, concession 4 in Oxford Centre.¹² Given the burgeoning population in Norwich Township, it was divided into separate North and South Norwich townships in 1855, using the road between the sixth and seventh concessions as the boundary. In 1876, the village of Norwich became independent and town residents elected a council for themselves.¹³ By the early twentieth century, Oxford County contained two federal and provincial electoral districts – Oxford North and Oxford South – with the latter representing the interests of East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich.¹⁴

The townships fit within various commercial and transportation networks that connected their residents to nearby urban areas. The newly-proclaimed City of Woodstock (1902) lay astride the northwest corner of East Oxford Township, which enjoyed the status of county capital. A short train ride to the east brought one to the manufacturing center of Brantford. The town of Simcoe, the county seat of Norfolk County, lay southeast of the townships, and the town of Tillsonburg perched on the southwestern edge of South Norwich. Although South Norwich, North Norwich, and East Oxford were primarily agricultural areas, these strong connections with surrounding urban centres brought a continuous circulation of people, ideas, and resources. Detailed “Town Talk” columns in local newspapers recited the frequent comings and goings of township residents to nearby towns, and vice versa. In short, the townships were neither isolated nor insulated from the outside world, and residents shared local, regional, provincial, national, and imperial identities with their neighbours and kin.

Transportation networks within and between the townships reinforced particular relationships between neighbours on farms and local communities. In the early twentieth century, the communities of the three townships were inter-connected by long-established roads that crossed invisible township boundaries. Steady traffic travelled over narrow cord roads which followed the traces of Indigenous trails that linked dam to mill and followed the lines of streams and creeks rather than the straight delineations of mapped concessions. “The Old Indian Trail,” one of the oldest paths crossing the dense forests of southwestern Ontario, ran from the ports at Niagara into the “interior” through the top of East Oxford Township. Robert Cuthbertson Muir observed in 1913 that anyone familiar with the region’s topography would understand that this route offered the only realistic way to navigate through areas of “continuous swamp.”¹⁵ As towns developed along the length of this trail, a new name reinforced its new purpose: Old Stage Road. Also known as the “Detroit path,”¹⁶ the road served as the main stage artery from Ancaster to London through to the end of the nineteenth century. “Numerous hamlets had sprung up along the Ancient Indian trail, over which passed to and fro all the heavy traffic of trade and commerce, so necessary to the advance of modern civilization,” Muir wrote on the eve of the Great War. “Large strings of heavily laden wagons, transporting all that a country imports and exports, travellers on horseback, on foot, and in all sorts or



East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich Townships in South Oxford, circa 1908



Sketch of early stage coach travel

history taking stock of settlement patterns recorded in 1967.¹⁸ The Burtch family followed this route west from New York state, through Brantford and Burford, and into East Oxford Township in 1798, where they established the small community of Vandecar. Blacksmiths, carriage makers, and a sulphur match factory followed,¹⁹ while nearby farmers grew barley, wheat, oats, peas, rye, core, buckwheat, and potatoes.²⁰ Further along the curvaceous, forested stage route through East Oxford, the village of Oxford Centre emerged at the geographical centre of the township.²¹ Anchored by a general store and a post office, the village boasted a tavern, Methodist and Anglican churches, a school,²² and a new township hall built in 1910 for the grandiose sum of \$2000.00. When road and rail networks redirected travellers to Oxford Centre in the early twentieth century, the settlement's rise saw Vandecar fall into decline and lose both its church and post office. "This once thriving village, on Stage Road, has now been incorporated into the surrounding farms and homes," a women's institute history observed. The small settlement of Oriel faced a similar fate. Its two Methodists churches combined when congregations thinned and its post office closed with the advent of rural mail delivery in 1909, which meant that neighbouring farmers no longer needed to head into the village to pick up their mail.²³

East Oxford "is a really splendid township, perhaps, the best in the county," Smith's 1846 *Ontario Gazetteer* boasted. "There is little or no wastelands, and the timber quality is hard wood, well watered and few or no swamps. The Great Western Railroad runs through nearly the entire township, running most of the way parallel with the Government Road about 40 chains from it."²⁴ While the township's natural attributes gave it potential, the access to a railway made it particularly enticing. The development of steam-powered railways in the nineteenth century revolutionized transportation in Canada and played a key role in the country's economic expansion. By opening new markets, connecting distant regions, and generally quickening the pace of Canadian life, railways directly benefitted Ontarians living on the agricultural frontier. Businessmen gained easier access to new consumers for industrial goods, farmers more efficient means to export their products, and people enjoyed new options to travel for work, leisure, or education. Maps from the

crude conveyances, [were] a daily sight."¹⁷

The township of East Oxford was first surveyed in 1793, and the first deed was registered nine years later. By 1875 its population exceeded 2000 people, although it fell modestly by the turn of the twentieth century. "Many pages of history have travelled down the Stage Road," a local his-

early twentieth century show the criss-crossing tracks of different railway lines that connected land-locked residents of Oxford County to markets and eliminated the need to cart their produce or livestock all the way to Port Burwell, Port Dover, or Woodstock. Although the tracks of these rail lines are long gone, a string of apparently haphazardly-placed telephone poles crossing open fields of wheat and corn, as well as snippets of walking trails in South Norwich, serve as quiet reminders of the railways that were once an essential and necessary means of transportation.

Railway routes obviously shaped settlement patterns in the townships. For example, running along the northern boundary of East Oxford, the Great Western Railway line connected the township to nearby Woodstock and Hamilton. The northernmost community of Eastwood had always been a hub for transportation, first by the “Great Plank Road” (later known as the “Stone Road”) before the railway confirmed this status. In addition to processing shipments of locally-produced brick, the railway station was flanked by expansive stockyards.²⁵ Another major rail artery, the Port Dover and Lake Huron Line of the Grand Trunk Railway, stretched from Stratford to Lake Erie, connecting ports on the lake to inland settlements in the north. Travelling south from the hub at Woodstock through East Oxford, the first station was Curries Crossing, formerly known as Zion. The railway line crossed the Norwich Road through Curry Farm just below the original settlement. A frequent stop for mail delivery and for students travelling by train to high school in Woodstock, Curries – like many towns in the townships – boasted dairy and cheese factories, as well as an apple and turnip evaporator. The Methodist church, built in 1891, stood at the heart of the community.²⁶

Malcolm Smith Schell was one of the local residents involved in building the impressive red brick church at Curries. The Schell family was well established in the area, having emigrated from the United States to Toronto and then to East Oxford in the 1840s, where Jacob and Catherine decided to grow their large family.²⁷ Their resourceful son Malcolm, born in 1855, expanded the original family holdings through business endeavours with brother Walter.²⁸ The two bred pedigreed short-horn cattle and ran the family lumberyard. His business acumen was matched by political aspirations, and in 1904 Malcolm was elected to represent Oxford South



Passenger train service in the townships, 1916



Malcolm Schell

in the House of Commons. Aware of the challenges of rural life facing his constituents, Schell published a treatise on “The Farmer’s View” in 1911. The subject was reciprocity, but his arguments for acceptance of the measure were accompanied by the dire message that Ontario’s rural population was decreasing. Quoting statistics of growth in urban centres and decline in rural areas, he pointed out that “farmers and farmers’ sons would not leave the farm if the conditions were equally favourable as those of our towns and cities.” Protective of the communities he represented, Schell insisted that “no growth of cities or increase of wealth can compensate for any loss

in either the number or character of our rural population.”²⁹ The trend lines were disconcerting for those who continued to conceive of Ontario and agriculture as synonymous. “Municipal coats of arms sprouted scythes and sheaves as did the ornamental sculpture on public buildings, bank notes were engraved with the symbols of farming, cartoonists represented Old Man Ontario sometimes as a hayseed, sometimes as a nobly-muscled son of the soil, always as a farmer,” W.H. Graham wrote. “The pre-eminence of agriculture enhanced the rural dwellers’ self-esteem.” They had cleared the forests to make way for the fields, saw themselves as the engine of the provincial economy, and the largely Protestant population “knew they were the guardians of the country’s moral tone.”³⁰ Schell’s farm, despite being only 5 miles away from Woodstock, was unabashedly rural in its orientation, as were his politics.

While Amelia Poldon’s local histories provided descriptions of bountiful harvests, vibrant communities, and farmer prosperity, Schell’s more pessimistic warnings about the decline of rural Ontario and small communities fading out of existence as farmers’ sons abandoned agriculture for city life would echo through communities during the upcoming war. An editorial from adjacent Middlesex County seemed to support the MP’s views: farm families had shrunk from five or six boys to only two on average, “the spare boy that could be gotten along without has gone to the city or the west,” and help was “scarce on the farms in the farming districts.”³¹ Malcolm and his wife Josephine lived this first-hand. The politician had grown up with seven siblings, five of whom were boys. He and his wife had only one son, Malcolm “Douglas” Schell, and he had left the farm to study at the University of Toronto. Without sons to share the burden of farm labour, Malcolm Sr. had to hire farm workers from outside of the area to cultivate his fields. Farmers complained of chronic shortages of men while, at the same time, the amount of land under cultivation increased and politicians trumpeted the importance of greater production. This reality would become a topic of intense political debate during the First World War, when enlistment drives – and ultimately conscription – enticed or compelled men to abandon their farmer overalls for khaki soldier uniforms.

The Grand Trunk railroad tracked a diagonal path southeast from Curries

Crossing, past Schell's farm, to the next station at Burgessville. First settled in 1811, the community was renamed in 1848 after the locally-born owner of a blacksmithing and carriage business. It soon blossomed into a village replete with shops, mills, a hotel, cheese factory, and train station. By the turn of the century, this "village in the orchards" shipped fruit around the world from a two-story cement packing house run by a local fruit growers' co-operative. With its adjacent stockyards and mountains of apples in wooden barrels, the Burgessville railway station was a hive of activity. Farrington's cheese factory flourished, local students attended a new large two room brick school, the Independent Telephone Company grew from a single line to a switchboard for 200 lines within a year, an automobile garage arrived, and a public library opened in 1911. These material indicators of growth and vitality helped propel the settlement to achieve police village status in 1915.³²

Natural features also shaped settlement patterns in the township. Water was essential to any human habitation, and the various water courses that flowed through the area satiated farms and settlements. In *The Story of Norwich*, local historian Ross Butler observed that "every village and hamlet in this area was founded upon

the Otter Creak or one of its tributaries."³³ The drainage basin of the Otter, which originates near Burgessville and meanders 42-kilometres in a southwesterly direction before emptying into Lake Erie, covered most of North and South Norwich townships. Along its tributaries were villages like Holbrook – a once-burgeoning village with a hotel, tavern and amenities that



The main four corners in Burgessville, circa 1920



Burgessville School, circa 1914



Holbrook house and store, 1913

fell into decline after a keen advocate of temperance purchased and then promptly closed the hotel and tavern in 1880. Population decline led to the folding of the Presbyterian church in 1910, and Holbrook's general store and post office following suit three years later.³⁴

Despite lacking stream, coach or rail, the peripheral towns of Newark and Zenda grew on the western edge of North Norwich Township. Newark lay three miles due south of Holbrook, and the small settlement of Zenda lay further west along the border of New Durham Township. Polden proclaimed Newark to be another small, bustling farming village boasting "well-cultivated [farms] and a number of fine residences."³⁵ Agriculture also flourished near railway stops such as Norwich Junction, a small settlement in the centre of North Norwich Township where the two railway lines crossed.

The visitor travelling southeast from Burgessville by creek, rail or road found themselves, after eight kilometres, at the main settlement of Norwich.³⁶ The provincial *Historical Atlas* of 1877 offered a pleasant description of the village, much of which remained relevant four decades later:

Norwich bids fair to rival the most prosperous and progressive of the towns of Oxford.... It is the centre of the most wealthy portion of the county. It is the resting place of the Quakers, who contributed so materially to the well-being of the county and whose descendants still cultivate broad acres and ornament the society of the township. The Port Dover and Lake Huron railway and the Brantford and Port Burwell railway cross at Norwich. It is the centre of our great fruit section and cheese business of the country is well represented in the neighbourhood. Norwich has large manufacturing establishments, good stores, connection with Woodstock and Brantford by post routes, churches, schools, etc. Had the Quakers not rebelled against the jail and court house, it might have become the county town.³⁷

The settlement's Quaker origins began when Peter Lossing obtained land in 1808 and convinced family and friends to join him in "Norwich Ville." The village grew steadily, boasting the first commercial cheese factory in Ontario by 1864, and



Norwich downtown street men congregating during the I.O.O.F Anniversary, 4 May 1908

was formally incorporated in 1876. That same decade, a block of red brick buildings went up on the northeast corner of Main and Stover streets and the village introduced an electric lighting system (run off a threshing machine) to illuminate the downtown in 1890.³⁸ Local residents sought to cast away moral darkness as well, with Norwich's nickname of "Sodom" bespeaking a reputation for drunkenness and vice – a clear affront to the village's quaker roots. Various waves of the temperance movement seeking to ban the "demon drink" swept through Norwich in the last half of the nineteenth century, with a local chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union providing women with an outlet for civic activism beginning in 1884. In 1908, an orchestrated campaign supported by the reeve, councillors, and local ministers led the town council to rescind the liquor licenses held by two of the four hotels in Norwich. "There is practically no drunkenness in the village, though there are instances where individuals will take a trip to Woodstock or some adjacent town and bring it in by the bottle," Amelia Poldon noted in 1914.³⁹ The campaign against alcohol, which was close to its peak when the war broke out that year, would soon be cast as a patriotic measure to preserve time and resources for the war effort.

Like most mid-sized Ontario towns, Norwich trumpeted its industriousness, superior agricultural products, and spirit of progress on the eve of the Great War. Various Protestant churches catered to the spiritual needs of town residents and farm families from the surrounding countryside. (The nearest Roman Catholic Church in LaSalette lay just outside the township boundary, and Poldon noted that there were very few Catholic families in Nor-

wich.) Local businesses flourished in the early twentieth century, providing ample employment opportunities for young men from the region and for the laboring class of new immigrants who poured into Canada at that time. A fruit evaporator in the southwestern part of the village employed about fifty people. Mr. Allen's Vinegar Works and Apple Juice Plant was the largest industrial enterprise in Norwich, with 50-60 employees processing about 100,000 bushels of apples annually. Other major businesses included a modern broom-making factory on the site of an old woollen mill, brick and tile factories, and the Borden Milk Condenser which had



Allen's Vinegar Works (above) and the Norwich Grist Mill (below)



opened in the summer of 1913. A new grist mill benefitted from the introduction of hydro-electric power, as did local homes illuminated by electric lamps.⁴⁰

One of the great houses of the time stood at 51 Stover Street North, its Italianate design, two-storey bay windows, and large wrap-around porch bespeaking wealth and prestige. Built in 1881 by medical doctor and school principal Dr. Fitzgerald Sutherland and his wife Jean Matheson, it was in this white-brick dwelling where Donald Matheson Sutherland (born in 1879) spent his youth – and would return to recuperate from injuries sustained in the Great War. Sutherland studied at Wood-



Donald Matheson Sutherland

stock Collegiate Institute and then the University of Toronto to follow in his father's footsteps and become a doctor. He set up a private practice in Princeton (North Oxford) in 1906 where he cultivated a strong interest in the militia, following in the footsteps of his uncles John, Neil, and Hugh, all of whom were army officers.⁴¹

The Oxford Militia boasted a long military history dating back to the War of 1812, and had been reorganized in 1863 as the 22nd Battalion Volunteer Militia, The Oxford Rifles, headquartered in Woodstock. The regiment helped repel the Fenian Raids in the mid-1860s (when the US-based Irish Brotherhood failed in their bid to capture and then ransom British North America as leverage for Irish independence), quashed "Whiskey riots" in Woodstock in 1868, and sent a small detachment to fight with the Royal Canadian Regiment during the South African (Boer) War in 1899. Following that war, the 22nd occupied a new armoury in Woodstock complete with a gymnasium, bowling alley, and ballroom. The regiment was reorganized as a city corps in 1905, with a mounted infantry detachment forming in the rural areas, headquartered in Brantford, as the 24th Regiment (Grey's Horse).⁴² Having previously served with the Oxford Rifles, 28-year-old Donald M. Sutherland was appointed co-captain of "A" squadron of the Grey's Horse in 1908. On their mounts, wearing the traditional scarlet uniform with yellow facings,⁴³ Sutherland and his militia colleagues from the county perpetuated a long history of military service that they would soon extend into the Great War itself.

The stories of the annual summer camps that local militia men attended were covered in regional newspapers, which pulled together stories from across the townships. The *Norwich Gazette*, a weekly paper that operated out of the Miller block on the main street in Norwich, supplemented the news from larger centres with a uniquely local brand of story that promoted "the interests of Norwich and the districts around, upholding its virtues, forgetting its faults," and self avowedly promoting items "of an uplifting character."⁴⁴ A large percentage of the paper was dedicated to "Town Talk" and to columns submitted by representatives from the surrounding small communities, including New Durham which technically fell within Burford



The Miller block on Main St. Norwich, c.1910

Familiar Fields to Foreign Soil

Township of Brant County, but whose school and cemetery were located within North Norwich Township.⁴⁵ Accordingly the *Norwich Gazette* regularly reported on the “goings-on” of New Durham residents.

Directly south of New Durham, edging the township line, was Norwich Gore or The Gore, a “fine farming community” with “great

brick residences” in a wedge-shaped area that jugged out to form the southeastern boundary of the townships.⁴⁶ One Quaker family arrived from America in 1851 and built such a house: a large, simple, triple-bricked home. Thirty-five years later, Charles Crabb (who always omitted the “e,” unlike son William Crabbe), born in New Brunswick of United Empire Loyalist stock, moved to this property known as “Pine Pond.” The farm comprised eighty-five acres of “prime agricultural land” on Quaker St. East, North Norwich Township. For Charles, wife Elizabeth Grifon, and their young daughter, the farm seemed perfectly situated.⁴⁷ There, on 9 December 1890, William was born, the third of seven children. At the age of five, he started his formal education in the little, two-room country school at Norwich Gore, which was a mile-and-a-half walk from their home. His older sister May was the “fighter type” who joined William in “beating back the larger boys when they took a notion to trim me up,” he later recalled. The Crabbe children attended Sunday School at the old Methodist Church, which was usually followed by a “fire and brimstone” sermon from the circuit preacher.⁴⁸ All in all he remembered a pleasant upbringing of hardwork, outdoor activities, and resourceful self-sufficiency.

“The Old Farm was well laid out,” William reminisced in his memoirs. The house was backed by a row of evergreen trees, and flanked by a grove with cedar hedges on one side and pine trees on the other, where the family used to hold picnics. “Farming in those days was not quite the same as it is today,” he noted later in life. They walked behind the horse-



Students of the Gore School, 1903. William Crabbe, age 11, is presumably amongst those photographed.

drawn plough to guide it, as “the mechanical age had not as yet arrived.” His father usually had a dozen milking cows, with younger ones to raise as well, and a team of three or four horses that worked the fields and took the family to church or to the village. Their mother made all of their clothing, from their jackets to their socks, as well as the carpets that adorned their home which were furnished from used cloth that was washed, torn into strips, rolled into balls, and woven into carpet rolls. Given the effort involved, “it was not many rooms that had carpets,” William recalled. The children swam in the nearby swimming hole, ate lots of varieties of apples as well as cherries, peaches, plums, grapes, walnuts and butternuts, and made maple syrup in the woods. It was a simple life, but a fulfilling one.⁴⁹

William quit school and joined the paid workforce at the age of sixteen. Like many young men in rural Ontario, he chose to leave the farm and bounced between jobs over the next decade. He started out as part of a gang of men who picked, graded, and shipped apples from the Niagara region to England for “\$1.25 a day which was a fair wage in those days.” The following spring, he assisted at a combined grocery store and post office in Clarkson. The next winter, his sister, who worked as a sales lady at the Eaton’s department store in Toronto, got him a job in the company’s women’s clothing factory (earning \$6.00/week and paying \$2.75 for room and meals/week – even less than the \$1.00/day he would receive as a soldier). Feeling “restless” by the following summer, he worked as a farmhand at Ryckman’s Corners near Hamilton. Then, like many young men from Ontario, prospects of employment and adventure lured him West at the end of August. He got off the train in Winnipeg with his Harvester’s ticket and quickly found employment with a farmer and a thresher heading north to a small town called Grand View to pitch sheaves and haul them to the threshing machine. Days began at sunrise and ended at sundown. “It was a real healthy work,” William recalled fondly. When his plans to head to Vancouver fell through in October, he went back to Ontario to help his father for a few weeks, worked as an apprentice molder at the Oshawa Iron Works for a half day before deciding that he did not like it, and finally resumed his old job at the Eaton’s factory in Toronto. The next May, when his “feet got itchy again,” William decided to go West yet again. In Sudbury, an old work colleague convinced him to



Five-horse team pulling a harrow, 1917

disembark and got him a job as a time keeper and freight clerk for the Algoma Eastern Railway.⁵⁰ The young man from North Norwich found his place working for the railroad, and he would spend most of his working career in this sector – before and after he went off to war.

Back in Ontario, the Otter Creek and the well-travelled trail between Otterville and

Norwich followed a meandering path looping east past the rural district of Milldale (formerly Newtown), skirting the banks of the millpond that attracted the first settlers to this area. The glory days of this small community had already passed, with its saw mill, grist mill, and pump factory all closing just before the Great War. (The Methodist church, which had originally been a Quaker Friends Meeting house built on the site of a demolished tavern, also would close in 1917.)⁵¹ Although the settlement itself was in decline, the farms surrounding it were not. As in the rest of the townships, their productive fields were planted with mixed crops, their barns housed dairy cattle that provided for the cheese industry, and their gardens fed families. Old brick farm houses were upgraded as new generations took ownership of them, and new barns, sheds, and other buildings went up as symbols of growth and progress.

To the southeast of Milldale, the Innis family first took up farming in South Norwich Township on Lot 4, Concession 10 at some point in the mid-nineteenth century when Samuel and his wife Sarah settled there, joined the Baptist church, and raised twelve children. "It must at one time have had considerable stands of pine if one were to judge only from the size of the stumps," their great-grandson Harold Innis reflected in his memoir. "The oak stumps disappeared at a fairly early stage but the larger pine stumps persisted, and were only gradually removed, apparently by a stumping machine and found their places in the stump fences of the period." Their experiences in carving an agrarian frontier out of the forest were shared by other local pioneers. It was a life of "hard manual work in driving oxen for the extraction of stumps and in the hauling of oak and possibly pine square timber," Harold noted. His parents William and Christina settled on a 100-acre farm (one mile long and 52 rods wide) almost directly north of the original farmstead, located along what became known as Oak Ridge. The topography was typical of the area, "made up in the north part below the ridge chiefly of sandy fields and in the south part of a rather heavy grade of clay and in the extreme southern fields of sand." Hickory nut, butternut, and chestnut trees served as reminders of the old forests that had dominated before settlers had cleared the fields.⁵²

Harold Innis ("Herald" on his birth certificate) was born in a 20' x 25' frame house on 5 November 1894. His earliest memories included his father milking cows to fulfill a dairy contract. "Cans of milk from the farmers in the area were hauled to the Bookton Cheese factory," Harold recalled. His mother, Christina "washed from eight to eleven [milk] cans per day preparatory to the next day's work," raised



For women of the time, family gardens were both a necessity and a great source of pride. Picture of prize-winning garden and gardener, 1916.

poultry and vegetables, and exchanged eggs at the general store for household necessities. "Her indefatigable energy was evident at every turn, notably in ways and means of avoiding dependence on the store and of increasing the output of the farm,"⁵³ her son observed. This was typical of farm women at the turn of the century, who believed that food production was the most worthy national task and who shared a sense of agrarian idealism that celebrated hard, honest work, sobriety, and self-sufficiency.

Conditions improved as the nineteenth century drew to a close. The family made more money by raising hogs and cattle, adopted new farming methods, built a brick wall around the farm house that attached a new brick house to the old one, and erected a silo in 1910 to replace the corn crib. "It was built at a period when great numbers of silos were being put up and when winter dairying had become much more important," Harold explained. "This meant the milking of cows during the winter season, the production of creams, and the use of the cream separator and the sale of the product, chiefly to city firms, among which Eaton's in Toronto was important." The binder replaced the scythe for the harvesting of grain, horse-drawn threshing machines ventured from farm to farm, separators were installed outside barns (so that grain could be taken to the granary and the straw blown into the barn), and seed was imported, all increasing the size of the fields and the efficiency of farm operations in the township. "With all these changes by 1910, farming became distinctly mechanized," Innis noted, making "farming into an operation which was much less arduous in character." The family farm showed the outward signs of improvement. The extent of cultivated land increased, owing partly to community tiling efforts that improved drainage. They built a new shed and pig pen, a cement cistern to collect rainwater, and wire fences replaced the previous stump fences. By 1911, the family had even installed its first telephone.⁵⁴

At the age of five, young Harold began his schooling at School Section (S.S.) No. 1, South Norwich, located about a half mile from the family farm. "As a one-room school, it meant that the teacher was compelled to devise ways and means of instructing a large number of students of different ages and of different levels of training and ability," he recalled. Harold passed the public entrance examination



Harold Innis stands amongst his school fellows in the back row, farthest boy to the right.

for continuation school at the age of eleven and attended Otterville School, located about three miles west of the Innis family farm, in 1906-07. He saw it as “an entirely new community,” with its unique games and traditions.⁵⁵

The thriving community of Otterville was enjoying its centenary year when Innis arrived there to attend high school. A stream below the fork of Sweet’s and Otter Creeks provided ideal conditions for early mill operations, giving rise to a “beautiful, clean and flourishing village” amidst the white pine that covered the region.⁵⁶ A varied population of United Empire Loyalists, Quakers, Irish, and African-Americans settled side by side. By the mid-nineteenth century, Otterville boasted twelve steam and fourteen water power mills, a sulphur match factory, a shoe factory, and an inventor who produced a

stumping machine used in land clearing across Canada. Amelia Poldon’s reflective sketch of the settlement painted a portrait of steady growth into the early twentieth century, relating that Otterville was “in a very prosperous condition,” with “fine buildings and private residences.” An acetylene gas plant powered electric lighting along the paved main street, a water system serviced homes and three churches (Methodist, Baptist, and Anglican), and small businesses – druggists, shoemakers, butchers, apiarists, furniture makers, cheesemakers, millwrights, and carriage builders – serviced local needs (and, in the case of the Otterville Manufacturing Co., exported piano stools throughout Canada and the British Empire). The vil-



Downtown scenes: looking west from the townhall, fire-hall, druggist, and bank in winter (above); the Otterville Hotel and mainstreet looking east to the bank (below)



Otterville Park and the mill pond, 1908



Otterville Grand Trunk Station, circa 1910

it “a fine resort of picnic parties” and a popular camping destination for young people.⁵⁷

For other amenities, however, township residents would have to venture to larger urban areas. The townships did not have the population to sustain post-secondary education institutions, but the railway connected the academically-inclined to the Woodstock Collegiate Institute. For Harold Innis this meant that, after completing one year at Otterville High School, he would leave the farm before 7 o’clock in the morning, walk two miles to the train station, and ride the Grand Trunk for 20 miles to Woodstock. It was here, in the county hub, that Harold got his first taste of the military. “An outstanding event of the period at Woodstock Collegiate Institute in the minds of many students was the meeting at the cadet camp in London,” he recalled. The students brought “the usual articles”: knife, fork, spoon, cup, plate, underclothing, towels, and an “ordinary cadet uniform.” Spending a week in London, Ontario, was exciting: “it meant a new city and experience with the more or less large-scale operations employed in army life: the handling of great carcasses of beef, mutton etc, enormous quantities of bread. All this mass accumulation of material was something with which most of us had no previous experience.” It was a stark contrast to his upbringing in South Norwich Township. “I doubt whether we learned much in the way of drill, other than to have a sort of nodding acquaintance with the way in which an army camp operates,” Innis conceded.⁵⁸ These camps, like the cadets more generally, helped to weave a “cult of manliness” and militarism into the fabric of Ontario society, associating military service with adventure, patriotic loyalty, and enthusiasm to defend Canada and the broader British Empire if the need arose.⁵⁹

Harold Innis’s prewar experiences drew him back to South Norwich before launching him to Toronto and eventually to the battlefields of Europe. Having obtained his teaching credentials with lightning speed by 1912, Harold’s father (who was a school board trustee) persuaded him to teach for a term at his old school near the family farm. “The adventure on the morning on which school opened of going, at the age of sixteen, to teach some who had been students with me in that school and others who were the brothers and sisters of those who had been with me, was perhaps the most terrifying experience of my life,” Harold recalled. By the follow-

lage’s hidden gem, Otter Park, was created when local residents purchased and cleared an acre of land around the turn of the century and built a footbridge across Otter Creek to reach the site. This park, of “restful groves,” and “fine ball grounds” (still used today), made Otterville “quite a summer attraction for visitors,” with tables, booths, swings, and stocked fish in the adjacent creek making



Street view of the main intersection of Hawtrey looking southward

war of words waged between Liberal leader Sir Wilfrid Laurier and Conservative leader Robert Borden over Canada's contribution to the British Royal Navy over the following year from Toronto, where he began his studies at McMaster University – a path that would eventually take him overseas to serve in a Canadian and imperial war effort directly.

The rail lines running south from Otterville crossed through more farms and small communities on their way towards Lake Erie. Dairy was the main industry in this area until the 1930s, when the region's sandy soils proved ideally suited to growing tobacco. The Port Dover Line turned sharply east passing through the southern-most part of South Norwich Township, making a stop at the village of Hawtrey, first settled in 1868. "Supplies and mail came into Hawtrey by the Grand Trunk Railway and Michigan Central Railway, and the farmers shipped their milk to Toronto on the G.T.R.," a sesquicentennial township history noted.⁶⁰ Because the village had two railway stations – one at each end of the community – it had developed



Jane Stringham and Alice Treffry in Summerville, 1918

two commercial centres. By the early 1900s, a string of houses lined the roadway between the two stations, and the village boasted a couple of blacksmiths shops, a gospel hall, and a town hall in addition to its hotels and tavern.⁶¹ Hawtrey residents travelled three-quarters of a mile to attend church in nearby Summerville, which had two Methodist churches (Wesleyan and Episcopal), a cheese factory, and an orchestra. Today, all that remains of the "wide awake, enthusiastic rural section," as Poldon depicted Summerville,⁶² is its small cemetery along Highway 59.

To the west of Norwich, the southern trajectory of the Brantford, Norfolk & Port Burwell Railway angled southwest to "the Spittler" (the small Otter tributary of Spittler Creek) at Springford. Poldon's account of the community reminded readers

ing winter, he returned to the farm. His mind, however, was following developments in the wider world. He invested some of his teaching earnings in a subscription to the *Toronto Globe* newspaper, and followed with "great interest and spirit" the epic parliamentary debate then transpiring in Ottawa over the role that Canada should play in the Empire. He would follow the acrimonious

of a bygone era when the village had been the centre of a prosperous lumber business that had faded when settlers finished clearing away the pines and focused instead on tilling the soil and raising livestock. The area was “now occupied by wealthy farmers,” she wrote, “who reside in beautiful residences, fine farm buildings, splendid orchards, [and] valuable herds of cattle (mostly Holsteins).” Springfield itself was only “a modest little hamlet” by 1906, with Methodist and Baptist churches, a school, and only a few businesses remaining: a painter, cheesemaker, general store, harness maker, and blacksmith.⁶³ Although it did not boast the same number or size of businesses as Otterville or Norwich, it still catered to a prosperous farming community and retained a strong sense of community pride. While proudly ensconced in South Norwich Township, Springfield residents were connected to the wider world by rail and had ready access to work or high school just across the township lines in the town of Tillsonburg, where the local newspapers readily claimed Springfield families as their own.⁶⁴

The Otter Creek meandered south and then west of Otterville, passing just south of the small community of Cornell. Originally named Farmersville and located six miles east of Tillsonburg, it boasted the same population (100) in 1908 as it had fifty years earlier.⁶⁵ An iron smelter that inspired early settlement had disappeared, as had a pork packing plant. Although the South Canadian Railway went through the small settlement, the main station had gone to St. Thomas rather than Cornell, spelling the village’s fate. Dairy and cheese factories offered some local employment, but enterprise was stagnant and Cornell’s post office and church closed their doors in 1914.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, farmers spanned the length of Cornell Road and the surrounding countryside in the southwest corner of the township, including small crossroad settlements like New Road, Rock’s Mills, and Rosanna, until invisible township limits – delineated by the end of one farm and the start of another – marked the passage from South Norwich into Dereham Township to the west or Norfolk County to the south.

Poldon’s historical tour of the townships highlighted devoted, hard-working, enterprising pioneers who had cleared the land, plowed the soil, built businesses, and forged communities. Underlying all of her narratives was the land – the foundation upon which the human history of the townships had been built. She turned

to George Monro Grant, a prominent Canadian church minister, writer, and political activist, to encapsulate the beauty of Norwich, the “Orchard Township” as he called it in his 1884 book *Picturesque Canada: The Country As It Was and Is*. His description was indeed picturesque, laden with the sunny language of the day and analogies to familiar European touchstones. “As we approached Norwich Ville, in the time of the fruit harvest, and saw



Rocks Mill's, the center of trade for the westerly section of South Norwich Township

the fair daughter of the west among the golden apples and yellowing pears, we seem to have found the long sought gardens of the Hebrides,” Grant wrote. “But the golden russets and the Flemish beauties are guarded by no dragons, here all are ‘Friends’” – an illusion to the region’s Quaker heritage. It was a land of plenty: of “choicest fruits” that would grace “the winter sideboards of the stately homes of England.”⁶⁷ Writing two decades later, Poldon advanced this image of a preeminent farming area, boasting of the Norwich townships’ stellar reputation for world-class agriculture and dairy products. “In driving through the township, the traveller will be surprised to see the stately farm residences, the splendid Barns, etc., the high-bred cattle in the fields, also the magnificent orchards of fruit trees, well kept lawns, and beautiful shade trees, generally the maple,” she wrote. The cities had their “merchant princes,” but her area was filled with “agricultural princes,” men “of sterling worth” who represented “the bone and sinew of our land.”⁶⁸

When war clouds gathered in Europe in the summer of 1914, they cast an ominous shadow over the townships of Oxford County as they did the rest of Ontario, Canada, and the British Empire. A persistent Loyalist identity meant a strong sense of connection to Britain, and a general European war that drew in Britain would inherently draw in its loyal dominion as well. The pioneer Quaker tradition espoused hard work, sobriety, piety, and pacifism. Although a few conscientious objectors would cling to the latter ideal during the war, most residents instead backed a war effort that called for “the bone and sinew” of their land – their young men – to head overseas to fight. Those who remained at home “did their bit” on the fields and in the villages of the townships. The experience would be transformative, bringing together the townships’ men, women, and children to support the war effort and, at the same time, raising challenging questions about roles, responsibilities, and required sacrifices. “At the close of the war conditions will make another change,” the *Norwich Gazette* anticipated in the fall of 1916. “They will never be as previous to July 1914.”⁶⁹ Ultimately, the Great War would affect every community, farm, and family in some way.



“Harvesting in Canada,” 1914

Notes

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- 2 W.H. Graham, *Greenbank: Country Matters in 19th Century Ontario* (Peterborough: Broadview Press 1988), 2.
- 3 Cecilia Morgan, "History, Nation, and Empire: Gender and Southern Ontario Historical Societies, 1890-1920s," *Canadian Historical Review* 82, no. 3 (2001): 491-528.
- 4 "Amelia Poldon, Historian," in *Norwich 1946: Old Home Week* (Norwich: Township of Norwich, 1946), 42-43; and Poldon, *The Amelia Poldon History of the Norwiches* (Norwich: Norwich and District Historical Society, 1985).
- 5 W.J. Wintemberg, *Uren Prehistoric Village Site, Oxford County, Ontario*, National Museum of Canada Bulletin No. 51 (Ottawa: FA Acland, 1928).
- 6 *Otterville-South Norwich Sesquicentennial 1807-1957* (Otterville: Township of South Norwich, 1957), 1.
- 7 Mabel Burkholder, *History of Central Ontario (Southwestern)* (Montreal: L.M. Durant, 1951), 203.
- 8 Poldon, *Amelia Poldon History of the Norwiches*, 4.
- 9 Bond's Federated Farm Women's Club, *A History of East Oxford Township* (Eastwood, 1967), 1-2.
- 10 W.J. Wintemberg, *The Place and Stream Names of Oxford County, Ontario* (Toronto: Ontario Historical Society, 1925), 7.
- 11 See South Norwich Historical Society (SNHS), *South of Sodom: The History of South Norwich* (Otterville: SNHS, 1983), 104-7.
- 12 Bond's Federated Farm Women's Club, *History of East Oxford*, 3.
- 13 Poldon, *Amelia Poldon History of the Norwiches*, 3, 28-29; and Stella Mott, ed., *Sesquicentennial Souvenir of North Norwich and Norwich, 1810-1960* (London: London Free Press, 1960), 13.
- 14 In 1901 the entire electoral district of Oxford South comprised 22,760 people, including the three townships that presently comprise Norwich Township, the towns of Ingersoll and Tillsonburg, and the townships of Dereham, West Oxford, and North Oxford. 1901 Census, Electoral District map no.54.
- 15 Major R. Cuthbertson Muir, *The Early Political and Military History of Burford* (Montreal: La Cie d'Imprimerie Commerciale Quebec, 1913), 23.
- 16 H.E. Durant, ed., *Short History of Oxford* (Woodstock: Historical Foundation, 1951), 204; Bond's Federated Farm Women's Club, *A History of East Oxford Township* (1967), 1; and Mel Robertson, "Our Ancient 'Trail': No. 53 Highway," *Burford Times*, 12 April 2000.
- 17 Muir, *Early Political and Military History*, 73.
- 18 Bond's Federated Farm Women's Club, *History of East Oxford*, 6.
- 19 Township of Norwich, *175 Years* (Norwich: Township of Norwich, 1985).
- 20 Bond's Federated Farm Women's Club, *History of East Oxford*, 9.
- 21 Floreen Ellen Carter, *Place Names of Ontario* (London: Phelps Publishing, 1984).
- 22 Township of Norwich, *175 Years*, 19; Norwich and District Historical Society (NDHS), *Oxford Centre Remembers* (Norwich: Norwich and District Archives Book Committee, 2010).
- 23 Bond's Federated Farm Women's Club, *History of East Oxford*, 26.
- 24 *Smith's Canadian Gazetteer, Canada West* (Toronto: H&W Rowsell, 1846).

- 25 Bond's Federated Farm Women's Club, *History of East Oxford*, 17. On the Plank Road, see Muir, *Early Political and Military History*, 75-76.
- 26 Carter, *Place Names of Ontario*, 283; and Township of Norwich, *175 Years*, 18. The church remains at corner of County Road 59 and Curries Road.
- 27 C. Denissen, "Schell, or, Researches after the descendants of John Christian Schell and John Schell" (Detroit: J. F. Eby, 1896).
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- 29 M.S. Schell, "The Farmer's View: A concise discussion of the Proposed Reciprocity Trade Agreement by M.S. Schell, of South Oxford, one of the richest and most prosperous districts in Canada," Woodstock Public Library, Local History section.
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- 31 Peter McArthur, "Country Recruits," *Globe*, 30 January 1915, reprinted in Barbara Wilson, *Ontario and the First World War, 1914-1918* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1977), 6.
- 32 Emma McCready, "History of Burgessville since 1812," in *Burgessville Memories: A Pictorial History of Burgessville* (Norwich: Norwich & District Archives, 2008), 5-6.
- 33 Ross Butler, "The Story of Norwich" (typescript, Woodstock Public Library, Local History section), 41.
- 34 Carter, *Place Names of Ontario*, 540; Poldon, *Amelia Poldon History of the Norwiches*, 103.
- 35 Poldon, *Amelia Poldon History of the Norwiches*, 67, 108. Newark was formerly Unionville. Wintemberg, *Place and Stream Names of Oxford County*, 23.
- 36 Poldon, *Amelia Poldon History of the Norwiches*, 100-102.
- 37 Durant, ed., *Short History of Oxford*, 228.
- 38 Poldon, *Amelia Poldon History of the Norwiches*, 89.
- 39 Poldon, *Amelia Poldon History of the Norwiches*, 93-95.
- 40 Poldon, *Amelia Poldon History of the Norwiches*, 72, 95, 97.
- 41 "Hon. Dr. Donald Matheson Sutherland," biographical sketch (source unknown) in Woodstock Public Library, Local History folders, "Sutherland, Donald Matheson (1880-1970); and "Recruits for Grey's Horse," *Norwich Gazette*, 14 August 1914.
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- 43 Marie Avey, "Stover Street house once home to war hero," *Norwich Gazette*, 28 August 2015. See also "Colonel Donald M. Sutherland, M.D.," Woodstock Public Library, Local History folders, "Sutherland, Donald Matheson (1880-1970).
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- 45 Township of Norwich, *175 Years*, 23.
- 46 Butler, "Story of Norwich," 149.
- 47 Marie Avey, "Cook Home One of Township's Oldest Brick Houses," *Norwich Gazette*, 17 August 2015.
- 48 William Barker Crabbe, "As it was in the Beginning," 1, Norwich and District Museum and Archives (NDMA).
- 49 Crabbe, "As it was in the Beginning," 2-3.
- 50 Crabbe, "As it was in the Beginning," 3-5.

Chapter 1

- 51 *Otterville-South Norwich Sesquicentennial 1807-1957* (Otterville: Township of South Norwich, 1957), 34.
- 52 Harold Innis, "Memoir of Harold Adams Innis Covering the Years 1894-1922," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 29, no.2 (2004).
- 53 Innis, "Memoir."
- 54 Innis, "Memoir."
- 55 Innis's family regularly travelled into Otterville before this point, with his biographer Donald Creighton noting that "the strict sense of values and the feeling of devotion to a cause, which became so characteristic of [Innis] in later life, were derived, in part at least, from the instruction imparted so zealously and unquestioningly inside the severely unadorned walls of the Baptist Church at Otterville." Creighton, *Harold Adams Innis: Portrait of a Scholar* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), 19.
- 56 Poldon, *Amelia Poldon History of the Norwiches*, 182.
- 57 Poldon, *Amelia Poldon History of the Norwiches*, 120-122. See also *Otterville-South Norwich Sesquicentennial*, 3.
- 58 Innis, "Memoir."
- 59 See Mark Moss, *Manliness and Militarism: Educating Young Boys in Ontario for War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).
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- 61 Ontario Ghost Towns, "Hawtrey," <http://www.ghosttownpix.com/ontario/intros/hawtrey.html>. Hawtrey would decline in the 1920s and 1930s when the railways were closed.
- 62 Poldon, *Amelia Poldon History of the Norwiches*, 113.
- 63 SNHS, *South of Sodom*, 325-342; and Township of Norwich, *175 Years*, 25.
- 64 Muir, *Early Political and Military History of Burford*, 114.
- 65 Carter, *Place Names of Ontario*, 518.
- 66 Township of Norwich, *175 Years*, 25; *Otterville-South Norwich Sesquicentennial*, 30-31; and interview with local historian Gail Lewis, 6 August 2018.
- 67 Poldon, *Amelia Poldon History of the Norwiches*, 53.
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- 69 *Norwich Gazette*, 2 November 1916.

2 “A call to uphold the honor and integrity of the Empire we love” The Townships Go to War

On a warm summer's day at the end of July 1914, Springford native Eddie Oatman took to the mound of the Delhi baseball diamond to pitch for the Otterville team. An impressive athlete, Oatman had gained national fame as a professional hockey player with the Quebec Bulldogs team that won the Stanley Cup in 1912. Playing for smaller stakes over rival Delhi, Oatman and the Otterville ball team began to suspect that the umpire favoured their opponent. After one particularly bad call, Eddie's younger brother Ross lost his temper and accused the umpire of favouritism who, in turn, threatened the teenager. Eddie rose to his brother's defence and the ensuing brawl left the umpire with minor injuries. When Delhi's magistrate arrived at the diamond, the injured man laid a charge of assault against Oatman who was promptly taken to jail in Simcoe. Two days later, to show their contempt for the charge, the Oatman family brought a suitcase full of one dollar bills to pay Eddie's bail of \$1200.



Eddie Oatman, 1912

The tale of Eddie Oatman's arrest appeared in the 31 July edition of the *Norwich Gazette* where it captured the attention of many residents in South Norwich. The affair “caused considerable excitement” in Otterville, the newspaper reported, and feelings “ran high” because townsfolk believed that their team was “being unfairly treated” – a sentiment apparently shared by other ball clubs in East Oxford and North Norwich which refused to play any more games against the Delhi team.¹ After digesting the entertaining local baseball drama, readers flipped the page in the *Gazette* and read a very different and alarming story: Russia was preparing for war with Austria-Hungary. It seemed that violence could only be averted through a “miracle” but the dispatch from London noted that British Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Sir Edward Grey, hoped to find a solution that would stop Europe's descent into war.²

Like other people around the world, township residents must have been shocked by the ominous turn of events. When Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip shot Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and his wife Sophie on the streets of Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, few believed that the assassination would lead to a general European war, especially when the murdered man's funeral did not bring immediate mobilization of armies or ultimatums. As part of a global telegraphic news network, the people of the townships kept abreast of the latest developments in Europe and the deep-seated tensions and potential

conflict in the Balkans.³ Discussions and debates over European politics and the requirements of imperial defence were commonplace over the previous decade, spurred by a steady stream of reports on imperial competition, economic rivalry, assassinations, naval races, and the build-up of armies as Europe divided into opposing alliances: the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy) and the Triple Entente (France, Russia, and Britain). These strategic tensions had crept into Canadian politics in 1910 and 1911, when the debate over whether Canada should contribute naval forces to the defence of the British Empire contributed to the fall of Sir Wilfrid Laurier and his Liberal Government. Canadians had read of violence breaking out in the Balkans on several occasions before 1914, but this had never escalated into a broader European War.

In East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich Townships, the dramatic tale of Ferdinand's assassination competed for the public's attention with several shocking local events that spring and early summer. The dramatic trial of the Fournier gang, responsible for a wave of robberies and assaults in North and South Norwich, had recently ended in Woodstock. The court gave the ring leader, George Fournier, eight years of hard time, while John and Walter Brown – whose mother had committed suicide when she heard of her sons' crimes – received light sentences after they promised that "they had turned over a new leaf, and would lead better lives in the future."⁴ (Their "better lives" would include service in the Canadian army.) The trial of Dr. Roy Riddell – a Norwich-based veterinarian who had performed a non-consensual and illegal surgery on his wife – continued to shock and polarize the community in June, particularly when a petition circulated asking that a pardon be given to the accused.⁵ The ongoing trial of W.E. Cunningham, a man who had sold a keg of beer to a friend in the "dry" town of Norwich, also sparked intense debate in the community.⁶ With these stories unfolding in their own backyards, the problems of the Balkans seemed a distant consideration to the townships' residents.

Throughout July 1914, people went about their usual business, absorbed in local concerns and priorities. They watched the agricultural markets, attended church socials, played baseball, and enjoyed the warm weather. It had been another good year for the dairy farmers of Oxford County and in the middle of the month the *Toronto Globe* ran a story on their successes. The county, the paper reported, held a "proud place among the dairy communities of Canada. In quality of stock, in record of breeding, in actual performance...the dairy cattle of Oxford Country hold an enviable and justifiable position."⁷ The *Globe* predicted another "golden harvest" for the county, if crops survived the "invasion" of army worms. These pests were "marching through" the oats and corn fields in Brant County and by the middle of July had started their assault on fields close to Norwich and Otterville. Millions were attacking crops and laying whole fields to waste. "Farmers," the *Globe* reported, "are facing a situation the like of which they have never before been called on to face." While some farmers burned fields to slow the army worms down, many found trenches far more effective.⁸ Some of the young men digging their trenches around Otterville and Norwich would soon find themselves doing so in very differ-

ent circumstances in France.

Then, on 23 July 1914, news broke that Austria had given a harsh ultimatum to Serbia, demanding it open its borders to an Austro-Hungarian investigation and take steps to root out all anti-Austrian propaganda and terrorist groups. Germany, which had already provided its ally with its famous “blank cheque” of support, publicly declared its backing of Austria-Hungary. Serbia rejected the drastic demands and on 28 July 1914 – the day before the big baseball game between Otterville and Delhi – Austria-Hungary declared war. Russia quickly ordered a general mobilization of its massive army, intent on aggressively defending Serbia and correctly anticipating the support of France. The *Norwich Gazette* suggested that only a “miracle” could stop a broader European conflict at this critical juncture. None came. Canadians watched as Germany declared war on Russia on 1 August and on France two days later. In the townships, thoughts about baseball, Eddie Oatman and the army worm were pushed aside as people awaited Britain’s response to Europe’s descent into war.

Germany’s strategy for a two-front war against Russia and France depended on a quick knock-out blow delivered to the French by bypassing the defences on the Franco-German border and invading via Belgium. On 4 August, the Germans launched their assault. Britain had committed to defending Belgium’s neutrality and on the day of Belgium’s invasion issued an ultimatum to Berlin demanding it halt the attack and start a full withdrawal. When Germany rejected the demand, Britain declared war shortly after 7 p.m. As a dominion of the British Empire with no control over its foreign affairs, Canada was automatically at war as well. The next day, readers of the *Toronto Globe* saw the headline, “Great Britain and Germany Are Now at War: The Bulwark of Britain’s Empire Goes Forth Against to Battle.”⁹ Local papers across Ontario soon broadcast similar information.

News that Canada would go to war in defence of the Empire inspired patriotic displays in cities and towns across the country. The *Tillsonburg Observer* announced that “excitement attendant upon the developments of the past few hours has stirred Western Ontario as it has never been stirred before.”¹⁰ People broke out into spontaneous renditions of Rule Britannia, waved flags, and paraded through streets. The majority of Canadians framed the war as a just one: the Germans had destroyed Europe’s peace, violated Belgium’s neutrality, and now threatened Britain. Belgian resistance had proven far stronger than the Germans had anticipated, prompting the invaders to commit atrocities against local populations in the small country. The *Norwich Gazette* fortified this perception of the war in its 7 August edition, which ran a story explaining that “the Germans committed repressions against the civil population of the town of Vise, eight miles northeast of Liege, burning the city and shooting many of the residents.”¹¹ Stories of Belgium’s brave defence, Britain’s stalwart support of Belgian neutrality, and the crimes committed by the Germans inspired and infuriated many Canadians in August 1914.

The war unified Canadians with widely different political views and cultural backgrounds – a unity reflected in the House of Commons. When Prime Minister Robert Borden spoke on Canada’s role in the war, he explained that:

In the awful dawn of the greatest war the world has ever known, in the hour when peril confronts us such as this empire has not faced for a hundred years, every vain or unnecessary word seems a discord. As to our duty, we are all agreed. We stand shoulder to shoulder with Britain and the other British dominions in this quarrel and that duty we shall not fail to fulfil as the honour of Canada demands. Not for the love of battle, not for lust of conquest, not for greed of possession, but for the cause of honour, to maintain solemn pledges, to uphold principles of liberty, to withstand forces that would convert the world into an armed camp.

Borden's long-time political opponent and leader of the Liberal opposition, Wilfrid Laurier, put the sentiment far more simply when he exclaimed that Canada was "Ready, aye, ready."¹²

A Call to Arms

Two days after Britain's declaration of war, Ottawa authorised the creation of an active service force for deployment overseas. The eccentric, energetic, and unstable Sam Hughes, the Minister of Militia since 1911, sent 226 telegrams to the commanders of militia units across the country ordering them to interview prospective recruits and start sending lists of volunteers to Ottawa. With these telegrams Canada's First Contingent started to take shape. To serve in this force, recruits had to be between 18 and 45 years of age, stand at least five feet three inches tall, have a chest measurement of 33.5 inches, and be prepared to serve for a year or however long the war might last. Recruiters were ordered to give preference to unmarried men, then married men without families, and finally married men with children. Medical officers were instructed to carefully examine the volunteers to screen out those with poor nutrition and illnesses, shallow chests, flat feet, and poor teeth. Meanwhile, Hughes initiated the construction of a massive military training camp at Valcartier near Quebec City, the destination for all new recruits.¹³

As the government's call to arms rang out across the country, the press, politicians and general public added their own appeals to the patriotism, loyalty, and masculinity of Canada's "youth and manhood." The representative of the townships in parliament, Conservative MP for Oxford South Donald S. Sutherland, embraced this rhetoric during a speech in the House of Commons on 9 August:

There is no mistaking the sentiment of the people of Canada. Today we are ready to face the issue, and justly so. The British Empire has been forced into a war to redeem its pledged word and insulted honour. This is no time for discussion or hesitation; all that can be done must be done.... Let us hope and pray that, before the crucial test comes in the present war, the flower of the youth and manhood of our nation, who are to-day volunteering by thousands, and who are ready if necessary, to sacrifice their lives for the cause of British liberty, which means the success of British arms and our national existence, may be found fighting shoulder to shoulder with the men of the motherland and the sister dominions....



Major D.M. Sutherland (seated in the second row with arms crossed) with the other officers of the 24th Grey's Horse

Sutherland concluded with a confident prediction that there existed “no sacrifice the occasion demands that the people of Canada are not prepared to make.”¹⁴

The nation-wide recruitment effort arrived in the townships in the form of another popular Sutherland – Major Donald Matheson Sutherland, a medical doctor who had orders to find recruits for his militia unit, the Grey's Horse.¹⁵ The officer had been born in Norwich in 1879 and was well known across the townships. When war broke out, Sutherland – who had offered his services even before Britain entered the conflict – received orders to bring his unit up to war strength and he arrived in Norwich looking for volunteers on 11 August.¹⁶ Soon after setting up in the town hall, Major Sutherland collected a small group of ten recruits, including William Burn. At 33, Burn was older than most recruits in the First Contingent, whose average age was 26. Born in Yorkshire, England, he had moved to Canada with his wife Martha in search of work. The couple settled in Norwich, where Burn worked as a labourer and an oilman. Like many members of the First Contingent, he had previous military experience, having served with the 38th Yeomanry in England. Burn was fit, had no children, and seemed an excellent recruit. On his way to Valcartier, however, he contracted a cold and the army sent him to a hospital in Quebec where he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. The military promptly ruled him “medically unfit for war service.” The news devastated Burn, who worried that people might think him a coward. He eventually asked the Department of Militia and Defence if there was “a Button of any description for me as it will be pretty Bad for me walking Round the City without Some Sort of a Distinguis[hing] Button.”¹⁷

Like Burn, many of the local men who volunteered with Major Sutherland failed to make the cut for Canada's First Contingent. Ernest Cole and Reginald Parker, for instance, left town with Sutherland but ended up enlisting later in the war. Another early recruit, Harry Cole, found himself deployed to Bermuda for garrison duty and only arrived in England in mid-1915. Plagued by illness, he was sent back home before ever reaching France.¹⁸ Others, like 20-year-old J.M. Finlay Dickson, an immigrant from Whitehaven, England, ended up returning to his home country to enlist. He would gain the rank of Lieutenant before being killed in action at

William Burn and J.M. Finlay Dickson were part of the largest demographic group to join the First Contingent: men born in Britain.²⁰ This was understandable, given the large influx of British-born immigrants to Canada in the preceding decade and their ongoing ties to their motherland. In the weeks that followed Major Sutherland's initial recruiting drive, several British-born residents of the townships answered the call to defend the "old country." Edgar Beeney, a 22-year-old insurance agent working in Burgessville who had been born in Netherfield, Kent, left for the training camp at Valcartier shortly after the onset of hostilities.²¹ William Moore, who had married a local Norwich girl and had been living in the town for several years, was in England visiting his mother when the war broke out. Having previously served in the 13th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, the British army considered Moore a re-



Major Sutherland leading members of the Grey's Horse

servist and called him into service.²² Other British-born labourers who had been working in the townships that summer also started the long journey home in August 1914 to join the fight. Young men born and raised in the townships also rushed off to enlist with the First Contingent. 24-year-old volunteer William Ansom Butts was born in Hawtrey and had been working as a farm labourer in East Oxford.²³ William Orrie Mitchell, only 20 years of age, grew up North Norwich and spent the previous few years working as a hardwood finisher and a hired dairy man. He also claimed some previous militia experience with the Oxford Rifles.²⁴ Nineteen-year-old Arthur Ellis Crabbe – the first of three Crabbe brothers to serve in the war – was one of the few farmers amongst the early wave of recruits from the townships.²⁵ Other volunteers, like Charles Edward Hart, Robert Gordon Buck, and Ernest LeRoy Underhill left jobs as bookkeepers and clerks.²⁶

Frederick Charles Bleakley looked more like a man hardened by manual labour than one who spent his days behind a bank desk. Standing over six feet tall and weighing over 185 pounds, the 27-year-old clerk towered over most recruits, who were on average 5'7" and weighed in under 150 pounds.²⁷ Bleakley enlisted with a proud family military history to live up to – his grandfather, George, had served in the Oxford Rifles for 27 years, had seen active service in the Fenian raids, and eventually reached the rank of Captain. Accordingly, Woodstock's *Daily Sentinel-Review*

reported that Bleakley had been “born in a family in which the best traditions of the British army were loyally upheld.” Throughout his school days in Norwich, the popular boy “was ever a leader among his classmates in every game of war. Never did patriotic zeal burn more brightly than in the captain of that little company of schoolmates which he drilled so zealously.”²⁸ As an adult, his interest in the military manifested in three years of militia service. Thus, as a child Bleakley dreamt of war, as an adult he trained for it, and now he was finally going to experience it.

As August turned to September, Bleakley joined the other clerks, farmers, labourers, and dairymen from the townships as they started their journeys to Valcartier. With limited time to organize and prepare, communities failed to provide proper send-offs to the first wave of volunteers – something they would regret and rectify in the months that followed.²⁹ Recruits who left with larger groups from Woodstock and Ingersoll, however, received an enormous outpouring of support. When Major Sutherland and the fifty men he had recruited for the Grey’s Horse departed Ingersoll on 20 August, hundreds crowded the train station in a heavy downpour to see them off with songs, cheers, and well wishes.³⁰ The next day, Edgar Beeney and William Orrie Mitchell experienced “scenes of enthusiasm never before witnessed” in Woodstock when thousands came out to cheer them on as they set out for Valcartier with the other members of the 22nd Oxford Rifles.³¹

As the men boarded the trains that would take them to training camp, they may have reflected on their decisions to go to war. Volunteers joined the First Contingent for a wide array of personal reasons. Many signed up to protect England and the Empire. Many enlisted because they thought it was the right thing to do. They accepted the war as a struggle of good versus evil, of liberty against German aggression, and reacted to stories about German atrocities in Belgium – of burnt towns, assaults on women, babies killed by bayonets, and summary executions. Although unemployment was a motivating factor for many Canadians (particularly in economically-depressed western Canada), most of those who joined from South Norwich, North Norwich, and East Oxford townships were gainfully employed. Accordingly, the basic rate of \$1.10 a day for a private would have held little appeal. Some, like Bleakley or William Orrie Mitchell, felt compelled to join because they were members of militia units. Others were caught up in the excitement of the moment, the sense of adventure, or the opportunity to see the world. School had taught the young men that war was noble and romantic, a true test of one’s manhood. Many enlistees also shared the popular misconception that the war would be over by Christmas.³²

Not everyone expressed unbridled enthusiasm for the war. William Moore, the reservist who had been visiting family in England and who now found himself attached to his old unit, shared a bleaker perspective on the war with his cousins-in-law back in Norwich in November 1914. His trip to visit his “darling mother” had turned out far differently than he had planned and, though he had hoped his “services would not be needed,” he had been called up, forcing him to leave his “true little wife” back in Norwich. “We are passing through a very critical time now,” Moore noted, “so much lays at stake.” He elaborated:

The whole world seems to be upset. I suppose you do not see it as we do here. We see the grim realities here, poor fellows coming back so terribly wounded...

My position is not to be envied, but I am going with a stout heart and if it be God's will that I shall return to you all, I shall have done my duty and I trust God I may return to the fill the gap I am leaving.

Christmas will be soon upon us again. I wish I could be in Norwich to spend it with you all. Well, however I am doing my best to make the best of it.

Don't think me a coward, I do not fear for myself, not a bit, I am quite willing to die for my country. ... I will keep you posted of my movements, I am sorry to write such a tragic letter but it is all that fills my mind at present.

Moore ended his letter explaining that it "is those I am leaving behind, what I think the most of, war is no respecter of persons."³³

Mobilizing the Home Front

As the first wave of men rushed off to volunteer, the war crept into the everyday lives of the people of North Norwich, South Norwich, and East Oxford townships. Town meetings and community events incorporated displays of patriotism, as did family picnics and socials. In 1914, the war was still new and exciting for Canadians – a topic for discussion at dinners, teas, and athletic events. Residents of the townships paid close attention as the war unfolded on the pages of their newspapers, following along as Canada's war effort intensified.

As summer turned into fall, local newspaper stories grew darker in tone. Papers reported on the hundreds of thousands of men killed and wounded in the opening battles of the conflict, sometimes providing graphic details that challenged romanticized ideas about warfare. In September, the *Daily Sentinel-Review* reprinted a letter from a French reservist describing his unit's experience at the front:

A shell exploded near us, followed by a terrible cry. Five were lying dead in a little square. One man had both legs blown off and was still conscious, imploring us to kill him. An officer ran past, stopped, and after a short look at the man, shot him through the head. The officer opened his mouth to utter a command and at the same moment got a bullet in the mouth. He turned and fell heavily on the dyke close to me. At a good distance behind us Red Cross soldiers and Red Cross friars, carrying the Red Cross flag, were removing the wounded to ambulance vans. A shell exploded over their heads and only a couple of the Red Cross men were left.³⁴

On 29 October, the *Norwich Gazette* reported that the "sun never beheld such a carnage or the moon such scenes of bloodshed. Midst the dreadful sacrifice of human life and desolation and destruction never before witnessed since the beginning of time, we pause to ask what will be the outcome."³⁵ Subscribers to the *Tillsonburg Observer* read that "Canada is fortunate in being so far removed from the scene of

the conflict now casting its shadow of death over Europe. The war is so wide spread and the engines of destruction so much more powerful than have been used in any other war, that the loss of life and the number of wounded and the suffering is certain to greatly exceed that of any former war.”³⁶ Still, each story, no matter how brutal or melancholy, ended with a promise that the Empire would prevail and would ultimately crush Germany.

The townships’ Christian churches also delivered this message of imperial triumphalism. No other institution in 1914 had more power to shape public opinion than the churches, which played a key role in garnering support for Canada’s war effort.³⁷ Every Sunday in the first months of the war, the ministers in Norwich would read the war bulletins of the *Daily Sentinel-Review* and provide a commentary to their congregants.³⁸ On 30 August, Methodist Reverend J.A. McLaughlin argued that service in the war effort was a Christian duty – a theme repeated in Christian churches throughout the townships and around the world.³⁹ At the Harvest Home Festival in Norwich in mid-September, several ministers spoke in support of the war, arguing that free and democratic societies such as Canada had to battle the corrupt and autocratic systems of Europe. Methodist Reverend Hamilton told his audience that Canada “was a great country and was destined to become a mighty nation, being an important colony of the great British Empire. We are glad that when storms arise, we are so blessed that we are in a position to aid the mother country.” Reverend Tancock echoed these sentiments when he explained that “a new spirit of Loyalty is developing, it requires a storm to test loyalty.”⁴⁰ Later that month, the Norwich Baptist Church hosted Reverend J.M. Warner from Woodstock, who explained that there was “nothing more beautiful and useful than the service given by man” as he spoke of the war in Europe.⁴¹ From their pulpits, the ministers in the townships bolstered the patriotism of their congregations and offered them a Christian lens through which to view and understand the conflict.

In his sermon, Reverend Warner discussed the aggressive and militaristic nature of German culture and the atrocities committed by German soldiers in Belgium – messages often repeated in newspapers and churches. The war generated hostility towards German-Canadians throughout Canada and led many to criticize and reject German cultural elements.⁴² The townships could not escape the spreading anti-German sentiment. By the beginning of September, Norwich resident Charles Eidt heard rumours that people were calling him a traitor. In response, he wrote an impassioned letter to the *Gazette*:

There is absolutely no truth in the stories which have been spread. I am of German descent, but both my parents and myself are Canadian born and as loyal as anyone can be. Just why anyone should do me the injustice is a mystery, and I hope the guilty parties, whether done through a misunderstanding or intentionally, will stop it at once. Of course I will make all allowance for the excitement caused by the present war. Some people, when excited, do and say foolish things. Still it is very disagreeable for myself and my family.

This is my country, as it is yours. I love Canada as no other country in the world. I know no other country. I am as interested in the success of the British in this war as any one in Norwich, and as pleased.

Eidt, who worked as a miller in the community, ended his letter with a note of humour: the rumours hurt his feelings, but they did not hurt his flour – it was as good as ever.⁴³ The anti-German sentiment must have continued in the community, however, for a few weeks later the *Gazette* asked its readers not to “forget that the Germans we have in this country are worthy men, good settlers, good neighbors. Say nothing and do nothing to wound, it is not their fault that their fatherland is at war with our motherland.”⁴⁴

Interest in the war effort, displays of patriotism, and a rise in anti-German sentiment marked only a few ways that the war came to insinuate itself into the everyday lives of the townships’ residents in the first months of the war. Many started to think about the potential economic benefits a global conflict could bring to the region’s agrarian economy. By the end of August, announcements in the *Gazette* speculated that home industries in Canada would flourish as imports from war-torn Europe declined.⁴⁵ In mid-September, the *Gazette* told its readership to sow more wheat. “The pinch will come next year,” the paper argued. “Millions of men who should be sowing wheat are sowing death or trying to. Those, who like the Canadian farmer are in a position to do so, should try to make up this deficiency that is sure to result.” Prices would rise and great profit could be made if only the farmers would start to plan for increased production.⁴⁶ A bulletin published in the paper in mid-September captured the economic optimism, exclaiming: “Now our vision is clearing, our alarm has fled, we have recovered our pose and our courage. We are seeing, also, our opportunity.... Good times are ahead, if Canada and Canadians see and seize the present opportunity for enlarging their industries and trading.”⁴⁷ In the months that followed, farmers looked forward to the profits that the next year’s harvest might bring.

While the economic opportunities that the war inspired certainly interested many local residents, the dominant narrative that gripped the communities in the early months of the war was one of giving and voluntarism. In the fall of 1914 and winter of 1915, a plethora of organizations across the townships embraced patriotic activities in support of the war effort. Just as men had multiple reasons for enlisting, people had many personal and communal reasons for engaging in patriotic work. Volunteer action and local organizations aimed at providing welfare for the public had long been a staple in Britain and its Dominions, and the townships certainly had many such groups, including the Young Men’s Club and several chapters of the Women’s Institute. For some members of these groups, the war was simply the next in a long line of causes.⁴⁸ In her study of the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire, historian Katie Pickles argues that voluntary societies formed important “local containers of identity” and membership played an important role in creating a sense of belonging.⁴⁹ A sense of competitiveness between neighbouring towns and community pride further motivated voluntary action, just as sporting rivalries had in the past. On a more personal level, membership in the patriotic organizations

reinforced traditional gender roles, especially for middle-class women, offered people new opportunities to socialize, and provided a sense of connection to loved ones who had volunteered for service overseas.⁵⁰

Whatever their personal motivations, women throughout the townships quickly took the lead in organizing and leading patriotic activities, just as they did across the country. Soon after the outbreak of the war, a voluntary committee of young women from Norwich formed to organize a patriotic concert in the town hall to raise money for the Hospital Ship Fund – part of a national fundraising effort. With the promise of patriotic speeches and songs, they raised \$145 in ticket sales and another \$18 in donations. In the “stifling heat” on Monday, 17 August, the township enjoyed its first patriotic concert.⁵¹ The *Daily Sentinel-Review* praised the women and their event. “While Norwich is not as large a town many of the other towns of the county, the women raised for the Hospital Ship Fund \$163.75,” the paper boasted. Then, without pause, the women turned their energies to crafting pillowcases for the Red Cross. The paper predicted that “before long ... every woman in the village will be doing something toward the work of the League.”⁵²

Although more women looked to get involved in patriotic activities, they had little official direction. In early September, the *Norwich Gazette* published instructions from the Superintendent of Women’s Institutes encouraging the collection of pillows, shirts, handkerchiefs, flannel shirts, socks, undershirts, and sheets for Canada’s First Contingent. A few days later, a group of women led by Jessie Elliot met in Norwich to create a local chapter of the Women’s Patriotic League (WPL). The women issued a statement to the *Gazette* explaining that “the purpose of this organization is that we may help provide comforts and necessities for the men at the front and assist in taking care of those at home who, because of the conditions of the war, will be in need this winter.”⁵³ A few days later, the women of Oxford Centre started a Patriotic League to mobilize community efforts in support of the Red Cross.⁵⁴ Next, the women of Otterville decided to organize a Patriotic Sewing Circle to meet every Thursday and make garments for the soldiers.⁵⁵ That fall, many women in the townships, like their peers across the British Empire, joined similar sewing groups. In December 1914, the *Gazette* emphasized the need for such groups and asked: “Are you doing



Norwich Women's Institute, c.1919

any knitting or sewing for the soldier boys, who are fighting the battles of the empire? They need comforts and you can probably add to them if you do your share.”⁵⁶ Soon after, the WPL sent off a shipment of 51 pillows, 59 pillow slips, 5 sheets, 36 cholera bands, 36 balaclava hats, 31 hospital night gowns, 10 pairs of socks, 19 handkerchiefs, 30 soldier’s housewives (a small package, usually with a needle, yarn and thimble for mending clothing), 138 towels, 1 pair of bed socks, and 98 pair wristlets – illustrative of the range of goods produced by women in the townships.⁵⁷



Apple-drying plant on Pitcher St., Norwich

Conservation of items vital to the war effort became another important mission for many of the voluntary groups at work in Canada in the first months of the war, and the Norwich branch of the WPL was no exception. At their first organized meeting, the women read an article urging Canadians to allow nothing to go to waste now that the war was on. Britain, after all, required extensive

food stores, particularly as Belgian refugees flocked to her shores. In particular, the women read that apples should be dried because they represented an easily transportable food that would resist spoilage. Dried apples would provide an excellent supplement to the rations of the sailors manning the Royal Navy ships blockading Germany’s coastline.

The instructions to preserve as many apples as necessary clashed with Charles Schier’s decision to close the Norwich Evaporator, which dried many of the apples from township orchards. Schier, who was in his late twenties, had purchased the Evaporator a few years before and added new machinery to boost its effectiveness. When running at full capacity, the business employed 50 people and could process 1000 bushels of apples a day.⁵⁸ In late August, however, the owner announced that he was “unable to say when the local plant would commence operations, owing to the present disturbance in Europe.” Schier pointed out that in peacetime he had exported 90% of his dried apples to Germany and Holland – markets cut off by Britain’s naval blockade. With the evaporator out of action, whole orchards would go to waste that fall.

The prospect of the townships’ apples rotting seemed a crime to Jessie Elliot and the other members of the WPL. As a first step, they set about instructing women how to dry their fruit at home. “It behooves us...as Canadians,” the women argued,

“to see that nothing is allowed to go to waste and that we are prepared to supply the demand when it comes.” The WPL realized, however, that no matter how many women were drying apples on their own, they would never be able to match the output of the evaporator. The members of the League soon formed a committee to approach the Norwich Board of Trade and find a solution to what they labelled the “apple problem.”

At a meeting of the Board of Trade at the end of September, its members and representatives from the WPL asked Schier to put the Norwich Evaporator back in operation. While Schier sympathized with their arguments, he did not have the money to run the factory without an accessible market for his product. He “did not feel like taking the risk all upon his own shoulders.” After some discussion, however, Schier agreed to a compromise – he would re-open the evaporator, but only with some financial assistance from those who wished to dry their apples. The Board of Trade and the WPL considered this a reasonable solution. In late October, the Red Cross asked the women of Canada to stop knitting socks for soldiers and to start drying apples – confirming the foresight of the Norwich WPL. By March 1915, dried apples from the townships had made their way into naval rations overseas.⁵⁹

While the WPL worked to resolve the “apple problem,” the number of patriotic societies in North Norwich, South Norwich, and East Oxford townships continued to grow. A Ladies Patriotic Society took shape in Otterville under the leadership of Mrs. H.G. Downing, with a mission similar to the WPL in Norwich.⁶⁰ In East Oxford, the Eastwood Patriotic League formed to work on raising money with their counterparts in Oxford Centre. These groups were joined by the Milldale Patriotic League, the Springford Girls Patriotic Club, the Maple Dell Patriotic Society, and the Hawtrey Patriotic Society – and more groups would form as the war went on. Existing groups, such as the King’s Daughters and Sons (a Christian charitable organization founded in 1886 by the wife of a Methodist minister in New York), the Curries Crossing Helping Hand Club, and the Women’s Institutes also devoted their time and energy to various patriotic causes.⁶¹

Together, these patriotic societies and social groups initiated a feverish wave of patriotic activity in late 1914 and early 1915. They actively raised money for various wartime funds in a seemingly endless cycle of socials, picnics, teas, festivals, theatrical performances, bake sales, concerts, raffles, patriotic picture shows, and dances.⁶² In the Gore, members of the King’s Daughters and Sons held an October Peach Social and raised \$25 for the war effort.⁶³ The Springford Women’s Institute began to organize patriotic activities and the people of the town put on a play, “The Old New Hampshire Home,” charging 25 cents for entry with benefits flowing to the Red Cross.⁶⁴ The WPL announced that the annual Norwich Fair Day in September 1914 would be a flag day and sent its younger members around selling flags. Despite awful weather, they sold over a thousand flags in the first two days.⁶⁵

Many of these societies also tried to provide comforts to groups acutely impacted by the war in the fall of 1914 – namely the families of less fortunate soldiers and Belgian refugees. They recognized how many poorer men had joined the war effort in the cities, leaving behind impoverished mothers unable to clothe their

children. In a letter published in the *Gazette*, the WPL explained that “it is hard for us in Norwich to realize these conditions but they exist and it seems a pity that little children must suffer from being improperly clad when there is an abundance of material lying around our homes that could be made up for them.”⁶⁶ In response, Norwich sent a flurry of old clothes and sheets to Toronto. Concurrently, the township’s patriotic societies gathered money, clothing, bedding, beans, flour, underwear and blankets for the Belgian Relief Fund, which assisted those driven from their homes by Germany’s occupation.⁶⁷ The Belgian Relief Fund remained popular throughout the war.

A large portion of the money raised by the townships’ patriotic groups went to the newly established Canadian Patriotic Fund which provided supplemental income to the dependents (wives, children, and mothers) of the soldiers serving overseas – administered at that time by the Oxford Patriotic Association (OPA) in Oxford County. The OPA’s executive committee included many prominent citizens from the townships: Charles W. Carroll, the Reeve of Norwich; Robert Fewster, Reeve of North Norwich; Albert Oatman, Reeve of South Norwich; Arthur T. Walker, Reeve of East Oxford; and Samuel B. Lee of Otterville.⁶⁸ The members of the executive had a tough job. Beyond raising money for the dependents of soldiers, they also promised to insure the lives of all soldiers who enlisted from Oxford County.⁶⁹ This pledge demanded large monetary donations – insurance for William Orrie Mitchell and Ernest Leroy Underhill, for example, cost the OPA \$500 per soldier.⁷⁰ On 9 September 1914, the OPA decided to issue a broad appeal to the entire county to help support the Patriotic Fund and insure the volunteer soldiers.⁷¹

The townships of East Oxford and South Norwich responded most enthusiastically to the OPA’s initial pleas for support. In the wintry weather of late 1914 and early 1915, the patriotic leagues of Oxford Centre and Eastwood, along with other volunteer canvassers, combined to raise \$3500 for the Patriotic Fund – garnering high praise in the local papers.⁷² In early 1915, community members in Otterville formed the South Norwich Branch of the Oxford Patriotic Society under the leadership of Reeve Albert Oatman and Alex McFarlane to raise money for the Patriotic Fund. The organization announced: “We that cannot or do not go to the front should be willing to help those that have gone and their loved ones at home who are dependent upon them.” If people failed to do everything they could for the war effort, the group cautioned, “it will mean that our country shall come under German rule.” The South Norwich Branch embraced the competitiveness that often drove these community efforts and explained that “it is hoped that everyone will be ready to pay their share and do all possible to assist the canvassers and make South Norwich the Banner Township in the County.”⁷³ The campaign raised \$1899.70 in a few days and the South Norwich Branch had the names of all donors published in the pages of the *Daily Sentinel-Review*.⁷⁴

While the patriotic societies took the lead in fundraising and organizing activities, individuals also took steps to support the war effort. In January 1915, the *Gazette* announced that “the latest appeal for the gallant and brave Canadian boys at the front is for tobacco and cigarettes. We are well aware that the use of to-

bacco is strongly condemned by many people, yet it is nevertheless the fact that the large majority of our soldiers do use the weed which is their right if they so desire.” Community members responded by sending a steady supply to the soldiers.⁷⁵ Individual acts of patriotism took many shapes. A young resident of Norwich, Eva Addison, gave up ice cream when the war started so that she could donate the \$2.00 that she saved to the WPL. The *Gazette* noted that “it is a question if any of the grown-up folks around town are depriving themselves in any way in order to help to help take care of the men at the front and those wounded in the fighting.”⁷⁶ From 1-5 December 1914, the owners of the Otterville Drug Store held a Patriotic Week at their store and donated 10 cents to the Patriotic Fund for every dollar that customers spent.⁷⁷ In Norwich a few months later, Cameron’s Livery held a special sale and donated a percentage of the proceeds to the Patriotic Fund.⁷⁸ In the months and years ahead, other businesses would follow their example.



Back (left to right): Kenneth McLeod, Fred Croxford; Front (left to right): Horace Stanley, Percy Rose

Thus, by the spring of 1915 the patriotic societies of the townships were busily raising money and collecting materials for the war effort. It was just the beginning of a long and sustained effort, and their activities would only intensify in the months and years ahead.

A Proper Send-Off

The patriotic organizations that grew and expanded early in the war had another important mission: planning send-offs and preparing gifts for the soldiers who volunteered after Ottawa authorized a second contingent of Canadian troops in October 1914. The Norwich Women’s Patriotic League regretted “most keenly that the opportunity was not given us to express our gratitude, our pride, to those others who have responded so readily, so loyally” in the first wave of volunteers, “ready to give their lives for the Empire.”⁷⁹ They would not repeat this mistake.

Local statements of gratitude paid tribute to the courageous men who had already gone overseas, their contributions to the imperial and allied war effort, and their service to Canada. Isobel Harvey’s poem “Our Soldiers,” which appeared in the *Norwich Gazette* on 4 March 1915, was a particular highlight:

A cheer for our brave Canadians,
Who have crossed the briny sea,

Who have gone to fight for our country
And keep the nations free;
They have gone to help 'Old England'
The 'Mistress of the Waves'
Keep free from stain, her standard,
Shield it from 'German Knaves.'
A cheer for dear 'Old England'!
She has kept us free from harm,
We felt we were free from danger,
When 'neath her sheltering arm;
Then we'll gladly send our soldiers
Brave men with courage high,
They go to win – or losing,
They are not afraid to die.
A cheer for Major Sutherland!
God bring him safely back,
Protect him in the trenches
While fighting for the 'Union Jack'
A cheer for Private Bleakley,
For Mitchell, Crabbe and Rowe
For Croxford and for Stanley!
As Canada's sons they go.
A cheer for 'the Pats' the bravest!
They have felt the battle's breath,
While some road on to victory
And some road on to death,
Then a shout and cheer for the victor,
Brave lads across the sea,
And a tear for those who have fallen
They died for you and me,
They died for love of country,
They died, this flag to save,
Heroes, Canadian heroes!
They sleep in honoured graves,
They sleep, and sleeping seek not
The cannon's angry roar,
Nor the clash of metal nor the triumph song,
Their day of battle's o'er.
Then a cheer for 'England's Allies'!
Of Belgians, proud are we,
And twenty cheers for King Albert!
A stalwart hero he,
A cheer for the Japs and Russians

The French and Serbians, too
And round of cheers for Britannia
Her allies knows she's true.

Five days after Harvey's poem appeared in the newspaper, the WPL put on a celebration of the new recruits "the like of which has never taken place in Norwich before." The evening began at the railway station, as the community greeted several of the new soldiers who had just returned from their training camps in London, Guelph, and Hamilton. Amongst the volunteers in their brand-new uniforms stood Fred Croxford, a 33-year-old farmer from Bedfordshire, England who had been living in North Norwich since 1904. He worked as a fruit picker for a few years before purchasing a farm two miles north of the town. At his side were his close friends Horace Stanley and the Money brothers, Fred and Harry (aged 23 and 20 respectively). Stanley hailed from Nottinghamshire and had lived in Norwich for five years working as a tile maker. The Money brothers also came from Bedfordshire, but had moved to North Norwich where Harry worked as a mechanic and welder and Fred as a farm hand. The two brothers went to war together and joined the same unit. On that exciting March night the town cheered the Englishmen on as they marched to the main event at the town hall.

The community celebrated other recruits that evening as well. Harold Parker and George Railson were both recent immigrants from England who worked as labourers on local farms. George McLean, who had only been in Norwich for a few months, worked at the Bowman Mill. While most of the new recruits were English-born, Elgin Sears grew up in Norwich where his father managed the local blacksmith shop, and 22-year-old Arthur Barton Rowe was well known in the community, having worked as bank clerk prior to enlisting in November 1914.⁸⁰

After the soldiers paraded to the town hall, the festivities began. The community treated the recruits to speeches, music and a dramatization called "England and her Allies." The WPL provided each soldier with a letter of appreciation and a wrist-watch with their monograph engraved on the back. In return, the soldiers thanked the women for the gifts and promised "that they would never forget the people of Norwich and vicinity, while fighting the battles of the Empire."⁸¹ When the celebration ended, the soldiers returned to their units.

As the volunteers jumped aboard their trains and settled in for the journey back to training camp, some of them dug into their pockets to read the letter of appreciation from the WPL. These notes echoed the feelings that had driven many of them to enlist in the first place. "Norwich and vicinity is proud tonight that you have heard the call of the Motherland and having heard you are hastening to their defence," the letter exclaimed. "It is not only a call to uphold the honor and integrity of the Empire we love, but it is a summons to defend the right against might, to champion the cause of the weak against injustice, the weak and defenceless against malicious cruelty, the cause of Christian peace, prosperity, freedom and happiness, against Prussian militarism, cruelty, harshness and bondage." The volunteers answered a "noble" call and one that should "appeal to the manhood of every freedom

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loving man.” The wrongs “imposed on the human race” by the Germans lent justice to the soldiers’ cause, which would strengthen them, make their aim “truer” and their “confidence firmer.”

The letter also asked that, if the men ran into any of the soldiers from the townships who had already left to fight without a proper send-off, they should “tell them their home town honors and esteems them highly.” The tribute to the enlistees closed with the hope that “when the cannon’s roar is loudest and the enemies charge the fiercest” the men would look at their new watches and remember “that away across the ocean, the men and women of our home town are hoping and praying for you.”⁸² With those words reverberating in their thoughts, it is easy to imagine the men glancing at their watches, folding up their letter, and imagining what would come next.



“Farewell to Her Soldier Boys.” Middle row: Horace Stanley, Fred Croxford, and Fred Money. Kneeling on the right side is Harry Money.

Notes

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- 2 "Suspense in London" and "Russia With Serbia," *Norwich Gazette*, 31 July 1914.
- 3 Terry Copp, "The Military Effort," in *Canada and the First World War*, ed. David MacKenzie (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 35-61; and David Joseph Gallant, "Bracing for Armageddon: Rethinking the Outbreak of the First World War in Canada" (PhD diss., University of Calgary, 2016).
- 4 *Globe*, 9 March 1914.
- 5 "Five Years' Sentence for Dr. Roy Riddell," *Globe*, 1 June 1914.
- 6 "Had His Beer in a Dry Town," *Globe*, 8 July 1914.
- 7 "Oxford Dairymen have a Good Year," *Globe*, 17 July 1914.
- 8 "Untold Damage Done by Army Worm," *Globe*, 18 July 1914.
- 9 "Great Britain and Germany are Now at War: The Bulwark of Britain's Empire Goes Forth Against to Battle," *Globe*, 5 August 1914.
- 10 "Great Britain Declares War," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 6 August 1914.
- 11 "Invaders are Beaten: Germans Receive Crushing Blow from Belgian Troops," *Norwich Gazette*, 7 August 1914.
- 12 "Sir Robert Borden, Prime Minister of Canada, declares his intentions regarding the First World War in the House of Commons on August 14th, 1914," <http://collections.ic.gc.ca/courage/sirrobertbordendeclearswar.html>
- 13 Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1914-1916* (Toronto: Penguin, 2016), chapter 2; Robert Craig Brown and Donald Loveridge, "Unrequited Faith: Recruiting the CEF, 1914-1918," *Canadian Military History* 24, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2015): 67; and Chris Sharpe, "Enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918: A Re-Evaluation," *Canadian Military History* 24, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2015): 17-60.
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- 15 "Recruits for Grey's Horse," *Norwich Gazette*, 14 August 1914.
- 16 "Proclamation: Recruiting Calvary," *Norwich Gazette*, 7 August 1914.
- 17 Soldier file, Burn, John William, 675847, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 1292 – 18.
- 18 "Military Notes," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 20 April 1916.
- 19 "Military Notes," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 4 May 1916.
- 20 Of the 30,617 men that made up the initial force, 60% of all volunteers were born in Great Britain. Cook, *At the Sharp End*; Brown and Loveridge, "Unrequited Faith," 67; and Sharpe, "Enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force," 17-60.
- 21 Soldier file, Beeney, Edgar, 6427, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 587 - 23
- 22 "Letter from Norwich Reservist," *Norwich Gazette*, 26 November 1914.
- 23 Soldier file, Butts, William Ansom, 11557, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 1355 – 26.
- 24 Soldier file, Mitchell, William Orrie, 6480, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 6267 – 26. At 5 ft. 4 inches, Mitchell stood only an inch above the cut off mark for height.
- 25 Soldier file, Crabbe, Arthur Ellis, 106, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 2092 - 47
- 26 Soldier files: Hart, Charles Edward, 675371, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166,

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Box 5111 – 17; Underhill, Ernest LeRoy, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 9869 – 12; and Buck, Robert Gordon, 40348, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 1235 – 32. 27 Soldier file, Bleakley, Frederick Charles, 29417, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 817 – 36; and Tim Cook, “The Eager Doomed: The Story of Canada’s Original WWI Recruits,” *Globe and Mail*, 1 August 2014.

28 “Norwich Honors Her Brave Dead,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 13 July 1915.

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31 “An Enthusiastic Send-Off to the Members of 22nd Contingent,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 21 August 1914.

32 Cook, *At the Sharp End*, 26.

33 “Letter from Norwich Reservist,” *Norwich Gazette*, 26 November 1914.

34 “War is Hell,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 10 September 1914.

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40 “Thanksgiving Services and Harvest Home Festival,” *Norwich Gazette*, 17 September 1914.

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42 See, for example, Brock Millman, *Polarity, Patriotism, and Dissent in Great War Canada, 1914-1919* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), and William Rowley Chadwick, *The Battle for Berlin: A Historical Drama* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992).

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45 “The War,” *Norwich Gazette*, 21 August 1914.

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Chapter 2

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81 "Presents for the Soldiers."

82 "Presents for the Soldiers."

3 “It is savage warfare with the most modern of civilized inventions added”

The War Overseas, 1915

“We have also had the opportunity of speaking to some of our wounded from the front and they all say that it is very hard. This is different from any war we have had in a century and they say that it is savage warfare with the most modern of civilized inventions added.”

– John Hamilton Paulding¹

On 27 August 1914, Pte. John Hamilton Paulding stepped off the train at Valcartier, Quebec, and joined the steady wave of recruits that descended on the hastily-constructed mobilization camp to volunteer with Canada’s First Contingent. The 26-year-old salesman lived in Buffalo, New York, when the war broke out, but quickly travelled to Montreal to enlist. When he arrived at Valcartier, he found a camp alive with intense activity. Lumberjacks still worked to clear pockets of trees, while an army of carpenters and labourers built streets, rail, water and telephone lines, buildings, and training facilities, including the largest rifle range in the British Empire. Just days before, the site on the east bank of the Jacques Cartier River, just 25 km north of Quebec City, had been a patchwork of forest, farm land, sand and swamp. Now Paulding, who grew up in Norwich, wrote to his relatives in that village about the impressive transformation of the camp from “a piece of woods to a tented city, with running water, shower baths and electric lights” and a railroad to deliver the volunteers.²

The first recruits had arrived at Valcartier on 18 August, and their numbers swelled to 32,665 by 8 September. Paulding joined long queues of men from all over the country as they filled out attestation forms to formally join the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), submitted themselves to medical examinations, and received a series of inoculations for typhoid and cholera which left many sick for several days. With thousands of new recruits filing into the camp during these weeks of frantic activity, an actual training regimen provided difficult to establish. Instead, historian Tim Cook describes how new volunteers tried to carry out military orders for the first time, “many of which seemed to be barked at them in a new language, half of which consisted of profanities.” They struggled to set up and take down their tents, as headquarters ordered them to move the camp’s tent cities every other day. Khaki uniforms and equipment slowly started to trickle into Valcartier, and the men haltingly learned the basics of soldiery. “Amidst these pointless exercises, the new soldiers also embarked upon drill and basic military training, which began to bring this disparate army together,” Cook narrates. “The patriotic talked

with the adventurous about getting into the war before it ended by Christmas; the upper-middle class tried to decipher the language of the working man; the spiritual bunked next to common criminals.”³

As the men bonded, the structure of the First Contingent started to take shape. By late September, seventeen battalions had been created, each with a strength of 1000 men, which were dispersed into four infantry brigades. The battalions were subdivided into infantry companies of 225 men each and then into platoons of fifty men. The First Contingent also included artillery and cavalry units, engineers, signallers, and medical services consisting of field ambulances, a casualty clearing station, two stationary hospitals and two general hospitals.⁴

Within this general structure, recruits who arrived at Valcartier were placed into provisional battalions based on their place of origin. While existing militia units were often kept together, the units were stripped of their names and given new battalion numbers. Members of the 22nd Oxford Rifles and Grey’s Horse, including North Norwich residents Pte. William Orrie Mitchell and Pte. Edgar Beeney, were placed in “A” Company of the 1st Battalion, 1st Infantry Brigade. In “A” Company, the Oxford County men were placed under the command of a familiar and welcome figure – Major Donald Matheson Sutherland. Recruits who joined non-infantry units, such as Pte. Paulding who became a member of the 1st Canadian Field Ambulance, extended the townships’ footprint even further.

As September wore on, the training regimen at Valcartier grew more active as unit commanders took the initiative to arrange their own programs. All of the recruits performed standard foot drills and rifle exercises. The new soldiers used the Canadian-made Mark III Ross Rifle to practice their shooting at the camp’s 1500-target rifle range, although there were not enough rifles for everyone. Even in training, many of the men found that the rifle tended to jam during rapid fire exercises – a problem that would only worsen when the Canadians deployed to the Western Front. The recruits also learned how to use their ten-inch-long bayonets, participated in physical exercise, and went on long route marches to improve their fitness levels. The soldiers trained to carry a load that included rifle, bayonet, entrenching tool, ammunition pouches, water bottle, field dressings, rations, and a large pack, all of which weighed more than 60 pounds. As they led their men in this training, officers like Major Sutherland also read through military textbooks and manuals that endeavoured to teach them how to organize, administer, and lead their men effectively.⁵

While the training kept the recruits somewhat occupied, as September drew to a close many started to grumble about their slow departure to England and the war. While Ottawa hurriedly gathered the transports necessary to ship the First Contingent overseas, restlessness grew in the camp, fuelled by inactivity, boredom, and liquor smuggled in from Quebec City. The soldiers had signed up to go to war and they were anxious to move out.

Crossing the “Big Pond”⁶

At the end of September, Prime Minister Borden made the decision to send all fit men of the First Contingent to England. Over the next few days, 31,000 soldiers moved to the docks at Quebec City. Men, artillery pieces, over seven thousand horses, and a whole host of other military supplies had to be placed on board thirty ships – many of them luxury liners hastily converted to troops ships. With no coherent loading plan in place, the docks soon became a place of chaos as soldiers were separated from their units (and units lost their baggage) when they boarded the ships that would take them across the Atlantic.⁷

Pte. Arthur Crabbe, the young farmer from Norwich, was one of the first men from the township to make it to Quebec City. Soon after arriving at Valcartier in early September, Crabbe was attached to the cavalry. Unlike the infantry which took the train, Crabbe and his comrades rode their horses and led spare mounts on a twenty-mile route march to the docks. Once there, Crabbe helped to load over 500 horses on the transport ship *Laconia* – a feat that he proudly told his parents about in a letter. The men placed one horse at a time in a wooden cage, which they then hoisted onto the deck of the ship with rope and tackle.⁸ The loading process was hard work, but Crabbe soon learned his life would become even busier when he and 37 others were given the task of looking after the horses during the voyage to England. While military regulations prescribed that each soldier should only be responsible for four horses, Crabbe and the other attendants had to look after as many as 16 animals.⁹ Crabbe told his parents that they split the horses into sections of 80 and posted “a man with each section constantly day and night to see that there is no trouble among them or any stalls broken down.” They performed this “picket duty” in 12-hour shifts, during which they had to feed the horses, clean out stalls as best they could, and keep an eye out for the ringworm that threatened to spread amongst the animals. Tending to the horses kept Crabbe busy for the entire voyage to England.¹⁰ As he rather nonchalantly put it to his parents: “you see we are not sleeping all the time.”¹¹

Nonetheless, Crabbe enjoyed the send off from Quebec City, where thousands cheered the departing soldiers, who loudly cheered them back. On 1 October, the fleet moved into the St. Lawrence to begin the first leg of the journey. The ships held over 30,617 soldiers – the single largest movement of Canadians at one time in the nation’s history. The convoy stopped at Gaspé Bay Basin to wait for the British warships that would provide an escort across the Atlantic and keep a watchful eye out for the ever-growing threat posed by German U-boats. Crabbe’s parents printed



“Canada’s Rally to the Empire - Answering the Call of the Motherland”

his letter about the voyage in the *Norwich Gazette* and he, perhaps unknowingly, narrated the experience for the entire community. He evocatively described passing the buoys that marked the resting place of the RMS *Empress Ireland*, which had sunk in May 1914 after colliding with another ship, leading to the deaths of 1012 of the 1477 people on board. For a young farm boy who had never sailed on the ocean before, the sight must have been sobering.¹²

While at anchor in Gaspé on 2 October, the troops received a letter from Sam Hughes titled “Where Duty Leads.” Crabbe and his comrades read how the men had been transformed from a group of “peaceful Canadian citizens” into an “army of free men” ready to “do duty on the historic fields of France, Belgium and Germany for the preservation of the British Empire and the rights and liberties of humanity.”¹³ The next day the fleet set sail, joined by a contingent from the self-governing colony of Newfoundland (who made it clear that they would not be fighting as part of the Canadian contingent).¹⁴ Crabbe reported that they enjoyed “an excellent voyage” and he had even heard some of the more experienced travellers say that “they had never been on the Atlantic when it was so calm.” Nevertheless, he fell ill for several days and would have “been willing to make my will in favor of anybody who would have been kind enough to chuck me overboard.” Sea sick and looking after dozens of horses, Crabbe’s journey overseas was anything but easy.¹⁵

Pte. William Bernard “Burney” Yates experienced a more enjoyable voyage to England. The son of Mary and Arthur Yates of Hatchley (four miles southwest of Norwich, just across the township boundary), William had been working as a labourer in St. Thomas when the war broke out. He journeyed to Valcartier to enlist and was posted to the 1st Battalion alongside many of his comrades from Oxford County. Yates crossed the Atlantic in comfort aboard the White Star ocean liner *Laurentic*. While Crabbe looked after his horses, Yates joined in mandatory physical training during the day and took in concerts that were put on in the evenings. He told his mother that he enjoyed a “fine voyage all the way” and was not sea sick for “even an hour.” He spent a lot of time on deck and even saw porpoises in the ocean below.¹⁶ Residents back home, reading letters from both Crabbe and Yates in the *Gazette*, received very different perspectives.

After twelve days, the convoy arrived in Plymouth to a warm welcome on 14 October. The Canadians represented the first large contingent to arrive from one of Britain’s overseas Dominions and the English crowds showed their appreciation. As the Canadians emptied out of their ships the British greeted them with cheers, handshakes, drinks, and even kisses. “My! What a welcome we got here,” Yates wrote to his mother. “Whistles blew, people hollered and waved flags all the way up the river.”¹⁷

Salisbury Plain

Soon after arriving in Plymouth, the troops boarded trains for Salisbury Plain, a 90-square mile military training ground with extensive artillery and rifle ranges. Following a seven-hour train ride, the Canadians marched the final 16 kilometres into the camp. They would once again live under canvas, as they had at Valcartier,

and only gradually would some of the soldiers move into permanent barracks or into billets in the surrounding villages. By Christmas, 11,000 Canadians remained in tents and the 1st Brigade, which included most of the recruits from Norwich Township, spent the entire winter in them. The high winds that often buffeted Salisbury Plain pierced the fabric of the unheated tents and gales often threatened to flatten them.

When the first Canadians arrived at Salisbury in early October 1914, many felt that the camp was much better than the one they had left at Valcartier. One Canadian officer noted that “the camp sites are beautifully situated and the turf is excellent, and will be quite an agreeable change from the sand plains which our boys have been accustomed to.”¹⁸ Before the last Canadian units arrived at Salisbury, however, the weather turned for the worse. During the First Contingent’s stay on the Plain, it rained 89 out of 123 days. Abnormally low temperatures, occasionally dropping below freezing, compounded the misery. All the horses, artillery, and marching men soon turned the turf of Salisbury into a quagmire and the soldiers could do little to escape the wet and the mud. With limited means to dry clothing, men spent all day in their wet uniforms, letting the khaki dry on their backs.¹⁹ Pte. John Hamilton Paulding, at Salisbury with the 1st Canadian Field Ambulance, wrote home about the “sea of mud” that confronted the soldiers and just how cold the camp had become. He was amongst the unlucky soldiers who spent the winter in a tent.²⁰



Bruce Poole's belongings arranged in his tent

officers shared his concern. Colonel J.W. Carson, who had been at Salisbury from the start with the advance Canadian party, reported back to Ottawa that the general opinion of the medical doctors was that, “another two or three months of present conditions in England will have a serious effect on the general health and well-being of our troops.”²² Four thousand Canadians were admitted to hospital during their sojourn at Salisbury, including Arthur Crabbe who contracted scabies and Burney Yates who came down with bronchitis. Overall, however, the health of the troops remained satisfactory. In fact, more than one-quarter of the Canadian cases were venereal diseases – a scourge that would continue to afflict Canadian soldiers throughout the war.²³

Despite the terrible weather, the Canadian troops busily prepared for war. Prime Minister Borden gave command of the Canadian Division to Lieutenant-General Edwin Alfred Hervey Alderson, a veteran British officer who had led Canadian soldiers during the Boer War. Alderson initiated thirteen weeks of training: route

As a member of the field ambulance, Paulding worried about the spread of disease amongst the soldiers. “The cases of meningitis in the contingent did not start until we were at Salisbury Plains for some time, and were chiefly on account of the wet weather and the fact that our men did not know how to keep their tents sanitary,” he observed.²¹ Other medical

marches, rifle practice, arms drill, entrenching, and company-, battalion-, brigade-, and eventually divisional-level exercises.²⁴ Pte. Burney Yates's experience with the 1st Battalion is illustrative. They had daily physical training from 7:00 to 7:30 a.m. On 3 November 1914, the unit had rifle practice in the morning, followed by extended order drill, and a night march across country. The next day, the Canadians found themselves under inspection by the King. On 5 November, it was back to business, and Yates engaged in more rifle practice and a long night march. On 11 November, the 1st Battalion participated in a mock assault and received instructions on entrenching in the days ahead. In a particularly busy period between 24 and 26 November, the soldiers practiced advancing under fire and using the ground, learned how to take cover from hostile aircraft, and received training on infantry patrolling.²⁵



Canadian soldiers conduct bayonet practice with bags of straw on Salisbury Plain

he and his mates took to London, and commented that all were in “good health and spirits.”²⁶ As Christmas passed and the new year began, however, the soldiers grew increasingly restless to get to the front and enter the fight. When the former members of the Oxford Rifles, including Pte. William Orrie Mitchell and Pte. Edgar Beeney, went on route marches, they sang about their eagerness to see combat. The Oxford County boys would pick up the tune of the unit’s marching song and Salisbury Plain would resound with:

We’re the boys of the 22nd,
And we’re only militiamen,
But with us they have to reckon
An we’ll fight to the bitter end.
Cheer boys, cheer, as we gaily go marching along.

We came across the ocean to help the allies on.
And when we get in the firing line
Our ranks they may grow thin;
But there’s sure to be some of us left to march into Berlin.

Despite the tedious training and awful conditions, the morale of the First Contingent remained high. Six days leave for all ranks, along with a free ticket to anywhere in the British Isles, alleviated some of the tension. Some soldiers blew off steam in the pubs of London, while others visited English homes. A private from the 1st Battalion who had previously served in the 22nd Oxford Rifles wrote a letter home describing a trip

We're the boys of Oxford County
And we came from Woodstock town;
And we're here to do our duty –
That's to fight for our King and crown.
Cheer boys, cheer, as we gaily go marching along.²⁷

For Pte. John Paulding, however, Salisbury brought home the realities of the war and he started to view the conflict in a different light. While training with the field ambulance in nearby hospitals, he spent time with wounded Englishmen returning from the frontlines. He listened to stories from the trenches and learned that “this is different from any war we have had in a century and they say that it is savage warfare with the most modern of civilized inventions added.” He accurately forecast a long, bloody war. “Unless the Kaiser is assassinated,” Paulding wrote his uncle in Norwich, “the Germans intend to fight to the last man.”²⁸

The Canadians soon would encounter the “savage warfare” first hand. On 7 February 1915, in the midst of a pounding all-day rain, the first troops boarded trains and left Salisbury Plain for Avonmouth on the Bristol Channel. They were heading to the Western Front.

To France

In early February 1915, the soldiers of 1st Canadian Division crossed the English Channel to France. The fighting along the Western Front had settled into a war of attrition since mid-October, with static trench lines running from the North Sea to Switzerland – one side occupied by the armies of Germany and the other by the armies of France and the British Empire. With the Germans occupying economically-vital parts of France and Belgium, the Western Allies could not simply sit back and do nothing. Allied strategic thinking was dominated by the basic idea that they needed to break through the German lines and force the enemy to end the war on favourable terms. The problem, however, was that modern technology and outdated doctrine gave the defence a tremendous advantage in trench warfare. Generals who were planning offensives saw no alternative but to attack frontally and hope that, with overwhelming manpower and firepower, their forces would break the enemy's main defensive lines using sheer brute strength. In theory, this would



A Canadian soldier tosses a bomb at the enemy trenches, 1915



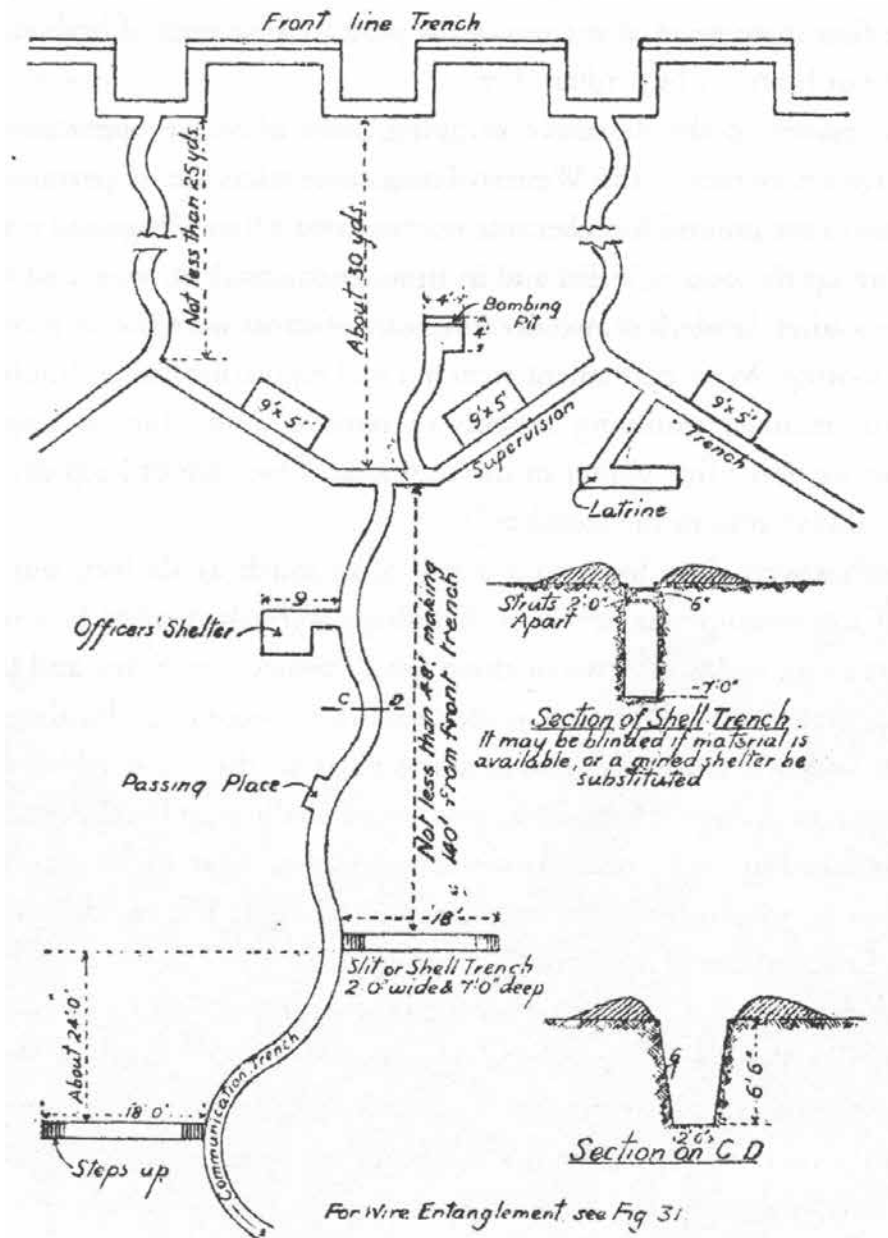
Painting by Edgar Bundy of the moment Canadian troops first set foot on the European continent.

make the other parts of the enemy's defensive line impossible to hold, leading the trench systems to collapse and facilitating a return to manoeuvre warfare. Instead, casualty lists grew at an astounding rate as British and French forces bashed up against German lines.²⁹

The Canadians' arrival in France lacked glamour or romance. "There were few port facilities at St. Nazaire, and the vessels had to anchor in the outer harbour waiting their turn to berth," official historian G.W.L. Nicholson described. "At the dock most of the unloading was done by work parties furnished by the units themselves." Nevertheless, French citizens gave the soldiers a warm welcome as they marched through the streets of St. Nazaire to the railway station where they were entrained in small box-like cars labelled "Hommes 40, Chevaux 8." In this less than glorious context, the men began their "long, circuitous 500-mile journey to the front."³⁰ Upon their arrival, veteran British troops attempted to introduce the Canadians to the realities of trench warfare before they ventured to the front lines themselves. Between 17 February and 2 March, each Canadian infantry brigade was attached to a British division holding the line in front of Armentières. "From company commanders down to private soldiers everyone was associated with a corresponding member of the host unit for 48 hours of individual training," Nicholson explained. "Then followed 24 hours of platoon training, during which each Canadian platoon was made responsible for a definite length of trench as part of the company forming the regular garrison."³¹

After a short period of mustering and training behind the lines, the Canadians moved in early March to the front west of Estaires, Sailly, and Laventie, and south of Armentières, as part of the first British Army. It participated "as little more than an onlooker" (but with the occasional casualty) during the Battle of Neuve Chapelle from 10-12 March.³² Scarcely a week later, Pte. John Paulding described his first taste of the front lines with the 1st Canadian Field Ambulance:

We were three days crossing from England to France, during which time I was quite ill from mal de mer [sea sickness], and because we marched from



"Diagrammatic sketch of portion of a front line with supervision trench, living dug outs and shell trenches" from the British General Staff's *British Trench Warfare 1917-1918: A Reference Manual*, p.88.

the Plains to the station, about 7 miles in the rain and after a short train journey arrived at the sea port in wet clothing, and remained so until we went on board the vessel the next day. We were billeted for a while about 10 miles beyond the firing line in a farm loft where we had plenty of straw and were very comfortable. Then they moved us to a town just behind the firing line and within range of the big guns. We were running a hospital in a large house, one of the finest in town, when we arrived it was in excellent condition with all the furniture just as the people had left it when the Germans entered the town. They had made a bad mess of it but one of our English ambulance corps had taken it over and we received it in fine shape. We had a piano in the ward, where we received the wounded, and we had concerts whenever anyone could play. The officers had fine quarters and we had good quarters in the attic next door. The ward was formerly a dining room and ballroom apparently and on one side of it were glass windows looking out on a large garden and two conservatories, one at each end of the room.

After two weeks, Paulding and his unit shifted three miles (about five kilometres) to a farm where their stretcher bearers were billeted, then back and forth between there and the original farm. Despite the disruptions, they developed a routine:

Our mode of operations is this: twice a day, night and morning, a party of stretcher bearers with a doctor and officer leave the billet and go to the Aid Post behind the trenches and gather up wounded collected there by the regimental bearers and bring them to the farm. There they are given attention and every night the motor ambulance leaves the hospital and brings the wounded men from the farm to the hospital. The doctor examines them and any men who can be sent back to their battalions soon are kept, and the others are sent on by the motor ambulances of the Red Cross Society to the Clearing Hospital.³³

Although Paulding's unit had not taken part "in any great action they supported those engaged in a recent battle at the right of us," and thus he believed that they were "doing good work." Most of the patients who arrived in the hospital were sick or suffered from "trench foot" – a painful condition caused by prolonged exposure of the feet to damp, unsanitary, and cold conditions which led to blackened skin and dead surface tissue. They also treated one soldier seriously wounded by shrapnel, and "several by bullets who are getting along nicely." Overall, Paulding had minor complaints about inequitable treatment, but the situation seemed bearable:

We are fed separately from the British troops, and our food is not abundant, but it is fairly regular. Our men are not getting as much bread and meat and vegetables and butter as the English troops before them, but they can buy bread and eggs occasionally. About comforts, I think we are well supplied, and except socks and handkerchiefs, we have plenty of clothing as a rule. I am personally well supplied with them also. The principal needs of our men are delicacies in the way of cakes, etc., cigarettes, tobacco, matches and candy. We can buy chocolate and oranges but of the other things there are not to be gotten. They are sent to the English troops and the Englishmen in the contingent by their friends, nearly every newspaper advertises a fund for these things. It

is almost impossible to send cakes and candy from Canada, but arrangements could be made for some business firms to supply them from London.³⁴

Paulding also benefitted from a working knowledge of French, which allowed him to speak with the French “poilus” (soldiers) and civilians. Having competency in a second language proved “very convenient,” and he spoke it whenever possible.

Pte. Burney Yates’s first “whirl” at the Germans in the trenches came in late February, when the Canadians took over a section of the British First Army’s front near Fleurbaix. “Because the water level came close to the surface of the ground, the trenches were shallow and built up with breastworks of sod and sandbags,” official historian G.W.L. Nicholson described. “They looked out upon an area of flat fields beyond which the rows of pollarded willows that lines the intervening ditches provided German snipers with concealed points of vantage.”³⁵ The enemy was difficult to see, but its presence could be heard. “It certainly makes you think when you hear the bullets whizz over your head,” Yates wrote to his mother Mary. He recalled stories from his Uncle Philip, who had experienced combat during the Boer War and said that “the bullets used to say ‘where are you.’” Yates confirmed that the German bullets “seem almost human.”³⁶ Paulding also wrote of a growing familiarity with the sights and sounds of war:

We have been hearing big guns so long we are getting accustomed to them, we have batteries all about us and at night the sky is lit up with star shells almost a half circle. However we hold the Germans easily at present and our men look forward to the time when the advance will begin. They speak of Germans with respect but man for man they say we can beat them. This is from the trenches and men who have been wounded by the snipers. They are very numerous and are all about us even behind our trenches. Some of our bearers were shot at the other night from behind the trenches. We have seen many aeroplanes and it is said that the shells from our guns brought down a German aeroplane today. Every church hereabouts is in ruins [with] only the towers remaining.³⁷

Baptism of Fire: The Second Battle of Ypres

Following their short experience of trench life in a relatively quiet sector of the front, in April 1915 the First Canadian Division was ordered into the Ypres salient: a seventeen-mile-long bulge in the Allies’ front lines on the Flanders plain. East of the ancient Belgian city of Ypres, the sector extended from Steenstraat (on the Yser Canal, five miles north-west of the town) to St. Eloi (nearly three miles south of Ypres). Both locations held symbolic and strategic significance. Ypres (known to the soldiers as “Wipers”) was the last major Belgian town in Allied hands, and represented a vital defensive position to protect French ports on the English Channel to which it connected by road and rail. Abandoning the area was not an option, but it was a dangerous situation for the Allied defenders, who were surrounded on three sides by the enemy and had already seen some of the most vicious fighting of the war.³⁸

By the time the 1st Canadian Division arrived, the “ancient moated town of Ypres” was in tatters. Nicholson described how:

German bombardment had damaged the stately 500-year old Cloth Hall and Cathedral, but many streets were still unharmed, and most of the inhabitants were still living at home. War had not yet devastated the fertile, densely populated area of the Salient. The network of roads which spread out across the Flanders plain linked Ypres with villages, hamlets and farms to north, east and south still tenanted though many were within two miles of the firing line. The largest of these communities proceeding clockwise around the perimeter, were Langemarck (in the north-east angle of the Salient), St. Julien (on the Poelcappelle road), Zonnebeke (about half-way down the eastern flank), and Zillebeke (two miles south-east of Ypres).³⁹

Although the green farmers’ fields north and east of the city might have made farmers-turned-soldiers think about their land back home, the dismal state of the trenches that they inherited from the French shocked the Canadians. The shallow, poorly constructed trenches reeked of urine and feces, as well as the decaying corpses of unburied soldiers killed in previous bouts. “The defensive parapet of sandbags along the top of the trench was thin, and enemy snipers soon learned that they could fire right through them,” historian Tim Cook recalled. The Canadians worked feverishly to bolster their defensive positions at night, knowing full well that any above-ground activity during the day would invite enemy fire.⁴⁰

The Canadians in the front lines in Ypres would face their baptism of fire. The German army tended to remain on the defensive on the Western Front, with their main attacks directed at Russia on the Eastern Front. Launching local offensives only when the conditions were perceived as favourable, the Germans conceived a limited offensive in the spring of 1915 to test the Allied defences, deflect attention from the movement of troops to the Eastern Front, and experiment with a new weapon – chlorine gas, a chemical weapon outlawed by international treaties prior to the war.⁴¹

On 22 April, two Canadian brigades occupied the front lines, with a third in reserve, near Ypres. At 5 p.m., the Germans released more than 160 tonnes of the gas from thousands of canisters arranged along German lines. An enormous green-yellow cloud, several kilometres long, drifted towards the lines of the French 45th (Algerian) Division to the Canadians’ left. When the toxic fog rolled over the



“Canada: Ypres, April 23-24, 1915,” drawing printed in Punch magazine, 5 May 1915.

French positions, the chlorine burned their throats and caused their lungs to fill with foam and mucus, effectively drowning the men in their own fluids. The Algerians either suffocated or fled, their eyes and throats burning from the gas. Most of the gas missed the Canadians, but the Canadian left flank was dangerously exposed by the panicked French retreat, which left a gaping hole, more than six kilometres wide, in the Allied line and which placed the whole Allied position in the salient in jeopardy.

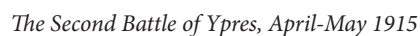
As the Germans sought to occupy the vacated Algerian trenches, Canadian and British battalions moved to plug the hole. During hours of desperate fighting that day, they managed to stop the enemy from encircling the First Canadian Division inside the salient and from marching on the city of Ypres. Outnumbered, outgunned, and outflanked, Canadian and British forces spent the next several days launching counterattacks and fighting a series of chaotic engagements trying to blunt the German assault and hold the lines outside Ypres at Mauser Ridge, Gravenstafel Ridge, and in hand-to-hand combat at Kitchener's Wood.

At St. Julien/Gravenstafel Ridge on 24 April, a second German gas attack hit Canadian units directly. Because soldiers were not issued gas masks at this point in the war, the Canadians improvised: 8th Battalion made respirators out of cotton bandoliers wetted and tied over the nose and mouth, while the rest of the front line companies met the gas attack by holding urine-soaked cloths and handkerchiefs over their mouths and noses (on the instruction of quick-thinking medical officers who believed that the urea in the urine would help to neutralize the deadly gas). Chlorine gas, which is heavier than air, found and killed the soldiers who sought refuge by lying face-down in the crevices of their trenches, all too often with jammed Ross rifles (which proved unreliable in the dirt of the trenches) lying useless at their sides. Although the gas attack forced several battalions to retreat and opened gaps in the Canadian lines, the First Division fought tenaciously to hold the ground outside Ypres and bought valuable time for fresh French and British reinforcements to take their place.

For soldiers writing home to families in Oxford County, this horrific ordeal provided proof that the Canadian soldiers' role in the war had become very real. Pte. Fred Bleakley sent his mother a quick war card on 26 April, mentioning that he had fought in a "great battle" with the 16th Battalion and had found himself in the "thickest of the fray."⁴² Censors did not allow him to elaborate on the details. Pte. Burney Yates wrote to his mother a few days after the battle:

Just a line to let you know that I got through last Friday's battle, April 23rd. Long will I remember the day. It was claimed to be the worst battle of the war. The French retreated but the Canadians saved the position and gained the day with a heavy sacrifice of life. You will likely see all about it in the papers.

My chum, E.J. Palmer, was killed. I promised him before going into action that if he went under I was to write and tell his folks about it and he said he would do the same for me. I wrote but it was a hard thing to do. My nerves have been sorely shaken. My hands shake as I write this.



I hear someone playing a flute. It is a piece we used to sing when on a march.
I have forgotten some of the words but the last of it runs –

The line is sure to be thinned,
But there is bound to be some of us left
To march into Berlin.⁴³

There is little more I can tell you so I guess I will have to close. I am now lying writing this in a dugout about two feet under the ground and an occasional shell comes floating this way, which makes me shake but not with fear, our nerves are all shaken.⁴⁴

As Yates anticipated, families back home did read in local newspapers how the Canadians had fought tenaciously to defend this exposed position, earning a reputation for courage, toughness, and dependability. Under the headlines “Canadians in Thick of the Fight in Belgium,” readers of the *Tillsonburg Observer* learned that:

In the great fight, which took place on Thursday, Friday and Saturday of last week in Belgium, when the British defense of Hill 60 was in danger, the Canadians took a brilliant and valuable part, the despatches from the war office announcing “*the gallantry and determination of the Canadians undoubtedly saved the situation.*” Their deeds of heroism were not accomplished without paying heavily for them, and the violence of the struggle is shown in the long lists of killed, wounded, and missing that have been posted. As in most big engagements in the war, the officers suffered greatly and some well known in western Ontario are among the killed and wounded....

The entire causality list has not yet been received, and while all reports show that the loss of Canadians is very heavy, no definite idea is obtainable of the number. Some estimates of the casualties run from 8,000 to 10,000 men; however, it is believed that this is excessive.

A strong northwest wind was blowing from the enemy's lines during the attack and the use by them of poisonous gasses which penetrated the ranks of the Canadians, causing hundreds to reel and fall in a stupor, a measure for the heavy death list. Reports state that many were bayoneted by the enemy while in this situation. Others who were overcome by the gasses were rescued and are recovering.

The enemy claims to have taken 1000 Canadian prisoners, but this is not confirmed by the War Office.⁴⁵

Family members back home thus learned of the great heroism displayed by the Canadians in “saving the situations,” as well as the tremendous cost—eventually calculated as more than six thousand Canadian casualties in four days, including 1,672 dead and 1,767 prisoners of war.⁴⁶

Amongst the wounded at Second Ypres was Major Donald Sutherland of the 1st Battalion — news that the *Norwich Gazette* said “brought home to our citizens a closer realization of the present war.”⁴⁷ After embarking for France on 8 February 1915, Sutherland had been engaged in the trenches at Armentiers and Bois Greni-

er before participating in the operations at St. Julien on 23 April, where he was wounded by an artillery shell while attacking an entrenched enemy position. The shrapnel bullet went through his left elbow, while another bullet grazed his forehead—but thankfully caused no injury. He received prompt treatment at No.7 Stationary Hospital in Boulogne, where a doctor removed the bullet and dressed his wounds. Sent to hospital at Shorncliffe in England, Sutherland spent twenty-nine days recovering. “Doing fine, left arm broken, will be here for a few weeks,” he reported to his mother in Norwich by cablegram in April. Readers of the local newspapers learned that Sutherland expected to return to the firing line in about a month—an overly optimistic forecast, as it turned out, but one that revealed his eagerness to return to the fray.⁴⁸ Instead, he was granted leave by a medical board and returned to Canada in late May, where he recuperated at his mother’s house in Norwich and spoke at local events to drum up additional support for the war effort.⁴⁹ The shrapnel left a large scar just below his elbow joint and limited his flexibility in that arm for the rest of his life.⁵⁰ This would not prevent him, however, from returning to fight overseas.

Pte. William James Dean, whose father Alfred E. Dean had lived in Norwich and whose uncle and aunt still resided there, was a 33-year-old miner who lived with his father in Hawtrey before he enlisted in Brantford with the 4th Battalion, First Contingent, in September 1914.⁵¹ At Ypres on 25 April, he suffered gun shot wounds to the face and hands while serving with the 48th Highlanders. “I am all right again, slightly disfigured, but still in the ring,” he wrote to his uncle Joseph Miles “and all the rest of the folks” on 10 May. “Would have written sooner but just got my hands out of bandages a few days ago.” Dean explained that they “had a pretty hard time of it” during the battle at Ypres, “but I guess we showed the ‘dogs’ where we get off at.” In his letter, his thoughts turned to the creature comforts of life back in Canada. “Tell auntie that I

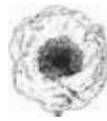
Having just endured the Second Battle of Ypres, John McCrae, a Canadian Army Medical Corps officer, wrote his famous poem “In Flanders Fields” just north of Ypres in May 1915. The poem was printed in the Norwich Gazette in 1917.

In Flanders Fields

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard a mid the guns below.
We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow

Loved and were loved,
and now we lie
In Flanders Fields
Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep,
 though poppies grow
In Flanders Fields

- Major John McCrae



would like to be in her strawberry patch—shortcake and cream is so much different to bully beef and hard-tack,” he noted. Typical of soldiers, he said that he was quite content but confessed that he would “be glad when the war is over with for bullets and shrapnel and gas is pretty hard stuff to play ball with.” He also sent the message that he had “got off pretty lucky” and was heading back to the front lines.⁵²

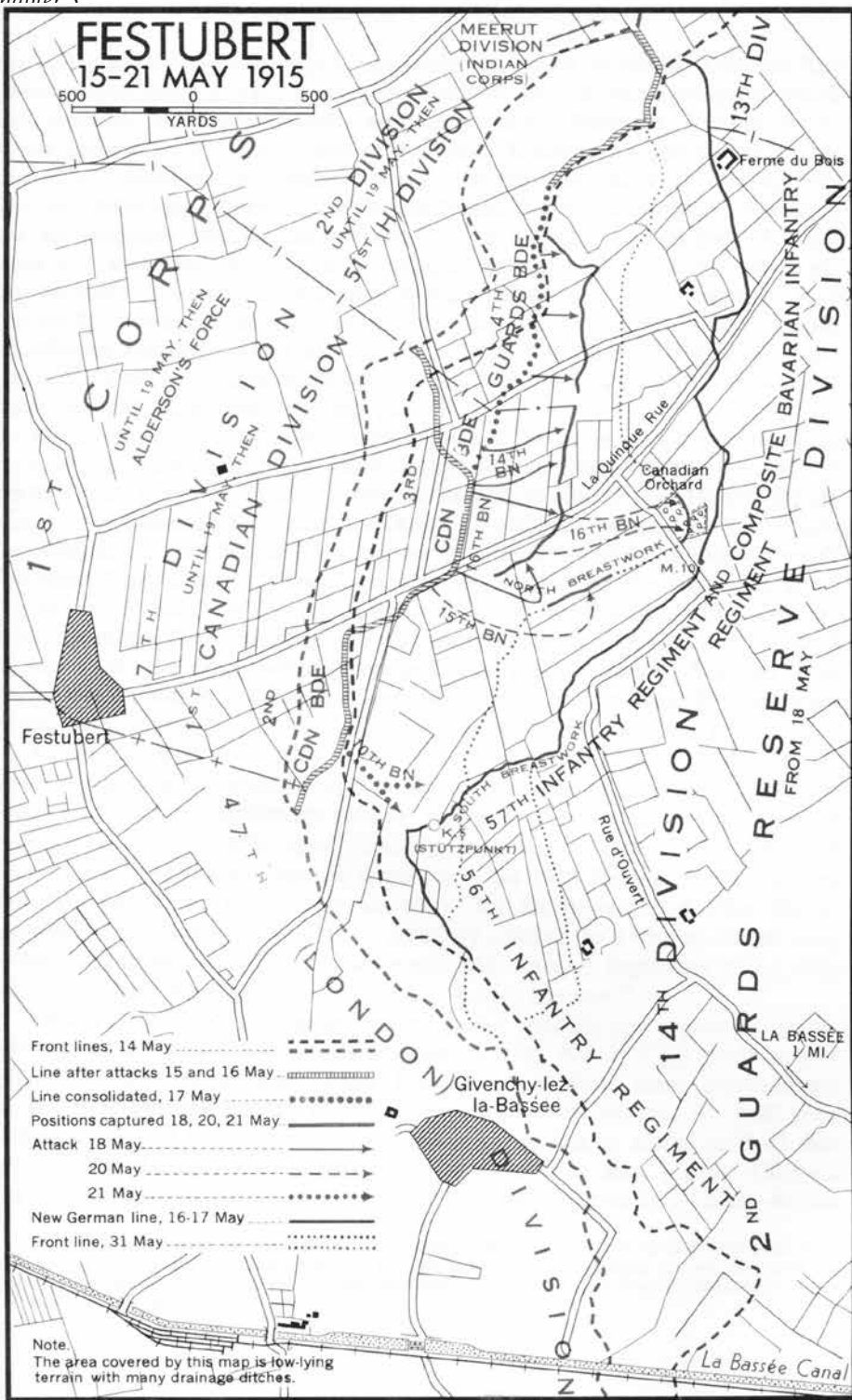
Festubert and Givenchy

In the months ahead, the war of attrition continued. Following the Second Battle of Ypres the depleted units of the 1st Canadian Division marched south to join in Allied offensives already underway in French Flanders. Given the massive force density on the Western Front, manoeuvre seemed impossible and there were no open flanks to exploit. The prevailing logic of the “*attaque à l’outrance*” or the cult of the offensive insisted (despite growing evidence to the contrary) that massed infantry, armed with the right aggressive spirit, could somehow overcome enemy firepower and overwhelm strong defensive positions.⁵³ The military tacticians failed to see individual foot soldiers as capable of independent thought. They simply grouped them into lines and ordered them out of the trenches and “over the top” to face the enemy with rifle and bayonet. For the Canadians who were thrust into their first offensive operations at Festubert in May 1915 and Givenchy in June, the fighting followed the predictable, suicidal pattern of frontal assaults against powerful enemy defences.

Sir Douglas Haig’s First British Army had sustained 11,000 casualties in an unsuccessful attack on Aubers Ridge, just south of the Ypres Salient, on 9 May 1915. Less than a week later, he ordered another push that would involve two Canadian brigades. Brigadier-General Richard Turner’s 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade was tasked with capturing a small orchard opposite the village of Festubert, while Brigadier-General Arthur Currie’s 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade was ordered to seize a series of trenches to the south simply called “K.5.” The deck was stacked against them. Canadian units had almost no time to prepare for the operation; their maps contained inaccurate information; and they received insufficient artillery support. The Germans, boasting the advantages of defensible terrain and solid firepower, observed the Canadians’ preparations and dealt with them accordingly. When the Canadian launched their frontal assaults, enemy machine-guns mercilessly



The war-torn Festubert landscape in 1915



Reproduced by Army Survey Establishment

Compiled and drawn by Historical Section G.S.

The Battle of Festubert, 15-21 May 1915

cut down the attacking infantry. Over a week of bitter fighting, the Canadians incurred 2468 casualties and gained little ground.

Amongst the fallen at Festubert was Pte. Frederick Charles Bleakley, who was killed in a frontal attack with the 16th Battalion (Canadian Scottish) on 18 May. In a typical assault of the time, his unit was ordered simply to advance in extended order across an open field. There was no cover or concealment from enemy bullets and shells. As soon as they emerged from cover, a regimental history noted, the enemy opened artillery fire against Bleakley and his mates. As one participant to the attack observed in the midst of the carnage, the Canadians were “blown to hell; there is terrible murder up there.”⁵⁴ Bleakley’s aunt in Norwich received the dreadful news on the morning of 2 June. “Fred made his home in Norwich, where he was known to all and highly thought of,” the *Norwich Gazette* reported when notified of his death. “In the great battle of Langemark he was in the thickest of the fighting and came through without a scratch.” Now, all that the citizens of Norwich could offer was their sympathy to his relatives in their time of “great bereavement.”⁵⁵

Pte. William J. Dean was another tragic casualty. “He was through the battles at Langemarck and Givenchy,” the Norwich newspaper reported. During the battle of Festubert, however, “he was seriously wounded by shrapnel and by being blown up and covered with sandbags, which caused internal injuries.” On 17 May, a shell explosion collapsed the parapet on him, injured the left side of his abdomen, and perforated his ear drum. Evacuated to hospital behind the lines, and suffering from gas poisoning and atony of the stomach (where the organ lost its muscular action) in addition to his recent wounds, medics determined him unfit for further military service. After months in hospitals in England and France, where severe pains in his left side (particularly when he ate) were only relieved by vomiting, he returned to Canada to the convalescent hospital in London. Although he had recovered sufficiently in spring 1916 to canvass for war books in Brantford and surrounding towns, his condition soon deteriorated and he died at Brantford General Hospital in May 1916.⁵⁶

The members of the 1st Canadian Division who remained in the Bethune area after the battle of Festubert welcomed a brief respite from fighting and the chance to occupy dry trenches a few miles south beside the banks of La Bassée Canal near the village of Givenchy. Prior to the next attack that the British 4th Army general planned for 15 June, when the Canadians would be charged with protecting the British right flank, the Canadians actually had time to prepare. The battle at Festubert had proven that it was essential for the artillery to neutralize enemy machine guns so that they did not annihilate the assaulting infantry as they crossed No Man’s Land. By mid-afternoon on the day of the Givenchy attack, the 1st Battalion (tasked with making the Canadian assault) was ready, its soldiers equipped with the short Lee-Enfield rifle which had replaced the Ross rifle throughout the Division only two days before. Although friendly artillery succeeded in targeting enemy parapets and barbed wire, the bombardment indicated to the enemy where it should expect an attack, and the Germans immediately responded with their own concentrated artillery fire on the Givenchy area. The debris from the detonation of a massive

mine in front of the Canadian positions “had scarcely ceased falling when the 1st Battalion’s leading company was on its way,” official CEF historian Nicholson explained, forcing the soldiers to reverse their attack and withdraw to a mine crater. By 11:00 pm, when the surviving men of the 1st Battalion were back behind their parapet, they had sustained 386 casualties: 46% of their strength.⁵⁷

Pte. Burney Yates was killed while fighting with the 1st Battalion during the Givenchy attack. He had been “among the first to offer his services for the defense of his country,” a *Brantford Expositor* story reminded readers in late July. “He was in training at Valcartier and Salisbury Plain, and had been in the lines almost continually after he went to France, except for a short time when he was in the hospital with bronchitis.”⁵⁸ Although the story provided no details about his death, residents of East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich – having followed his journey through letters to his family published in the *Norwich Gazette* – would not have questioned the description that he was “a brave Canadian” worthy of commemoration. In honour of his memory, local mourners organized a public memorial service that August in Racher’s Grove, near the New Durham cemetery, which featured the Norwich band and an ecumenical service featuring various local pastors.⁵⁹

In the end, the battles of Festubert and Givenchy reflected failed Allied attempts to overwhelm entrenched German positions using outmoded tactics. “Hampered by poor information, unrealistic goals, a lack of substantial artillery support and facing unbroken barbed wire and hidden machine gun nests,” a recent overview notes, “Canadians troops were unable to make any significant gains. 2,868 Canadians were killed or wounded in these two battles alone.”⁶⁰ As casualty lists reached home, the Canadian public joined the soldiers overseas in recognizing the devastating realities of fighting in the entrenched stalemate that was the Western Front. Most infantry battalions in the 1st Division had already “lost between two-thirds and three-quarters of their men,” historian Tim Cook noted. “For the thousands of Canadians who enlisted in the heady days of August 1914, impelled by adventure, glory, or patriotism, the Western Front proved little more than a charnel house. In a war not short on terror, brutality, or horror, the Battle of Festubert marked the most callous sacrifice of Canadian lives.”⁶¹

“We have had quite a bit of fighting lately and are now holding a part of the line that is practically a deadlock,” Pte. John Paulding wrote to his cousin Harold Poldon on 6 July. A letter home to his uncle “and all” that same day provided a more positive outlook for the broader family. Canadians were earning praise for their work on the battlefield, Paulding observed. “We have had many casualties in our infantry but are still on the firing line.”⁶² The 1st Canadian Division had moved north to the Ploegsteert Woods area of Belgium to recover from the losses sustained during the battles of Ypres, Festubert, and Givenchy. Until mid-September “a strange tranquility persisted across the Canadian front,” Nicholson suggested. “Apart from the activity of snipers on both sides and one small patrol clash in no man’s land, the only hostilities were an occasional exchange of light shelling by the opposing artilleries.”⁶³ Frontline soldiers would have painted a more sombre portrait. “Lives continued to be lost in disconsolate dribs and drabs,” Cook observed:

“a man dismembered by a shell in one part of the trench, another shot through the arm somewhere in the next bay, or a raid gone bad, leaving a handful of corpses in No Man’s Land. Companions were slowly claimed, one after another.”⁶⁴

Interestingly, the casualty lists from 1915 did not dampen enthusiasm for the war back in Canada. A second contingent of Canadian volunteers sailed for England in the spring 1915, providing the basis for a 2nd Canadian Division created on 25 May. After training in England, the new recruits joined the comparatively seasoned 1st Division in France and formed a Canadian Corps in mid-September. The following month, Prime Minister Borden raised the CEF establishment to 250,000 men (and would double it again in January). “Recruiting took off dramatically” over the next few months, historian Richard Holt noted. “More than a hundred battalions were created to accommodate the new recruits. Instead of a rational, coherent reinforcement structure, new battalions were created haphazardly across the country” by defence minister Sam Hughes. Although a few voices (such as French Canadian Henri Bourassa) began to raise concerns about over-extension, a “tsunami” of volunteers in English Canada seemed to suggest unbridled support.⁶⁵ Before the end of the year, the Canadian Corps added a 3rd Canadian Division under the command of Major-General Malcolm S. Mercer, who had been raised in Delmer near Tillsonburg. Thus, as the Canadian Corps settled in for a dismal winter in Ypres, where steady rain filled muddy trenches and soldiers fought off Germans as well as trench foot, colds, influenza, and lice, the home front was abuzz with activity as residents worked to “do their bit” for Canada’s war effort.

Notes

- 1 Letter from John Paulding to Uncle and All, 9 December 1914, Norwich and District Museum and Archives (NDMA).
- 2 “Town Talk,” *Norwich Gazette*, 24 September 1914.
- 3 Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1914-1916* (Toronto: Penguin, 2016), 48.
- 4 G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1962), 23.
- 5 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 24-25; Cook, *At the Sharp End*, 33-46.
- 6 “Letter from Mr. A. Crabbe Who is With First Contingent,” *Norwich Gazette*, 5 November 1914.
- 7 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 28-30.
- 8 Stephanie Potter, “‘Smile and Carry On:’ Canadian Cavalry on the Western Front” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Western University, 2013), 68.
- 9 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 30.
- 10 Potter, “Smile and Carry On,” 68-70.
- 11 “Letters Arthur Ellis Crabbe to his Parents,” 29 September 1914 and 14 October 1914, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 5 November 1914.
- 12 Crabbe to his parents, 29 September 1914 and 14 October 1914.

Chapter 3

- 13 Crabbe to his parents, 29 September 1914 and 14 October 1914; and Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 31.
- 14 On the Newfoundlanders' experience, see G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Fighting Newfoundlander* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006).
- 15 Crabbe to his parents, 29 September 1914 and 14 October 1914.
- 16 "Letter from Private W.B. Yates," *Norwich Gazette*, 29 October 1914. Although the village of Hatchley falls within Brant County, Yates's letters were a regular feature in the *Norwich Gazette* in late 1914 and early 1915 and his name appears on the monument in New Durham cemetery in Norwich Township.
- 17 "Letter from Private W.B. Yates," *Norwich Gazette*, 29 October 1914.
- 18 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 34.
- 19 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 34-36.
- 20 John Paulding to Uncle and All, 9 December 1914, NDAM, John Paulding Papers, Correspondence Series 8 #4.
- 21 "Letter John Paulding," 20 March 1915, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 15 April 1915.
- 22 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 35.
- 23 See Jay Cassel, *The Secret Plague: Venereal Disease in Canada, 1838-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).
- 24 On the 1st Division early in the war, see Andrew Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers: The 1st Canadian Division at War, 1914-1915* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).
- 25 War Diary, 1st Canadian Infantry Battalion, 1914-1916, LAC, RG 9-III-D-3, vol. 4912, file 350.
- 26 "22nd Boys Marched to Music of Mouth Organ," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 21 November 1914.
- 27 "22nd Boys Marched to Music of Mouth Organ."
- 28 Paulding to Uncle and All, 9 December 1914.
- 29 On the early stages of the war, see David French, *British Strategy and War Aims 1914-1916* (London: Routledge, 1986); Hew Strachan, *The First World War, vol. 1: To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Michael S. Neiberg, *Fighting the Great War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).
- 30 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 37.
- 31 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 46.
- 32 J. George Adami, *War Story of the Canadian Army Medical Corps, vol. 1: The First Contingent* (London: Canadian War Records Office, 1918), 79-80.
- 33 "Letter John Paulding to Unnamed," 20 March 1915, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 15 April 1915.
- 34 Paulding to unnamed, 20 March 1915.
- 35 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 49-50.
- 36 "Letter William Yates to Mother," 25 February 1915, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 25 March 1915.
- 37 "Letter John Paulding to Unnamed," 20 March 1915, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 15 April 1915.
- 38 On the First Battle of Ypres, see Ian Beckett, *Ypres: The First Battle, 1914* (London: Longmans, 2003).
- 39 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 51.
- 40 Cook, *At the Sharp End*, 111.
- 41 On the 2nd Battle of Ypres, see Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, and Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers*. For more popular accounts, see James L. McWilliams and R. James

Steel. *Gas! The Battle for Ypres, 1915* (St. Catharines: Vanwell Publishing, 1985) and Nathan M. Greenfield, *Baptism of Fire: The Second Battle of Ypres and the Forging of Canada, April 1915* (Toronto: Harpercollins Canada, 2008).

42 *Norwich Gazette*, 13 May 1915.

43 Yates was citing the end of the marching song of the 22nd Oxford Rifles. In November 1914, the *Daily Sentinel-Review* reproduced the end of the song with the following lines: And when we get in the firing line our ranks they may grow thin; But there's sure to be some of us left to march into Berlin. "22nd Boys Marched to Music of Mouth Organ," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 21 November 1914.

44 "Letter from Private Yates," *Norwich Gazette*, 20 May 1915.

45 "Canadians in Thick of the Fight in Belgium," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 29 April 1915.

46 The battle would continue for another month, fought largely by British units (and a battalion of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry) which re-established control of the salient.

47 "Dr. Don. Sutherland Wounded," *Norwich Gazette*, 29 April 1915.

48 "Cablegram from Major Don Sutherland," *Norwich Gazette*, 1 May 1915.

49 "Major Don Sutherland Arrives Home," *Norwich Gazette*, 17 June 1915.

50 Soldier file, Sutherland, Donald Matheson, Queen's Canadian Military Hospital note, 29 May 1915, and medical report 1918, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 9432 - 27; and "Expects to Return to the Firing Line," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 2 May 1915.

51 Soldier file, Dean, William James, 27183, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 2395 - 15. Dean had previously served for three years with the US Army as a coastal artilleryman.

52 "Letter from Private W.J. Dean," *Norwich Gazette*, 3 June 1915. See also "News Articles," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 11 May 1915.

53 See, for example, Richard Holmes, *The Western Front* (London 1999), 30-35.

54 H.M. Urquhart, *The History of the 16th Battalion (The Canadian Scottish) Canadian Expeditionary Force in the Great War, 1914-1919* (Vancouver: Trustees and Regimental Committee of the 16th Battalion CEF, 1932), 6-77.

55 "Fred Bleakley Killed in Action in France," *Norwich Gazette*, 3 June 1915.

56 After a funeral with full military honours, Dean's body was taken to Harley for interment. "Hawtrey Soldier's Wounds Fatal after a Year," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 1 June 1916.

57 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 107.

58 The article made no mention of the venereal disease that he picked up in England in December 1914.

59 "Hatchley Boy Met Death," *Brantford Expositor*, 28 July 1915; Note, *Brantford Expositor*, 29 July 1915; and "In Memory of Pte Yates," *Norwich Gazette*, 19 August 1915.

60 Vimy Foundation, "Festubert and Givenchy," <http://www.vimyfoundation.ca/festubert-and-givenchy/>.

61 Cook, *At the Sharp End*, 215.

62 John Paulding to Harold, 6 July 1915; John Paulding to Uncle and All, 6 July 1915, NDMA.

63 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 108.

64 Cook, *At the Sharp End*, 303.

65 Richard Holt, *Filling the Ranks: Manpower in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2017), 192.

4 “A Call Again Rings Forth...Will You Let it Go Unanswered?”¹

Mobilizing the Home Front, 1915-1916

Throughout 1915 and 1916, the people of East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich townships continued to display a strong sense of patriotism, unity and support for the war. Volunteer organizations raised funds, hosted patriotic events, and sent care packages and clothing to the soldiers serving overseas. The people celebrated the military achievements of the Allies, limited as they were, and waited for news of a big victory or turning point in the war. When a rumour spread in Norwich that the Royal Navy had secured the Dardanelles Strait and won the Battle of Gallipoli, residents “blew every whistle and struck every bell” in town for over a half-hour until the story proved false.² People still heard patriotic sermons from the pulpit on most Sundays and few town events were complete without a speech praising the war effort. A talk given by Reeve James E. Carroll to a large North Norwich audience in January 1916 reflected many of the messages and themes common in public discussions of the time. Carroll reminded his audience that if their support for the war waned, “might we not be called upon to witness, with shame, the entrance of the foe’s army? Might we not be demanded to pay tribute to a foreign King?” The people of the township were “not a war-like people,” but given the gravity of the situation they would offer their all for future generations. “The war is ours, our language, our rights, our all, is at stake and let us say with determination, ‘we’ll never let the old flag fall,’” Carroll concluded to loud applause.³ Patriotic messages like this provided some solace to families and friends as the first men from the townships died in battle.

Despite strong support for the war effort across the townships, new tensions emerged in the communities that reflected fissures opening across much of Ontario. Historian Adam Crerar has shown that while the province is often depicted as the centre of wartime Anglophone patriotic fervor – and the leading source of men, industry, and charity – friction over recruitment and a clear divide between urban and rural communities undermine this simple narrative.⁴ Allegations emerged from within and without the townships that too few of their young men were volunteering. Farmers in the townships faced mounting pressure to enlist while, at the same time, Ottawa stressed greater production to feed Canada, Britain, and the soldiers overseas. Expansion demanded ever more labour, which clashed with intensified recruiting efforts. In the face of tensions over recruitment, mounting losses overseas, constant fundraising efforts that ate up thousands of dollars, and with no end in sight, the first signs of war weariness emerged.

Memorials for the Dead

Families from the townships emerged from the Second Battle of Ypres relatively unscathed. They had read accounts of the battle in the newspapers and knew that thousands of Canadians had perished. Although many worried about the health of Major Donald Matheson Sutherland who was wounded in the battle and came home to recuperate at his mother's house in Norwich, no one with close ties to the townships had died in the fighting. In June and August 1915, however, after the battles at Festubert and Givenchy, news arrived of the deaths of Frederick Bleakley and William "Burney" Yates. There were now faces to personalize the long lists of casualties coming from the front. The war suddenly became far more real. The outpouring of mourning, support, and solidarity that ensued was unprecedented.

On 11 July 1915, well over a thousand people from all over the townships gathered on the public school grounds in Norwich to honour Fred Bleakley. "Never in the history of Norwich has such a gathering assembled as that which last evening came from every home in the village and all the countryside to do honor to Pte. Frederick Charles Bleakley, the first of our boys who fallen in defence of our Empire," the *Daily Sentinel-Review* reported.⁵ The Norwich Women's Patriotic League decorated the service with the flags of allied countries, bouquets of flowers, boughs of maple, and a portrait of the fallen soldier. Ministers from several congregations delivered sermons commemorating Bleakley's sacrifice and extolling the virtues of the war. Reverend McLachlan told the mourning audience that "peace at any price was a mistake, that other principles, rights and claims must be upheld." Presbyterian pastor Rev. Dr. John Hilary Barnett, who had served with the Royal Grenadiers during the North-West Rebellion of 1885, explained that the Union Jack "stands for all that we should hold dear and who surrenders himself, his life, his all, for the old flag, has completed his life's work." Rev. Doolittle highlighted how the war created a "sense of world unity, that every man is related to every other man that the good or ill of any one effects every other." Reflecting on the memorial service, the *Norwich Gazette* emphasized Doolittle's theme, explaining that, "as remarkable as the alliance that is opposing Prussian dominance is," so too was "that all denominationalism and sectarianism ...were forgotten in the common desire to do honor to the memory of one who had made the great sacrifice for the cause of humanity."⁶

The theme of unity appeared again on 22 August 1915, when a large crowd gathered in Racher's Grove near the New Durham cemetery to remember Hatchley's Burney Yates. The *Gazette*



The Norwich Musical Society Band, pictured here in 1908, played at the funerals of soldiers killed in wartime

reported that “never in its long history has New Durham experienced a meeting similar to that which was held” for the young soldier. Yates’ service had brought a “personal interest in the gigantic struggle being waged in Europe” to the people of Hatchley, New Durham, and Norwich. The greater community had followed along with his experiences through the letters his mother published in the local newspaper. Cries of distress broke the silence of the memorial on several occasions, especially when Rev. E.L. Rice lamented “the sacrifice of the sweetheart, the sister and the mother.” Speakers emphasized that Yates’ sacrifice had not been in vain. Rev. R.E. Zimmerman gave a “rallying call to duty” and insisted that “the struggle must go on until Prussian militarism is broken down.” Only loyalty and unity would win the war. Rev. D.B. Cohoe highlighted the “real union of forces” inspired by the war, noting that “the professor and the laborer, who now are united against a common foe, standing shoulder to shoulder in the trenches, would, after the conflict, be brothers still.”⁷ The message of both memorial services was clear: the deaths of Bleakley and Yates were tragic but necessary, and the people could best honour their memory by casting aside differences and uniting behind the war effort.

As the number of Canadians killed overseas increased, local churches held communal memorials that commemorated all of the allied war dead. In November 1915, for instance, St. John’s Church in Otterville honoured the fallen, the service concluding with the thought that “these men were not saints – they were more – they were heroes with unparalleled deeds of heroism, they have won for Canada the homage of the Empire.”⁸ In early 1916, the *Gazette* reprinted the memorial sermon given by local Anglican Rev. F.V. Vair who preached that “a friendship given to benefit the whole world, was the highest form of friendship, that to lay down your life as a soldier, is the greatest life and the greatest death we can give.”⁹ There would be many more memorial services – both individual and communal – as the war went on.

In the summer of 1915, the wounded and broken started to return from the front. Pte. William Green of Otterville, who had gone overseas with the Second Contingent, came home after developing rheumatism while on active service in England. Green “has returned broken in health and with shattered nerves as a result of his illness there,” the *Tillsonburg Observer* reported, having spent time in a convalescent home as a consequence.¹⁰ In early 1916, Harry Cole, who had been one of the first to enlist in the townships, returned to Norwich when he was deemed medically unfit after garrison duty in Bermuda and training in England.¹¹ Every returned man reminded the community of the war’s rising cost.



Pte. William Green

The case of William James Dean of Hawtrey was a particularly sad one. Wounded at Festubert in May 1915, Dean suffered from severe pains in his left side (particularly when he ate) relieved only when he vomited. He returned to Canada in early 1916 and bounced between hospitals in Brantford and London. Although he

had sufficiently recovered in the spring of 1916 to fundraise for the war effort in Brantford and surrounding towns, his condition deteriorated and he died on 25 May 1916. His coffin was placed on a gun carriage drawn by uniformed soldiers and paraded to the Colborne Street railway station, where it was placed on a train bound for Hawtrey. Once there, Dean's coffin was taken to the cemetery where soldiers fired off a three-volley salute. The deceased had remained a fervent supporter of the war to the end, having told the *Brantford Expositor*: "We're glad we went. We had good times and we had rough times, but no matter how we fared, we're glad we went."¹²

To Farm or to Fight?

The ministers who presided over the memorial services for Bleakley and Yates saw the large gatherings as perfect opportunities to recruit more soldiers. At Bleakley's service, Rev. McLachlan shamed the men in attendance, plainly stating that "young Canadian manhood would do better than it has in responding to the urgent call of the need of King and Country."¹³ At Yates' service, the ministers agreed that "the best monument" the community could erect was to "follow in the footsteps of Pte. W.B. Yates." They urged the young men present to enlist and prepare to "make the supreme sacrifice."¹⁴

The ministers' emphasis on recruitment reflected a growing issue. Historian Mourad Djebabla has pointed out that, "regional and cultural differences aside, Canadian farmers on the whole were not disposed to enlist: In 1916, they made up only 8.5 percent of volunteers."¹⁵ Military recruiters quickly critiqued the reluctance of men living in rural districts to enlist.¹⁶ In early 1915, for instance, Major H.M. Abell stopped in Norwich to recruit for the Mounted Rifles. After failing to acquire any volunteers, he told the *Gazette* that "the young men of this neighborhood were not very much enthused over being given an opportunity to serve the Motherland in the great war now waging."¹⁷ *The Globe* also highlighted the unwillingness of Ontario's farmers and rural population to enlist. In late January 1915, the paper reported that rural militia regiments were struggling to reach their recruitment quotas. The author asked: "Is rural Ontario losing its Imperial spirit? Must the stalwarts of the breezy uplands, the vigorous manhood of mountain and plain be branded as laggards in the Empire's shoulder-to-shoulder march to the trenches? Will the rural regiments allow the city regiments to put them to shame? So far they have."¹⁸

Those who criticized rural residents for their reluctance to enlist failed to take into account rural depopulation.¹⁹ At the end of 1914, the *Gazette* reprinted a column from the *Tillsonburg Observer* which argued that "when the city dweller looks to the farm for volunteers for the army he forgets that for years the rural population has been decreasing to such an extent that in time of peace there has not been enough men to properly man the farms and bring agriculture up to the place it ought to occupy in the nation."²⁰ When the Ophelia's Farmers' Club met in Norwich in late February 1915, its members noted that the population of the cities was only three generations removed from the country. The "centres of population" had long depended on "the country for their vitality, manhood and sustenance." By this

logic, the club asserted, the best of the men in the cities – and, therefore, the best of Canada’s soldiers – initially came from the country.²¹

Critics who censured farmers for failing to enlist in large numbers also ignored the special obstacles that made volunteering for overseas service particularly challenging for these men. Soldiers were often single and in their twenties, while most farm owners were married and in their thirties.²² When a young farmer wanted to serve, he had the added worry of either renting out his farm or leaving it in the hands of a neighbour or family member.²³ Historian Adam Crerar has pointed out that while recruits from the city could expect their jobs to be waiting for them when they returned, farmers “wondered whether their properties – their business *and* their homes – could survive their absences.”²⁴ In short, farmers faced significant hurdles if they wished to enlist and Canada’s recruitment campaigns rarely addressed these concerns. Instead, recruiters geared their efforts to urban men, promising them adventure and a break from their desk jobs – messages that held little appeal to farmers.²⁵

The federal and provincial governments’ constant pleas to dramatically increase agricultural production proved one of the most important considerations that kept farmers from enlisting in greater numbers. Starting in the fall of 1914, the Canadian government mobilized the country’s agricultural sector and pushed for greater food production – a campaign it continued for the entire war.²⁶ In 1914, England imported over 60% of its total food supply – including 80% of its wheat and 40% of its meat. When the fighting broke out, England lost most of its agricultural imports from Europe and turned to Canada to pick up the slack. As the war went on, much of Western Europe came to depend on food imported from South America, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.²⁷ In February 1915, Germany’s declaration of “unrestricted submarine warfare” exacerbated the need for increased production even further. Hoping to cut off Britain from food and supplies, the Germans declared a war zone around the British Isles and their U-boats proceeded to sink any

merchant ships in the area without warning. With essential supplies being sent to the bottom at an alarming rate, Canadian farmers were asked to increase their production to replace the losses.²⁸

Farming remained central to Ontario’s economy even in the face of increased industrialization and urbanization.²⁹ The province focused most of its at-



A farmer marks corn rows for hand planting, 1909. Agriculture was a labour intensive process during each part of the growing season.

tention on the production of wheat, but also produced more beef, pork, cheese, and condensed milk.³⁰ By extension, the government told farmers that increased production was the most valuable contribution they could make to the war effort³¹ – a common theme in the *Norwich Gazette* and *Woodstock Daily Sentinel-Review*. A December 1914 editorial printed in the *Gazette* highlighted that the “farmers’ duty is at home.” England and the armies of the Empire had to be fed, and there were already too few farmers to meet the increased demand. The author reminded the readers that “the lines of communications extend from the battle fields to the farms of this country and the force on the farm is as important as the one on the field and it must not be depleted but ought rather to be strengthened.”³² Another story, published by the *Gazette* in March 1915, concluded: “In serving the Empire we are serving ourselves.... Now is the time to prove ourselves the Granaries of the Empire. We have the soil, we have the resources, we must have the energy to use them to the greatest advantage.... Canada’s future depends on our actions today.”³³ Common messages echoed throughout rural Ontario.

At the beginning of 1915, federal Minister of Agriculture Martin Burrell launched the Canada-wide food production campaign “Patriotism and Production,” which directly connected increased agricultural output to patriotism – while emphasizing the profits that farmers could make. In support of this initiative, Ontario’s Department of Agriculture implemented its own greater production campaigns, using advertisements like “Farms are Second Line Trenches” to motivate farmers.³⁴ The department also increased the number of advisers it provided to the province’s farmers, supplied tractors for use at cost, arranged for seed loans, ran breeding programs for cattle and horses, and circulated information on how to increase yields. A report printed in the *Gazette* in March 1915 on “Can the Farmer Do It? That is the Question He Asks re Greater Production – Thoroughly Cleaning and Testing His Seed Will Do It” was typical of the advice disseminated by the Department of Agriculture. The report encouraged farmers to secure plump, bright Canadian-grown seed and to test their seed on blotting paper or in moist soil before planting.³⁵ The advice columns often asked farmers to take a more scientific approach in their efforts to increase production.

Farmers could attend a plethora of educational lectures put on by the Patriotism and Production program. On 12 February 1915, for instance, farmers from the townships attended a conference in the armouries at Woodstock called “The Duty and the Opportunity of the Canadian Farmer.”³⁶ Professor E.S. Archibald, head of the livestock branch of the Dominion Experimental Farm, said that the outlook for the Canadian cattleman had never been better. While the start of the war had lowered the prices, he guaranteed that they would soon rise. “There never was a better time to get in pure-bred stock than now,” and he advised that “instead of getting rid of pure-bred breeding stock because of dull times ... every man should use to advantage pure bred sires for the building up of decent herds.” Another speaker argued that Oxford County should diversify beyond dairy to take advantage of changing markets, such as the growing global demand for poultry and eggs. The night ended with a government horticulturalist calling on all young boys and girls,

in the farm and the city, to begin gardening so that they could produce food for their families, thus freeing up more for export abroad.³⁷

Local farming organizations also helped to encourage and facilitate increased agricultural production. At South Oxford Farmers' Institute meetings, participants discussed topics such as "Breeding and Feeding Hogs profitably" and "Corn Growing."³⁸ The North Norwich Agriculture Society held a Patriotism and Production Field Crop Competition offering prizes for the best wheat, oats, and corn,³⁹ while the Norwich District Milk Producers' Association featured lectures on increasing the output of dairy cattle.⁴⁰ In early 1916, the Ontario Department of Agriculture rearranged the province's Farmers' Institutes into County Boards of Agriculture with representatives from different agricultural societies, such as the North Norwich Agricultural Society. Each board disseminated agricultural knowledge, developed local talent, encouraged cooperation, and offered short technical courses.⁴¹ In short, farmers had unprecedented access to "expert" advice – although some would have agreed with a peer writing in the provincial agricultural magazine the *Weekly Sun* that "we are just now suffering ... a diarrhea of advice and a particularly acute constipation in the matter of help."⁴²

Increasing actual production reaped great rewards. Farmers cultivated greater acreages in the spring of 1915, anticipating rising prices and healthy profits. Oxford County escaped the damaging late frosts that other regions of Ontario experienced that spring, and the harvest proved bountiful.⁴³ In January 1916, Norwich Board of Trade President A.W Pritchard reflected that 1915 "had been one of the best in the history of Norwich...in the face of the one of the greatest wars that has ever been. We had a bumper crop and the Government has shown great skill in handling the same; the banks had also done well in the way of financing."⁴⁴ The harvests would grow even more lucrative as the war went on.

While crop producers welcomed the rising grain prices, the livestock industry initially suffered. At Oxford County's annual Holstein-Friesian cattle sale in April 1915, for instance, some of the best cattle in the world sold for under a hundred dollars. The low price was "explained by one of the breeders following the sale, his opinion being that no one was anxious to fill his stables with live stock just now, when grain is proving to be costly." The breeders remained confident, however, that the livestock industry would soar after the war.⁴⁵ Earlier than expected, the cost of beef rose in the fall of 1915 and again in the spring of 1916.⁴⁶



Dairy remained king in Oxford County – even during the war years. In the fall of 1914, with the market momentarily unstable, the price of milk dropped and Borden's Milk Condenser in Norwich had to sell its dairy supply to local cheese factories and temporarily shut down operations. The dairy industry bounced back dramatically in early 1915, however, as the demand for condensed



Borden's Condenser Factory in Norwich, 1916

milk grew to supply Western Europe and the soldiers at the front. With prices rising, Borden's resumed full operations in March and purchased ever greater quantities of milk from local dairy farmers, capturing much of the supply destined for the Norwich Junction Cheese Factory and putting it out of business. The dairyman looked to increase production "planning for a more abundant milk harvest than ever from his faithful, patient cows," the *Gazette* reported.⁴⁷ Dairy farmers were delighted when the price for milk went up again in September 1915,⁴⁸ and production at Borden's increased consistently. On one spring morning in early 1916, the Norwich condenser received 140,000 pounds of milk – a record to that point.⁴⁹ The wartime dairy business was booming.

As the experience of the Norwich Junction Cheese Factory suggests, the war's impact on the townships' cheese industry proved complicated. Historian Hayley Goodchild has shown how the "war destabilized the rural cheese industry even though it temporarily increased both the demand for cheddar overseas and the prices paid to patrons." Although demand increased, cheese producers across Can-

ada struggled from a shortage of rennet, used to separate milk into solid curds for cheesemaking. The rennet for Ontario producers often came from Bavaria and Russia, trade routes disrupted by the war. Consequently, the price of the extract increased dramatically, as did the price of cheese. While cheese producers enjoyed higher prices,



The Burgessville cheese factory with rounds of cheese and milk cans

they struggled to compete with the milk condensers which benefitted from greater demand and better profits, allowing them to pay a higher price to dairy farmers for their raw supply. By early 1916, the Borden Company purchased John Mac Hoover's Burgessville Cheddar and Butter Factory, turning it into an additional receiving station – an indication of the challenges faced by the townships' cheese producers and the opportunities provided to its milk condensers.⁵⁰

Ultimately, the war brought greater profits to the dairy industry and to farmers who could increase their production of crops and livestock – to obvious effect. A government official who toured parts of the townships in the summer of 1915 noted that the area “has apparently suffered less from the effects of the war in a business way than almost any other place I have visited.”⁵¹ The farmers profited and, given that they were able to produce their own food and fuel, were comparatively insulated from the rising commodity prices experienced by city and town dwellers.⁵²

Despite their financial success, the realities of an ever-worsening labour shortage constantly hung over the heads of the townships' agriculturalists. Already in 1914, a farm labour shortage started to build in Ontario due to competition from the expanding war industries, a decline in immigration, and the enlistment of potential labourers. The townships had depended heavily on migrant workers from England in the years before the war, but many of these labourers had volunteered. The labour that remained available became progressively more expensive, with the annual wage of a farm hand doubling by the end of 1916 from \$323 to \$610 – a blow only partially softened by the increased farm profits.⁵³

The *Norwich Gazette* regularly referred to the growing labour problem in the area. In January 1916, the paper predicted that some farmers would have difficulty planting and harvesting their crops in the upcoming season and advised that farms must be “kept at the maximum with the minimum amount of hired help.... The good farmer must plan to build up his farm with as little labor as possible.” Further urging farmers to increase their livestock herds – after all, a farm could still produce cattle on pasture and grass with relatively little additional help⁵⁴ – the *Gazette* also offered a simpler solution to the labour problem: work harder. After the planting season of 1916, a member of the Oxford County Council lamented the effects on farm families. “The farmers' wives of Oxford are just as patriotic as the soldiers' wives,” he wrote. “Farm labor is scarce and the wives of many farmers in Oxford today are working from twelve to fourteen hours a day trying to help out on the farm.”⁵⁵ At the end of February, the *Norwich* newspaper told its readers that “while it is ‘fight, fight, fight’ with those at the front, it should be ‘work, work, work’ with those at home.”⁵⁶

To compensate, rural communities across Ontario appealed to city-dwellers to come to the country where they could work and do their part for the war effort.⁵⁷ An unexpected source of labour came from a militia order on 12 July 1915, which granted furloughs to recruits in training camp to assist with planting and harvesting. Historian Barbara Wilson has pointed out that the Department of Militia probably thought that “if it could be demonstrated that the government recognized the plight of the farmers and was prepared to give them practical assistance, the farm-

ers might then be more inclined to encourage their sons and hired men to enlist.”⁵⁸ Farmers also received welcome news in the spring of 1916 when the government announced that more than 15,000 Ontario school boys would be made available that summer for farm work.⁵⁹ When this new source of labour began to work in the townships, a local farmer wrote in to the *Gazette* that “the school boys, they tell me, are out farming and are making good too. They say it’s real nice having them around, so different from the majority of men one gets on the farm.”⁶⁰

The development of hydro-electric power in East Oxford, South Norwich, and North Norwich also helped reduce the sting of the labour shortage. To secure power, farmers had to petition their Township Council, which then forwarded the petition to the Hydro-Electric Commission. The Commission would then prepare rates for the township and its residents would vote on whether to embrace electricity. In Oxford County, the Hydro-Electric Commission had agreements with individual farmers for use of current, with a service charge of \$3 a month for areas that had three users per mile, \$2.50 for those with four, and \$2 where there were five users. On top of this, customers had to pay for actual current used (for farmers, usually between \$70 and \$85 a year). Electrical use in the townships grew as the war went on, with the farmers of North Norwich securing access to electricity in late 1915 and their South Norwich counterparts following soon after. Power came to the town of Burgessville at the end of October 1916: “a red letter day in the history of the enterprising village.” By the summer of 1917, the town of Norwich would claim “the honor of being the centre of the most extensive rural Hydro-electric service in Ontario.” Thirty miles of rural hydro lines extended in all directions to more than 130 farmers, and power lines soon spread out to Springford and Holbrook.

Toronto *Globe* reporters actually visited North and South Norwich townships on several occasions during the war to see the impact of hydro-electricity on rural Ontario. “See what this power will do,” the national paper exclaimed. “It will light the house and outbuildings, run a sewing machine and washing machine in the home, heat irons for ironing, make toast or coffee and sweep the floors. In the barn and home it will pump the water. In the barn it will also pulp roots, run the fanning mill and grain crusher and milk the cows.” M.L. Haley, a Springford resident and former head of the Canadian Holstein Breeders’ Association, reported that “along the 6th and 7th concessions of South Norwich almost all farmers are taking the service. It certainly is a great convenience to be able to snap on a light at the barn as one leaves the house to do chores.” East of Norwich, Walter Lossing used his new power to light his home, barn, hog pen and garage, pump water from a drilled well over 100 feet deep, grind feed, cut wood, and fill his silo.⁶¹ There was little doubt amongst the farmers with access to electricity that it improved their production and helped relieve the labour shortage.

Even with the assistance of electric power, soldiers on furlough, and school boys, the townships’ labour problems remained acute, especially as the military’s recruitment efforts intensified in late 1915 and early 1916. Farmers saw their extra effort as a patriotic duty – the work in the fields and the barn equal to military service. Crerar points out that many of these farmers hoped that their efforts “would

reawaken urban citizens' appreciation of the value of farming and rural life."⁶² Rather than improve the image of the farmer in the eyes of most city and town dwellers, however, the war inspired a barrage of criticism about the failure of farmers and their sons to enlist.⁶³ In a column in the *Globe*, Peter McArthur came to the defence of the farmers, arguing that "it is high time that the Department of Militia and the Department of Agriculture got together and decided on a definite policy. If a man is doing his duty by producing more, he should not be open to criticism if he does not enlist."⁶⁴ For the young farmers of the townships, however, the pressure both to fight and to farm increased as the war went on.

"Take off your short skirts and put on the King's Uniform": The Battle for Recruits

The importance placed on farm work clashed with Canada's increasingly desperate plea for more soldiers by the middle of 1915. Prime Minister Borden announced that summer the Canadian Expeditionary Force would increase to 250,000 men and a hundred new battalions were to be created across the country to accommodate recruits. His directive was a challenge to the perception that not enough men were enlisting, particularly in rural districts.⁶⁵ Across the province, informal groups of recruiters formed, largely made up of members of the professional middle class. Clergy, politicians, town leaders, and newspapers intensified their efforts to convince young men to enlist, using posters, leaflets, advertisements, rallies, and parades to first encourage and then shame men into volunteering.⁶⁶ "The language of patriotism, duty, and sacrifice which framed recruiting efforts represented strong convictions that allowed for only one answer to the 'plain facts:' prompt enlistment," historian Matt Baker describes. "The result of this single-mindedness was that recruiters quickly reached the limit of voluntarism and turned to coercion,

applying intense pressure on men to conform to their idea of patriotism." Public speakers berated young men, deriding their character and manhood. In many small towns, committees roamed the streets in search of recruits, while some young women started to hand out white feathers to men they thought should enlist – a devastating accusation of cowardice.⁶⁷ While recruiters did not distribute white feathers in East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich townships, pressure grew on the young men to enlist.

In late August 1915, reports circulated around Oxford County that the freshly promoted Lieutenant-Colonel Donald Matheson Sutherland, recently recovered from his wounds, had taken command of a new unit: the 71st Battalion. The unit would recruit its soldiers from Western Ontario and Sutherland hoped to raise a full com-



Lt.-Col. D. M. Sutherland, 1916

pany of 250 men from Oxford County.⁶⁸ The creation of the 71st led to the first “systematic [recruitment] campaign” in the county. The unit established recruiting offices in Ingersoll, Tillsonburg, Embro, and Norwich, while officers and sergeants actively solicited possible volunteers at rallies, community events, and church services.⁶⁹ To launch the county-wide recruitment campaign at the beginning of September 1915, the *Daily Sentinel-Review* published a front-page drawing of a Canadian soldier crucified by the Germans, accompanied by an “open letter to any young man” demanding that they seek revenge. The paper criticized those who had not enlisted when rumours of the crucifixion first appeared after the Second Battle of Ypres. Upon hearing of the barbaric act, the paper asked, “did you ask yourself what any young Canadian with red blood in his veins would feel like doing?” The letter stressed that no able bodied man could be spared from the front and insisted that men should go to preserve their “manhood.”⁷⁰

Shortly after the campaign began, a recruiting office opened in Norwich under Lieutenant Hugh Rowe, a civil engineer who had been born and raised in the community. The young officer told his fellow townsmen that the timing was ideal because they could serve in the same company and fight beside their friends. The *Gazette* concurred, reporting that “no better opportunity could occur than this for men wishing to join the colours, and all men desirous of taking their part in the big job the Empire has on its hands, and of taking their place beside the Canadians who ‘saved the situation’ at Langemarck, are urged to act promptly and enlist at once.”⁷¹

A week later, Rowe’s efforts had secured only eight men for the 71st Battalion. Amongst them was 21-year-old Aubrey Strode, who had been born in Norwich, and one of his best friends, 23-year-old Clark Beattie, who had been training as a druggist for the past few months. Another volunteer, Melvin Lambert, worked as a lithographer and had recently married. Archibald Morris had been born in England and worked at Borden’s Condenser, while another English immigrant, Reginald Palmer, was an employee at Norwich’s broom factory. Two of the recruits, John Barnes and Arthur Lloyd, worked as farm hands.⁷² While the *Gazette* commended the eight volunteers, the 71st required more men. Hugh Rowe worked with the Norwich Women’s Patriotic League and prominent community members to plan a recruitment rally that would address the problem.

On the night of Friday, 17 September 1915, well over a thousand people from the town and countryside attended a rally on the Norwich school grounds (where three months earlier another large crowd had mourned Fred Bleakley). The military band of the 22nd Oxford Rifles marched down Main Street led by the town’s Boy Scout troop who carried a banner with a powerful message: “If you don’t go we’ll have to” – a stinging critique aimed at the young men in the audience. Once the crowd had settled, a group of leading citizens and recruits gave speeches. Farmer and former Liberal Member of Parliament for Oxford South Malcolm S. Schell asked the crowd: “What is life? It is a small thing in itself but to lay it on the altar of one’s country is worth a hundred years of hum drum existence. True, it may mean death, but is it not sweet to die for one’s country? The young men of Norwich should consider it an honour and a privilege to serve under one of this village’s

distinguished sons.” Schell’s perennial political opponent and Oxford South’s sitting MP, Donald S. Sutherland, then came to the stage and delivered a “vigorous speech” urging the young men to fight the Empire’s battles:

A privilege and opportunity such as this might never arise again.... It ought to be the pride and ambition of every young man to go and take his place on the firing line – to help maintain the glory and fame that the Canadians have already won on the battlefields of France and Flanders. Many of you mothers have sons you don’t want to let go. Are they any better than the thousands who have gone, many of them to lay down their lives for their country? I only wish it were possible for me to go and I would be there with the other Canadians for let me tell you that when peace comes the supreme test of citizenship is going to be ‘what did you do in the great war’?”

Lt.-Col. Sutherland, who would command the new recruits secured by the rally, followed with a rousing speech about his experiences in the war, and implored the men in the audience to come fight alongside him.⁷³

For the young men in attendance, the most powerful and damning words surely came from two of their own: Aubrey Strode and Clark Beattie. The 21-year-old druggist told his community that the soldier’s life was the only one for him. Indeed, it was “the only life for a young man today because it brings the consciousness that you are doing something in a great cause.” Aubrey gave a fiery address that shamed and ridiculed his peers. As he stared out at the large crowd, no doubt recognizing many faces and friends, he proclaimed:

For God’s sake take off your short skirts and put on the King’s Uniform. That’s the only thing that will fit you. There are boys here in Norwich that do little else than loaf around and go to the movies. I know a dozen boys in this little old town who have been saying, ‘I’m going to enlist.’ I have said it too, but thank God I’ve said it for the last time.... And I’m proud of my strength, for it enables me to do something in the fight for my country. I’m only sorry I’m not twins.

Strode ended his speech by explaining that “Clark Beattie and I are going to the front but we don’t want to go alone from this village. We want every able-bodied young man in the place to come with us.”⁷⁴

The large recruitment rally and the strong words of its speakers led to a trickle of recruits in the days that followed. Percy Leroy (Roy) Marr, a 27-year-old farmer from Norwich Junction, enlisted shortly after the rally.⁷⁵ As experiences all over Ontario proved, however, shaming and coercion often had the opposite effect on young men.⁷⁶ A few weeks later, Lieut. Rowe took a more casual approach. He set up his recruiting table at the Norwich Town Fair with the assistance of Aubrey Strode, who had been promoted to corporal and was on leave from his training camp in London, Ontario. By chatting with individual men as they passed by the booth, Rowe and Strode managed to recruit Samuel Honour, Mungo McGregor and Thomas Morgan – all immigrants from England who had been working on local farms for the past few years.⁷⁷

In the weeks that followed, more men joined the 71st. From Eastwood came 36-year-old Arthur Thomas Smallman, who had been born in Kent, England. He had moved to East Oxford with his wife Gertrude, where he worked as a railway section man.⁷⁸ Bruce Edwards, a 27-year-old clerk who worked at C.G. Hulet's store in Norwich, volunteered, as did 18-year-old high school student Wilfred Oatman, who grew up in South Norwich Township. To the surprise of some residents in North Norwich, the 51-year-old Presbyterian minister Dr. John Hilary Barnett also signed up to serve as the unit's chaplain. These recruits were joined by a wave of farmers and farm labourers. Eighteen-year-old Percy Newton enlisted at the beginning of October – soon followed by his older brother Roy (24) and his younger brother Fredrick (18) – all of whom worked on farms outside Norwich. So too did 26-year-old volunteer Thomas Carroll Abraham. From Springfield came Clarence McKee and George Swance, later joined by his brothers Elmer and Frank, all of whom worked on farms.⁷⁹ As a group, these men represented a significant loss to the agricultural labour pool in the townships.



Roy Newton, 1916

By November 1915 a draft of 5 officers and 248 other ranks from the 71st departed for England, while another 350 recruits overwintered in Woodstock. Here the experience and skill of Lt.-Col. Sutherland paid off as the unit trained and prepared to go to war. Many of the men grew to love their battle-hardened commander, a sentiment captured in a poem written by Lieut. Samuel Leslie Young – a young officer in the battalion:

A man that can fight, a fighter who's fought,
A man to whom danger to self counts for naught,
A man all the way with a conduct sheet clean,
As a man and a soldier our Colonel's beloved.
A man; Colonel Sutherland, that's whom I mean.⁸⁰

While the 71st broke up before Lt.-Col. Sutherland could lead the unit into combat, many of its members continued to profess their admiration for the commander in the years ahead.

While the men learned from Lt.-Col. Sutherland in Woodstock, they also socialized with the surrounding communities. The hockey team of the 71st played games against squads from across Oxford County. Civilians from all over the county also travelled to Woodstock to watch the battalion as it trained or conducted parades.⁸¹ Other points of contact were less savoury. Pte. Edward Gooding was a young man from St. Mary's who was married with two children. While stationed in Woodstock he seduced Stella Munro and, in great deceit, married her. The couple honeymooned in Norwich where she had family, but he overstayed his leave which led to his arrest for bigamy. Both Stella and her mother insisted that they did not know about the soldier's double life.⁸²

Despite rare instances of bad behavior, Lt.-Col. Sutherland and his soldiers became a staple of county life over the winter of 1915-1916. In late December 1915,

the commanding officer announced that his 350 recruits would conduct a route march through Burgessville, Norwich, Otterville, Tillsonburg, and Ingersoll – an event that many community members remembered as a high point of the war years. The news created a flurry of activity in the towns as they prepared food and accommodations for the visiting soldiers. After setting out from Woodstock on 10 January 1916, the 71st had dinner in the churches of Burgessville. The next morning the battalion approached Norwich, where they were greeted by the whistle of Borden's Condenser and a crowd of school children who marched behind the unit into town.⁸³ The men ate in the churches and played hockey games with the locals into the afternoon. At a rally that evening, town leaders and members of the 71st asked the young men of Norwich to enlist and join the fight.⁸⁴ That night, some residents of the town may have been treated to the unofficial battalion poem, written – somewhat pre-emptively – by a young recruit:

The Kaiser looked down,
And asked with a frown:
“Is the 71st Battalion coming, I wonder?”
The Crown Prince answered, “Yes”;
Said the Kaiser, “I guess this business
is settled by thunder,
I’ve heard of the 71st
And heard of its boys
They are loyal, whole-hearted and splendid;
And if they come here
We have reason to fear
That soon the great war will be ended.

I fear not submarines
Torpedoes or planes.
Nor the men of all the other battalions
But the 71st boys
Are no Crown Prince’s toys
And my kingdom is sure to surrender.”

So he’ll saddle his horse
As a matter of course,
And make for his home without plunder,
And shout as he goes,
The worst of his foes
Have come – the 71st battalion.
“So I’m conquered it seems,
the worst of my dreams,
(To be monarch of Europe – my boast)
By this well-equipped host,
Who will stick to their post –
The brave heroes of the 71st battalion.”

So here's to the heroes
Who fought under Sutherland.
And made them a name that is glorious;
While we think of their fame,
We shout and exclaim:
"The brave boys of the 71st battalion!"⁸⁵

After spending the night in Norwich, the unit left for Otterville, early the next morning.

The 71st marched into Otterville to the cheers of its residents and other onlookers from across South Norwich, who professed their admiration for the smoothly marching soldiers. As the battalion swung into the town, no doubt members of the community heard and sang along with the unit's catchy marching song:

D'yer ken John French in his Khaki suit,
His belt and leggings, and his stout brown boot
Along with his guns, and horse and foot
On the road to Berlin in the morning.

Yes we kun John French, and old Joffre top,
And alt his men to the tri-colour true;
And Belgians and Russians, a jolly good few,
On the road to Berlin in the morning.

For the mothers they slew, and the kids as well,
And for sundry things it's not fit to tell,
We've just got to catch them, and give 'em hell
On the road to Berlin in the morning.⁸⁶

Upon their arrival, the soldiers were quickly given a warm meal in the village's churches, before leaving for Tillsonburg a few hours later. Although a short visit, the residents celebrated the event and agreed that "this will go down in the history of Otterville as a day never to be forgotten in the village."⁸⁷



Members of "A" Company, 71st Battalion at London, Ontario, October 1916

The men of the 71st remained in Woodstock until the beginning of April 1916 when they boarded trains for Halifax. The *Norwich Gazette* reported that:

the send-off that they received at the hands of Woodstock citizens and the people of Oxford generally, will be long remembered by the boys of the 71st, and those who witnessed it. The crowd present at the farewell was the largest ever seen in the city. Norwich was well represented, quite a number drove up, while others went by train. The local members of the battalion, who had spent several days at their homes here, departed for the barracks on Saturday morning, March 25th and quite a number of the citizens escorted them to the station. The 71st is considered one of the best battalions that ever left Canada, and it is the charge of one of the best soldiers that Canada ever produced.⁸⁸

On 5 April 1916, the 71st boarded RMS *Olympic* in Halifax and arrived in England 6 days later. Once again, the men settled into a pattern of training and preparation, waiting for the call to go to the front.

The 168th “Oxford’s Own” Takes Shape

While Lt.-Col. Sutherland was busy raising the 71st Battalion, the federal government announced yet another nation-wide recruiting drive. In the fall of 1915, Ottawa decided that communities would bear the responsibility and cost of recruiting local battalions, which included paying for tents, mess facilities, and other basic equipment. The system would encourage young men to join by allowing them to enlist, train, and fight with their friends – or so the government hoped. A few months later, on New Year’s Day 1916, Prime Minister Robert Borden put great pressure on this voluntary recruitment system by pledging to raise the country’s military contribution to 500,000 men – a measure that came not from careful consideration of Canada’s manpower situation but from Borden’s belief that, by increasing the size of the CEF, he could increase Canada’s influence over British war policy.

In the phase of voluntary recruitment stretching from October 1915 to October 1917, Canada sent 123,966 men in 170 battalions overseas. 75 of those units were raised in Ontario. Of these recruits, 72,296 men, almost sixty percent of the total, were raised in the first few months of this two-year period.⁸⁹ During this phase of intensive recruiting, Oxford County’s 168th Battalion was born. In late December 1915, the Department of Militia and Defence authorized Lt.-Col. W.T. McMullen, commanding officer of the 22nd Oxford Rifles, to raise a local unit from Oxford County.⁹⁰ The 168th “Oxford’s Own” hoped to raise 1200 men, including 30 from the town of Norwich and 60 each from North Norwich, South Norwich and East Oxford.⁹¹ For the first few months of the battalion’s existence, the recruits would be billeted locally, where they would undertake basic forms of drill and training. While “C” Company was initially to be housed only in Tillsonburg, the Norwich Board of Trade and local businessmen successfully lobbied to have local members of the company housed in the town until the military sent the 168th for further training elsewhere.⁹²

As the new battalion began recruiting in January 1916, the *Tillsonburg Observer* predicted that “Canada need not fear conscription. There is no need. Young men agree with Horace when he wrote: ‘How brave it is and noble to die for the Fatherland.’ They are flocking to the colors by the hundreds throughout the

Dominion.”⁹³ The 168th’s recruiting office opened in Norwich under the direction of Woodstock’s Lieut. W.H. Pierce and, as the *Observer* predicted, a wave of volunteers came forward. Amongst them was 22-year-old druggist Ernest Clayton Root from Macwhirter’s drug store. Upon his enlistment, Clara Hemingway took over his position, taking advantage of one of the new opportunities that the war provided to women when men left their jobs to volunteer.⁹⁴ Edward Isaac Chapman, a 27-year-old carpenter working in Norwich, also volunteered, leaving behind his pregnant wife Ruth and their two-year-old son. Ernest Campbell, who was born in Courtland but had been work-



Roy Fewster, 1916

ing at Borden’s Milk Condenser, also left behind a young family to enlist – his wife Mretta and their recently adopted two-year-old daughter Dorothy.⁹⁵ Farm labourers George Bolton (18), Roy Stuart Newton (24), and Walter Pollard (20) signed on, as did 25-year-old farm owner Hubert Coles, and 18-year-old Ernest Crabbe who had been working on his parent’s farm. Ernest was the third Crabbe brother to enlist – Arthur and William were already at the front.⁹⁶



Joseph Agar, 1916

Other men from the townships enlisted in Tillsonburg and Woodstock. Robert William Harp, a 27-year-old teamster from Otterville, joined in Tillsonburg as did bookkeeper Elgin Herbert Armstrong, whose parents lived in Springford. Eighteen-year-old labourer Arthur William Westbury from Burgessville enlisted in Woodstock, as did his neighbour, 22-year-old well driller Allen Casler. So too did North Norwich farmer Harrison Roy Fewster and Jacob Harvey Searls, who had been working as a tinsmith in Woodstock but whose mother lived in Norwich. From East Oxford came William Downey, an engineer; Ernest Cox, a labourer; Charles Edward Hart, who worked as a shipper; and Russel Cook, who had just turned 18 and left his family farm at Curries Crossing.⁹⁷



Leslie E Baker, 1916

Notably, there were also several older men in this wave of recruits. Norman Burch, a 43-year-old broom maker living and working in Norwich, enlisted in early February, as did 37-year-old brick layer Angus McLeod. Joseph Agar had grown up in Norwich, and his mother Sarah still lived in the community. For the previous few years he had been living in Toronto and working as a sailor on the Great Lakes. Now the 45-year-old sailor came back to his hometown to enlist in the 168th Battalion. He

Local Soldiers of the 168th Battalion *

<i>Adams, John Russel "Dick"</i>	<i>Lamoure, Cecil Fremont</i>
<i>Agar, Joseph Frederick</i>	<i>Lobban, Robert</i>
<i>Almost, Enos Henry (Harry)</i>	<i>Losee, Chester Welford</i>
<i>Armstrong, Clarence</i>	<i>MacDonald, John (Jack) H.</i>
<i>Armstrong, Elgin Herbert</i>	<i>MacLachlan, Harold Dewart</i>
<i>Back, Arthur</i>	<i>Maher, James Patrick</i>
<i>Baker, Leslie (Lewis) Edwin</i>	<i>Markham, Albert</i>
<i>Baker, Leslie Victor</i>	<i>McElhone, Moses James</i>
<i>Bearse, Roy Melvine</i>	<i>McKibbon, W.H.</i>
<i>Beeken, Thomas</i>	<i>McLeod, Angus</i>
<i>Biddis, Charles</i>	<i>McManus, Hugh</i>
<i>Bird, James Preston</i>	<i>Morgan, Arthur Peter</i>
<i>Boughner, John Sydney</i>	<i>Newton, Roy Stuart</i>
<i>Boulton, George</i>	<i>Oatman, Roy Harris</i>
<i>Bourne, Henry</i>	<i>Orum, Williams Charles "Charlie"</i>
<i>Brandow, Judson Eli</i>	<i>Ostrander, Harry (Henry B.)</i>
<i>Brown, Gordon Wilmer</i>	<i>Ostrander, Morley</i>
<i>Burch, Norman</i>	<i>Palmer, E.D.</i>
<i>Burn, John William</i>	<i>Pearce, Raymond</i>
<i>Camp, Robert Milburn</i>	<i>Pollard, Walter W. (Bronc)</i>
<i>Campbell, William Henry</i>	<i>Poole, Bruce</i>
<i>Carter, Thomas</i>	<i>Purdy, Monroe</i>
<i>Casler, Allen</i>	<i>Reavely, Ambrose S.</i>
<i>Chapman, Edward Isaac</i>	<i>Revell, W.W.</i>
<i>Cole, John William "Ernest"</i>	<i>Rice, Wilcox Harmin(on) Maitland</i>
<i>Coles, Hubert</i>	<i>Rockett, George Raymond</i>
<i>Cook, Russell</i>	<i>Rogers, Ralph</i>
<i>Cox, Ernest</i>	<i>Rolter, G.</i>
<i>Crabbe, Ernest Levert</i>	<i>Root, Ernest Clayton</i>
<i>Deller, Vernon Arthur</i>	<i>Sands, Clark Edwin</i>
<i>Dines, William George</i>	<i>Searls, Jacob "Jack" Harvey (Searles)</i>
<i>Downey, William</i>	<i>Searls, William George (Searles)</i>
<i>Draper, Everett Henry</i>	<i>Shelby, Karl Clayton</i>
<i>Duffield, Albert Samuel David</i>	<i>Shellington, James</i>
<i>Duffield, Alfred (Albert) Samuel David</i>	<i>Sims, John</i>
<i>Ede, Douglas Valintine</i>	<i>Singer, Clifford</i>
<i>Farrell, Archie Albert</i>	<i>Smith, (Berton) Edward</i>
<i>Fewster, Harrison Roy</i>	<i>Smith, Charles Francis "Frank"</i>
<i>Fletcher, Nelson Stanley</i>	<i>Starkiss, Samuel George</i>
<i>Foreman, Norman</i>	<i>Starr, John Percival</i>
<i>Fournier, Lewis Albert</i>	<i>Stevenson, James Albert "Bert"</i>
<i>Furlong, Frederick William</i>	<i>Stewart, John</i>
<i>Harp, Robert William "Bob"</i>	<i>Sumsion, Ernest "Ernie"</i>
<i>Hart, Charles Edward</i>	<i>Terry, Franklin "Frank" Maxwell</i>
<i>Hart, Reginald Preston "Reg"</i>	<i>Utle, James Albert</i>
<i>Hart, Thomas Brewer "Tom"</i>	<i>Vigar, Ernest William</i>
<i>Haylow, James Drake</i>	<i>Walters, William Joseph</i>
<i>Hird, John</i>	<i>Ward, Thomas</i>
<i>Hughes, William Albert</i>	<i>Weaver, A.J.</i>
<i>Hugill, Loyal J.</i>	<i>Westbury, Arthur William</i>
<i>Ingle, Cecil Arthur</i>	<i>Wilkinson, George E.</i>
<i>Kirbyson, William J.</i>	<i>Winn, Frank</i>

Soldiers known to have affiliations with East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich Townships who enlisted with "A," "C," and "D" Companies of the 168th

trained with the unit for ten months before being discharged as medically unfit. Undeterred, Agar enlisted again in 1917 and deployed to France as a labourer with the Canadian Forestry Corps, where he would work until shortness of breath and pain in the chest finished his service.⁹⁸ Unlike Agar, 39-year-old Leslie Edwin Baker, a farmer from South Norwich who left behind his fields to enlist in Tillsonburg, was fit enough to serve in the front lines.

While the recruitment campaign started promisingly in Norwich, by the second week of February the enlistment of new volunteers stalled with the battalion at only half of its required strength. From overseas, John Paulding heard of the recruitment problems in the area and wrote to his cousin Ethel: "I believe that Norwich should be able to contribute what is expected of her and will do so eventually. Of course many a man hates to leave home and friends and come here with a good chance of being killed or injured but many men as good have gone before."⁹⁹ While potential recruits may have feared leaving their homes, jobs, and families, others may have been dissuaded by the poor conditions faced by the new "C" Company recruits housed in Norwich. The town placed the soldiers in an uncomfortable and cold block next to the Morgan Hardware store. The men complained about their lodgings and the general welcome they received from the town – they were given tiny rooms and provided with few leisure activities or comforts. Unlike their counterparts in other parts of Oxford County, delivery of their sharp new uniforms was delayed and many had to wait until the end of February to receive their kit.¹⁰⁰ In short, the experience of the local 168th recruits posted to Norwich provided little incentive for others to join.



Recruitment poster, 1916



Douglas V. Ede, 1916

As enlistment rates declined in the townships (and across much of rural Ontario) recruiters turned again to shaming and coercion. On 14 February, 75 local men attended a 168th recruitment rally at Oxford Centre. Here the recruiters focused on a reason for enlisting that had been popular since 1914 – the need to safeguard Canada from the German menace. James Haylow, a 21-year-old farm hand from Curries Crossing; Douglas Valentine Ede, a farmer working near Oxford Centre; and labourer Gordon Brown were convinced enough to enlist.¹⁰¹ At the end of February, members of the 168th held a recruiting meeting in the Norwich Methodist Church where they asked the town to contribute fifty more men to the battalion (as only twenty had enlisted thus far). They specifically shamed parents for blocking their sons from enlisting and again urged the citizens to form a recruiting committee

and post lists of those who were refusing to serve.¹⁰² The idea that parents, particularly mothers, were holding their sons back became a popular one. At a rally in Burgessville in early March, the second-in-command of the 168th, Major Thomas Gibson, also asked the parents if they were holding their sons back and lauded families who had willingly given all of their sons to the war effort. "At the close of the meeting Major Gibson asked if there were any young men who would like to enlist," the *Gazette* reported, "and to his appeal one strong young man walked down and took his place along side the Major on the platform."¹⁰³

The local newspapers played an important role in the attempt to boost recruitment, sometimes in editorials but also through the stories that they chose to publish. The *Daily Sentinel-Review* issued a strong call to the county's men to:

Join the 168th Oxford's Own. If you are fit for service – and you probably are, if a man – it is YOU, and not Cousin Bill or Neighbor Brown that is wanted in the khaki of the 168th Battalion and wanted NOW – today – tomorrow at the latest. Kitchener's call, Britain's appeal, Canada's safety, mean Y-O-U in the army – you and a half million more like you. Get in.¹⁰⁴

In February, the *Gazette* published the story of the young ladies of Ingersoll who took to the streets to ambush men on their way home from work and ask why they would not join – perhaps trying to inspire similar action in Norwich.¹⁰⁵ Later that month, the *Gazette* wrote, "Dear Reader – If you are of military age what more do you want either of appeal or information. Why not do your manifest duty, and DO IT NOW?"¹⁰⁶ The paper sent an even stronger message a few weeks later, when it exclaimed, "Mothers! If you respect your son you will not jeopardise his title to manhood by enticing him to remain in the ranks of the slackers. To pass unheeded the call of duty means years of ignominious shame. Uphold the honor of the village by joining the Norwich Company of the 168th Battalion at once."¹⁰⁷

According to this logic, the decision to enlist was not just a personal or a family one – it reflected upon communities themselves. In late March, the *Gazette* published a strongly worded letter from an anonymous author calling out the men of the area. "The really desperate nature of the conflict the nations of the world are engaged in and the downright need of men for the front seem to be only imperfectly grasped," the author emphasized. Many people seemed to think that "somehow things will come all right whether we do our bit or not" and they showed "much too little seriousness in our estimation of the work the men in khaki are undertaking." If local men really understood what was at stake in the war, the author hypothesized there would be a large crowd besieging the recruiting office. "The war is the most serious that the world had ever witnessed. The issues are gravest for the British Empire, and, indeed, for the whole world, that have ever hung on the outcome of war," he wrote. "The future peace and safety of the world demand the services of every man, woman and child." The Hun and his "devilish ideas" had to be defeated. With the final recruitment push of the 168th underway, the author encouraged all men to "consider how they could serve the Empire."¹⁰⁸

The *Gazette* also published the patriotic poems of the 62-year-old widow Emma Wilkinson of Norwich. Her first poem, simply entitled “Enlist Now,” asked local men to join the fight.

Men, more men are needed,
To down our relentless foe;
Come lads and don the khakis,
And say you are ready to go.

Go fight for your King and Country
As your comrades have done before.
And show the cruel German and Hun
How the old lion’s cubs can roar.

Think of those blood-stained fields afar,
Where bullets still hiss and sing,
Of helpless women and innocent babes.
Go, help in the fighting ring.

Don’t let your comrades fight for you
But go and stand side by side,
And feel you have helped win a victory,
When peace is declared far and wide.¹⁰⁹

Her next poem, “Why Britain Calls,” published in March 1915, asked the men of Norwich to do their duty to Canada, fulfill their obligations to the Empire, and combat the evils perpetrated by the Germans.

A call again rings forth for men,
From our mother over the seas,
Will you let it go unanswered
And stay at home at ease.

Somewhere in France
Where the fair lilies bloom
Lies a lad from our little town
Staunch and true to the Red, White and Blue
His young life he laid down.

Other chums are in the firing line,
Fighting both night and day
And they are calling for you to help them
Keep the enemy at bay.

From the depth of the fathomless ocean,
Cries the life blood of women and babies
Think of our lads slain wth gases
And many in zeppelin raids.

What of the murder of brave nurse Cavell
By the cowardly German and Hun;
Can we stand idly by in this free land of ours,
And fret not, when such deeds are done.

Boys, think of little Belgium,
By the enemy laid low
Let the 168th share in the praise,
Of striking the final blow.

This is why England is calling
Each brave lad today
To rally round the grand old flag
And check the German away.

We will keep a warm spot in our heart lads,
No matter where'er you may be,
And pray the good God above us
Protect and keep watch o'er thee.¹¹⁰

While it is difficult to gauge the impact of the poems, stories, letters, and editorials published in the newspapers on local men, they do indicate the fervency with which some community members approached the issue of recruitment.

At the start of April, prominent citizens in Oxford County formed the Woodstock and North Riding Recruiting League to canvas the city and countryside for new recruits to fill the ranks of the 168th.¹¹¹ The battalion unleashed twenty-four recruiting sergeants on the county to “to hunt up all young men and make personal appeal.” Each wore a distinctive red armband and brandished a list of eligible men. Receptions were not always “gushing,” and sometimes “there was a touch of incivility on the part of men who resented interference.”¹¹² Given the lacklustre results of these “personal appeals,” Oxford South MP Donald Sutherland suggested that conscription might have to be imposed – making one of the first calls for compulsory military service in the county. He told an audience that the scale of this war “has not fully dawned upon a great many people of this country.” If the Germans won he did not “believe life would be worth living.” The “time is coming, if it has not already arrived,” Sutherland prophesied, “when there could be a judicious selection of men to fight the battles of the Empire.”¹¹³

The pressure on the young men of the townships to enlist mounted in the newspapers, at public events, and on the streets. Even Sunday service offered no escape, given the concerted efforts of local clergymen to secure more recruits. Male attend-

ees of the Norwich Presbyterian Church were told in March to enlist, for “God is surely on the side of the Allies for he is a God of love and not a God of lust of rapine, of broken treaties and destroyed cities.”¹¹⁴ The *Gazette* praised the churches for their recruiting efforts, noting that they delivered “an exceptionally bright service which could gender only true and robust national appreciation. Such religious gatherings are among the best and strongest factors in blending right and lofty national principles.” The paper concluded that “the officers and teachers of such an organization, who are instrumental in stimulating these noble sentiments in the spirits of the youth of our land, are rendering to the country the highest form of service.”¹¹⁵

The expanded recruitment efforts paid slow dividends, and more men joined the 168th in April, May, and June.¹¹⁶ John William Ernest Cole, a 27-year-old immigrant from New Zealand who had found work as a miller in Norwich, joined the battalion, as did broommaker Arthur Peter Morgan. Twenty-five-year-old Nelson Stanley Fletcher from Springford left the postal service for the 168th, along with the Norwich postal clerk Ernest Vigar.¹¹⁷



Moses McElhone

Otterville's Fred Furlong enlisted in Tillsonburg, where he worked as a bank clerk, in May 1916 at the age of 18. Moses McElhone (Fred's close childhood friend) soon followed. While working as a labourer in London, Ontario, Moses had recently lost the third finger of his left hand in an accident. Nevertheless, the military deemed him medically fit and he joined the battalion in June.¹¹⁸ Bruce Poole had recently graduated from the Norwich Continuation School and had started courses at the Brantford Business School. Poole was well known around Norwich for his involvement in the Methodist Church and his avid participation in its Young People's Society. He enlisted in mid-April at the age of 21.¹¹⁹ Other students followed Poole into the 168th, including Harold MacLachlan and Vernon Arthur Deller from Norwich, E.D. Palmer from Springford, and



Bruce Poole

Burgessville's Joseph Leslie Dickson.¹²⁰

Another wave of farm labourers also left the townships with the 168th Battalion. Arthur Back, a 26-year-old farm labourer working outside Otterville, enlisted, as did 48-year-old Charles Biddis, who was working on Malcolm Schell's farm in East Oxford (and lied about his age to pass his military screening). John Stewart, who had been born in Scotland and immigrated to Canada to work at the Hillcrest Fruit Farm before moving to Norwich, joined up, as did 21-year-old worker Archie Farrell.¹²¹ While their assistance would be sorely missed on local farms, they helped to fill the ranks of the battalion.

The local recruits of “C” Company housed in Norwich remained in their uncomfortable accommodations, undertook a limited amount of drill and training (they did not yet have their rifles), and socialized with local community members.

At times they also provided an additional source of manpower for difficult jobs and farm work. In early March, for instance, Ernest Crabbe decided to assist the ice-cutting operation at Norwich Junction. "Seeing that every one was very busy, he pulled off his great coat, and lent a hand in the operations," the *Gazette* reported. "Seizing a pike pole he charged the large cakes of ice in a manner that made all take notice but unfortunately after a brief spell, his pike slipped and into the ice cold water he plunged. After a short struggle with his enemy he emerged on one of the channel boards, with the usual smile on his face."¹²²

While the community appreciated the efforts of Ernest Crabbe and the manual labour provided by his comrades, all knew that the men would soon leave Norwich. At the end of April, the recruits received their orders to report to new quarters in Tillsonburg. By this point, the *Gazette* reported, 44 men from the town and adjacent countryside had joined the local company. As they boarded the train, the men received a warm send-off from "a large number of civilians" who "in general regretted the departure of the boys, who were fine fellows."¹²³ A few weeks later, the entire 168th left its quarters in Oxford County for Camp Francis, the military training camp in London, Ontario.¹²⁴ The *Daily Sentinel-Review* followed their progress as the men entered into a more intensive stage of their training. In the middle of June, the paper reported that:

The Battalion, although having been in camp only two weeks is already showing signs of improvement in drill, discipline and general bearing. Following the first day or two, while the settling down process was in progress, the battalion dropped into camp routine quite easily and when the 168th took its place in the big route march last Friday, the companies marched as steadily as any unit on parade. So far, four hundred rifles have served out and enough to equip the whole battalion is hoped for soon. In the meantime, the rifles will be used by two companies for a time and then handed over to the other two companies for rifle drill.¹²⁵

The 168th continued to train in London throughout June and enjoyed the relative comfort of the camp. For the farmers and farm labourers, in particular, the early summer sojourn in London was an enjoyable break from the hard work of the fields. When a farmer from Oxford County visited the recruits, the *Sentinel-Review* recounted, "some of the farmers' sons told him that soldiering had farming beaten a hundred ways."¹²⁶

The Patriotic Societies

As the farmers strove to increase their agricultural production and the recruitment campaigns intensified across East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich, local patriotic societies continued to fundraise and produce goods for the war effort. The number of voluntary organizations in the townships expanded, with new Patriotic Leagues forming on the 4th and 5th Concessions and the creation of the Rosanna Wartime Workers group.¹²⁷ They joined the existing patriotic societies and voluntary organizations in the work they had been diligently carrying out since

the start of the war.

Members of these groups spent much of their spare time knitting and collecting goods for Belgian refugees, the Red Cross, and the soldiers, who sent a steady stream of requests home for edible treats, tobacco, warm gloves and, above all else, socks.¹²⁸ In Eastwood, the ladies of St. John's Church and the town's Women's Patriotic League held patriotic meetings on the first Tuesday of every month, where their "little band" knit socks and hospital shirts. "The fine sample of socks showed the kind and motherly thought for the boys at the front," the *Sentinel-Review* reported.¹²⁹ In September 1915, the women of Burgessville held a drive to collect materials for their soldiers and brought in 6 dozen pillow cases, 12 handkerchiefs, 4 pillows, 20 sheets, 268 surgical pads, 1 box of gum, 30 chocolate bars, 3 writing pads, 3 boxes of homemade candy, 2 jars of cocoa, 50 cakes of toilet soap, 80 surgical bandages, 10 surgical shirts, 19 towels, 2 barrels of canned fruit and jam.¹³⁰ At Christmas 1915, the women of Norwich made Christmas boxes full of cakes, candy, cigarettes, and new socks for the soldiers from the community.¹³¹ Over the rest of the year, the volunteers put together large care packages for individual soldiers who they knew were serving. William Orrie Mitchell received such a package from the Norwich Women's Patriotic League, which included pencils, a writing pad and envelopes, a candle, soap, a towel, Zam-Buk, 8 plugs of chewing tobacco, smoking tobacco, a pipe, 2 packages of cigarettes, 2 bars of milk chocolate, 1 bar of gum, 1 pair of socks, and a mouth organ.¹³² Through these activities, the women hoped to help individual soldiers – names they could put a face to – and in so doing they felt closer to them and the war effort.



Women of the Oxford Centre Soldier Cheer Club. Back row (left to right): Mrs. Peers, Edith Hayward, Marion Reach, Anna Frezelle, Averil Herd, Jessie Richardson, and Ada Cook. Front row (left to right): Mrs. Sales, Ollie Chorett, Irene Kim, Mildred Mitchell, and Lorena Canfield.

The women responded to the developments and requirements of the war as it evolved, with the activities of the Norwich Women's Patriotic League offering a good illustration. After the Second Battle of Ypres, the patriotic society focused on collecting luxury goods for all of the wounded Canadian soldiers, including jellies, jams, canned fruit, chocolate, and maple syrup.¹³³ Then, when they heard about the use of gas during the attack, they sought instruction on how to prepare respirators for the soldiers.¹³⁴ Anticipating new allied offensives in the spring of 1916, the WPL devoted its time and energy to securing hospital supplies.¹³⁵ Through these efforts, women demonstrated their attentiveness, intuition, and dedication.

The patriotic societies continued to raise a steady stream of money for the Red Cross, the Patriotic Fund, the Belgium Relief Fund, and a variety of other smaller causes. The Norwich WPL, for example, started to collect money to purchase and

maintain a cot in Fred Bleakley's memory at the Canadian-run Cliveden Military Hospital in England.¹³⁶ In 1915, much of the money that raised by the patriotic societies went to the Oxford Patriotic Association (OPA), which continued to manage the Patriotic Fund and pay the insurance premiums for the county's soldiers serving overseas. By the time the OPA amalgamated with the national Canadian Patriotic Fund in December 1915, the county had already raised \$80,000. In the last major independent fundraising campaign launched by the OPA in the fall of 1915, East Oxford contributed \$1767.50, while South Norwich raised \$1050.¹³⁷ The Township Council of North Norwich decided to levy a new tax on its constituents to raise \$5000 for the Patriotic Fund – a move that the Oxford County Council eventually copied to grant \$6000 a month to the OPA.¹³⁸ During this campaign, the town of Norwich gained notoriety as the second last settlement in the county to give a sizeable donation to the Fund. Despite the town's reticence, the *Gazette* often trumpeted the fundraising efforts in Norwich and reported in November 1915 that "the citizens have always met the appeals and given in such proportions that we are proud to say we lived in Norwich, for their generosity has become known throughout Western Ontario and even further." The paper asked its readers to dig deep into their pockets to ensure Norwich contributed,¹³⁹ and the town finally sent \$1000 to the fund in December.¹⁴⁰

While Norwich had been somewhat tardy in supporting the Patriotic Fund, its residents raised significant funds for other causes, particularly the Red Cross and the Belgian Relief Fund. In the summer of 1915, the men of the community made their patriotic mark. The machine gun movement had started spontaneously in Canada in January 1915 after newspapers reported that German battalions had ten or twelve machine guns each while Canadian units had only four.¹⁴¹ Canadians rallied to address the deficit. In August, the Norwich Board of Trade agreed to purchase two machine guns, with the funds to be specially raised by the "men of Norwich." A committee led by J.C. Henderson, James McKnight, W.W. Avey, and Jabez Hogarth initiated the quick campaign. "This, to our minds, is giving the right kind of

expression to our patriotism," the committee concluded.¹⁴² With donations from individual citizens, the Norwich Electrical Department, James Irwin and Sons, the Borden Milk Company, and the broom factory employees, the campaign raised \$2200 in two days, which the Militia Department used to purchase two Lewis guns at the price



Ladies "manning" the Belgium booth at the Allies Patriotic Fair, 4 August 1915

of \$1000 each in the name of the town.¹⁴³

The fundraising efforts of the patriotic societies continued to inspire a range of social activities throughout the townships. Patriotic concerts, social dances, Halloween parties, and food sales quickly became staples in local social calendars. A strawberry garden party held in



The "Great Britian and Colonies" booth raised funds for the Patriotic Fund during Allies Patriotic fair, 4 August 1915

Oxford Centre, complete with orchestra and football game between the Oxford Centre and Burgessville teams, raised money for the Red Cross.¹⁴⁴ The "chain teas" held by the Norwich WPL every Monday evening raised over \$150 to purchase comforts for the soldiers, as did the weekly patriotic teas organized by the Eastwood WPL.¹⁴⁵ Townspeople in Norwich had their photographs taken at Alma Clutton's Gallery, with 20% of the proceeds going directly to the WPL.¹⁴⁶ Patriotic activities provided residents of the townships with the opportunity to contribute to the war effort, while simultaneously offering new outlets for leisure and recreation.

The big social event of 1915 – and one of the largest held in the township during the entire war – was the Allies Patriotic Fair held on 4 August. The WPL, Norwich Women's Institute, Newark Ladies' Aid, Burgessville Women's Institute, and Ladies Patriotic Society from Otterville banded together to put on the event, the likes of which the town had never seen. The women ran booths and sold goods representing the different allied countries, including Japan, France, Italy, Belgium, Russia, Serbia, and the British Empire. Attendees played games, ate a variety of exotic dishes, and could voice their displeasure to a handmade effigy of Kaiser Wilhelm II, the German leader. "The Kaiser will be there as large as life," the newspaper reported, "and you can have a shot at him and afterwards added illumination will be given to the grounds by the burning of the effigy, and we will have the satisfaction of seeing him go up in smoke."¹⁴⁷ By the end of the day, 1900 people had attended the event and it raised over \$700 for the war effort.

After the fair, the *Gazette* hailed the great "victory" won by the women of the patriotic societies. It concluded that:

When the needs of the Canadian soldiers brought into existence the Women's Patriotic League, there was started an alliance, the like of which Norwich has never known. We little dreamed that such stupendous tasks could be undertaken and carried through so successfully, and indeed our ladies have undertaken some Herculean tasks. Their success but makes evident the possibilities of a thorough organization imbued with a patriotism that is above

such little things as party or religious differences. They have made the old village a different place. Everybody has caught the contagion and some are growing enthusiastic who little thought they ever could become excited over anything. These determined women have planned and worked, early and late, they have picked and delved and have unearthed treasures long hidden. They have sprung the locks on pocket books and unslipped the knots on money bags that seemed closed for ever.¹⁴⁸

The success of the Allies Patriotic Fair even caught the attention of the *Toronto Globe*, which highlighted it as a model for other communities to follow.¹⁴⁹

The *Norwich Gazette* highlighted the role that the women of the townships could play in unifying residents and inspiring patriotism, but members of the patriotic societies also played another role in the community: policing behavior. Throughout the war, women volunteers imposed their middle-class values on the other members of their communities. This involved critiquing how others spent their money, promoting temperance, and preaching about how to live properly. More invasively, female volunteers often investigated those receiving money from the Patriotic Fund to ensure that they spent the money properly, armed with the power to cut off the financial support to any women they deemed undeserving.¹⁵⁰

In the townships, the women of the patriotic societies encouraged conservation – and kept an eye on those who did not. A note printed in the *Gazette* explained that “upon the women of the land will rest the greatest burden of success in the campaign for thrift that has been inaugurated. As hands of the household they are the chancellors of the domestic exchequer.... But, stinginess, parsimoniousness, or miserliness is not thrift. The thrifty combines with a natural aptitude for economy and wisdom of selection and utilization.” The note concluded that “every ounce saved is a contribution to the welfare of the country and perhaps to winning the war.”¹⁵¹ The patriotic societies insisted that women do their “national duty” in leading the thrift campaign, arguing that at this critical stage “the only luxury the Empire can afford is victory.”¹⁵² They celebrated those who gave up even modest luxuries, including Doris Schmidt, a four year old who sold her mother’s sugar cakes to raise money for the WPL and refused to eat even one. “That meant self-denial as well as work for the little girl,” the WPL observed – which applauded her for doing her “bit in this war.”¹⁵³

Women in the townships also took a leading role in the wartime temperance campaign, continuing the long history of activism against the “demon drink.” The war generated renewed calls to ban alcohol in Ontario, and a meeting of temperance reformers in Toronto on 15 October 1915 prompted the creation of a “Committee of One Hundred” with orders to circulate a petition calling for province-wide prohibition.¹⁵⁴ In January 1916, residents in the riding of Oxford South organized an interdenominational and non-partisan temperance campaign to correspond with the visit of the Committee of One Hundred scheduled for the following month.¹⁵⁵ As they canvassed the region, the *Norwich Gazette* reported that at least 80% of the people solicited agreed to sign – 510 signatures in all.¹⁵⁶ On 8 March 1916, a massive parade marched to Queen’s Park to deliver the petition with 825,572 Ontarians

names on it – their slogan: “Ontario dry by First of July.” The Ontario government introduced the Temperance Bill two weeks later and it passed unanimously. On 17 September, all bars, clubs, and liquor shops in Ontario closed for the duration of war.¹⁵⁷

Unpatriotic activity quickly caught the patriotic societies’ watchful eye. One Sunday evening in April 1915, for example, a group of women from the WPL witnessed a man fail to take his hat off during the national anthem. They also witnessed other people leave before the “national prayer” was finished. The incident was dutifully reported in the local newspaper: “Certainly no one intends to appear either disloyal to our king or irreverent to God, but it would look much better if the men would follow the usual custom of removing their hats and ladies would refrain from talking or starting home when God Save the King is played.”¹⁵⁸ The women also policed how much time and money their neighbours donated to the war effort – which they felt had become a problem by early 1916. The North Norwich Township Council decided to impose a levy of \$5000 for the Patriotic Fund at the bidding of the patriotic societies, which argued that many residents were not contributing enough. “It is not the giving of the contributions that trouble these liberal people, but the adjusting of the burden so that one and all will participate therein, in proportion to their ability,” the *Gazette* reported.¹⁵⁹

Complaints designed to generate civic support for patriotic activities became increasingly commonplace. When the Norwich WPL failed to meet their Red Cross fundraising goals in the fall of 1915, they published a series of critical letters in the paper. The first was a relatively gentle reminder that, while Norwich had done well in the past in the support of the patriotic cause, “the people must remember it is our duty, and it is also our duty to see that our contribution today is in keeping with our town.”¹⁶⁰ After their appeal failed to garner the desired funds, the women wrote a more strongly worded reprimand claiming the “need for a little arousing” and prodded the Board of Trade to make sure the town did its duty.¹⁶¹ In June of the following year the WPL again took to the *Gazette*, this time asking residents to collect as much paper as possible – magazines, books, and newspapers. If they could collect 24,000 pounds or 12 tons of paper, they could earn \$120 to support their patriotic efforts. The WPL desperately needed this money to continue its work because donations had stopped flowing in and its bank account was low. People were simply not donating enough money anymore. Ultimately, the WPL discovered that residents did not want to donate paper either and the campaign failed. “We are a little disappointed at the way the people have fallen in line with this enterprise,” the ladies lamented.¹⁶²

The WPL’s fundraising problems pointed to growing reality across Ontario: war weariness. As 1916 progressed, historian Desmond Morton observed, “the blithe, optimistic patriotism that had carried much of the country through the first two years of the war had been exhausted by the setbacks” on the battlefield.¹⁶³ The unity so apparent in the Allies Fair of August 1915 had started to dissipate.¹⁶⁴ Although the townships still supported the war effort, the shift in community enthusiasm was apparent to concerned citizens. The changing sentiment inspired Maude Hunt,

who lived with her husband Raymond on a farm just outside Burgessville, to publish a poem in the *Gazette* reminding her neighbours of their sense of community and the need to remain united in support of the war effort:

There's a quiet little place
 Where my memory ne're forgets
Where the foliage looks so pretty,
 And the lawns are nicely kept
 That's in Norwich.
The houses and verandahs,
 In their artistic shape
Makes me long to have another look,
 And with my plans to make
 For Norwich-
The milk rigs they do proudly come
 Along our county roads
To centre in at one great place,
 West Norwich-
I know we lack amusements,
 And pleasures we will seek,
Now citizens come do your part,
 The young folks you must keep.
 In Norwich.
Some think their trials hard to bear
 And some trouble galore,
Take this from me, and you can see
 We could have far more,
 All around Norwich.
Our heroes have left their homes
 And loved ones left behind
With this one thought always in view
 The Red Cross has been kind.
 In Norwich.
Each of us has our own lot of care
 Which would not be for all to share
But with our kind thoughts, put in deeds,
 Makes other troubles small to bear
 In Norwich.
Those with health and those with wealth

As though this would go
Just stop and think what you possess,
Your kind deeds we will know
In Norwich.¹⁶⁵

Enlistments Further Afield

Local women such as Maude Hunt not only kept track of the men who had enlisted directly from Norwich and the townships and ended up in the 71st and 168th Battalions. They also paid close attention to family members and other people connected to the community who enlisted in units across the country. James Howard Church, a 20-year-old brakeman from Otterville, enlisted with the Canadian Mounted Rifles in Hamilton.¹⁶⁶ Thomas Harp of Otterville joined the 133rd Battalion in Delhi, as did Lorne Hansel, a 29-year-old telegraph operator born and raised in South Norwich.¹⁶⁷ One of Fred Furlong's friends from Otterville, Carman Fish – a painter and former reporter for the *Sentinel-Review* – enlisted in Brantford.¹⁶⁸ Frank Malcolm, who had left South Norwich for the west a few years before, enlisted in Calgary.¹⁶⁹ Captain J. Johnson, Burgessville's former doctor, joined the 91st Battalion out of St. Thomas and served as its medical officer.¹⁷⁰ Douglas Schell, the son of East Oxford farmer and former Liberal MP Malcolm Schell, enlisted with the 5th University Company in Toronto while in his second year at the University of Toronto. At his side was his cousin Rueben Millyard, who had lived with Douglas and his parents since the death of his own father in 1902 and had just graduated with high honors in Arts. Both would end up with the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry – Douglas as a sergeant and Millyard as a Lieutenant.¹⁷¹

William Samuel Beckett, a 34-year-old Scottish tinsmith who had lived in Otterville for years with his wife Beatrice and three young children, enlisted in Brantford. His experience highlights how training could take a toll on inexperienced men. During a calisthenics exercise in a Brantford gymnasium in January 1916, Beckett broke the arch of his foot. The medical officer, however, missed the fracture – he was given “no care” and simply told to rest a day then get back to training. When the pain persisted and Beckett complained, the medical officer put him on light duty, which involved scrubbing the floor, cleaning latrines, and taking meals to the sick, which he did for five weeks, enduring “intense pain.” After complaining again, the injured soldier was sent to the Toronto Base Hospital, where the doctors insisted he had nothing wrong with his foot and that he should be put back on full duty.

The frustrated Beckett decided to pay a local doctor to have his foot x-rayed at the end of February, which revealed the broken bone in his right foot. In response, Beckett's medical officer put the man on three weeks of rest and then sent him back to Toronto for further treatment. Here, Beckett claimed that he overheard a doctor say that the foot needed surgery, but recovery could take a year and might leave him with a permanent disability. Instead of surgery, Beckett alleged, the military simply discharged him in June 1916 with a pension allowance of \$96 for six months. Still

“unable to walk any distance” or to “put weight on toes of right foot” by October, Beckett tried to find work in Otterville and Norwich. He wrote to his Member of Parliament, Donald S. Sutherland, explaining that “I think I have not been treated fair by the military and if you could get me a position that I would not have to be on my feet so much I would great appreciate your kindness.” A year later, still with no employment or assistance, Beckett wrote an angrier letter insisting that “I have served my King and country and was disabled to the extent that I cannot follow my trade.” He asked Sutherland to help him secure a position at the Norwich Post Office or as a lighthouse keeper at Long Point, but to no avail.¹⁷² The 1921 census still listed as Beckett as a tinsmith living in Norwich.



John Aubrey Holdsworth in civilian garb

John Aubrey Holdsworth had a much better experience during his early months in the military. A bright young man well on his way to a successful future in education, he enlisted in Brantford on 18 March 1916. Aubrey grew up on a farm near Vandecar, East Oxford, along with older brother Milfred and younger siblings Margarite, Montrose, Russel, and Genevieve. His parents, Nelson and Rosalind, instilled in their children a strong Christian belief and emphasized the importance of education. After graduating from the newly-built Stratford Normal School as a qualified teacher, Aubrey accepted posts in Troy and then Dorchester where he confessed an insecurity to his mother: “I know what it feels like to be in a position that I am not capable of filling.”

Aubrey soon ran into difficulty with the parents of some his charges. Not wanting to be responsible for an outbreak of measles in the school, Aubrey had strictly adhered to the rules and blocked infected children from returning to school without a doctor’s note. This choice set some of the local parents “raging” and eventually led to his dismissal.¹⁷³ Aubrey transitioned into life as a travelling map salesman but found far greater enjoyment in teaching Sunday School and running youth activities through the local churches that he attended. Despite the promise of a being moved to a more “profitable section” and his self-avowal that teaching was not his “forte,” in September 1914 Aubrey tried once more and took a position in 1914 at the newly-opened King Edward School in Brantford, Ontario. There his attention to the rules served him well, and he became vice principal and then principal when his superior enlisted in 1915.¹⁷⁴ Aubrey thrived in his new role and soon took the initiative to become a certified cadet instructor during



Pauline Kilmer at school

the summer break of 1915.¹⁷⁵

The 29 year old also found time for painting and long walks with a fellow teacher, the pretty Faye “Pauline” Kilmer. As the months progressed so did their affection. When news arrived that the 215th Battalion would be raised in Brantford early in early 1916, however, Aubrey quickly answered the call.¹⁷⁶ Fortunately for the couple, the soldier’s early training was undertaken at the armoury in Brantford, which allowed their courtship to continue. Considering his experience with the cadets and his position at the school, Aubrey was promoted to Lieutenant and participated in local recruiting efforts, proudly boasting to his mother about record-breaking recruitment days within his unit.¹⁷⁷ He was considerate of the men and their families and – reflecting his own experience on the Holdsworth farm – arranged leaves for the recruits who wanted to help in the fields.¹⁷⁸

Aubrey’s unit departed for further training at the district camp in Niagara in the summer of 1916. Soon after, the military put his skills as a teacher to good use, employing him as an instructor at the bombing school in St. Catharines.¹⁷⁹ After months as a trainer, Aubrey grew unsatisfied with his non-combatant role and chose to give up his commission to get to the front. He spent his last leave in Brantford with Pauline. Walking with her on the night before he shipped out, he gave her a letter opener with which to open all the notes he promised to send her from overseas. Another parting gift was a locket with her initials engraved on one side and his on the other. The romantic officer misquoted a poem about being apart – a fact later corrected good-heartedly in one of the many letters sent from abroad.¹⁸⁰ After he departed for England in 1917, Pauline considered the two engaged and supported him as best she could during his time overseas with a flood of parcels and letters.¹⁸¹ In the following months, Aubrey would note that the wealth of her devotion overfilled his small locker and the single backpack that he would be allowed to take to the frontline.¹⁸²



The Holdsworth family takes Aubrey to the train station, 1916

Harold Adams Innis also enlisted in the spring of 1916. Innis had entered McMaster University in fall 1912 at the age of seventeen. The scholar struggled financially to make ends meet as he paid his way through school while living in Toronto (where that university was then located, in what is now the Royal Conservatory of Music building on Bloor Street). “I had gone to Toronto in excellent physical condition such as one acquired by work on the farm,” he recalled, “equipped with such skill as was involved in handling rapidly great quantities of sheaves of grain, tossing them with a fork so that they always landed with the grain toward the cylinder of the threshing machine, and ploughing and even on occasions shocking grain as rapidly as the finder could cut it.” He lost weight while in the city, fought despair, and persevered at his family’s request although he wanted to quit his studies. After completing his exams in 1915, he decided to head to Western Canada during the summer and taught for five months in the small hamlet of Landonville, Alberta. “After returning to the University, I entered into the general spirit with enthusiasm,” he noted, joining a co-operative eating club, becoming president of the debating society, serving as acting editor of the *McMaster Monthly*, “as well as general poo bah for all sorts of other organizations.”¹⁸³

The university was altered by the war, which in turn changed Innis. The tone of the traditionally pacifist Baptist institution changed after 1914. “The zeal and dedication released on the McMaster campus seemed to be an extension of the traditional evangelical militancy of the Baptists,” university historian Charles Johnston explains. “Combat against anti-Christian forces at home and on foreign mission fields in time of peace was now to encompass a campaign to destroy the enemies of the British Empire, the acknowledged safeguard of civilization and of Christianity itself.”¹⁸⁴ Innis became convinced of the righteousness of the allied cause. In December 1915, as president of the debating society, Innis won a competition against



Lecture to the Canadian Officers Training Corps at University of Toronto, painting by C.W. Jefferys

Trinity University, where he argued against the resolution that the war was fought for economic purposes, rather than to stop the evils of German aggression.¹⁸⁵ Innis enrolled in the Canadian Officer Training Corps (C.O.T.C.) in 1914 out of a sense of duty, but he indicated that he only wished to train to “efficiency” rather than “proficiency” and would not attend any training camps. In short, he did not want to become an officer.¹⁸⁶

By the 1915-16 school year, the war’s impact on McMaster became even more obvious. The university waved examinations for the graduating class so that men could enlist, prompting fifteen of Innis’s classmates to leave to join the artillery and

the signalling corps. “The remainder of the year became increasingly difficult for all college activities, particularly as men in the senior years were given their degrees without examination when they enlisted,” he recalled. “Those of us who had not enlisted were compelled to carry the additional load.” Innis had decided not enlist until he had completed his education “and taken my degree in the usual fashion at Convocation on May 10th, 1916,” which he did. Immediately after, he returned to Otterville to tell his family that he was enlisting and, ignoring their pleas that he become a minister instead, joined the 69th Battery of the Canadian Field Artillery, “a recruiting unit through which troops were sent to units overseas.”¹⁸⁷

Innis enlisted in Toronto on 17 May 1916. He was twenty-one, stood at 6' 1-3/4", and



*Harold Innis in graduation robes,
McMaster University, Toronto*

weighed just over 152 lbs. According to his attestation records, he was in very good physical shape. His spiritual health also appeared strong. In a letter home to his mother on 4 April 1916, he explained that it was not peer pressure but Christian duty that made him enlist. If he did not go overseas, he would not be able to “content myself with the fact that I had not lived up to my duty, that Christ had asked me once to take up his cross and follow him and I hadn’t been able to do it.” The matter also was one of conscience. “Germany started this war by breaking a treaty, by breaking her sealed word,” he wrote. “Not only did she do that but she trampled over a helpless people with no warning and with no excuse. If any nation and if any person can break their word with no notice whatever, then, what is the world coming to.” Innis chose the artillery because it was the safest branch of the combat arts, whereas the infantry was “no place for a man if he wants to come back alive.” Opting out was not an option, as he saw it. “The man who doesn’t go will have no chance after the war,” he explained to his mother. “The people will despise him and there will be no chance of his succeeding. Besides, I will have seen a great deal of country and will have seen life no other way. It would be a profitable investment.”¹⁸⁸

Although he made no reference to imperialism or patriotism as a rationale for joining, his wartime service inculcated a new sense of Canadian nationalism from the onset. Upon enlisting, Innis reminisced, “we began the usual sort of inspections, were given doses of anti-toxins for various diseases and were drilled in a sort of way by an Imperial non-commissioned army officer.” The distinction between being a Canadian and a Brit, however irrelevant in terms of formal citizenship (Canadians did not hold distinct citizenship or passports until after the Second World War), soon became apparent to Innis—and left a deep imprint that would remain with him throughout his lifetime. “The treatment of Canadians and all others by officers and non-commissioned officers sent out from Great Britain must have been

an important factor in hastening the demands for autonomy throughout the Commonwealth,” he lamented. “Their insolence and brutality were such that Canadian recruits could scarcely overlook, indeed they condemned them in the heartiest fashion.”¹⁸⁹

After drilling in the grounds around the Armouries for a few weeks, Innis and the other recent recruits were allowed to join a draft going overseas. He went home to Otterville for a last leave, but he gave no indication to his family that this was his last visit before heading across the ocean. He returned to Toronto “prepared to move,” and in July 1916 found himself immersed amongst the “train loads of troops” for the long trip to Halifax. He recalled in his memoirs:

In an undated letter I find that on the day of departure from Toronto we left about 11 o'clock. During the day we had kit inspection, inoculation and vaccination, and pay and paraded at 6:30 to be put on the train at about 9:30. The heat was incredible and crowds of people jammed the station. We got into Montreal the next morning and were put under double guard from Amherst to Halifax, arriving at the latter point at one o'clock in the morning. Our kits were inspected; all the windows were closed; no one was allowed to post a letter and we were kept locked up on the train until after dinner when we were marched down to the boat.¹⁹⁰

Soon after, Innis and his comrades set sail for England, moving ever closer to the battlefields

Notes

- 1 Emma Wilkinson, “Why Britain Calls,” *Norwich Gazette*, 30 March 1916.
- 2 “Norwich Celebrated,” *Norwich Gazette*, 30 September 1915.
- 3 “The Visit of the 71st Battalion,” *Norwich Gazette*, 13 January 1916.
- 4 Adam Crerar, “Ontario and the Great War,” in *Canada and the First World War*, ed. Robert Craig Brown (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 230-271.
- 5 “Norwich Honors Her Brave Dead,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 13 July 1915.
- 6 “Memorial Service,” *Norwich Gazette*, 15 July 1915.
- 7 “Hatchley Boy Met Death,” *Brantford Expositor*, 28 July 1915; “In Memory of Private Yates,” *Norwich Gazette*, 19 August 1915; and “Memorial Services at New Durham,” *Norwich Gazette*, 26 August 1915.
- 8 “Otterville,” *Norwich Gazette*, 4 November 1915.
- 9 “Memorial Service,” *Norwich Gazette*, 1 June 1916.
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190 Innis, “Memoir.”

5 “It was blood and fire, a regular hell on earth”

Summer 1916

“It was blood and fire, a regular hell on earth”

“Pte. Scanlan Writes from France,” Norwich Gazette, 31 August 1916

William Barker Crabbe, who had been raised as a typical, turn of the century farm boy in North Norwich, had settled into his job as a timekeeper, freight clerk, supervisor, despatcher, and station manager for the Algoma Eastern Railway when the war broke out in 1914. The following August, while on holidays in Toronto, Crabbe was walking up University Avenue when he noticed men lined up in front of the armouries. “I asked one of them what was going on,” Crabbe recalled, “and was informed that recruiting was going on for the Army. I began to think I had nothing to lose, why not join, [so] I joined the line-up.” The following morning, the Medical Staff turned him down “because of the hole behind my ear and [my] being somewhat hard of hearing.” Anticipating that the same medical officers would not be on duty the next day, he “lined up again and found myself a number in the Canadian Armed Forces.”¹

After about a week in Toronto, Crabbe left by boat for the military camp at Niagara-on-the-Lake where he became a member of the 35th Infantry Battalion. “We were soon issued Uniforms and all the other equipment that they used to hang on a member of the Infantry,” Crabbe later recalled. “I thought I was fairly physically fit but soon discovered I had a long way to go.” He enjoyed the experience at camp through to 10 October, when his unit learned that they would be going to England. After three days leave in Toronto, they proceeded on to Montreal, where the CPR steamer *Metagami* was waiting. This medium-sized ship, which had not yet been properly fitted as a “troop” ship, was so full of crew and equipment that the soldiers had to sleep four to a cabin. After a pleasant ride down the St. Lawrence River, Crabbe came down with a swollen ear and reported to the medical officer. Diagnosed with the mumps, he was “quarantined ... away down in the hole” so the last three days of the six-day Atlantic voyage to England “was not very enjoyable.”²

After landing at Plymouth on 25 October, Crabbe and his comrades headed to Bramshott, about forty miles southwest of London, where the Canadian Expedition Force (CEF) was building a camp. “We had huts to sleep about thirty men, [with] low wooden bunks with a straw mattress a pillow and a couple of blankets,” he recalled. Here they completed basic training, with a respite on Saturdays (which afforded an opportunity for soldiers with money to leave camp and hop the train to London). When Crabbe heard the call for volunteers for a signal school that had opened in a new part of the camp, he applied and was accepted. He spent the winter of 1915-16 learning “visible signalling with flag and lamps, as well as semaphore, all

using the international morse code which is somewhat different from the American code.” They practiced on keyboards in their huts during off-duty hours. Crabbe had “no trouble making my grades,” completed the course in mid-March 1916 and, with five others, learned that he would be joining the 28th (Northwest or Winnipeg) Battalion in France.³

After being outfitted with equipment at the Canadian embarkation base at Folkeston, Crabbe and several hundred other soldiers boarded a small channel steamer for the base camp on the French coast. “For the first and only time in my life I was sea sick,” he noted. “We were crowded below deck during the night crossing and it was rough. I defied orders and went up on deck and found a large coil of rope next to cabin and, wrapping my overcoat around me, stayed there until we arrived at Le Havre. At the Canadian camp a few miles outside of that city, the soldiers were “further loaded up with more equipment,” including a hundred more rounds of rifle ammunition. “Before leaving Camp we were lined up for a farewell sermon by the Camp Padre, standing in heavy [rain]. I don’t think we got much from his blessings.” They marched several miles before loading into box cars with straw to sit on, which were “labelled (in French) as accommodating 17 horses or 40 men.” The poor track meant that the train never went faster than twenty miles an hour – a consideration that a railwayman, like Crabbe, could not fail to note.

The following morning Crabbe found himself with other members of the 28th about twelve kilometres in front of the old city of Ypres at the 2nd Division tent camp. The war had left Ypres “almost totally destroyed, but some of the old horse barracks and underground points along the side of the canal which curled around part of the city could be used as shelters.” It was a dismal scene. “Trench warfare as it was conducted during that war was pure hell,” he recalled. “The trenches jig-jagged in curves and part circles, each bay about twenty feet long with a firing steel facing the Germans. The water table in that part of Belgium at that time of the year was only about two feet down, so the front of the trenches were built up with sand bags.” The trench mats laid at the bottom of the trenches were usually broken, meaning that “most of the time we were in water so much so that for a period of four days, which was our stretch in the actual front line, we had wet feet. Our feet swelled and it was quite common, when we were finally relieved and were back at Div. Camp, to have to cut our shoe laces to remove our boots.”

Between “trench feet and body lice,” Crabbe lamented, “it was a hell of a life.” They were given whale oil as a remedy for trench foot, a frost-bite-like in-



Canadians in shallow reserve trenches, which provided a second line of defence in case the front line fell



Canadians sheltering in communications trench, 1916

fection that, if left to fester, could lead to gangrene and amputation. His first experience with body lice came just a few days after his first trip to the front lines. He contracted such a severe case that he had to report to sick parade and was sent to the divisional medical camp. There Crabbe was treated “with a hot bath into which they poured creosote.” He did not know which was worse: “the lice or the treatment.” Over time, however, the soldiers “got used to it,” and “we even made pets of our pests. We had to, for they were always with us.”

Life in the Trenches

For the Canadian soldiers on the Western Front, lice were one of the many unsavoury realities of trench life that they simply had to endure. “It was an environment of misery and anonymous death,” historian Desmond Morton described.⁴ Doctors eventually identified lice as the cause of trench fever, which left soldiers with headaches, fevers, and muscle pain. Giant, bloated rats, fattened by the debris of war, also spread disease and tormented troops, adding to the general discomfort. Soldiers endured the physical discomforts of dismal living conditions, sleep deprivation, illnesses, and persistent stress that sapped their health. Letters home, typically penned “from somewhere in France,” are filled with descriptions of long periods of boredom punctuated by interludes of sheer terror. The prospect of imminent death hung over everyone on the front lines. Soldiers described devastated, desolate landscapes marked by shell holes, shattered trees, scattered pillboxes, and, of course, the dead and wounded human beings and animals that littered the battlefields. Even in quiet sectors, the faceless enemy, largely hidden from view in his opposing defensive positions, posed a continuous threat of random death during tours to the front lines. This fear, coupled with the need for continuous vigilance, kept soldiers on edge.

Random shelling, mortar fire, and sniping brought a steady trickle of death and maiming, even in the long stretches between formal battles. Each day, Canadian

soldiers were killed or wounded owing to “wastage”: infantry and machine-gun units planned to lose up to ten percent of the total strength each month to death, wounding, and illness. This took a physical and psychological toll on front line units. The daily hardships of trench life, compounded by the inability to defend oneself against shelling or snipers, contributed to extreme stress and exhaustion. Cpl. John Paulding, serving with the 1st Field Ambulance, wrote to his uncle in Norwich on 13 November 1915. They had set up a hospital for the Canadian Corps in a French town “and have our hands full.” Although there were few major actions going on, “with the rain and the cold weather here the trenches on both sides about here are quagmires and we have many of our fellows in the hospital as one can only stand so much of it. However after a few days in the hospital, they are back again.” He saw the futility of casualties caused by indiscriminate fire on the front lines. “There are artillery duels where the Germans throw a few shells over and kill a few soldiers and we do the same,” Paulding wrote. “There are rifles, machine guns, and bombs which all take their daily toll of men.” Both sides had also taken to placing landmines along the wire so that patrols venturing beyond their trench lines would step on them. “This all seems so useless,” he lamented.⁵

Sapper Arl Avery, a native of Norwich who had been an electrical engineer before enlisting in September 1915 at age 27, had the misfortune of stepping on one such landmine the first day that he arrived at the front that December. “Just as I stepped on it they sprung it,” he wrote to his aunt and uncle in Norwich, “so the next I remember was when I woke up, back in England, with five holes in my right leg and one in my stomach.” Fortunately, his unit was deployed close to a field hospital or “I might have been pushing up daisies now instead of writing you,” he reflected. “I don’t want to go through it again, I tell you, it puts a few years on a man’s life.” He had nearly recovered after seven weeks in hospital, but he would “never be able to march any more.” Although offered the opportunity to be invalidated back to Canada, Avery wanted to remain overseas until the war was over. “I am marked up for permanent duty,” he wrote, and he expected to drive a staff officer’s car.⁶ Instead, he returned to France that summer to serve with the 9th Field Ambulance.⁷

Despite the miserable conditions and the pall of death and wanton destruction that hung over the battlefields, most soldiers’ letters expressed a sense of optimism and unabashed commitment to the Allied cause. They rarely expressed bitterness, instead focusing on the prospect of victory and the valour of their Canadian comrades. Pte. Elgin Sears, who had lived his early life in Norwich before enlisting with the 2nd Contingent and heading overseas, wrote to his uncle Mr. Griffin in October 1915:

As you know I am at the front now and very happy that I am. I have been under shell and rifle fire for some time. It gets pretty warm at times and you don’t know whether you will see night or not. The bullets come fast and often, but let them come, the more the merrier; for the sooner we get through with them the sooner we will get back to dear old Canada, the land where the maple leaf grows, and the Union Jack waves. We are fighting to save the good old flag that she might ever wave.

... At any time your life is none too safe but two can play at the game, and we must win, we are Jack Canucks. Sometimes we cannot hear for the noise of the big guns. It is awful to see the destruction they cause, but a very pretty sight to witness at night if you care to go out of your trench. It reminds me of 24th of May celebrations in old Canada. They say war is hell and it seems like it, but we have our fun. Now Uncle if the men in Canada have not the courage to volunteer without my letters to coax them they had better stay at home, as such would be no good here.⁸

A mix of nostalgia for Canada, sense of duty, and desire to create narratives that would motivate other men on the home front to enlist for overseas service marked many letters from overseas. Pte. James Arthur “Jim” Langdon, who farmed with his parents at Cloverdale Farms in Oxford Centre before enlisting in January 1915 at the age of 33 and heading to France with the 4th (Canadian Mounted Rifles) Battalion of the 3rd Division, tried to be upbeat in his letters home, typically asking about his family’s welfare (and that of his dog “Prince”) and describing his meals—breakfasts of tea and porridge; lunches of bread, stew, tea, and puddings; and suppers of bread, jam, tea, and cheese—as adequate.⁹ These letters, which bridged the military and domestic spheres, allowed him to perform his role as a caring family and community member, but also as a responsible soldier who did not divulge too much about the Canadians’ activities on the Western Front.

How much did Canadians at home actually know about what was transpiring on the battlefields overseas given military censorship that blocked communication of harsh overseas realities to families and friends? Although soldiers frequently admitted that they thought about censors (or used them as an excuse to keep their letters short), recent scholarship highlights that letters from the front lines, reproduced in newspapers, provided more realistic and graphic depictions of the horrors of war than postwar commentators emphasizing state censorship typically acknowledge.¹⁰ The letters in the *Norwich Gazette* confirm this observation. For example, Pte. John Barnes, whose father and mother lived on Main St. in Norwich, offered a vivid description of his experience in France with the 2nd Battalion:

Well mother I have come out of the trenches for a second time. So I am beginning to feel quite at home out here, or at least as much as home as one can feel out in this God forsaken place. We were only in for three days this time but I thought that quite enough. It had been raining for two or three days before we started to go up and it rained nearly all the time we were there, so you can imagine a little of what it would be like. We had to stand in the mud and water nearly to our waists most of the time we were on duty, and when we started



Jim Langdon

back we were pretty well loaded down with mud, but our division took back a lot of trenches from the Germans so they payed [sic] for all of it. ...

I was in the front line trenches where the Germans had been before we took them back and what parts of them are not blown up by shells are nearly full of dead Germans, in one place I saw them piled up three deep. So you may guess from that, that things are not very nice. Just imagine laying in a trench for two or three hours with shells flying around you so thick you can't count one out of ten, and expecting every minute that one will come to blow you up or bury you alive and that does not include machine gun or rifle fire, gas or liquid fire so you can have some idea of what it is like, it is regular hell on earth.¹¹

The censors had no problem with Barnes's depiction, which did not reveal anything secret about his unit, where he was stationed, or the objectives of the battle. But there was nothing sugar-coated about the carnage of battle: a "regular hell on earth." If Barnes and others were feeling more "at home" on the battlefield, it bore no resemblance to the homes that they had left.

Barnes explained openly how many soldiers collected souvenirs or trophies on the battlefield, which they typically gathered from the bodies of dead enemies or during trench raids. "I have collected a few souvenirs which I hope to bring back to Canada with me," he explained, "such as buttons and different little things which are not very heavy as we generally have all we can do to carry ourselves back from the trenches." With one letter he sent his parents a button cut off a German's coat.¹² Almost every soldier overseas engaged in this culture of "souveneering," seeking trinkets, treasures, and relics that would be material reminders of their unique experiences overseas.¹³

For the most part, however, it was the flow of gifts from the home front to the battle front that played a pivotal role in maintaining wartime morale. Letters from soldiers in the field regularly expressed gratitude for the care packages periodically received from home containing food, clothing, reading material, and other material comforts. "I received the parcel that you sent me in good condition and I cannot tell you how glad I was to get it," John Paulding wrote on 7 January 1916. "Everything was fine and the maple sugar and cake was a treat" – a sweet delight amidst incessant rain, mud, and cold.¹⁴ Writing to his cousin Ethel one month later, he noted how he would love to receive gum, cigars, doughnuts, and cookies.¹⁵ These simple pleasures sustained overseas soldiers during their long sojourns in the trenches, offering both comfort and tangible evidence that those back home appreciated their efforts and sacrifices.

As a member of a front-line medical unit, Paulding saw firsthand (and indeed shared) the soldiers' hardships when he assisted sick and wounded soldiers. The French winter was miserable, which did little to help morale.¹⁶ The cold rain, frosts, and snow made it "look quite like Canada," he wrote home in early March 1916, but melted into slush in afternoon which left the roads impassable. "We have moved up to the trenches again and taken over the aid posts and dressings [dressing stations] and our bearers say that the trenches are very bad," he reported. "They use waders in bringing out the wounded." The opposing trenches near Dranoutre were remark-

ably close (separated by no more than 30 to 40 yards, or 27-37 metres), which brought a regular stream of men wounded from “grenades, bombs and bullets. The surrounding country on both sides is being searched with shells and aeroplanes are active. We have had shells and aeroplane bombs on both sides of us but fortunately none of us have been hit yet.”¹⁷

Soldiers did not want to be seriously wounded or disfigured, of course, but they regularly expressed their hope for a “blighty”—a wound sustained on the front lines that would rescue them from the trenches and instead offer them a comfortable hospital bed, regular meals, and care from nursing sisters far from the enemy. When Pte. Bruce Poole, a student from Norwich, arrived in England in late 1916, he wrote: “I hope I get a ‘Blighty’ after I have been over [in France on the front lines for] about a month. ‘Blighty’ is what they call England out here and if you get a bad enough wound to come back to England they call it a ‘Blighty.’”¹⁸ A wound of this nature, sustained on the battlefield, was an honourable way for a soldier to leave the horror of war while still intact. After all, injury in battle was proof of one’s willingness to do their part and confront death head on. Once a man did that, he could proudly say that he had done his duty for King and country. (Poole, however, did not get his wish. Instead, he ended up in hospital for a tonsillectomy in November and then a fractured clavicle in December when he was knocked down by a tram while on leave in London.)¹⁹

While ordinary foot soldiers dreamed of the ideal wound, strategists in distant headquarters thought about ways they could best expend soldiers’ bodies to win a war of attrition. “After the terrible bloodletting during the Battle of Festubert in May 1915, the Canadians passed almost a full year on the Western Front without engaging in a major offensive operation,” historian Tim Cook observed. “But 1916 would bring a year of mayhem and battle.”²⁰ Both sides remained convinced that direct, frontal assaults offered the only way to break the enemy’s deeply entrenched defences on the Western Front. In February, German General Erich von Falkenhayn launched a massive attack on the French defences surrounding the fortress-ringed city of Verdun. His plan was to lure French forces into a salient where the Germans could then “bleed France to death” with artillery fire. For the next ten months, both sides threw a continuous stream of soldiers into the Battle of Verdun, neither prepared to concede defeat: for France holding Verdun became a symbol of life itself; for the Germans, it was a simple case of national prestige and morale.



‘Blightly’ postcard, sent home to the Poole family from their son Bruce, depicts the wish held by many front-line soldiers to get back to loved ones.

However futile, the butcher's bill was horrific: by the time the battle finally ended at Christmas, Verdun had claimed 680,000 casualties, including a quarter of a million killed.²¹

The Battle of St. Eloi Craters

One way to avoid the mass casualties sustained during frontal assaults was to try to hit the enemy from below. By late 1915, sappers (military engineers) dug tunnels under the battlefields to plant explosives under enemy positions, which they would detonate. Pockmarked with craters from attempts by British sappers to capture a small German salient known simply as "the Mound" (which the enemy used to direct artillery fire over the battlefield), the fields near the Belgian village of St. Eloi, five kilometres south of Ypres, bore visible evidence of combat mining.

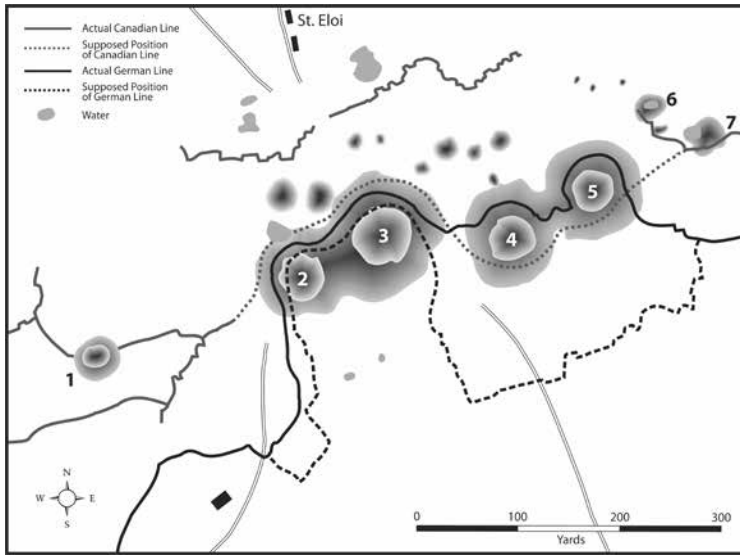
In the early spring of 1916, the 2nd Division of the Canadian Corps had rushed to the front lines to support a British attack that started on 27 March. Six British mines, detonated in rapid succession, shook the earth "like the sudden outburst of a volcano," filling the sky with yellow smoke and debris and opening up seven "yawning craters and dozens of smaller ones pockmarking the Crater" in Cook's description. The explosion was so loud that it was heard in England. German trenches collapsed, the British soldiers captured three craters, and brutal hand-to-hand combat ensued in a week of savage fighting. Soldiers fought from inside the craters in No Man's Land, battered by high winds, sleet, and "a week of chaotic shooting and shelling."²²

Although Major General Richard Turner, the commander of 2nd Canadian Division, questioned the need to hold the craters, the Canadians (wearing newly issued steel helmets) were ordered to enter the fray on 4 April to relieve the battered and exhausted 3rd British Division. "The mud was out of this world," recalled Pte. William Crabbe, who was fighting with the 28th Battalion. On his second night at the divisional camp, he was picked for a working party to string barbed wire "behind

a dent the Germans a few nights previously had punched in our line near what we called the [St. Eloi] Craters." They worked in the dark to avoid being seen by the enemy, the only light coming from "the German star shells which they constantly fired over our lines." When the shells burst, they "lit up the ground for



One of the craters at St Eloi, 1916



The Battle of St. Eloi Craters, 10 April 1916

quite a space until they went out. Everyone stood perfectly still, otherwise any movement could be detected.” In his case, the Germans saw Crabbe and the rest of his party and “poured several dozen shells” on them. In the midst of this onslaught, Crabbe could not find his rifle, which he had laid against a hedge. Ordered to “get out” of the area, he took off across the countryside. Fortunately, on a country dirt road he overtook another soldier who was carrying two rifles. “I had been turning over in my mind what I was going to say on inspection the next day because I had no rifle,” Crabbe remembered. He astutely offered to carry it back to camp and, checking the number the next morning, was relieved to discover that it was his rifle. “Looking back it seemed that it was one of the lucky breaks that came my way.”²³

Others were not so lucky. Advancing in darkness, confused Canadian raiders were directed to the wrong craters amidst a deadly rain of enemy shell fire. The 28th and other units suffered heavy casualties. German counterattacks on 6 April drove the Canadians out of the muddy craters, compounding the confusion throughout the divisional and higher headquarters about where the troops were located. This was typical of the two weeks of bitter fighting, where soldiers—dug in under heavy fire and divided by the shell-pocked terrain—were in no position to provide their commanders with accurate information on where they were or how the battle was unfolding. After aerial photography provided a better snapshot of the actual Canadian and German positions, the Canadian divisional headquarters called off the battle on 16 April. The Canadians had suffered 1,373 casualties, and when the smoke cleared the Germans still held the key positions. “The battle at St. Eloi ... was a minor side-show compared to the armageddon raging between the Germans and French at Verdun,” Cook observed. “Yet it was also an important event for the 2nd Canadian Division as it was their first set-piece battle on the Western Front. It was also an unmitigated disaster.”²⁴

Those Canadians fortunate to avoid injury still faced and endured common



Soldier returning from the front lines through the mud

Art, who had enlisted in September 1914 and went overseas with the First Contingent. Art had joined the 28th Battalion in the field in November 1915 but served in a different company. Their paths finally met the day after their unit was pulled out of the battle for the craters and marched to Zevecoten.²⁵ After asking around about his brother's whereabouts, William found Art "back in his tent lying on his back with mud from head to foot playing the mouth organ. He was the only one of us boys that ever could play the mouth organ."²⁶ After the terror of battle, the soldiers had earned a much needed rest.

The Canadians in the field, now joined by the 3rd Division, would spend the summer in the Ypres salient. "The enemy was still able to shell the salient from several directions making life in the forward lines both miserable and very dangerous," historian Terry Copp observed. Although many Canadian (and British) officers opposed orders to hold and even expand the salient (a controversy that led to Prime Minister Borden's dismissal of Sir Sam Hughes as the Minister of Militia and Defence), "the men serving in the front lines knew little of these policy matters which seemed remote from the soldier's experience of war."²⁷

For the boys from the townships (and the rest of the Canadian and British infantrymen), life in the trenches represented a monotonous routine of work,



Making use of a shell hole for a quick wash

down time, and restless sleep. In his masterful social history of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, *When Your Numbers Up*, historian Desmond Morton narrates how the Canadian soldiers rotated between three lines of trenches. Unless battalions were preparing to mount an attack, the companies each spent one out of every three weeks manning the forward positions. When manning the front line trenches, soldiers were awakened at the crack of dawn each morning to “stand-to” and guard against an enemy attack. If the enemy did not attack, the soldiers gathered for inspections, ate breakfast, and received their highly coveted daily rum ration. Then began daily chores, ranging from cleaning latrines, to filling sandbags and repairing duckboards. Knowing that enemy snipers waited for heads to pop up above the parapets, they conducted all of their work below the ground. In between work assignments, soldiers embraced the time for leisure activities: reading, writing letters, keeping personal journals (which were forbidden but remarkably common), and playing cards.²⁸

When serving on the frontline trenches, the danger never truly ceased – even for commissioned officers. Lieut. Ernest LeRoy “Roy” Underhill, a clerk from East Oxford who had enlisted with the 1st Divisional Signal Company in September 1914, joined his unit in the field in February. On 4 May, he was shot in the right thigh. He would recover from what the doctor’s considered a “slight” wound, but developed a “nervous disability” that kept him out of battle for the rest of the war.²⁹ 26-year-old Capt. Thomas D’Arcy Sneath, a civil engineer and former Royal North-West Mounted Police officer also born in East Oxford, first enlisted in August 1915 and received his commission in March 1916. In command of “B” Company, 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles, his platoon moved into the front lines near Sanctuary Wood on 15 May. The following afternoon, the enemy “kept up very active fire on our line with rifle grenades and trench mortars causing many casualties,” the unit war diary recorded. Captain Sneath was one. He suffered “severe shell shock”³⁰ when a shell exploded in the trenches beside him, burying him and knocking him unconscious for about an hour. The concussion ruptured both of his ear drums, forcing him out of action and off to the officers’ hospital in Hyde Park, England, where doctors noted that his nervous system recovered and his ears healed after several weeks. By late June, he regained his strength and rejoined his unit.³¹



Thomas D’Arcy Sneath

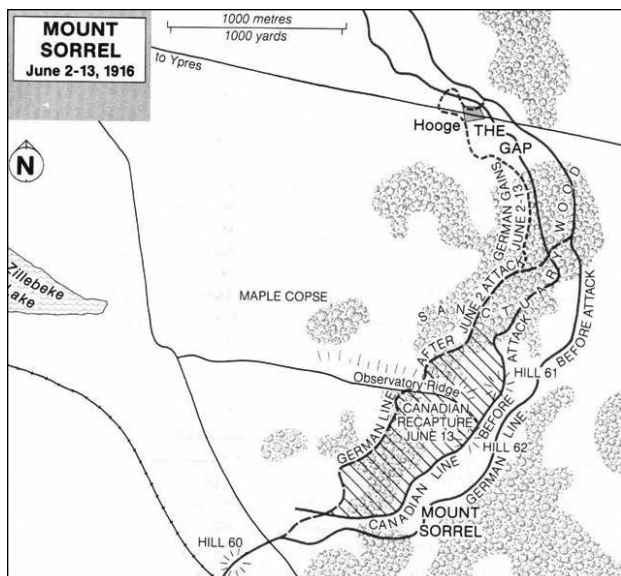
“Wastage” – the dehumanizing term used to describe the dead, wounded, missing, or sick during the war – had to be replaced. “The reinforcement system was much like a system of linked reservoirs, each flowing into the next, the first reservoir being in Canada and final one in France or Belgium at the corps railhead behind the front-line divisions,” historian Richard Holt explained.³² This required careful management. Wounded or sick soldiers who recovered had to return to their units to avoid becoming “bed-blockers” clogging up hospitals, and some of the new soldiers arriving overseas had to be redirected into units already serving

on the battlefield to replace casualties. Although Hughes' system had encouraged militia-based recruiting into local battalions, with the implicit idea that friends and neighbours would have a chance to serve together overseas, this system dictated that some units would instead be broken up to provide reinforcements for the battalions already in the field. Shortly after the members of Lt.-Col. Donald Matheson Sutherland's 71st Battalion – many of whom came from Oxford County – arrived in England in April 1916,³³ they learned that this would be their fate. The unit immediately transferred almost two hundred men to the 44th (Manitoba) battalion and the 73rd Highlanders. The unit lost its commander in July when Sutherland took command of the 52nd (Port Arthur) Battalion and deployed to the front. The rest of the men continued to train in England for the next five months, providing reinforcements for the CEF until 30 September 1916 when the remainder were absorbed by the 44th, 54th, and 74th Battalions. "[The] officers and men of the Battalion felt the split-up keenly," reported the *Daily Sentinel-Review*, "but sunk their personal feelings in the one great end to be gained."³⁴

Sanctuary Wood and Mount Sorrel

While Sneath was recovering in England, 2nd Canadian Division had "regrouped and reintegrated new men into their mauled battalions," Cook aptly summarized,³⁵ and Lieutenant General Sir Julian Byng, an experienced and respected British cavalry general, took over command of the Canadian Corps. At the beginning of June, the corps was holding the southern portion of the Ypres salient when the Germans decided to attack their lines in hopes of wresting the last substantial piece of high ground from British possession. "The large concentration of enemy troops, the amount of artillery which had been 'registering' on vulnerable points for days past and the activity of the Germans in building new trenches and saps were menacing, and had been worrying the Staff for some time," a regimental history explained. The Canadians hastily prepared for a potential attack, digging new trenches and pushing forward machine gun emplacements, but no one knew where or when it would come. Heavy mists concealed the enemy's final preparations, making the attack even harder to anticipate.³⁶ On the morning of 2 June, a massive German bombardment pummelled the 3rd Canadian Division at Sanctuary Wood, devastating its forward positions and killing hundreds of Canadians, including division commander Major-General Malcolm Mercer.³⁷

Another victim was 33-year-old Pte. Jim Langdon, who had enlisted in January 1915 and ended up with the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles in France. After a long rest in Divisional Reserve, his unit entrained for Ypres on 31 May and upon arrival in this familiar district (which they had held two months before) "recognized again its unwholesome orders." At Shrapnel Corners they turned east and were led into the trenches, lit by the occasional flash of artillery or flares that "exposed the grizzled terrain or silhouetted a deserted ruin." At least the trenches were clean and dry, with good fire-bays and elephant-shelters "with gas curtains protecting the spirit if not the flesh." When Langdon awoke on 2 June, he was treated to "a calm, beautiful and noticeably quiet morning." Then it all changed. "Suddenly, without warning,



Mount Sorrel, 2-13 June 1916

Familiar Fields to Foreign Soil

from a heavenly, peaceful sky broke a deafening detonation and cloud of steel which had no precedent for weight and violence," his regimental historian later recounted. "Every conceivable type of gun, howitzer and trench-mortar around Ypres poured everything it had upon the Third Divisional front. The most extravagant imagination cannot picture such a downpour of destruction. Even those who had tasted the bitterest in modern warfare were staggered by

the violence of this onslaught." The enemy's artillery barrage pounded the Canadians for more than four hours, demolishing trenches and turning Sanctuary Wood into a wasteland of charred stumps before the enemy infantry advanced "in large numbers with an air of assurance and confidence that all resistance had been removed by their artillery."³⁸ 4th CMR was obliterated, and few in the forward trenches survived to tell the tale. In Langdon's case, his body was never found.³⁹

The German infantry swept forward and captured Canadian positions at Mount Sorrel and two nearby hills. In response, the Canadians hastily mounted a counterattack on 3 June. Pte. Ed Scanlan, a farm labourer in Norwich at the outbreak of war who had been born in England,⁴⁰ fought with the 15th Battalion at Mount Sorrel. "I am still among the living, and out of the dug-out for a few days rest," the exhausted soldier wrote to his next-of-kin Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Jellie after the battle. "Before I came out the shells flew so close to the opening that they blew our mess tins and water bottles to pieces and piled the three of us in a corner. As usual we laughed and joked about it. Sometimes the shells come closer and leave nothing, then the Frenchman call it Napoo, (meaning finished)." This casual off-hand remark about the randomness of death, cast in the distinctive slang of the front lines (often adopting bastardized French terms), was typical for soldiers coping with the horrors of combat. "We certainly had some time on the King's birthday [3 June 1916]," Scanlan reported. "It was blood and fire, a regular hell on earth." The Canadian counter-attack failed, but Scanlan did not disclose this to readers back home. "We carry two hundred rounds in our bandoleer [*sic*] all the time, a pack on our back, a rifle and bayonet which we use on the Germans," he explained. "The Germans may be good soldiers, but they will not face the steel, it is true they will run every time. You have read lots about the war and seen lots of war pictures no doubt, but it's the soldiers behind the guns and bayonets who know about the fight

and what war means.”⁴¹

The experiences of the front line soldiers convey different meanings than might be gleaned from examining spaghetti-noodle maps, high-level narratives, and the cold statistics often used to briefly describe battles. On the night of 5-6 June 1916, the 28th Battalion relieved the Royal Canadian Regiment on the knoll marking the shattered village of Hooze along the Menin Road. The following day, the 28th was battered by the enemy’s heavy artillery and the Germans detonated four mines under the Canadians’ trenches and captured the village. “Whenever the date June 6th comes along I always remember the Ypres-Menin Road,” Pte. William Crabbe noted later in life. “On that evening we were in Division Camp and the Germans had opened a heavy scrap.” The 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles, holding the old Roman cobblestone road extending eastward from the city, were “practically wiped out.” Afterwards, Crabbe and his comrades “were mustered for a relief and marched all one night to relieve them.” He described:

We arrived at the crossroad that marked what was left of our front line about four in the morning. The party of 27 men which I was with were told to occupy what remained of our front line but to come back to a strongpoint when daylight broke because in daylight we would be in full view of the Germans. We did so and on returning to the command post were questioned by the major then in charge who had been, from appearance, hitting the rum hard. He said we should not have come back and ordered us back. We did, and the Germans saw us when it got light and wiped us off the map. That was the first and only time during the war that I came face to face with enemy.

Several in Crabbe’s group “threw up their hands and surrendered when [the German] mopping up party surrounded us,” but he did not see the situation the same way and “as a result got a cut hand when I caught the bayonet that was lunged at me, and a crease under my left arm where one of their bullets nicked me.” He plunged head first into a drainage ditch and managed to crawl back to the Canadian support lines, spending the rest of the day carrying wounded soldiers to a safe spot where the ambulance could pick them up.

Those who remained in Crabbe’s battalion mustered the next day in the old horse barracks in Ypres. The Adjutant called the roll, asking the soldiers to report if they knew anything about the fate of the men who were absent. Crabbe remembered the names of two men who he saw surrender and explained the situation. “I got told off for saying they were prisoners,” he recalled, because the authorities “didn’t like that word ‘prisoner.’” Instead, the soldiers would be listed as “missing”—even though Crabbe had personally seen them put up their hands and surrender. “I often wondered afterwards why I did not have the sense to do so,” he reminisced later in life. He carried the scar on his wrist for several years before it gradually disappeared, but would always remember how big the bayonet looked when it came at him during the battle.

William’s brother Arthur was not so fortunate. He was killed on the opposite side of the road during the battle on 6 June when his company was bombarded with artillery fire and trench mortars.⁴² “His body along with a number of others were

buried deep under a first aid station that was in the way of a high explosive shell,” William recounted. His brother was one of many casualties that fateful day. “As I remember it the battalion mustered approx. 670 when it went into that trap,” William lamented, “and came out 260.”⁴³ Other units suffered similar fates. Twenty-two-year-old Pte. Harry Money, who lived with his sister Alice and brother-in-law William Croxford in Norwich where he worked as a welder before the war, had enlisted a couple of weeks after his brother Fred. Fighting with the 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles on 4 June, he suffered serious shrapnel wounds to the face and shoulder. Front line medical personnel who, faced with a deluge of casualties in a battle like this one, had to make assessments about who was beyond assistance and who might be saved, sent Money to the hospital in Etaples. Unfortunately, he died of his wounds the next day.⁴⁴

Despite the heavy losses, the Canadian Corps commander, Sir Julian Byng, was determined to retake the lost ground. Early on 13 June, he ordered a major set-piece attack where the remaining units of First Division assaulted the German lines after intense artillery preparation and under the concealment of a thick smoke screen. “The success was an indication of the corps’ increasing capabilities,” historian J.L. Granatstein noted. The Canadians managed to drive back the Germans to their original starting point, thus reclaiming most of the ground that had been lost since the start of the



Lieutenant-General Julian Byng, appointed to command the Canadian Corps in May 1916

month, but it came at an exorbitant cost. During the two weeks of what became known as the Battle of Mount Sorrel, the Canadians sustained more than 8,000 casualties. Despite losing the first two phases of the battle, the final operation managed to succeed thanks to careful planning and concentrated artillery bombardments. “General Byng had begun the process of turning the Canadian Corps into ‘Byng’s Boys,’” Granatstein explained. The Canadians had traded their Ross rifles for the trusted Lee-Enfield, and their Colt machine guns for Vickers and Lewis guns. They acquired rifle grenades, the new Stokes mortars, and steel helmets to offer a modicum of protection against shrapnel.⁴⁵ For reinforcements training in Canada and England, these new tools would prove essential in the battles to come.

Readying for Service Overseas

As their neighbours and countrymen fought at Mount Sorrel the raw recruits of the 168th Battalion continued to train at Camp Francis in London, Ontario. All looked forward to the Dominion Day celebrations in Woodstock, when the unit’s colours (flag) would be bestowed on the soldiers in a public ceremony. On 1 July 1916 – the same day that over 20,000 British soldiers died in the opening offensives of the Battle of the Somme – the men marched into the Woodstock Fair Grounds and were met by “the largest crowd ever drawn to Woodstock” – 12,000 cheer-

ing county residents. “Practically everyone in the city was there,” noted the *Daily Sentinel-Review*, “and tremendous crowds came in by trolley car, train, auto, and rig from Ingersoll, Tillsonburg and, in fact, every centre in the county.” They all crowded into the fair grounds to watch as Lady Hughes, wife of Minister of Militia Sam Hughes, presented the colours to the battalion. While much of Oxford County looked on approvingly, the unit unfurled the large blue flag, its motto – *Ubi Ducit Honor Sequimur* - “Where Honour Leads We Follow” – proudly displayed on the silk. The battalion’s commander, Lt.-Col. W.T. McMullen, thanked all who attended and exclaimed that “the day would live on in the memories of himself and his officers and men.” The officer was “sure it would inspire them to do their bit in such a way as to bring glory” to Oxford County, the Empire and their new flag.⁴⁶

The men were not allowed to enjoy the afterglow of the ceremony for long: a few days later their orders came to report to the newly-constructed Camp Borden near Barrie. The government had purchased hundreds of acres to build the new central camp and spent millions to get it ready. By the summer of 1916, the camp was not yet finished, but the government decided to rush troops there – including the 168th. On Sunday, 9 July 1916, the men boarded trains and left London for their new training camp.⁴⁷ With them was Otterville’s Fred Furlong, who had so far enjoyed his time in the military given how many of his comrades in “C” Company were his friends from South Norwich Township and Tillsonburg. Camp Borden momentarily challenged his positive outlook. On the day he arrived he wrote to his mother about the rough conditions of the camp. The army had burned off all of the trees and shrubs in and around the camp, leaving the area full of ash and dust, which found its way everywhere – into the soldiers’ clothes, beds, food, mouths, and eyes. Pte. Furlong complained that “the grounds are just cut out of the woods & every step you take you swallow about 4 bushels of dust.”⁴⁸

Edward Walter Nesbitt – who had been born in Holbrook in 1859 before moving to Woodstock and becoming the Liberal MP for North Oxford in 1908 – gave



Camp Borden, 1916

a speech in the House of Commons on the problems faced by the soldiers at Camp Borden and the broader impact they had on recruitment:

I was going to say that the people in the section of the country from which I come condemn very strongly the expenditure at Camp Borden. They say that the two military camps at Niagara and London were quite sufficient for the purposes of training, at least to a certain stage, of 10,000 or 12,000 men. Valcartier Camp had been established at large expense, and it was absolutely unnecessary to acquire the sand waste at Borden and at great expense to fit up these lands for military purposes.... I may tell you hon. Gentlemen ... that this camp at Borden did a great deal to delay recruiting in our section of the country. No one thing that I know of did more harm to recruiting than Camp Borden, to which the men were sent absolutely against their wills.... The pinery and shrubbery there had been burned off not long before; the surface was full of ashes and black dust from the burnings and if a sand storm came up while the soldiers were eating everything would be covered with dirt, so that the men could not possibly eat their food—the dust would grind in their teeth. Their beds were filled with this stuff; they could not sleep in them for dirt. The young men who volunteered to go to the front complained very bitterly about these things and their fathers who are paying the taxes, complained even more bitterly contending that the expenditure on the camp was not necessary.⁴⁹

After interviewing local men from Fred Furlong's "C" Company about their experiences, the *Tillsonburg Observer* succinctly summed up the initial reaction: "there seems to be a general agreement of opinion that the conditions existing during the first few days the men were in Camp Borden were almost unbearable."⁵⁰

On 11 July 1916, Fred Furlong and the 30,000 other recruits assembled for the official opening of the camp and a review by Minister of Militia Sam Hughes. For hours, the men stood in the sweltering heat and choked on the dust cloud that swirled around the camp, forbidden to carry water in their canteens.⁵¹ Eventually three to four thousand recruits vented their displeasure in a large-scale riot. Tents were pulled down, windows broken, and officers assaulted before troops with fixed bayonets dispersed the raucous soldiers.⁵² While the *Observer* reported that a few soldiers from the 168th participated in the riot, it was careful to note that none of the men from "C" Company – which contained many men from North Norwich, South Norwich, and the town of Norwich – had joined in the disturbance.⁵³



Fred Furlong, 1916

After the riot, the 168th fell into a routine of training and war games, with additional recruits from Oxford County frequently arriving to swell the unit's ranks. The sweltering summer heat, the poor living conditions in the camp, and the grass fires that occasionally broke out continued to stoke the ire of the recruits, but no more rioting occurred.⁵⁴ As the training progressed, the men of the 168th started to turn into "good soldiers," the *Observer* reported. In August, commanding officer Major Charles Thomson praised "C" Company:

I do not know of a better body of men in this camp than C Company. They are willing and earnest in their work and make life a pleasure for their officers. This camp is the real thing. It is hard to take a man from civilian life and make a soldier of him in a short time, especially if he is entirely green. The discipline 'hours' etc., may be galling until he finds out why and the necessity for such, and this is a real man's job. We can't expect home life at any stage of the game.... There is little or no sickness up here. The training puts a man in great shape.

The "Empire depends on men to defend her," Thomson concluded, and the soldiers from "C" Company had proven to be "real men" at Camp Borden.⁵⁵

August brought a break from the training and camp routine when the army ordered many soldiers in the battalion to return home to help with the harvest. "The farmers in Oxford would have been in a sorry condition this season but for the timely help given by boys of the 168th," the *Observer* explained. "The boys are doing a great work and will come back in good condition for the serious task ahead of them. They are not shirkers or slackers, or else they would not be wearing the Khaki. They have borne the early discomforts of the camp well and will eventually shape second to none in the whole camp."⁵⁶ After helping with the harvest in their home communities, most of the men had returned to Camp Borden by the beginning of September. Shortly after, Arthur Lorne Oatman, the Reeve of South Norwich, visited the camp bearing gifts: \$10 a piece for the 110 men who had enlisted from the township.⁵⁷ These moments of reprieve from the drudgery of camp life helped sustain morale, but soldiers' letters reaffirm that they were tired of Borden and longed to depart for England and France.

While the men of "Oxford's Own" trained at Camp Borden, other township residents who had donned their khaki uniforms elsewhere made their way overseas. Pte. Stanely Vanderburgh, a 27-year-old druggist whose parents lived in Norwich, was working in Edmonton when he enlisted with the 63rd Battalion in July 1915.⁵⁸



Lieut. J. Leslie Dickson of Burgessville leads physical training of the 168th men at Camp Borden, 1916.

Three reinforcing drafts from his unit had gone to England by March 1916, and he joined the rest of the battalion as it crossed the Atlantic in April.⁵⁹ Although it was against the rules, he kept a “little diary of events” but, in passing along information to his parents, he was careful not to discuss the specific route or methods of transport. “All told we travelled about seven thousand miles almost equally divided land and sea,” he boasted in general terms. “The sea was unusually calm nearly all the way. When it was rough I liked to stand on the bow and catch some of the salt water.” During one rough stretch, Vanderburgh recalled some verses which he recited to himself, and instructed his mother to “look in my library” for “a book by Dr. Aked. I forget the name but here are some of the lines and they did appeal to me so forcibly”:

“When the winds are raging o’er the upper ocean,
And billows wild content with angry roar
‘Tis said far down beneath the wild commotion
Far, far beneath, the noise of tempests crieth
And silver waves glide ever peacefully
And no rude storm how fierce so e’er it flieth
Disturbs the Sabbath of that deeper sea.
So to the heart that knows Thy love O Purest.
There is a temple sacred evermore
And all the babble of life’s angry voices
Dies in hushed stillness at its peaceful door.”⁶⁰

In the ornery North Atlantic, Vanderburgh seemed at peace. Although some of the men were sick, he did not miss a meal and he enjoyed the entertainment onboard: concerts, band music, boxing, wrestling, tug-of-war, and other sports. “On Sunday we had a nice church service,” he assured his mother. When they arrived in England, he was uplifted to see that the people appreciated the Canadians’ contributions to the war effort.⁶¹

Pte. Harold Innis, who embarked from Halifax on 16 July 1916, had a less pleasant voyage. “I became ill on Monday morning and remained seasick until Thursday morning,” he recorded in his memoirs. His trans-Atlantic voyage onboard the *Empress of Britain*, a 570 foot-long ocean liner⁶² refitted as a troop ship (meaning simply that hammocks were hung, in Innis’s view), was uncomfortable if rather uneventful. “I had planned with another man from our group to draw the rations from the cook’s store in return for a small cash payment for the trip,” Innis recalled. “Unfortunately I had no previous experience with ocean travel and found myself almost immediately out of action. We spent most of our days and nights lying on the decks, to be interrupted early in the morning by sailors who were ordered to scrub down the decks, throwing water in all directions and giving us no warning other than a rather hearty shout ‘Arise and shine my lucky lads.’”⁶³

They arrived in Liverpool on 25 July 1916, then were quickly despatched by troop train to the large military camp at Shorncliffe near Folkstone in Kent. “We were put in the corner tent in a large space of ground covered with tents with eight or ten men in each,” Innis recalled. “This was my first experience of what might



Harold Innis

family farm in Otterville “made it very much easier for me than for a great number of others.” Then he was sent to quarantine, where he slept on an old blanket during the training and picked up “hives.” Rather than a hardship, he described quarantine as “one of the most desirable places” in the camp:

A guard with a rusty Ross rifle paced up and down in front at the rate of 140 paces per minute, paid compliments to officers as his chief duty, and stopped the men from going out at the front of the quarantine. As a result, the men went out the back of the quarantine and every place was accessible to its inmates. Sometimes everyone was present since they always arrange it in that way and every name called out was answered whether the man was actually present or not. It was the essence of red tape and the ideal of ease and comfort. Located on the top of a hill, it received the fresh sea breezes and one could enjoy the warmth of a sloping incline. As to the scenery: the sea, the fleet of ships, particularly the white hospital ships, Sandgate below the camp, Folkestone across the valley with the grandest of all its buildings - the Metropole Hotel. Only four were allowed in the tent in contrast to the usual eight. There were no parades, the grub was of the best and all one had to do was to enjoy oneself.

Most of Innis’s colleagues from McMaster who had enlisted before him arrived at a neighbouring camp for engineering training. Innis admitted that he spent most of his time in quarantine slipping away from camp to visit his old friends, only narrowly missing getting caught by the authorities. Had he been caught, he would have had his pay docked for being AWOL – absent from his post without permission (with no intention to desert) – or given a humiliating field punishment. Neither was an attractive option, of course, but the lure of connecting with friends from back home was too great to resist.

While under canvas in England, Innis wrote a steady stream of letters to friends and family. As recent compilers of this correspondence note, these letters “not only conveyed information about his whereabouts, his daily routines and activities, his diet, the weather, and the activities of the enemy, such as Zeppelin raids; they also

be called army life as we slept on the hard boards of the tent and ate rations as they were given to us.” It was eye-opening for the student-turned-soldier. “The men came from all parts of Canada but they represented a cross section of life with which I had not been familiar, particularly the men from industrial communities,” he noted. “There was a hardness such as I had not come in contact with, expressed perhaps most noticeably in the obscene and blasphemous parodies of various hymns.”

Soon after arriving at Shorncliffe, Innis passed the routine test in horseback riding, “which meant primarily looking after the horses, feeding and watering them and cleaning out the stables.” He felt assured that experience working with horses on the

came to constitute a running dialogue with his family members about what was happening at home and in the Norwich county community.” He updated his family about his McMaster classmates and soldiers from Oxford County, “trying to recreate a McMaster/Norwich-county community overseas.” Despite his later reputation “as an ascetic, discipline-driven over-achiever,” Innis’ letters from England reveal a young man who was “something of a cynical slacker and gourmand,” stressing his experiences “relaxing in quarantine, avoiding hard work, and digging into the sumptuous ‘good grub’ laid out for him at the Sunday teas organized by the women of the Folkestone Baptist Church.”⁶⁴ He forged friendships with local residents, helping to change their rather cool opinion about having soldiers in their midst.

The prospect of heading to France made Innis nervous, he confessed to his family in early September after a German Zeppelin passed over the camp and “machine guns rattled” to try to bring it down.⁶⁵ Courses in gunnery (which involved training on 18-pounders) and signalling were designed to prepare him for combat, but the prospect of being bombed from above brought the realities of war down to earth. “Our tent mates began to change as some left for France and were replaced by recruits from Canada,” he wrote on 17 September.⁶⁶ As the month went on, cold weather came and “reveille at 5:30 became more and more difficult to meet and the warm blankets more difficult to leave.” The Canadians at Shorncliffe contemplated the prospects of moving into winter quarters or heading on to France. “More men were arriving from Canada, the tents were being crowded and it was becoming less and less comfortable in the camp as a whole,” Innis reminisced in his memoirs. “By October 29th there was definite talk of our going into barracks. The wet and the cold and the mud were beginning to make the camp intolerable. The wind became stronger with the result that tents were blown over and blankets were wet.”⁶⁷ Innis and the other gunners in England braced for a damp and uncomfortable winter, but their situation and mental state was far more palatable than the constant anxiety borne by soldiers in the trenches in France – or the heat, dysentery, and malaria of the Mediterranean campaign.

The Medical Front: Salonika and the Mediterranean Campaign

My friends at home, May I for a moment take your attention and draw for you a picture of true bravery.

Picture to yourself a dug-out, dimly lit by candle with shelves on which are dressings and bandages of different shapes and sizes and here and there a bottle of iodine which the wounded dread more than bullets because of its sting.

The doctors are waiting to work over a stretcher case just being brought in by two muddy stretcher bearers. The stretcher is put in place, the blanket is drawn back from the face of a man whose head is swathed or a bandage covered with mud, both legs are broken and equally covered with mud and slime. In spite of all these horrible wounds and the pain caused by them a smile lights up the face of the hero; he asks for water in a hollow voice and after he has received it says: ‘Well Doc, old sport, we did the trick and Fritz will not

forget it in a hurry- We've won the last trenches and more those for days in a land swept by a hell of a shot and shell have passed and gee! I wish I had the Kaiser in my grasp, he would die for the pain and suffering caused and the death of my chum Jack who, poor lad, has been with me through it all from the first. Say Doc, how's the chance for a cig. I'm crazy for a smoke."

The work of dressing the wounds and applying splints to the broken limbs has finished and the hero is carried to the ambulance. God speed him and may he have the best of luck and a speedy recovery.

E.D.F. from a "Hospital Somewhere Overseas" to friends at home,
Norwich Gazette, 9 November 1916

This story of "Bold Canadian Spirit" drew local readers' attention to the importance of medical services in industrial warfare. Without efficient treatment, even minor wounds could become infected and threaten a soldier's life. The Canadian Army Medical Corps (CAMC) thus played an essential role in keeping soldiers alive. Founded in 1904, the Corps expanded during the war to include field medical units, casualty clearing stations, hospital ships, and hospitals in England and Canada. On the battlefield, it was essential to quickly move wounded soldiers to better medical care in rear area hospitals – a process that could take hours. Stretcher-bearers cleared the wounded from the muddy battlefield, often in the face of bullets and shell fire, and field ambulances (substantial organizations with nearly 250 personnel and 59 horses) evacuated wounded soldiers to dressing stations and casualty clearing stations.⁶⁸ If a soldier's wounds were treatable, surgery could be performed at any medical unit (depending on the urgency of the situation), and following initial recovery a patient might proceed to stationary and general hospitals in France and England for long-term care.⁶⁹

More than 2000 nursing sisters drawn from hospitals, universities, and professional practices across Canada and the United States served with the Canadian army overseas. "Throughout the war, enlistment applications by nurses always surpassed the number of places available in the corps," nursing historian Geneviève Allard observed. The reasons for this high level of interest "were many and diverse," despite the dangers associated with serving in a war zone. In Canada, "the job prospects for nurses were still quite dim and salaries were low, so the possibility of regular and higher pay and the advantageous conditions associated with military work made it attractive," she explained. "The CEF also offered adventure, an exciting life, and new professional challenges." Furthermore, wartime propaganda encouraged young women to contribute to the war effort, and enlisting as a nursing sister was a logical way for professionally-trained nurses to serve their country in a manner that seemed steeped in romanticism. Their elegant blue uniforms with white veils (which earned Canadian Nursing Sisters the nickname of "bluebirds") became a strong symbol of women's courage and patriotism, stirring the popular imagination and affirming that the battle front was not an exclusively male domain.⁷⁰

Cecil Matilda Oatman enlisted with the CAMC in Toronto, where she had completed medical training before the war. Born in South Norwich Township in 1890,

she had gone to school locally before training to become a professional nurse at Toronto Western University, graduating in 1914. Accordingly, Matilda as she was known, fulfilled the criteria that Canadian military nurses already be professionally trained and, at the age of 25, Oatman was just slightly above the average enlistment age. Like nearly all of the nurses, she was single when she volunteered with No. 4 Canadian General Hospital, organized through the University of Toronto, alongside her friends Grace Gray and Emma Elliot on 7 April 1915. She earned \$55-62/month in her commissioned rank – equivalent



Cecil Matilda Oatman

to an army lieutenant and double the pay of a private, gunner, or sapper.⁷¹ As a “bluebird,” she would play a significant role in saving Allied soldiers’ lives by assisting with medical operations and caring for convalescing soldiers at stationary and general hospitals, dealing with a full spectrum of patients: soldiers suffering from diseases, broken limbs, clean gunshot wounds, horrendous artillery wounds, gas burns, and shell shock.⁷²

Also in the No. 4 Canadian General Hospital was George Harold Poldon. Born in Norwich in February 1886, he was a second year Arts student at the University of Toronto in the spring of 1915 when a recruiting officer appealed for volunteers for ambulance work overseas, noting that 50-60 university doctors were going over and they would need students to join them. “The hospital will be situated 20-100 miles from the firing line,” Harold wrote to his father, and would be housed in a “large building in some large town.” Harold asked the CAMC recruiter directly whether, “if we were to enter in this work, we would be in the firing line picking up soldiers and he said no, that the different armies have their own ambulance men who do that work, and with the rapid transportation they have now the wounded are carried to the base hospitals.” With this assurance in hand (as well as the idea that the recruiting officer preferred men from rural areas rather than “those who come from down town or somewhere else in the city”), Harold joined up. “The pay for this work is \$1.10 per day,” he told his father, which would easily cover off any expenses and allow him to send up to four-fifths of the money home. “They wish to get as good men as they can because they wish to make it as congenial as possible for the nurses who might help them in the hospital,” he reported home. “Thus you will see the risk one will have will not be very great since there will be plenty of doctors around to watch everything as carefully as possible.” References to King and Country, the desire to take it to the Germans, or an adventurous foray into danger were conspicuously absent. Poldon’s creed was cautious and practical, motivated by a commitment to his “chums” at school and the desire for an “experience” that he would carry with him for the rest of his life:

Now, daddy, you see the position of things and I think that if you were a young fellow and had a chance such as this and had nothing very special to hold you, you would be very likely to go over there for a year at the most, for the experience. It will be something one will never forget and if one stays here

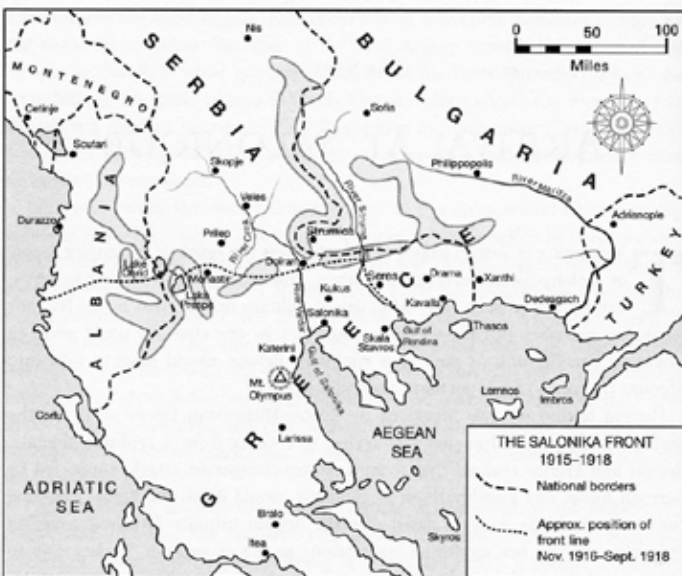
he would wish he had taken it in. Besides there will be a dozen to 20 of us who are well acquainted with each other and will therefore be company for each other and look after anyone who will need any care. The doctor said that he did not want one to go if he did not have some friends, so he said that he wanted the Vic bunch to go together.⁷³

He enlisted as a private on 4 May 1915, and arrived in England later that month.

On Dominion Day, 1 July, Harold Poldon wrote to his aunt in Norwich from Moore Barracks in Shorncliffe, England, where about forty members of his unit had been sent to serve in a hospital. He was put in charge of a ward almost immediately, but he admitted that he “had it fairly easy.” One of his patients, who had been to the front, showed him “the plate off of a helmet which belonged to a German he stabbed,” which had an eagle and the words “Mitt Gott bur Koenig und der Vaterland” (“With God for the King and Fatherland”). The soldier “thinks there is going to be some very severe fighting before the Allies get into the German land,” Harold reported home. “He says that they [the Germans] are better equipped in all ways for the fighting.” The English newspapers contained little actual news, and Harold lamented that what they did get was “very heavily censored” and designed to influence the people “to give the government loans to meet the heavy drain on [national] resources.” He was unimpressed, and found the absence of substantive information frustrating. “We cannot tell where we will be one week ahead,” he complained, so he could not forecast when his unit would head to France.⁷⁴

By this point, Nursing Sister Oatman was already in France serving with the 10th British General Hospital (with whom she would serve from June-October 1915). So too was Cpl. John Paulding, Harold’s cousin, who was excited to learn that the 2nd Canadian Division would form a Canadian Corps with 1st Division in France, thus meaning that Harold “will likely come to France too.”⁷⁵ But this was not to be. In

early October 1915, Harold Poldon heard rumours that his unit would be sent to Greece. “It will be a very favourable place to go for our doctors to get a great medical experience,” he wrote to his father. “It will be a great change for us to spend the Winter in that warmer climate.” So far, their “trip” overseas had been “one great pic-



nic with just enough work to keep us in shape.” Their service in the hospital in England had been “considerable,” but by this point Harold and his comrades were “looking forward to a time when we will be of much greater service in this great effort which the British are putting up for the cause of humanity against the German dictator.” His language revealed a newfound enthusiasm for the war’s higher purpose, reflecting the contact that he had in England with soldiers heading to the battlefield. “It is a very hard scene to look at those fellows who are looking fine & physically fit marching out to do their best for their country and soon to return as we see many of them [come back] to the hospitals wounded and crippled,” he lamented after two units moved out. “But such is war, and it seems to be necessary for the welfare of all.”⁷⁶

Poldon correctly anticipated a Mediterranean mission. By November he was on his way to Salonika with 4th General Hospital. Although relatively few Canadians would serve in the Mediterranean theatre during the First World War, about 1500 personnel with Canadian medical units served in the region, eventually establishing five stationary hospitals to support British forces fighting in Gallipoli, Egypt, and the Greek city of Salonika. Nursing Sister Matilda Oatman, also serving with the No. 4 Canadian General Hospital, had already arrived in Salonika on 11 November, where the British had erected a hospital that could accommodate more than one thousand beds.⁷⁷ The staff lived and worked in wooden huts, treating an average of 1300 patients a day – mostly soldiers suffering from malaria, dysentery, and other diseases, but also a large number of wounded men. “With the fiercer fighting in France the newspapers did not give much information on the long trench warfare with attacks and counter-attacks on the Balkan front,” a short unit history recounted.⁷⁸ Poldon found it rather boring and routine. “We have been continuing our uneventful work and it is gradually wearing away the time when we shall be privileged to return home,” he wrote on 12 April 1916. There was not much sickness, “so we are not rushed with work.” Harold exercised when he could, played football and baseball, fought off flies and mosquitos, and enjoyed the local newspapers that his family sent to him from home. In turn, he shared the papers with friends from Woodstock who, in turn, handed them to “Miss Oatman.”⁷⁹ This process, which continued throughout the year, ensured that “we all have a good look at the news from home.”⁸⁰



Hospital huts of No.4 Canadian General Hospital, Salonika

Although the hospital offered a commanding view of the town and harbour, the Canadians posted to Salonika had little opportunity to interact with Greek citizens

or to venture into the surrounding regions. Poldon purchased ancient Greek and Roman coins, and napkin rings crafted out of melted zeppelin frame by wounded French soldiers.⁸¹ Oatman also collected some souvenirs which she sent home with a captain from Brantford (who was returning to look after his ill mother). These trinkets “look[ed] like so much junk,” she confessed:

but I know you will appreciate them as I do when you know about them. The miniature coalscuttle is made of a shell case fired at the first battle of Ypres. The little brass thing with a pedestal is a bowl for grinding coffee. The Turks use these. The lace is made by the Maltese. The colored embroideries are real antiques, having been worn by Turkish ladies as headdress. The Medallions are Greek work. The penholder, paper knife and inkstand are all made out of the Zeppelin that we saw brought down. The wood is from the propeller, which is the only thing of wood in the whole machine. The Zeppelin was one given by the Kaiser to the Sultan of Turkey as a birthday gift before the war. The little dagger is just an ordinary Turkish one.⁸²

Canadians serving in the medical corps took pride in the services that they provided to the wounded and sick soldiers in their care. “The patients here do not lack very much for comforts,” Poldon suggested. “The Red Cross is very strong and the sisters are very considerate.” The nurses bought decorations to make their wards feel less sterile, and the Red Cross stores provided patients with items to make them feel “more contented,” including pipes, tobacco, writing paper, ash trays, bandages, “and so many other things that it would take too long to enumerate them all. In many ways he is a lucky patient who gets in this hospital. War in these days is greatly different in this way than ... most of the previous wars.”⁸³ As medical practitioners, he and the rest of the CAMC were doing their part to make the First World War the first conflict in millennia where the fatality rates from disease had minimal impact on operations and where first aid, evacuation procedures, surgery, and techniques to fight infection meant that more than ninety percent of injured soldiers who made it to medical care survived.⁸⁴ “It must not be forgotten though that there is a very large share of suffering also,” Poldon reminded his father. The hospital did its share of surgeries, and many men “go around minus a limb or an eye.”⁸⁵

Nevertheless, serving in the Mediterranean theatre left Poldon with the feeling that he was merely passing time on the sidelines. “One could be far better off in some good profitable work at home,” he complained to his father. “But this well applies to ... most of the men over here.”⁸⁶ His thoughts could not help but pass back to home. How was his father getting along in his shop? How was the Ford man making out with his sales? How were “Billy and Jake doing up in the west end,” and how about “little Georgie and Margaret” or the “Palmer boys”? Had the condenser opened the new building yet, and what new houses were going up? What retired farmers had moved into Norwich? The flood of questions seemed endless. He also thought of his father coming to Greece to “enjoy a week around town just to watch the way the natives do their mechanical work.” He told of mules and donkeys shod on the street, and of little 12-foot square shops filled with forges, bellows, anvils, and tools. “Then you could go to the docks and see the large ships coming and go-

ing, loading and unloading. You would also enjoy the walks up through the old city and along the old wall which has been there for centuries.”⁸⁷ His rich description not only showed his love for his father, but perhaps his own suppressed desire to be a tourist.

Poldon’s letters reveal little of the general struggles that medical personnel in Salonika faced in coping with extreme temperatures and restricted access to supplies. Instead, he wrote about concerts that he attended with diverse groups (“French, Algerians, Serbians, English, and Canucks” in one case); his regular visits to see Bill Boughner (a drug clerk from Norwich) who worked in the hospital dispensary; and his techniques for distributing tobacco rations.⁸⁸ It was certainly a different climate than that of Oxford County. “The sun is very hot & at about 9:30 it is like our noon sun in Can[ada],” he described on 20 April. “We are standing this heat quite well and carrying on the work. Some of the boys who are not very strong show up their weakness,” and a couple of the nursing sisters were sick (one with a serious bout of typhoid), but Poldon remained healthy.⁸⁹ By contrast, Matilda Oatman’s health suffered. She had served on a hospital shift in the Dardenelles during intense naval bombardments without incident, but her return to Salonika brought bouts of colitis, enteritis, and chronic appendicitis, with the latter taking her off duty for five weeks in March-April 1916. As Oatman discovered, the heat and omnipresent disease took its toll on the health of the medical personnel – and particularly the nurses – serving at Salonika.⁹⁰

From the “sidelines” in the Mediterranean theatre, Poldon, Boughner, and Oatman followed developments on the “main” battlefield in France and Belgium. “We see by the papers that the Canadians are doing some good work but it has cost them some serious losses,” Poldon wrote to his father in Norwich that July. “I hope that there will not be many of the chums at school [who] meet with bad luck.” He questioned his decision to volunteer for the CAMC and serve in Greece, suggesting that if he not been so “hasty” in wishing to help a little” and waited “a few more months I may have had the chance to get some better position or do a great deal more that can be done here. But we are here and just have to peg in to do what we can here no matter how little it may be.”⁹¹ Everyone had their part to play, as many of Harold’s friends from back home were doing on the Western Front.

Holding the Lines

The Canadian Corps remained in the Ypres salient through the summer of 1916 in a “stationary yet aggressive” role. “Though holding their positions but thinly the Canadians continued to harry the enemy with bombardment, mining, and raids,” official historian Nicholson described.⁹² Pte. Fred Croxford, the unmarried son of William Croxford of Norwich, was a 34-year-old farmer when he enlisted on 16 April 1915 in Hamilton. He had sailed overseas with the third Canadian contingent and joined the 1st Battalion in France in March 1916. In the reserve trenches near Mount Sorrel in early July, the Canadians and Germans exchanged regular artillery and mortar fire which took a heavy toll: about 100 members of the 1st Battalion were killed or wounded on 9 July. Croxford made it through that day’s intense bom-

bardments unscathed, but not the enemy's "intermittent shelling" the next day.⁹³ A shell landed beside him, leaving him buried, totally deafened, and unable to speak. In a letter to his sister Prissy, he later recounted what transpired:

They were not satisfied with burying me, but, tried their best to do me after I had dug myself out, and was doing my best to dig the other fellows out, when they dropped some more big shells and shook me up, besides nearly blinding me, and making me deaf, so I did not care how much they shelled after that, I could only feel the jar of the explosion.

I was alone, except for a fellow with one eye put out of business, and shook up so much he could not do anything. There were two fellows with just their heads out, wedged between timbers and earth, and every time a shell exploded the earth would tumble in and cover them up, so I lay there and kept digging them out with my hands, until the bombardment was over, and then I made a hole so the fellows underneath could get some air. By this time I was almost blind, a shell must have exploded pretty close for it blew my head into the soft earth as I was lying on the side of the trench keeping the fellows heads uncovered until it would be dark so I could go for help.

I was so weak I could not do anything myself, so I went down to the next line of trenches, and told the captain, and he sent up a bunch of fellows to dig the others out. He told me to get down to the dressing station, but I went back until they had dug six or seven out but, one was an officer, his first time in.

I got the fellow who had lost his eye down to the next line, and went back again, and tried to help get some of the other fellows down who were badly crushed, but, I guess I was not much use, so the captain sent me down with a sergeant who was hit in the leg. I started to take him, but before I got there someone was leading me, as my eyes by this time were both closed, and I did not see much for the next day or two. I was in a hospital in France for a week then they sent me over here, and I am alright again now.

I am glad the Germans have some poor shells. I was sitting down taking a rest one day and one hit underneath me, and lifted me up about a foot, but didn't explode. That isn't the only time but quite a few that I might have been put out of business. I often wonder how it is that I am still here, but I am.⁹⁴

Croxford ended up losing sight in both eyes for four days. He was evacuated to the dressing station and then on to Calais, where he stayed in bed for one week before being sent to hospitals in Scotland and England. Although he received treatment for his eyes and the blood was drained from his ruptured right ear, he complained of severe headaches, buzzing in his ears, and pain in the back of his neck. Little wonder the doctors diagnosed Croxford with a case of "acute shell shock."⁹⁵

Croxford's letter home from the Canadian military hospital in Epsom on 9 September 1916 was quite typical of someone recovering from an injury. "Well I have not had very much news from you lately," he scolded his parents and siblings. "Don't be scared to write. I can still stand quite a bit." He wrote about the weather, asked about family members back home, and reassured them that he was "feeling all right

now—none the worse for wear.” Although he had been unable to find out any information for Mrs. Crabbe about the fate of her sons overseas, he passed on news from other local men serving on the front lines. His friend William Horace Stanley, who worked as a tile maker in Norwich before the war,⁹⁶ was “still plugging away out there” and had been promoted. “I hope he pulls through all right,” Croxford noted, expressing the usual concern for the fate of a chum serving in the trenches. “He has been out there quite a while now without anything serious. He calls me a lucky dog being over here and wishes it was he.” One could not be faulted for wanting to escape the battle front. “You can’t wonder at it though if you had been out and seen what it is like over there,” he explained for those back home who had not experienced it firsthand. “It is no picnic although when we get out we laugh about things that happened although they looked serious enough at the time.” He even seemed eager to get back to his unit in France. “My eyes are all right and I am feeling pretty good again but am tired of hospitals and convalescent camps,” Croxford wrote. “You would think we were a lot of kids. They tell you when to get up and when to go to bed and when you can go out and when to come in. You don’t even have to think for yourself in the army. There is no mistake they do take care of you in the army.”⁹⁷



Fred Croxford in England while recuperating from shell shock, 1916

What Pte. Croxford failed to disclose was that he had been awarded a gallantry medal for the assistance that he had given to his comrades after he had been injured by the shell on 10 July. “You need not worry about me and you need not spread this around,” he told his sister Prissie in a letter after she learned about his medal from an English newspaper.⁹⁸ Of course, she ignored his appeal and made sure that the story of his selfless actions circulated in Oxford County.

Stories such as Croxford’s inspired the volunteers who had enlisted in the 168th Battalion and who were enduring the monotony of camp life in the dusty and rough conditions of Camp Borden. In late September, they welcomed the news that the military had scheduled a sailing date to take them to England. Over the next two weeks, most of the soldiers went home on leave to see their families and enjoyed a last send-off from their communities. In Norwich, the congregation of Holy Trinity Anglican Church held a social evening for fifteen soldiers and gave each man a fountain pen. The volunteers from South Norwich received ten dollars cash that they could spend on whatever they wanted.⁹⁹ On 5 October, the Norwich Women’s Patriotic League hosted a supper in the Methodist church for soldiers from the town and the surrounding countryside, giving each one a five-dollar gold piece and a parting note of encouragement:

Your home town joins in congratulating you on the great privilege that is yours of doing your part in the great world-wide struggle. We have admired

your manliness and courage and have always been proud to own you as our own, and will follow with interest and affection, as you cross the seas to join those of our pride who have already been through the thickest of the fight, and like them, we feel assured you will bring honor and glory to Old Oxford, and the friends and loved ones in Norwich.

The women thanked the soldiers for the “valiant service” they were “rendering the Cause of Freedom and Justice” and promised to keep the “Home Fires Burning” for them.¹⁰⁰

Although the men who had enlisted with the 168th were eager to finally head overseas, their desire to enjoy Thanksgiving dinner with family and friends on Monday, 9 October, proved irresistible to many. Local papers reported that hundreds of members of the 168th failed to return to Camp Borden on the Saturday evening when they were due. “The Oxford boys are really on spot, but when parents, friends and sweethearts plead at home, then sturdy hearts melt to that state of softness that characterizes the Britisher when dealing with the gentler sex,” the *Tillsonburg Observer* offered by way of excuse.¹⁰¹ By mid-week, nearly all of the soldiers had overcome their momentary lapse into “softness” and returned to Borden to complete their final preparations prior to departure.

The 700 men of the 168th left Borden once and for all on 27 October 1916 to start the long journey to England. Any internal fears were shrouded by outward displays of jubilation. “The men of Oxford’s Own looked as if out on a big picnic, everyone laughing and singing battalion songs and generally acting as if on a holiday outing,” the *Norwich Gazette* reported. “There was no boasting among the men but determination was written on every face and the people of this county can rest assured that the men of the 168th will uphold the honor and good name won by the Oxford men who proceeded them to the firing line.”¹⁰² Four days later, they boarded SS *Lampland* in Halifax harbour. The next soil that they would touch would be that of Mother England.



Group of men from Norwich who joined the 168th Battalion

Notes

- 1 William Barker Crabbe, "As it was in the Beginning" (typescript on file at the Norwich and District Museum and Archives), 1-7. See also his attestation papers, which lists his birth date as 7 December 1891 (not 1890).
- 2 Crabbe, "As it was in the Beginning," 8. Please note that we have silently corrected typographical and minor grammatical issues in Crabbe's manuscript.
- 3 Crabbe, "As it was in the Beginning," 9. Supplemented by dates in attestation papers. The following three paragraphs are also derived from this source.
- 4 Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1994), 117.
- 5 John Paulding to Uncle and All, 13 November 1915, Paulding papers, Norwich and District Museum and Archives (NDMA).
- 6 Arl Avery to Uncle and Aunt in Norwich, "Arl Avery Had a Close Call," 17 January 1916, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 10 February 1916.
- 7 Soldier File, Avery, Arlin, 500163, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 314 – 3.
- 8 Elgin Sears to his Uncle Mr. Griffin of South Norwich, from "somewhere in France," written 21 October 1915, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 2 December 1915.
- 9 The Armstrong Family, eds., *The Maple Leaf Forever: A Short History from 1800 to Present of the Military Involvement of Old East Oxford Township* (self-published, 2011), 32.
- 10 Contrast, for example, the perspectives in Jeff Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship during Canada's Great War* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996), and Ian Miller, *Our Glory and Our Grief: Torontonians and the Great War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).
- 11 John Barnes to his Mother, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 18 July 1916.
- 12 John Barnes to his Mother, 18 July 1916.
- 13 Tim Cook, "'Tokens of Fritz': Canadian Soldiers and the Art of Souveneering in the Great War," *War & Society* 31, no. 3 (2012): 211-226.
- 14 John Paulding to Uncle and All, 7 January 1916, NDMA.
- 15 John Paulding to Ethel, 10 February 1916, NDMA.
- 16 War diaries, 1st Field Ambulance, February 1916, LAC, RG9-III-D-3, vol. 5026, file 822, reel T-10913.
- 17 John Paulding to Uncle George and All, Somewhere in France, 9 March 1916, NDMA.
- 18 Undated letter from Bruce Poole, "Saturday," authors' collection.
- 19 Soldier file, Poole, Bruce, 675904, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 7897 – 25. He would see the front lines eventually, and feel the bite of a gunshot in his calf – and later a bullet that meant he never returned to Canada.
- 20 Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1914-1916* (Toronto: Penguin, 2016), 323.
- 21 On Verdun, see Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *The French Army and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); P. Jankowski, *Verdun: The Longest Battle of the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and H. P. Pétain, *Verdun*, trans. M. MacVeagh (London: Elkin Mathews & Marrot, 1930).
- 22 Tim Cook, "The Blind Leading the Blind: The Battle of the St. Eloi Craters," *Canadian Military History* 5, no. 2 (1996): 24-36.
- 23 Crabbe, "As it was in the Beginning," 10-11.

Chapter 5

24 Cook, "The Blind Leading the Blind," 25.

25 War diaries, 28th Canadian Infantry Battalion, 9 April 1916, LAC, RG9-III-D-3, box 4935, file 425.

26 Crabbe, "As it was in the Beginning," 11.

27 Terry Copp, "The Military Effort 1914-1918," in *Canada and the First World War*, ed. David MacKenzie (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 51.

28 Morton, *When Your Numbers Up*.

29 Soldier File, Underhill, Ernest Le Roy, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 9869 – 12.

30 War Diaries, 5th Battalion, Canadian Mounted Rifles, 18 May 1916, LAC, RG9-III-D-3, box 4949, file 473.

31 Soldier File, Sneath, Thomas D'Arcy, 32462, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 9131 – 37.

32 Richard Holt, *Filling the Ranks: Manpower in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2017), 192.

33 A previous draft of 5 officers and 248 other ranks had gone to England the previous November.

34 "Breaking Up of the 71st Battalion," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 17 June 1916.

35 Cook, *At the Sharp End*, 343.

36 Capt. S.G. Bennett, *The 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles, 1914-1919* (Toronto: Murray, 1926), 16-18.

37 Desmond Morton, "Mercer, Malcolm Smith," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 14 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/merc_malcolm_smith_14E.html; Gordon MacKinnon, "Major-General Malcolm Smith Mercer: The Highest Ranking Canadian Officer Killed in the Great War by Friendly Fire," *Canadian Military Journal* (Spring 2007): 75-82.

38 Bennett, *4th Canadian Mounted Rifles*, 18-19.

39 Jim's mother received a telegram on 29 June 1916 notifying her that he was missing in action. She did not receive any further responses to her inquiries until 23 February 1917, when she received a telegram confirming that he had been killed in action on 2 June 1916. He is commemorated on the Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial in Belgium and on the monument in the Pioneer Cemetery, Oxford Centre.

40 Soldier File, Scanlon [sic], Edward, 602745, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, box 8683 – 56.

41 Ed Scanlan to Mr. and Mrs. Jellie, "Pte. Scanlan Writes from France," printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 31 August 1916. The *Norwich Gazette* reported that Scanlan had been wounded in the back and was in hospital on 28 September 1916.

42 War Diary, 28th Canadian Infantry Battalion, 6 June 1916, LAC, RG9-III-D-3, box 4935, file 425.

43 As a recent battalion history summarizes, the Germans taking Hooge represented a traumatizing Canadian defeat. "The holding of Hooge had been important to the British honour, having suffered many casualties in holding this hamlet," Robert Lindsay notes. "Its loss by the Canadians was viewed with disdain by British troops." Robert Lindsay, "28th Battalion History: St. Eloi and Hooge - Spring 1916," <http://www.nwbattalion.com/history3.html>.

44 Soldier file, Money, Harry, 112095, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, box 6291 – 13.

45 J.L. Granatstein, *Canada's Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace* (Toronto: Univer-

sity of Toronto Press, 2002), 92-93.

46 "Presentation of Colours Witnessed by Thousands," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 3 July 1916; and Oxford Remembers, "168th Canadian Infantry Battalion," <http://www.oxfordremembers.ca/>.

47 "168th to leave London for Camp Borden Sunday," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 9 July 1916.

48 Fred Furlong to his Mother, 10 July 1916, authors' collection.

49 "Speech by E.W. Nesbitt, M.P. in the House of Commons," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 3 February 1917.

50 "Home for Sunday," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 20 July 1916.

51 Richard Merritt, *Training for Armageddon: Niagara Camp in the Great War* (Victoria: Friesen Press, 1915).

52 "Home for Sunday," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 20 July 1916.

53 "Home for Sunday."

54 "Military Notes," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 20 July 1916.

55 "'C' Company Men are Good Soldiers," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 17 August 1916.

56 "Camp Borden News," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 24 August 1916.

57 "'C' Company presented with \$10 Gold Pieces," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 12 October 1916.

58 Soldier file, Vanderburgh, Stanley, 466129, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 9901 - 19.

59 Department of National Defence (DND), Directorate of History and Heritage, Official Lineages, vol.3, part 2: Infantry Regiments - The Loyal Edmonton Regiment (4th Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry), <http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/his/ol-lo/vol-tom-3/par2/ler-eng.asp>.

60 The quote is from Harriet Beecher Stowe's hymn "When winds are raging o'er the upper ocean."

61 Pte Stanley Vanderburg [*sic*] to his Mother, undated, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 29 June 1916.

62 "The Ships List," <http://www.theshipslist.com/ships/descriptions/ShipsE.shtml>.

63 Harold Innis, "Memoir of Harold Adams Innis Covering the Years 1894 - 1922," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 29, no.2 (2004). The following paragraphs in this section are also derived from this source unless otherwise cited.

64 William J. Buxton, Michael Cheney, and Paul Heyer, eds., *Harold Innis Reflects: Memoir and WWI Writings/Correspondence* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 8. For his correspondence from Shorncliffe, see pages 120-36.

65 Innis to "Mother and all," 27 August 1916, in Buxton et al, *Harold Innis Reflects*, 126.

66 Innis to "Mother and all," 17 September 1916, University of Toronto Archives (UTA), Harold Innis fonds, B72-0003, box 4, file 2.

67 Innis, "Memoir."

68 Bill Rawling, *Death their Enemy: Canadian Medical Practitioners and War* (Ottawa: self-published, 2001), 76.

69 By 1918, the CAMC operated sixteen general hospitals, ten stationary hospitals, and four casualty clearing stations. Overall, more than 21,000 men and women served with the CAMC overseas (including more than half of all Canadian physicians), ultimately providing services for 418,052 troops overseas and hospital treatment for 539,690 cases of sick or wounded soldiers (27% of which were casualties in battle). Andrew MacPhail, *Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War, 1914-1919: The Medical Services* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1925).

Chapter 5

70 Geneviève Allard, "Caregiving on the Front: The Experience of Canadian Military Nurses During World War I," in *On All Frontiers: Four Centuries of Canadian Nursing*, eds. Christina Bates, Dianne Dodd and Nicole Rousseau (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2005), 153-167.

71 Soldier file, Oatman, Cecil Matilda, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 7396 - 38. On CEF rates of pay, see Queen's Own Rifles of Canada Regimental Museum and Archives, "CEF Rates of Pay," <https://qormuseum.org/history/timeline-1900-1924/the-first-world-war/cef-rates-of-pay/>.

72 Marilyn Whyley's list of "Nursing Sisters of World War I from Oxford County" also identifies Kathleen Adams (born in Norwich on 6 July 1887) and Norma Louise Harper (born in Norwich on 31 March 1887) but no further information could be found on these women.

73 Poldon to father, "Sunday Afternoon," n.d. [circa 2 May 1915], NDMA. The "Vic" bunch refers to Victoria College at the University of Toronto.

74 Harold Poldon to Auntie, 1 July 1915, NDMA.

75 John Paulding to Harold [Poldon], 21 September 1915, NDMA.

76 Harold Poldon to father, 9 October 1915, NDMA.

77 MacPhail, *Official History: Medical Services*.

78 Peter Cavendish, "The University Units: No 4 General Hospital," in *University of Toronto Roll of Service 1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1921), xxxi.

79 Harold Poldon to father, 12 and 20 April 1916, NDMA.

80 Harold Poldon to father, 19 December 1916, NDMA.

81 Harold Poldon to G.W. Poldon, 5 July 1916 and 16 October 1916; and Poldon to Auntie, 18 September 1916, NDMA.

82 "Tillsonburg Nurse Writes From Saloniki," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 21 December 1916.

83 Harold Poldon to G.W. Poldon, 5 July 1916, NDMA.

84 Rawling, *Death their Enemy*, 101.

85 Harold Poldon to G.W. Poldon, 5 July 1916, NDMA.

86 Harold Poldon to father, 20 April 1916, NDMA.

87 Harold Poldon to G.W. Poldon, 29 July 1916, NDMA.

88 Harold Poldon to G.W. Poldon, 16 July 1916, NDMA; Soldier file, Boughner, William Schillar, 951, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 919 - 49.

89 Harold Poldon to father, 20 April 1916, NDMA.

90 Harold Poldon to Daddy, 21 June 1916, NDMA.

91 Harold Poldon to G.W. Poldon, 5 July 1916, NDMA.

92 G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1962), 154.

93 War Diaries, 1st Canadian Infantry Battalion, July 1916, LAC, RG9-III-D-3, box 4912, file 350.

94 Fred Croxford to his sister Prissie, "Norwich Boy Receives Medal for Bravery on Battlefield," *Norwich Gazette*, 21 September 1916.

95 Soldier file, Croxford, Fred, 406061, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 2185 - 12.

96 Soldier file, Stanley, William Horace, 406017, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 9234 - 39.

97 Fred Croxford to Father, *Norwich Gazette*, 9 September 1916.

98 Fred Croxford to his sister Prissie, "Norwich Boy Receives Medal for Bravery on Battlefield," *Norwich Gazette*, 21 September 1916.

- 99 "Norwich," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 14 October 1916.
- 100 "Patriotic League Banquets Soldiers," *Norwich Gazette*, 12 October 1916.
- 101 "Camp Borden News," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 19 October 1916; and "Over 300 Absent from 168th Ranks – Situation is Bad," *Norwich Gazette*, 12 October 1916.
- 102 "Oxford's Own Has Left Camp Borden," *Norwich Gazette*, 2 November 1916.

6 “We are beginning to grow weary of the constant strain...”

The Somme’s Impact at Home and Abroad

“We are beginning to grow weary of the constant strain. At the first outbreak of the war we thought, ‘our people will be untouched,’ but as time passes on we scan the casualty list and we ponder upon the great calamity...”¹

*- Dr. Robert Alexander Falconer to the
Oxford Teachers’ Institute, Woodstock, 19 October 1916*

At the end of October 1916, 53-year-old Elizabeth Crabbe and her husband Charles, her senior by five years, had just finished another busy harvest on their 85-acre farm on Quaker Street in North Norwich Township. As they recuperated from their work, the couple remembered happier times, when they had the company and help of four sons and three daughters. The war had changed everything. Arthur had been the first to enlist, joining Canada’s First Contingent in 1914. William, the oldest boy, followed him overseas in the fall of 1915. Ernest, the youngest, joined the 168th in January 1916 and was due to land in England in a few weeks. That summer, however, had brought devastating news to the couple – their son Arthur was reported missing in action near the village of Hooze during the Battle of Mount Sorrel. For months Elizabeth and Charles had waited to hear if Arthur was a prisoner of war, but their hope that their son was alive faded with each passing day without news. By Arthur’s birthday in late September, the military informed the couple that he was presumed dead. Meanwhile, stories about the intense fighting experienced by the Canadians at the Battle of the Somme filled the newspapers. The couple knew that William was somewhere in the middle of that maelstrom of violence. In the face of all of this, the couple’s second oldest son, 23-year-old farm hand Stanley, declared his intention to enlist in Delhi. When this news spread, the *Norwich Gazette* reported that the Crabbe family had “certainly done its share towards upholding the good old flag, and the cause for which it stands.”² Such words of praise likely did little to ease the fears of Charles and Elizabeth. Although Stanley would eventually be rejected for military service as medically unfit, for a few weeks the Crabbes faced the prospect that all of their sons would face mortal danger. Peaceful pre-war days on the farm must have seemed a distant memory.

“A regular slaughter house for both sides”: Enduring the Somme

On our last trip into that region one night [in September 1916] we were relieved and a Scout was sent in to guide us out from the advanced Brigade Post. When the scout told me the route he was going to take out, I objected and finally refused to go with them. From tracing and repairing telephone lines, I

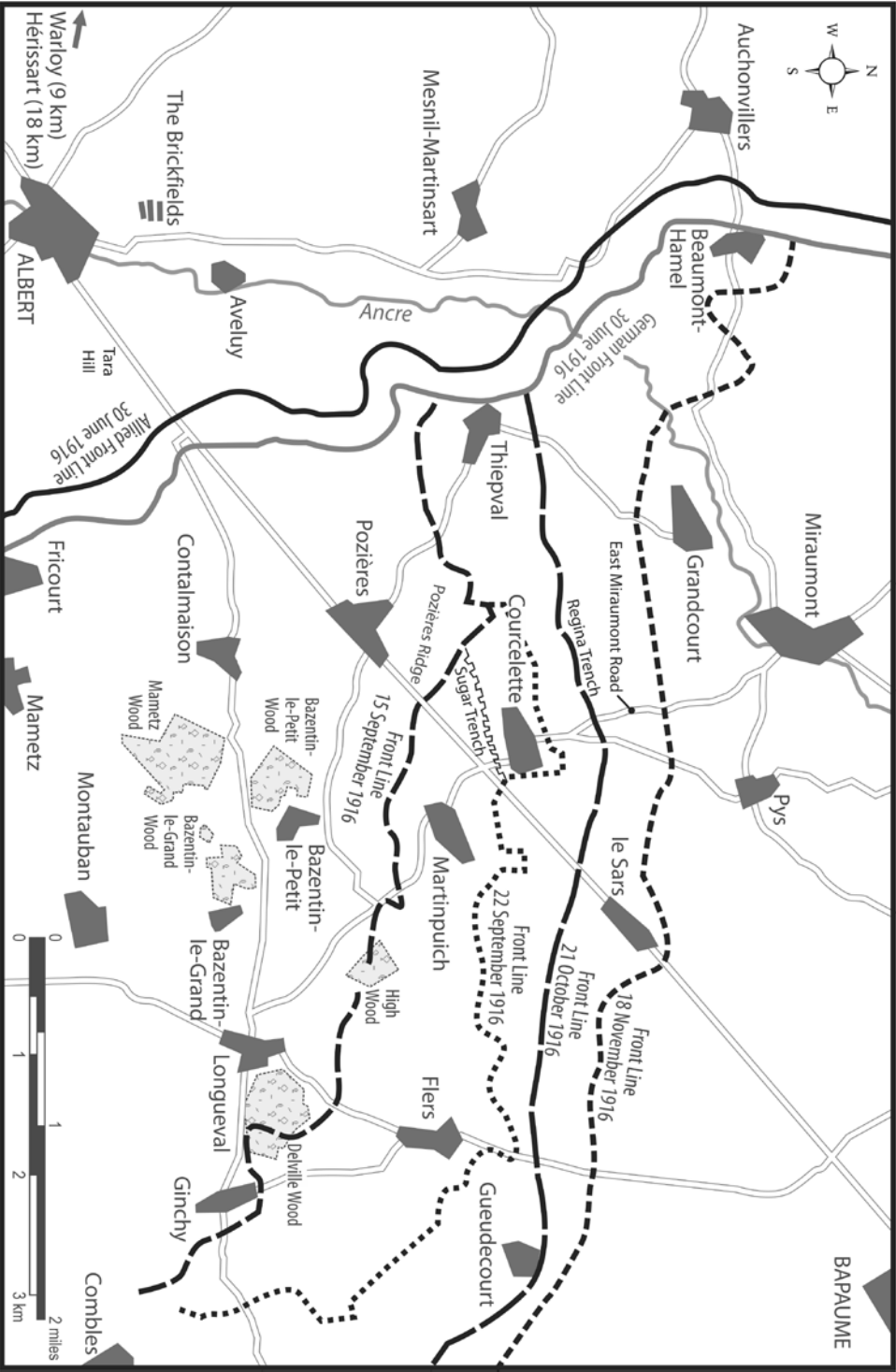
knew the territory better than he did anyway. I got out. They never did. That was a regular slaughter house for both sides.

-Pte. William Crabbe

While the members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force continued to persevere in the muddy fields of Flanders, the British launched their major offensive—the Battle of the Somme—on 1 July 1916. The French generals, whose forces were being decimated at Verdun, had frantically appealed to the British to launch an offensive that would take some of the pressure off the French front. Accordingly, the British amassed men and munitions to launch their “Big Push” by the end of June, with British Army commander Sir Douglas Haig anticipating that the sheer weight of the British assault would shatter the German lines, inflict heavy losses, and allow his troops to stream through and capture vital parts of the enemy’s rear areas. The German defenders, however, were well prepared and had restructured their lines so that they could wait out the artillery barrage in deep dugouts. At 7:30 am on 1 July, the British and French launched their offensive over a forty kilometre front. It was a veritable slaughter. Many British shells were “duds,” ineffective fuses meant that much of the barbed wire remained intact, and conventional, linear tactics failed to suppress enemy fire. Consequently, German machine guns and artillery annihilated the British troops as they advanced through No Man’s Land, leaving 57,500 British soldiers killed, wounded or missing—the worst disaster in terms of combat losses in a single-day in the history of the British army.

Fortunately for the Canadians, none of their infantry units participated in this attack.³ The British failure to achieve a breakthrough did not end the Somme campaign, however, which descended into a bloody attritional struggle. The Canadians, who had missed the first two months of fighting while stationed in the Ypres salient over the summer, moved to the Somme in late August. By early September, they had taken over a section of the British front lines west of the village of Courcellette. “A heavy action had been going on there for several months and the losses were heavy on both sides,” William Barker Crabbe recalled. “A few hundred yards gain was looked on as a victory.”⁴ While the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions prepared for an attack that General Sir Douglas Haig planned for mid-month, the 1st Division held the entire Corps front—three thousand yards (more than 2.7 km) of battered trenches. Its tour of duty proved much more eventful than Haig had anticipated and, almost immediately upon arriving at Pozières Ridge, the Canadian battalions on the front lines found themselves engaged in heavy fighting.⁵ As a result, the Canadian Corps sustained 2600 casualties even before the full-scale offensive.

South Norwich’s Pte. Wilfred B. Oatman was one of the casualties. After enlisting with Lt.-Col. Sutherland’s 71st Battalion and travelling to England with the unit, Oatman had transferred to the 44th. His unit arrived in France on 10 August 1916, and on 5 September he suffered multiple gunshot wounds to his left leg. He was evacuated to hospital, but the injuries were not fatal.⁶ Indeed, Oatman and his friends considered this kind of “blighty” a God-send. Frank Boyle, one of his chums from Tillsonburg, wrote home soon after that, finding himself in the chaos of battle, he would not “have time to write unless he gets a blighty, same as Wilfred



The Somme, 1916

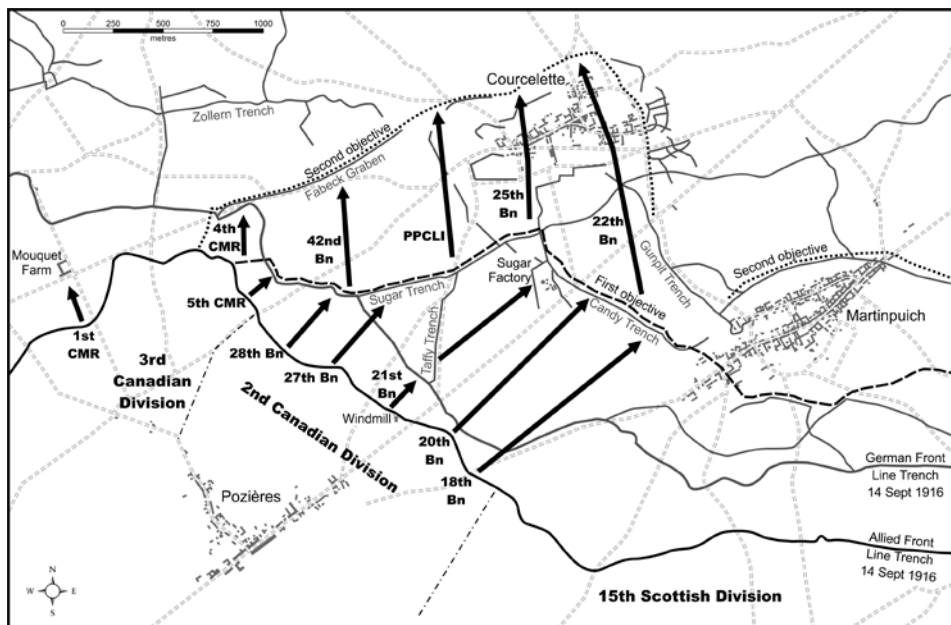


On their way to Blighty

Oatman got. He went to England yesterday with a hole in his leg. He sure was tickled about it—wish it had been me.”⁷ Oatman relished his good fortune (as only a soldier could consider such wounds), and was equally delighted to be treated by a nurse from Ingersoll for a few weeks in hospital before returning to his unit on the front lines.⁸

According to British plans, the Canadian Corps’ operations in the upcoming Somme offensive would benefit from two tactical innovations. One key element was the creeping barrage: using artillery not to destroy the enemy trenches but to rake the enemy lines, forcing the defenders to take cover in dugouts, while the invading infantry walked at a predetermined pace behind the curtain of shells. By “leaning into the barrage” like this, the idea was that the attacking troops would be able to cross No Man’s Land under the protective cover of artillery fire without enemy troops firing at them. Second, the introduction of armoured tanks onto the Somme battlefield to cut barbed wire, silence enemy machine guns, and provide the infantry with support as they crossed No Man’s Land, raised hopes that the Allies may have finally discovered a solution to trench warfare.

The Canadian Corps took on a significant role in the Flers-Courcelette offensive, launched on 15 September and involving two British armies. At dawn that day, the Canadians, on the extreme left of the British assaulting force, attacked on a two kilometre sector west of Courcelette astride the Albert-Baupaume road, supported by two detachments of three tanks. The appearance of these armoured land cruisers on the battlefield for the first time had what we today might call a “shock and awe” effect that encouraged some Germans to surrender. The tanks of 1916, however, were pitifully slow (with a maximum speed of 3.7 miles an hour), mechanically unreliable, and highly vulnerable to artillery fire, and most of the six assigned to the Canadians were put out of action within the first few hours of battle. The Royal Flying Corps attacked the enemy’s trenches with machine-gun fire, but in the end it fell to the artillery and infantry to take the objectives in a carefully prepared set-piece attack. Advancing behind a creeping barrage, the Canadians took their main objective, a German stronghold known as the Sugar Factory, by 8 a.m. Soon after, Canadian units captured the ruined village of Courcelette itself and then cracked the Zollern Graben (a long German trench). Over the next two days, the Canadian units consolidated their gains and beat off German counter-attacks. It was a victory (one of the few that Allied forces secured on the Somme battlefield), but it came with the price of thousands of casualties.⁹



Courcellette-Ponzières, 15 September 1916

Capt. Thomas D'Arcy Sneath, who had already been mentioned twice in despatches for bravery, won the Military Cross "for conspicuous gallantry in action" as a company commander on 15 September. The war diary of the 5th Battalion, Canadian Mounted Rifles, noted his "conspicuous courage and skilful handling of his men [which] were instrumental in quickly overcoming the resistance of the Enemy." They captured their assigned objective, taking several prisoners as well as a machine gun, "and his skilful dispositions enabled the position to be consolidated and held with a minimum loss to his men." His Military Cross citation echoed how Sneath had "set a splendid example to his men."¹⁰

Lt.-Col. Donald Sutherland, who had taken command of the 52nd (Port Arthur) Battalion after accompanying the 71st Battalion to England, received an order from brigade headquarters at noon on 16 September to move up to the chalk pits beyond Fabeck Graben, then take over the Zollern Graben trench and capture the redoubt beyond it. Crossing the field up a slope between the Sunken Road and Centreway Trench around 7:00 pm, the battalion came under intense artillery, machine gun, and rifle fire and suffered heavy casualties. Sutherland, leading his soldiers in the assault on the enemy trenches, was hit by rifle or machine gun fire.¹¹ "His men, he said, went forward as though on parade and, although casualties were very heavy, they never faltered or hesitated," the *Tillsonburg Observer* recounted. Sutherland sustained his wound at 7:00 pm, just after the assault began, when a bullet cut through his back from one side to the other. Unable to move, he laid in No Man's Land until about 8:30, when the onset of darkness gave stretcher-bearers an opportunity to retrieve and evacuate the wounded.¹²

In the days ahead, the enemy brought in fresh troops to hold the maze of trench-

es east of Courcellette. Attempts by the Canadians to breach the German line failed, their focus redirected to repulsing counter-attacks. Thiepval Ridge and Regina Trench remained in German hands, with German “defence in depth” tactics stymieing Allied attackers who still adhered to the doctrine of “fire-effect *preceding* movement” rather than “fire-effect *combined with* movement.”¹³ Amidst the carnage, soldiers on the front lines found relief (and even humour) in near death experiences. Pte. William Crabbe reminisced:

I still laugh to myself when I remember one instant in our first trip in. We were holding a dirt road along which heavy action had taken-place previous to our arrival. Two of us were sitting in what we termed a “Dug-Out” dug into the bank of our side of the road. The Germans had a few days previously been routed [*sic*] out and so left behind some of their hand grenades. Anyway, we two were sitting in this shelter, my companion on a box which [unknowingly] contained German hand grenades. We called them “Potatoe Mashers” on account of their shape. A string was along the handle and the idea was when it was thrown the string was pulled and so the bomb was [detonated]. He was sitting on this box and finding that part of the lid was loose, he reached in and pulled out a grenade—or started to when it exploded under him. He jumped up holding the back of his pants and yelling that he was hit and took off to a dressing station a couple of hundred [yards] away, shortly afterwards coming back with a plaster on his backside and a safety pin in the rent in his trousers. It was amusing. That it put us in good humour for the balance of the night.¹⁴

The remainder of Crabbe’s time on the Somme battlefields was less amusing. As a signaller, his role was running and repairing phone lines that had been cut by shell fire. “Our losses were heavy,” he noted, but he took solace in the fact that the Germans also suffered heavily.¹⁵

In the weeks ahead, attacks by the three Canadian divisions against German entrenchments, particularly against Regina Trench (the primary objective), revealed how Courcellette had degenerated into an attritional battle. Soldiers attacked and counterattacked repeatedly over the same ground under heavy enemy fire, with horrendous losses. After the Canadian Corps attack on 1 October against Kenora Trench and Regina Trench, Pte. Frank Malcolm of South Norwich (who had enlisted with a Western battalion) wrote to his parents about his baptism of fire:

I came out of the trenches this morning. We sure did have an awful sight. No doubt you will see in the papers all about the big push that was made. The first time I was in the trenches we had to get over the top. Believe me, it was hard for the first time in, and I figure myself pretty lucky for getting out without a mark of some kind. I was almost buried once by a big shell that Fritz sent over, and another burst just in front of me and covered my face with dirt. When we had to go from one trench to another which was about two or three hundred yards away, the machine guns played upon us all the way across and we were lucky, as not one of us was hit. A Red Cross sergeant went across when we did, walking straight up. He told us to walk upright and not crawl along as we were doing; but before he was over a sniper got him right through the head, and I guess he won’t worry any more about the war.



Canadian soldiers going over the top

Malcolm emerged from the battle physically unscathed but emotionally scarred. “It is a hard looking sight, after a big charge to see the wounded and dead,” he explained to his parents. “I cannot figure out how anyone gets out at all.” He had no desire to repeat the experience. “I have sure seen enough, and hope that peace will be declared before we have to go back to the trenches again.”¹⁶

Despite the temptation to become disillusioned with the realities of trench warfare, soldiers found solace in sharing a common fate with the rest of “the boys” and in their faith that service for a righteous cause would guarantee them entrance into heaven if they fell in battle. Lance Corporal Aubrey Strode, serving with 2nd Division’s 5th Machine Gun Company on the Somme, wrote a prophetic letter offering comfort to his mother on 22 September. It would be the last words she would ever receive from her son:

Dearest Mother. – Just a few lines to let you know that I am still in the ring. I have left the base and am now with the company a few miles behind the lines and expect to go into the trenches in a few days time. We have what the boys call a good billet. Of course you will understand that we are not in houses. We are in a fine, big barn and all have all kinds of straw to sleep on, and get along alright. I like the boys fine, they are a bunch of good fellows as also are the officers. One of them, the commander of our section, was stationed at West Sandling in the machine gun company with us, and is sure some fine fellow. The boys in the section swear by him.

Now, dear mother, don’t worry about me. There is one who is watching over all, and He will protect if He sees fit, but if I am taken, well, His will be done. And dear mother, if He does take me don’t grieve too much but hold up your head and smile, and be proud that your little boy was not a slacker, but died doing his bit. But we won’t think about these things but about the time when

I will come home.

Now I will close for this time but will write again when I come out. God bless you and uncle Billie and keep you safe until I return for mother. I do love you both so much.

Your loving son,

AUBREY

Tragically, Aubrey died of wounds sustained in action on 2 October 1916. "From its contents it can be plainly see that he died heroically for his country, he had no fear, for he trusted his God to take care of him," the *Norwich Gazette* editor reassured readers when it published the letter early the next month.¹⁷ "Corporal Strode was a young man of fine physique and habits, and was highly thought of by the citizens of Norwich," the notification of his death extolled, offering the community's sympathy to the family for their loss. Perhaps recalling his impassioned pleas and role in early recruitment rallies, the newspaper noted: "his appearance in the uniform of the King was an incentive to many local boys to join the Battalion."¹⁸ A few weeks later, one of Strode's best friends with whom he had enlisted, Sgt. Clark Beattie, was also killed in action in the fierce fighting around Regina Trench.¹⁹

Others survived the ordeal of the Somme but were broken in either body or mind. Twenty-two-year-old Pte. Clarence McKee, who had lived with his uncle W.M. Bell and worked as a farm labourer in Springford before enlisting in December 1915, was hit by shrapnel in his right leg while fighting with the 44th Battalion on 28 October. "I think his limb was broken," one of his comrades, stretcher-bearer Pte. Carroll Abraham of Newark, described in a letter home. "In fact I am sure it was, and he also had his hand smashed. He was hit in his hand first, and was out helping another fellow, when some shrapnel hit him in the leg. He lay in the trenches all day until night before he was taken to the dressing station. He lay in a sap trench in No-Man's-Land until two o'clock the next morning, and then two of us carried him, or partly carried him, as we could get no stretcher back to the front line." Amidst the pain and uncertainty, McKee displayed "lots of good grit and will not be in so much danger for a long time now, and perhaps not again while the war lasts," Abraham noted. "I hope so, anyway. I guess he counts himself lucky to get off as light as he did."²⁰ McKee would survive, but his leg would be amputated below



Bringing in a wounded Canadian from the Battle of Courcellette, September 1916

the knee and his service ended.

Overall, the Canadian Corps did not “get off light” at the Somme by any measure. In late October, when its first three battered divisions “limped off the Somme” having suffered 20,000 casualties, Regina Trench remained in German hands. Capturing the trench would fall to 4th Canadian Division, which arrived in France in August 1916. “When the newly arrived 4th Division took its place in the line it faced an almost unbelievable ordeal of knee-deep mud and violent, tenacious, enemy resistance,” the Canadian War Museum observes. “However, despite the almost impenetrable curtain of fire, on November 11 the Division captured Regina Trench—to find it reduced to a mere depression in the chalk.” A week later, the Canadians advanced to Desire Trench—“a remarkable feat of courage and endurance.”²¹

Percy Leroy (Roy) Marr, a farmer born at Norwich Junction in 1888, had enlisted with the 71st Battalion in September 1915 at the age of 27. In England he was transferred to the 44th Battalion, heading to France in August 1916 to join in the Somme offensive. In November, his unit was thrust into action. “Well dad you can tell the people that I took part in the big drive and did not shirk a bit, but went right ahead which is the only thing to do – I was in the first wave every time,” his parents learned in a letter. “You will, no doubt, read about the great work of the Canadians in this big drive,” so the soldier recounted his experience:

I was over the top three times in four days, and I hope it will be the last for awhile. The first trip over was awful, the bullets were flying all around and men were killed and wounded along side of me but I made the objective O.K. and Pat was with me. We captured some prisoners and Pat and I took them out and I got some souvenirs, a [Hyena – euphemism for German] watch and some more little things. The second trip over was sure awful, it was snowing, we could hardly see. I was a runner and had to stay with the officer all the time. We were ahead and were met by a big bunch of [hyenas], the officer, myself and a machine gunner put them out of business. I got two that I know of, the mud was above our knees and we had a hard time to get along but made our objective and held it, so we are doing some good work. The third trip was easy, all we had to do was sling our rifles and walk over. We went nearly a mile, the [Hyenas] had gone so far back that it was hard to keep up with them.

It is not a very pleasant job this going over the top but ... once [you] get started you never think of anything but go ahead. The machine gun bullets are the worst, but thank goodness, I was lucky enough to get through it all.²²

Marr came away positive. “We captured a lot of prisoners and guns,” he informed his parents. The Germans “will not fight when they see they are beaten – up goes their hands and they run towards you and cry for mercy.” Like so many soldiers, he optimistically stated that “I do not look for it to last much longer.”²³ Marr left out any reference to his gas poisoning during the November battles, which left him with chronic bronchitis for the rest of his life.²⁴

The Canadian capture of Desire Trench would be the last attack of the Battle of the Somme. The British offensive ground to a halt when autumn rains turned the front into an impassable quagmire. For historians, however, the campaign contin-



Leaving the Somme

ues to spark controversy and debate. Critics of the attritional battle suggest that it confirms the adage that the British armies were formations of “lions led by donkeys” – that misguided British generals, with a callous disregard for human life, ordered their soldiers like automatons to simply march to their deaths in senseless attacks, lacking the weapons or tactics to overcome their adversaries. Other historians suggest that the Somme was a costly but necessary battle at this stage in the war, taking pressure off the French who were being bled white at Verdun and thereby preventing the collapse of the entire Allied front. Although the human costs crippled the British army, this campaign of attrition also took its toll on the Germans – who dubbed it “*das Blutbad*” (the bloodbath) and could not deploy their resources elsewhere. Whatever the verdict, the Somme battlefield proved that the Canadians and their allies would have to change their tactics to overcome modern, sophisticated German defensive systems.

David Lloyd George, the new British prime minister who was highly critical of Haig and the war of attrition on the Western Front, later noted that “the Canadians played a part of such distinction that thenceforward they were marked out as storm troops; for the remainder of the war they were brought along to head the assault in one great battle after another. Whenever the Germans found the Canadian Corps coming into the line they prepared for the worst.”²⁵ To uphold and even enhance this reputation required innovation in combined arms, improved tactics, and better training. Simply put, the offensive techniques promoted by the British high command needed to change. Like other observers on the Western Front, the Canadians thought that there must be a better way to fight than simply launching successive lines of infantry in piecemeal fashion after inadequate artillery bombardments, only to have these waves of soldiers cut down by German machine gun fire and shrapnel. When the Canadian Corps was put into reserve near Arras, the staff began to discuss more effective ways of meeting their objectives. The 1st Division commander, Major General Arthur Currie, was sent to visit the French Army to learn about its evolving battle doctrine, which focused on innovative uses of artillery to support

infantry attacks. Recognizing that the realities of modern warfare had exploded pre-war assumptions about infantry offensive power, Currie noted that the French had adopted a semi-independent platoon organization to great effect – in contrast to the faulty British method of employing company-strength attack formations. These lessons would be instrumental as “Byng’s Boys” prepared for the next battle.

For soldiers wounded at the Somme, the first priority would be rest and recuperation. Lt.-Col. Sutherland again returned home to his mother’s house in Norwich to convalesce in late October. After being evacuated from the Somme battlefield, he had a brief sojourn in a military hospital at Letouquet, France, before going to the Royal Free Hospital, London, and then heading back to Canada for medical furlough. Sutherland was convinced that the war would last for at least another year. For his part, he expected to stay in Canada for about eight weeks before rejoining his unit to “do his bit”—in his case, for the third time.²⁶

Soldiers also endured the trauma of losing friends in battle. Twenty-two-year-old Pte. Leslie Force, born in Princeton and raised in Norwich, worked as a mechanic and chauffeur in Toronto when he enlisted in the Canadian Army Service Corps Motor Transport unit on 18 March 1916 (and promptly married Valma Bradley, a Norwich woman). Having served with the 24th Grey’s Horse for three years, he headed over to England a month later, arriving at Shorncliffe on 23 May. Being flat footed, he struggled to drive the big trucks and eventually found a place as a motorcycle despatch rider – a dangerous job on the front lines. Unfortunately he contracted diphtheria in the fall of 1916 and was hospitalized.²⁷ From his bed in Hastings, England, he wrote his poem “The Dispatch Rider,” inspired by the death of “an old pal” with whom he had crossed the Atlantic and who had been killed by a sniper during the battle of the Somme. His mother passed it along to the Woodstock *Daily-Sentinel*:

T’was down between base and the trenches,
An ambulance car to repair,
With no hammers, or drivers or wrenches,
So curses were filling the air.

When up came a brave despatch rider,
Riding through shell holes and mire,
“Can you spare me a little petrol, Bill,
For I’ve to ride through hell of fire.”

“I’m sorry, old man, I can’t do it,”
The ambulance driver said,
For I’ve barely enough for the base myself
And I’ve seven in here half dead.

“Well, I’ve an ‘urgent’ here for headquarters,
And one for the R. F. C.,

So I've got to make that trip to-night
As any slacker can see."

Once again he mounted his two-wheeled horse,
And was off like a shot through the night,
As if pushed away by some unseen force,
Such a brave and wonderful sight.

At forty along that shell holed road
That Indian boat did glide,
The rider and bag its precious load,
But that boy could certainly ride.

But a "zing" and then a sizzle,
The rider knew by the klank,
That some curious German missile
Had hit the petrol tank.

No what did this brave despatcher do?
Did he stop for a moment to think?
No, he stuck his hand on the hole in the tank,
And onward, onward he flew.

Five miles, two miles, one mile,
Then into headquarters' yard,
The brave despatcher road with a smile,
He had played a winning card.

He just got there in time though,
'Cause his motor stopped with a bang,
But he could fight a German foe,
Or rather a darned big gang.

And up before the Colonel,
This boy with his pack did run,
He turned the orderly in the hall,
"I tell you 'twas lots of fun."

"Why didn't you get here sooner,"
Said the Colonel in all his ire,
But I don't think in all his life,
He'd been under a sniper's fire.



Leslie and Valma Force

“I couldn’t sir,” the boy just said,
He stood at attention a moment,
Then fell on the floor stone dead –
The sniper had got him as well.²⁸

Paying tribute to fallen chums in verse was just one way of coping with loss – an inevitable reality for those serving overseas. “Nearly every day brings some news ... of one of the boys whom we knew well receiving wounds or getting killed,” Harold Poldon wrote from Salonika in mid-October. “There will be many empty chairs which we will see on our return.” The country would rebound, “but the old chums will be gone for all time. It seems that this is the way of life and we will have to dig in and conform to whatever circumstances may arise no matter how unfortunate they may happen to be.”²⁹

The 168th Arrives in Britain...and is Disbanded

Forty-five-year-old Pte Angus McLeod, a bricklayer from Norwich, had volunteered with the 168th in January 1916. Owing to his age, he transferred to the 4th Pioneer Battalion in April 1916 and arrived in England ahead of his fellow enlistees that September. On 11 November, he wrote to the Women’s Patriotic League in Norwich. “It is encouraging to me to know that while I am in England, the land whose very atmosphere is impregnated with patriotism, my patriotic friends in far off Canada are thinking of me,” McLeod observed. “While waiting here we do not know how soon we may be called to France to engage in the great struggle, and as I anticipate the future and allow my thoughts to revert to the past I sometimes wonder if I will ever return from the dark scenes of war to the happiness and sunshine of former days in Norwich. But be assured of this my friends, that if some of the Canadian boys do shed their blood on the battlefield the others will return with songs of victory.” He offered the people at home a deal: “We will keep the ‘Old Flag Flyin’ while you keep the ‘Home Fires Burning, and some day, it may be in the distant future, God willing we will meet again.”³⁰

McLeod’s mates from the 168th Battalion arrived in England en masse in November. The soldiers soon found themselves in a training camp at West Sandling, where they encountered harsh conditions that rivalled the early days at Camp Borden. Fred Furlong wrote home explaining that one had “to wade through mud up to your neck to get in your tent” and then had to clean the mud out of the tents every morning with shovels. The men eventually moved into huts, but the weather did not improve. That winter in England proved one of the coldest in recent memory, bringing frigid temperatures as well as heavy snow fall. Furlong told his mother that some of the British blamed the Canadians for bringing the winter with them. Nevertheless, Furlong insisted that the men took it all in good spirit, recognizing that the mud was “only a trivial matter to what we expect to go through.”³¹

During his time in camp, Furlong proved a conscientious correspondent, often penning two or three letters a week to his mother. He relayed details of his training, describing the long marches and his time on the firing range. He proudly recounted

that “I have had pretty good luck so far. In shooting, I have made 65 points out of a possible 80; not so bad is it?” He told her about the worrisome rumours that the 168th was going to be split up to provide reserves for units already at the front. The idea did not sit particularly well with Furlong, who had joined up with so many of his friends. Serving in the war would be “much better with all the boys you know than to be put in with fellows you never saw before,” he explained.³² The “boys” certainly had a good time together. On one occasion, Fred and his friends missed curfew and spent the following week confined to barracks, leaving only to clean the stoves, the latrines, and the huts. Still, Furlong reported that they made a “fine time of it, Ha ha!”³³ At the end of November, he and his friends took six days of leave to visit Edinburgh and London. The men viewed the sites in London, including Westminster Abbey and Madame Tussauds Wax Works, before taking the train to Scotland. “I liked it much better in Edinburgh than I did in London & the scotch people certainly use a Canadian like a prince,” Fred reported to his mother, “so if I ever get another leave it will be spent in Edinburgh.”³⁴ Fred ended his account with a plea for more money – his trip, evidently, had been an expensive one.

The 168th remained together for Christmas 1916, Furlong’s first away from home. Still, surrounded by friends with whom he had enlisted, including his close childhood companion Moses McElhone, “it seemed like home.” He and his friends feasted on roast turkey, sausage, potatoes, plum pudding, apples, and, to top it all off, a pint of beer. Not willing to end the festivities, Furlong and ten of his mates went to the nearby town of Folkestone and rented a room in the Osborne Hotel, where they “had some time” – no doubt drinking a few more pints of beer. While he admitted that “he thought of home once or twice,” being with his friends alleviated some of the holiday-inspired homesickness.³⁵

Another recruit in the 168th, Bruce Poole, had a very different Christmas – he spent the holiday season in hospital in Westminster. The former Norwich student was still recovering from a badly fractured clavicle, which he suffered when hit by a tram while on leave in London. Despite missing Christmas with his friends from the 168th, Poole enjoyed his stay in the hospital – or so he claimed when he wrote to his cousins in Norwich early in the new year. “The hospital I am at is called St. Thomas’s, ... on the southern bank of the river Thames and directly across from the Houses of Parliament,” he described. Nearly a quarter mile in length, “it is about the biggest if not the biggest hospital in London. The ward I am in there are 38 beds and in some of the wards there are 80 beds. They have 8 wards for the soldiers and I don’t know how many for civilians, 3 times that and over.” His letter captures the sense of camaraderie that existed amongst the wounded and injured soldiers, the new experiences and adventures that they enjoyed in England, and what it was like to recover in a wartime hospital.

I am having a jolly good time here. I am the only Canadian in the ward and they all call me “Canada”. There is one Australian and a few S. Africans and the rest are all English. They call the Australian “Dinkem,” and he is some clown believe me. He has one leg in a splint as it is paralyzed and he has no

control over it. There are 38 in the ward and I guess there are about a dozen with a foot or leg off. They are a jolly lot though and one never gets time to get homesick. There is always something doing, playing games, reading or writing and working fancy work. They have a recreation room for the soldiers and they can play billiards or do puzzles or work at the work bench on a dozen and one things to pass the time.

Once or twice a week musicians performed concerts in the recreation room. "All those who are not able to be up and want to go are wheeled down on their beds by those who can push them," Poole described. "There is an hydraulic elevator just outside the door of our ward and the beds are put in first and taken down to the floor." He appreciated the talent of the performers, some of whom were as good as those he had paid up to 33 cents to see in Norwich. "The comedians are the ones that get the encores though," the injured soldier reported. "The last concert an old sailor was on the program [and] ... everybody pretty nigh split themselves at some of the speeches he made."³⁶ For men recovering from wounds or injuries, laughter was an important part of their therapy.



Bruce Poole

Like a tourist, Poole revelled in the sights and sounds of the imperial metropole. On occasion, he received passes to head out of the hospital to attend concerts or to watch a "moving picture" at the cinema. He and his hospital mates who were mobile enough to get around London also took in the highlights of the city. "I have seen the tower bridge, the Abbey, the Horse Guards, the War Office, the Strand, Trafalgar Square and the Houses of Parliament with Big Ben, and am going to see as much as I can," Poole wrote home. "The night before I met with my accident I was in Madame Tussard's Wax Works and chamber of horrors." On a daily basis, however, life was routine:

Since I can get up and around I put my bed on the porch every evening and sleep out in the open. Last night there were 8 of us. It was a clear night and rather cold but I put my great coat over me on top of the covers and that makes it fine. About 15 minutes to five the night nurse brings out a bowl of oatmeal porridge and when that is gone a cup of tea and a piece of bread. The orderly comes on duty about six and he wheels our beds inside. Then we get up and have a wash in time for breakfast at 8 o'clock. We get fed well all right. At 11:30 we get some bread and tea, at 12:30 lunch, at 4:30 tea and 6:30 supper. How is that for meals?³⁷

Shortly after Poole wrote his letter, a medical board deemed him fit to return to duty. By the time he was ready to return to training, however, his old unit no longer existed.

Shortly after spending a pleasant Christmas together, the men of the 168th learned that their battalion would be broken up for reinforcements and they would

be separated. The losses suffered by Canadian units at the Somme had been heavy and reinforcements were needed from the fresh battalions stationed in England. Most of the 168th men were siphoned off to the 4th, 6th, and 12th Reserve Battalions to await deployment to the front.³⁸ Looking on the bright side, Furlong reported that “breaking up of our old 168th Battalion is not as bad as it might have been.... They have used us fine so far & we get good meals, which is the most important part of it all.” While his officers were stricter and the men had to “toe the mark,” Furlong thought “that is just the thing we need & have need[ed] for some time.”³⁹ When the 168th broke up and he lost that tangible connection to home, Furlong sought out news about local soldiers serving in other units and delighted in chance encounters with them while on leave.⁴⁰

Soon after the break-up of the 168th, Furlong’s new officers assigned him to a machine gun course, which he thought he would enjoy. Knowing that the machine gun had gained a deservedly fearsome reputation, Furlong was careful to tell his mother that “they will probably tell you around there that the machine Gun section is a suicide section, but don’t you believe them. It is one of the best branches of the army so don’t you worry. It will likely take us about two months to finish the course so it will be much better weather by the time we get to France, that is one good thing anyway.” Furlong qualified as a Lewis gunner and was posted to the 18th Machine Gun Company. While he “miss[ed] the rest of the guys” from the 168th, he told his mom about the “mixture” of Canadians that made up his company. “There are some from British Columbia, Manitoba, Quebec, Nova Scotia and Ontario. So you see that this company sure represents Canada.”⁴¹ Accordingly, his service left him with a new understanding of his country and its people.

While Furlong made new friends from across Canada, the other men from the 168th deployed to units serving in France as individuals and in small groups. As the months passed in England, Furlong’s number never came up, which disappointed him for he “would like to have gone with the bunch” from the former battalion’s “C” Company.⁴² In March 1917, after more than thirty of his old company comrades deployed to France, Furlong answered his mother’s questions about when he would be going to the front:

Say Mother I don’t know anything more about than I did when I was in Canada. We never hear anything about going anymore. But I think some of us will be going before long now, if we go at all. We are certainly making the Germans go now, I think that a few months will see things very near the finish. And it can’t come any too soon to suit us fellows as we are all patiently waiting to get back home or to France or someplace. Say Mother this soldier life is a restless one, you are never satisfied with anything.⁴³

While Furlong trained to use his machine gun, his mates Vernon Deller, Roy Newton, and John Stewart were amongst the first of the local 168th boys from the townships to reach France.⁴⁴ While they readied for battle, Furlong’s boredom with training in England grew and he anxiously awaited his turn to go to the front.

Like all soldiers, Furlong spent a lot of time thinking about and missing home. “Well I suppose everything is the same in the old town, I can hardly realize that I

am so many miles away from it, but I know it's true," he lamented to his mother. "I feel sometimes as though it was twice as far but when I began to feel that way I think of something else."⁴⁵ Sitting in his cabin at night, he reflected on what his family members might be doing in Otterville. "It is about 8 p.m. but I suppose you have just nicely got through with your dinner dishes as there is about 5 hours difference in the time."⁴⁶ He kept up with the developments in his siblings' lives, their new jobs, social activities, and who his sister might be dating.⁴⁷ Through the cold English winter, he thought about sleighing and skating back home, exclaiming that "it would seem good to me to have a skate on the old pond once more." When lonely, "at night mostly," he longed for news from home, and asked his mother to send him local newspapers and community news, especially the names of those people who had enlisted since he left.⁴⁸

While Fred Furlong's mother provided him with a steady stream of news, she left out one very important detail out: his brother Jack had enlisted. For whatever reason, Mrs. Furlong proved slow to confirm Jack's enlistment. Fred first heard the news from another soldier he knew from Otterville, but hoped "this is not true as he is not strong enough to stand it."⁴⁹ He wrote to his mom imploring Jack to change his mind, "for he will be good and angry at himself before long if he has not." On account of his age (Jack had just turned 16) and his weak constitution (he had suffered from a right inguinal hernia since birth), Fred was sure that Jack would just "do guard duty all the time" which he "would soon get sick of." If his brother felt compelled to sign up, Fred hoped it would be "in the band." He would look up Jack in England "to tell him where he is getting off at," and was sure that if he had his brother alone "for a few minutes I'll bet you anything I could change his mind about soldiering."⁵⁰ Much to Fred's consternation, Jack lied about his age and failed to disclose his hernia.

The Curious Case of Eddie Oatman



While Fred worried about Jack, he also kept track of two other close friends from Springford: Ross and Eddie Oatman. In December, Fred wrote home that "it was also a surprise to hear of Ross & Ed enlisting. I certainly never expected them to do it."⁵¹ The Oatman boys, who had a fierce reputation in South Norwich, seemed ill-suited for the discipline of military life.⁵² Another brother, Arthur Munroe, who had enlisted in Saskatchewan in March 1916, exhibited similar tendencies when he went AWOL for a few days and ended up in the stockade.⁵³ Fred wondered why Ross would enlist at this point instead of joining the 168th a few months before. Eddie's decision to join up was also puzzling – after all, he was the captain of the Pacific Coast Hockey Association's Portland Rosebuds and had participated in a dramatic Stanley Cup Final

only a few months before. The plucky team from the west coast had pushed a strong Montreal Canadiens squad to the brink. Eddie had played well when the best-of-five cup final went the distance, his team ultimately losing by just one goal in the final game.

In the early November 1916, Eddie anxiously awaited the start of another hockey season and passed the time at the family home in South Norwich. While he lamented his Stanley Cup defeat during the long off-season, his expectations were high for another successful season with the Rosebuds. Out of the blue, two professional hockey players that Eddie knew quite well asked if they could meet with him in his hometown: Howard McNamara, the captain of the Canadiens, and Goldie Prodgers, who had scored the winning goal in the championship game. Oatman and Prodgers had played together on the Stanley Cup-winning Quebec Bulldogs team in 1912, but Eddie's former teammates arrived sporting a new khaki uniform. The 228th Battalion (the Northern Fusiliers) had recruited several professional hockey players the previous summer, which gave its commanding officer an idea: why not enter a battalion team into the National Hockey Association? A team of soldiers might inspire young men to enlist – something the military desperately needed as recruitment flagged across the country.⁵⁴ For the team to have any chance against the professionals of the NHA they would have to bring other star players onto the team. This scheme brought McNamara and Prodgers to Eddie Oatman's door.

Eddie listened when the two hockey-players-turned-soldiers asked him to serve their country by playing the game he loved.⁵⁵ To do so, he would have to officially join the army and give up his contract with the Rosebuds. It was a tough decision, but on 1 November 1916 Eddie enlisted with the 228th Battalion in Toronto. A few days later, his brother Ross Oatman enlisted in the battalion as well, but without any plans to take to the ice.⁵⁶ By the middle of November, Eddie had earned a spot on the starting lineup of the 228th Battalion team. Wearing khaki jerseys and drawing large crowds wherever they played, the team started off the season with a four-game winning streak. By January 1917, the 228th sat atop the league standings and Eddie enjoyed accolades as the team's top scorer.

Despite their success and the fans they won over, criticism started to dog the soldier-hockey players. Why were these men playing hockey when other soldiers were overseas fighting and dying for their country? Rumours circulated that these particular soldiers even pocketed extra money for their efforts. Furthermore, what proof was there that the hockey team boosted recruitment? To quiet the controversy, the military announced in mid-February that the 228th Battalion would be deployed overseas immediately.⁵⁷

As the unit prepared to cross the Atlantic, Eddie turned up in Montreal with a shocking tale to tell. Initially, he told the press that he had never actually enlisted in the Canadian military – a story carried by Woodstock's *Daily Sentinel-Review*. Instead, Eddie said that he had agreed to play for the 228th after signing a \$1200 contract, and he insisted that the army owed him \$700.⁵⁸ The next day, the press ran another story in which Eddie said he had indeed enlisted, but only to play hockey and with the explicit condition that he would not have to deploy overseas.⁵⁹



The 228th Battalion "Northern Fusiliers" National Hockey Association team. Oatman is second row, centre right, beside the officer in uniform.

These revelations brought a sharp reaction – Eddie had, after all, been wearing the King's uniform and enjoyed much praise as a volunteer.

After spending a couple of days in Montreal, Eddie took the train back to Toronto and reconsidered his situation. He arrived in Ontario's capital with a far different story to tell. Now he lamented that the

228th had "used him badly." When first approached to join the battalion's team, McNamara and Prodgers had explained that it "was being run entirely distinct from the battalion, but they wanted every man to enlist; that salaries would be paid as usual." Out of patriotism, Eddie explained, he had agreed to the \$1200 salary, even though he would have made more playing for Portland. He had enlisted in the military and was careful to point out that he was prepared to go overseas with the 228th, even though the unit's officers had told him his job was to play hockey. When the army unexpectedly decided to send the battalion overseas, Eddie prepared to go with his comrades (including his brother, who would end up serving with the Canadian Railroad Detachment in France) only to find that he had been discharged owing to "special circumstances." Dumbfounded, he arranged a meeting with the unit's officers and tried to secure the remainder of his salary – whether he tried to fight his discharge was conspicuously absent from his statement. While the other officers refused to pay up, Howard McNamara, who had recruited him, offered to pay him \$20 cash and then wrote out a cheque for \$175. When Eddie tried to cash the cheque, however, the bank refused, saying that McNamara had cancelled it. When Eddie turned to the NHA, he found out that his contractual salary filed with the league was listed as \$1. Confused and angry, Oatman told the press that the other players on the team had been paid and he threatened a lawsuit to secure the money owed him.⁶⁰

Eddie Oatman's personnel file says nothing about his time with the 228th hockey team and suggests that he was discharged from the military because he was "not likely to become an efficient soldier."⁶¹ While serving, Eddie had received only the most rudimentary training during his three months in the 228th. Most of the soldiers in the unit, including the hockey players, had spent the entire summer of 1916 training at Camp Borden. Oatman had not. Given his lack of training and preparedness, the battalion's officers must have considered him a liability. Whatever the reason for Oatman's discharge, the situation raised serious questions and portrayed him in an unpatriotic light – even after he told the press his convoluted story in Toronto. Nevertheless, the odd affair did little to damage his hockey career; he

went back to the Portland Rosebuds and enjoyed a very strong 1917-1918 season.

In a country embroiled in the third year of a terrible and costly war which demanded ever greater sacrifices from its citizens, it is surprising that Eddie Oatman received only modest criticism. In South Norwich Township, Oatman retained his status as a local sports hero and celebrity, and received no criticism in the *Daily Sentinel-Review* or the *Norwich Gazette*. With greater numbers of local men dying at the front, others coming back grievously wounded, more deploying overseas, and the war effort demanding a constant stream of money and voluntary contributions from the people on the home front, his story was conspicuously devoid of self-sacrifice and a sense of national duty. The entertaining battles on the hockey rink bore no resemblance to the dangers of the front lines, where Eddie's childhood friends from the townships and other members of his family faced true sacrifice whenever they donned their uniforms.

Connecting to the Soldiers Overseas

The deployment of first the 71st and then the 168th had brought hundreds of local men into harm's way and, just as Fred Furlong longed for news of life back home, the people of East Oxford, North Norwich and South Norwich townships kept close tabs on their husbands, sons, and brothers who went overseas. The local newspapers did their best to track the movements and activities of the soldiers. In February, for instance, the *Gazette* reported that the boys were "keeping fit in England" and provided its readers with a detailed programme of a concert held by the former members of "C" Company, 168th Battalion – many of whom had been housed in Norwich the previous spring. Local boys like Harry Ostrander from Springford, Roy Newton and John William Burns from Norwich, and George Trousdale and Earl Miners from North Norwich recited poems and sang songs such as "Shall we get more bacon when we get across the Rhine," "I wonder who's kissing her now," and "We were Sam Hughes' Army."⁶² A few weeks later, an assortment of stories under the headline "The Canadian Boys are Happy in France" tried to explain who had deployed to the front, who was still in camp, and who was in hospital.⁶³



George Trousdale

Newspapers continued to published letters sent home by soldiers at the front as more local boys reached the trenches. In February 1917, for instance, the *Gazette* published correspondence from Pte. George Dennis – a young carpenter who grew up in Burgessville – to his sister. "You ought to be close to this and hear the guns. They are ever lastingly going to it," the soldier described. "We have guns that throw a shell of 300 pounds. They are the ones that put the Fritz's out of misery. I seen one of these shells drop short one day and you ought to have seen what went up into the air – trench mats, a rifle and one of those things that use a rifle."⁶⁴ With so many more local boys serving, these letters offered the people back home frequent glimpses of what their loved ones were experiencing in France.



Lyric Theatre, Norwich, 1916

For 25 cents, the people of the township could watch moving pictures about the war at the Lyric Theatre in Norwich. In January 1917, most of the community came out to watch “The Battle of the Somme: The Greatest Moving Picture in the World,” which depicted the first weeks of the battle in the summer of 1916 and provided audiences with scenes of artillery firing, mines exploding, men charging over the top, Germans surrendering, and – in scenes that must have been hard for many to see – images of dead and dying British soldiers.⁶⁵ The *Gazette* advised that “the moving pictures of the ‘Battle of the Somme’ should be seen by every person within 10 miles of Norwich.”⁶⁶ A few months later, the people could watch “The Canadian Army in Action and the

Advance of the Tanks: The Official Moving Picture of the Battle of Courcellette” which was advertised as “five reels – action all the way – battle action.” Real footage of Canadians serving on the battlefield offered an opportunity to visualize what was happening overseas – and promotional materials highlighted that “women have recognized their sons and husbands in this great picture.”⁶⁷

Another source of information on the war came from the trickle of veterans who started to return to Oxford County in the summer and fall of 1916. By the end of the year, total membership of the Oxford Returned Soldiers’ Association (ORSA, which would eventually include members from all over the county) numbered 45 and the group opened their own club rooms in Woodstock.⁶⁸ “All the returned boys in Canada are wanting a society to look after their interests as much as possible and this is the reason everyday the forming of returned soldiers clubs, with the object of looking after the welfare of its members,” the ORSA explained to the *Daily Sentinel-Review*. “We opened one of these clubs in Woodstock and we are having the support of nearly all returned boys in the county of Oxford.”⁶⁹ The ORSA looked after the needs of returning soldiers, visited them to boost their morale, cared for the wounded, helped the families of serving soldiers, and tried to ensure that veterans had proper “consideration at the hands of employers” – a growing concern as the number of returned soldiers increased.⁷⁰

Aiding the Returned Soldiers’ Association was the Oxford branch of the Soldiers’ Aid Commission, which attempted to secure employment for disabled veterans so that they would have opportunities “to supplement their pensions and at the same time become self-supporting.” For those returned soldiers whose disability left them “unfit them for their former employment,” the Commission would help to educate and train them “for such class of work as they be able to perform.”⁷¹ The Soldiers’ Aid Commission often depended on local organizations and institutions to help find and secure employment for returned soldiers. In December 1916, for instance, the Township Council of South Norwich formally discussed how it could guarantee employment for returned soldiers. Although they could not come up

with a formal plan, they acknowledged the need to secure work for veterans as the war went on and more “medically unfit” men came home.⁷²

Some of the returned soldiers proved willing to share their stories of the war – at least sanitized versions – with the public. In October, for instance, a small group of “returned men” from Woodstock and Brantford gave a public talk about the war at St. John’s Parish in Otterville.⁷³ No veteran talked about the war more often, or with more zeal, than Lt.-Col. Donald M. Sutherland. In February 1917, he was the main feature at a Patriotic Evening in the Methodist Church in Norwich, where he was publicized as “a Norwich boy, and known and loved by all our citizens.” Sutherland spoke about his experiences in France, about the good work of the Canadians, and the technological developments that marked the war, especially the airplane.⁷⁴ His speeches presented a heroic and rosy picture of the war and emphasized “the splendid work” the Canadians were doing at the front. “Their spirit is simply grand,” Sutherland told the *Tillsonburg Observer*, “and they have unshakeable faith that they are winning, which is indeed a fact.”⁷⁵ In a speech to the ORSA, Sutherland trumpeted the fighting skill of the men from Oxford who “had brought honour to their country at the front.”⁷⁶ The officer once again used his public speeches and newspaper interviews to encourage men to enlist, arguing that the “German belief was that might was right, [while] on the other hand the British Empire believed in justice before all else.” Germany would stop at nothing to destroy the empire, which would threaten Canada, and Sutherland asked that more men to enlist to stop this calamity.⁷⁷ No one could question Sutherland’s bravery or commitment to the war effort, given his wounds and experiences. His message about the need to keep on fighting and sacrificing resonated as the boys of the 168th moved closer to the battlefield and the number of local men killed in battle increased dramatically.

With the Canadians fighting and dying at the Somme in the fall of 1916, almost every week brought news of another local man killed in action. In October, Otterville learned that Pte. Fred Chapple, who had emigrated from England in 1907 and settled in the town, was killed by an enemy high explosive shell at the age of 25 while “digging in” as a member of a Lewis gun crew at Sugar Trench on 16 September. South Norwich community members remembered him well because he worked for Scidmore’s market garden and often traveled to sell produce.⁷⁸ South Norwich also took the news of Pte. Wilfred Oatman’s death in November 1916 particularly hard. Having recovered from the leg injuries that he sustained in early September, he returned to his unit on 23 October, two days before his nineteenth birthday. He was hit by shrapnel in the head, legs, and arm while serving on a work detail outside the trenches on 12 November and died of his wounds.⁷⁹ Well known and popular throughout the township, his peers described him as a “sunny” and “genial” person, and a “favourite with his fellow students.” His mother received a tremendous outpouring of sympathy from his many friends in town and country.⁸⁰

When Canadian participation in the Battle of the Somme ended, the torrent of casualties slowed but did not stop. In the winter of 1917, Norwich learned that Pte. Arthur Staddon, an Englishman who had worked at Borden’s Condenser, was killed in action, as well as Burgessville’s Herbert Barnes, a former broom-maker, who died



Arthur Staddon

along with his entire machine gun crew when they were hit by an enemy shell.⁸¹

By March 1917, the *Daily Sentinel-Review* commemorated several of the local men from the 71st Battalion who had perished overseas. The men had played “real soldiers’ parts on the Somme front and elsewhere, and many, unfortunately have given their lives. They will never return to Oxford County, but their names will never die, and their memories will always remain green in the city and district to which they brought honour by their unselfish loyalty.”⁸² The communities came together and

people still attended memorial services en masse to grieve the loss of these men and to keep their memories alive. Norwich’s Methodist Church could not hold all of the people who came to pay their respects for Clark Beattie in November 1916,⁸³ nor could Burgessville’s Baptist Church during the service for Herbert Barnes.⁸⁴ People wrote letters of support to families who had lost a member, while others prepared meals and visited. While the families of the dead suffered the most, the entire community felt the losses and grieved together knowing how easily it could have been their own son, husband, or brother. Every new death highlighted a sad reality. As the men of the 168th moved to the front, there would be more.

The Pressure Mounts: Recruitment and Farming

In early November 1916, the readers of the *Norwich Gazette* received a strong message. On the paper’s front page, sandwiched between news of more local men killed and wounded at the Somme, they read: “Say! Do you guys at home in your fancy cut suits and dicky shirts and ties, realize what the men are doing for you? ... Do not let your conscience trouble you any longer, but join up and be a man, for a time is coming when those of us who left will return and then where will you fit?”⁸⁵ Young men were wrong if they thought that the pressure to enlist might lessen after the local recruiters of the 168th left and the battalion departed for Camp Borden and then England. For many in the townships and Oxford County more generally, the heavy casualties suffered by the Canadians in 1916 inspired not only grief but also concern about where the military would find more recruits to replace the dead and injured.

From the efforts of visiting recruiting officers, to stories in the newspaper, to the speeches of Lt.-Col. Sutherland, to the pleas of the returned soldiers, the young men of the township faced a constant barrage of pressure to enlist. Some young men, like Jack Furlong, were underage when they signed up. During the war, some 20,000 underage Canadian boys enlisted for overseas service (the minimum age for service was 18, although it was later raised to 19). Others tried but failed. Chester Losee, who was born in Burgessville in October 1898, tried to enlist in March 1916 but was immediately rejected. Often, the young recruits were accepted initially, only to be found out later and discharged. Norwich’s John Beckham travelled to enlist in Brantford with the 215th Battalion, claiming to have just turned 18, but his

true age was discovered at Niagara and he was deemed medically unfit due to his youth and sent back home. Ralph Barnett of Curries Crossing enlisted in October 1916 saying he was an 18-year-old clerk instead of a 16-year-old student. He made it to England before the military discovered his true age.⁸⁶ As recruiting officers grew more desperate for recruits in late 1916, however, they became evermore willing to accept obviously underage teens they encountered, which explains how the slight, sickly, 16-year-old Jack Furlong made it overseas.

That recruiters felt the need to accept more underage volunteers highlighted an undeniable truth: after June 1916, the number of enlistments declined dramatically across Canada – especially in rural areas. The five non-urban battalions recruited in Ontario after this point raised only 1124 men for overseas service.⁸⁷ As the second anniversary of the war's start approached, an *ad hoc* committee comprised of representatives from across the county met in the Armouries of Woodstock to discuss the problem. The county's chief recruiting officer, Lt.-Col. Williams, asserted that "the Canadian boy had not responded to the call as he should have done" was unsustainable – a point Oxford South MP Donald S. Sutherland had made a few months before when he highlighted the struggles of the 168th to secure enough recruits and suggested conscription as a solution. The committee debated compulsory military service. Britain had passed the *Military Service Act* in early 1916, imposing conscription on all men aged 18 to 41, with exemptions for the medically unfit, clergy, teachers, and some industrial workers. In May 1916, the British government extended conscription to married men. While the committee in Woodstock could not arrive at a consensus, they agreed to attend a larger meeting in London, Ontario to discuss the topic, with representatives from every township in the county.⁸⁸ When the actual meeting was convened in August, however, no one from the village of Norwich or from East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich townships attended – perhaps allowing their absence to speak for itself.



Donald S. Sutherland, M.P.

In the aftermath of the heavy Canadian casualties at the Somme and reports of a reinforcement "crisis," support for conscription grew in large parts of English Canada. "The argument in its simplest form was that with four divisions in the field the monthly 'wastage rate' was roughly 6,000 men," historian Terry Copp explains. "If less than 6,000 men volunteered each month, and a proportion of them were unfit for front line service, the Canadian Corps would eventually wither away. When the Canadians moved to the Somme in September 1916 monthly losses doubled and then doubled again creating a reinforcement crisis that left the infantry battalions severely understrength." This was the "public perception" at least. In reality, "the wastage rate included large numbers of men evacuated as sick or wounded who would return to their units," Copp points out. "The Somme reinforcement crisis had more to do with Sam Hughes' decision to hold back the best trained troops to

create a fifth and if possible a sixth division.” The forced resignation of Minister of Militia Sam Hughes and the reorganization of the CEF that followed helped alleviate some of the issues “in time to rebuild the Canadian divisions for their part in the 1917 spring offensive.”⁸⁹

Nevertheless, common belief that Canada faced a “reinforcement crisis” remained strong throughout the winter of 1917, and many Oxford County residents accepted the need for conscription, especially in Woodstock and other urban areas. Residents of the rural townships reading reports of county council business in the *Sentinel-Review* were likely surprised to see an intense debate about conscription occur between councilmen on 1 February 1917 – a far cry from the routine local matters with which the council usually dealt. At this meeting, Reeve D.R. Ross of Embro and Deputy Reeve John Murray of West Zorra put forward a resolution that council should “urge the Dominion Government to do their utmost to secure the necessary number of men either by bounty or draft.” Ross argued that Canada had fallen far short of the 500,000 soldiers promised by Borden the previous year and he informed his counterpart that men at the front had been sending him letters that “begged for more men to be sent.” The recruitment situation was only getting worse, he observed, and “if the young men of the country do not volunteer they should be compelled to do so.” To his surprise, Ross faced opposition from several councilmen who suggested that county council should avoid making demands to Ottawa and allow the federal government to handle the situation. With their conscription resolution under attack, Ross and Murray insisted that securing recruits was the biggest problem facing Canada at that time. Murray emphasized that “the resolution is in favor of winning the war, and this can only be done by putting into operation some method of securing recruits.”⁹⁰ In his view, those who resisted conscription were standing in the way of victory. In the end, Ross withdrew the resolution, but the contentious discussion highlighted the differences of opinion on conscription that existed in Oxford County and foreshadowed the bitter debate to come.

Oxford County Council’s discussion of conscription came as the first National Service Board (NSB) registration cards started to arrive in the area. The Borden government had created the NSB in August 1916 to ensure that “all available labour [was] utilized to the greatest advantage,” both for expanding agriculture and industry in Canada, as well as to supply men for the military. To fulfill its mandate and determine the number of prospective military recruits in the country, the NSB decided to take an inventory of Canadian manpower and mailed out cards to every man between the ages of 18 and 65 to fill out. While the government chose not to make the return of the cards compulsory, publicity was used to “create an atmosphere sufficient to induce people to voluntarily sign the cards.”⁹¹ The *Gazette* reported that men had until March 31 to fill out their cards and “if not done by this date, the department of National Service may make it unpleasant for you.”⁹² Despite these warnings, twenty percent of males in Canada between 18 and 65 never returned their cards, while over 200,000 returned them blank or partially completed.⁹³ The data collected from the National Service cards showed 528 men in

Woodstock and 212 men in the rest of Oxford County eligible for military service, although many of the latter were also listed as engaged in the essential industry of farming.⁹⁴

Total National Service Registry Cards Replies Received	1,549,360	100%
17-30 single, no dependents	58,897	3.8%
17-30 single, no dependents- engaged in agriculture, ship building, munitions or mining	40, 185	2.6%
31-45 single, no dependents	13,624	0.9%
31-45 single, no dependents- engaged in agriculture, ship building, munitions or mining	11,525	0.7%
17-45 married with dependents	92,469	6.0%
17-45 married and single with dependents, engaged in agriculture, ship building, munitions or mining	97,095	6.3%
Total military prospects (of which 40% are engaged in agriculture, ship building, munitions or mining)	364,470	23.5%

Numbers taken from article "364,470 Canadians are 'Eligibles,'" Daily Sentinel-Review, 15 May 1917

The cards inspired deep concern in labour unions and amongst farmers across Canada, who worried about how the government intended to use the information. Edward Walter Nesbitt, the Holbrook native and Liberal Member of Parliament for Oxford North, reflected the angst of many farmers when he stood up in the House of Commons and asked what purpose the cards would serve. Were they to encourage enlistment? Were they "designed for peace purposes – that of getting men to work on the farms ... or to engage in various callings at home"?⁹⁵ By providing concrete evidence of the labour shortages in the agricultural sector, would the cards put an end to the aggressive recruitment measures aimed at farmers and their sons? The main question on farmers' minds, however, was simple: did these cards represent the first step towards the imposition of conscription for military service?

The spectre of conscription began to haunt Canadian farmers in the winter of 1916-1917. "The farmers believed that conscription would aggravate the problem caused by the pressure recruiting officers were putting on rural areas by depriving the countryside of the strong men needed for farm labour," historian Mourad Djebabla explains.⁹⁶ The very idea of conscription seemed to denigrate the valuable service that the farmers provided to the war effort through their work at home. Interestingly, MP Donald S. Sutherland, a proponent of conscription, encapsulated the rural dilemma in one of his speeches:

[The government] must not lose sight of the fact that the people who have been endeavouring to keep the flag flying on the farms of Canada are entitled to some consideration at this time and that the future welfare of the country is bound up in these men who have been working long hours, and have been struggling under a mighty and heavy handicap in order to keep themselves going.... Countries must realize that they have to till the soil in order to get

food products. You cannot live on manufactured articles but you must live as a result of the fruits of the soil.”⁹⁷

Conscription would undermine the essential work done by farmers and threaten their ability to “keep the flag flying on the farms of Canada.” The message from Canadian farmers was consistent and clear: their work should be as respected as that done by factory workers or even the soldiers at the front. As such, they should not be forced to serve in the army against their will.

The pressure on farmers to produce steadily grew in 1916 and 1917, and orders for milk kept flowing in, but local farmers had difficulty delivering. “The dry weather is lessening the milk flow with a rapidity for the season of the year never before experienced in this locality,” the *Norwich Gazette* reported during the summer of 1916, in the midst of the worst dry spell anyone could remember. All kinds of cattle were suffering due to the lack of pasture and people worried that the harvest would be poor.⁹⁸ The high temperatures and arid conditions were so unusual and severe that people around Norwich started to speculate that the incessant firing of the big guns in the war had caused a change in global climate.⁹⁹ Fortunately, conditions improved towards the end of the summer, milk production increased, and the harvest of 1916 ultimately proved a good one. Oxford’s reputation remained intact, and the *Daily Sentinel-Review* actually praised county dairy farmers’ progress in an impressive front-page spread. The county was a national leader in cleared land and dairy production because of its “good stock, good soil and good men.” The Oxford dairyman was a “progressive thinker” constantly looking for better feed and better stock to boost production.¹⁰⁰ During the war, the dairymen had risen to the occasion and dramatically increased their worth.

At the 50th Annual Dairymen’s Association of Western Ontario meeting in Woodstock in January 1917 – attended by farmers from all over the county – the dairy farmers heard fewer accolades and more of the familiar refrain: produce even more. President James Bristow opened the meeting by declaring that “war conditions have stimulated the export trade in dairy products beyond expectations. The scarcity of dairy products throughout the world and the heavy demand has advanced prices to a point never before realized.” Bristow acknowledged that the ever-rising cost of feed, which had doubled in price since the start of the war, and the scarcity of labour were growing problems. Regardless, the farmers had to find a way to increase their production. That night, the leader of Ontario’s Liberal party and Member of Provincial Parliament for Oxford North, Newton Wesley Rowell, shouted to the crowd at city hall: “Produce! Produce! Produce!” Production meant life for Canada and the Empire. “Nothing has done so much as the present war to emphasize the importance of agriculture,” he insisted. “No country can prosper unless its stock breeders and agriculturalists are producing an adequate supply of foodstuffs.” Rowell concluded that the “man who fails to cultivate land which can be cultivated is disloyal.”¹⁰¹

Borden’s Condenser in Norwich answered the call to increase production. In the first months of 1917, the company increased production and drew in 112,000 pounds of milk a month,¹⁰² built a receiving platform in Otterville,¹⁰³ bought a new truck

to haul five tons of milk at a time,¹⁰⁴ and built a new concrete holding reservoir. The improvements were necessary, historian Hayley Goodchild observed, because the Borden Company “could barely keep up with demand by the middle of the war; its plants worked ‘at capacity’ to produce an



Borden's Condenser with new expansion, 1917

average of 25,000 to 50,000 cases of condensed milk per month by 1916.”¹⁰⁵ The company's expansion greatly impressed a visitor to Norwich in the summer of 1917, who wrote a letter to the *Gazette* emphasizing that “Norwich is the heart of Oxford's great agricultural and dairy section. The erection of a large condensing plant last year by the Borden Company has secured for the farmers a very profitable market for their milk supply and as a result the dairy industry has been greatly stimulated.”¹⁰⁶

Demands for agricultural output grew even louder in the spring of 1917 when Germany returned to unrestricted submarine warfare, targeting all vessels supplying the allied war effort (even if they came from a neutral country). The Germans believed that cutting off the flow of foodstuffs and other vital supplies would finally strangle Britain into submission. Hundreds of ships were sunk in the first half of the year and the supply situation became so bad that the British government feared it might lose the war. While the convoy system and the construction of new naval vessels eventually lessened the damage wrought by the German U-boats, they remained a significant threat. The heavy allied shipping losses prompted another wave of calls for greater industrial and agricultural production in Canada. In this way, the German campaign had a direct impact on the farmers of East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich townships.¹⁰⁷

Correspondingly, the labour shortage in the townships (and in Canada more generally) became more acute. By the harvest of 1916, most Ontario farmers worked 14-hour days and sorely needed help,¹⁰⁸ and concerns arose that wartime progress might be lost. That December, MP Donald S. Sutherland wrote to the Minister of Agriculture: “the outlook for help on dairy farms is most discouraging, as most of those who worked on the farms have either enlisted or gone to work in the munitions factories.... The dairy industry which has taken many years of painstaking labor and energy to build up, can be destroyed under present conditions.”¹⁰⁹ On 31 March 1917, the Oxford Patriotic Association organized a meeting to discuss the upcoming planting season, attended by farmers from every township in the county. “The farmers of the district showed their interest by sending delegates in large numbers, and judging by the expressions of these delegates unless

help is more plentiful than it appears to be at the present time, the farms of Oxford County will not produce anything like what the land is capable of producing,” the *Sentinel-Review* reported. Not only had the farmers lost many local labourers to military service, but many workers had flocked to Woodstock’s factories where they could make as much as \$5 a day. “Speaker after speaker declared that farm help in their respective districts was practically unknown and cited instance after instance where 100 acre farms were being worked by the owner alone” and 200-acre farms worked “by the owner with the assistance of a boy.” Without a solution to the labour problem, the farmers predicted that “large portions of the very best land in the district” would go uncultivated.¹¹⁰

The hunt for labour became the focus of both the provincial government and Oxford County’s “Greater Production Campaign.” Organizers agreed to work with the Ontario Department of Agriculture to facilitate the search for labourers, offering to connect farmers with men “willing to work.” They also suggested that retired farmers and business men should help with the labor shortage in agricultural production and asked the patriotic organizations throughout the county to organize these efforts.¹¹¹ Later that month, the *Norwich Gazette* published an advertisement from the provincial government calling for retired men to “enlist in the farm campaigns.”¹¹² As it did the previous spring, the provincial government encouraged male students between the ages of 14 and 18 to enlist for farm service between 20 April and 20 May.¹¹³ Local farmers, however, had mixed reactions to employing boys and men from the cities as labourers. Some complained that “city boys would take too long to learn and the season would be over before they would be of any help.” It was no use taking boys from their studies if they could not milk, plow, or hoe properly.¹¹⁴ Others agreed with the sentiments shared by Arthur T. Walker, the Reeve of East Oxford, who argued that a man or boy from the city, “providing he is willing, can be used to advantage on the farm. It all depends on how the farmer uses him.”¹¹⁵ Even if they could convince all of the local farmers to accept the help of

school boys and men from the city, the organizers of the Greater Production Campaign feared that they would still fail to secure enough labourers. As a result, they suggested that the province provide tractors that the farmers could share with one another.¹¹⁶ Shortly after, Oxford County received two tractors to loan out for 35 cents a day.¹¹⁷ While



Plowing with a steel-wheeled tractor, 1916

these efforts provided some relief, the labour shortage persisted and the farmers had to work harder than ever.

As farmers prepared to work their fields in the spring of 1917, they noticed more frequent discussions about compulsory military service in the press. Still, many felt that the government would recognize the essential service provided by farmers and exempt them from conscription. Newton Rowell – the Oxford North MPP who had demanded that farmers “Produce! Produce! Produce!” – consistently spoke out in support of compulsory military service, but always added the caveat that exemptions should be provided to “any men now in agriculture who cannot be replaced, as we must keep up our agricultural production and agriculture is now suffering from a lack of farm labor.” Rowell believed that conscription, if complemented by exemptions for farmers, would better protect the agricultural sector from “further dislocation by our present methods of recruiting.”¹¹⁸ Farmers could only hope that the federal government would agree if it ever decided to go down the road of conscripting Canadian manpower for involuntary military service.

“Are we, as individuals, making sacrifices...?”¹¹⁹

In late 1916 and early 1917, the effects of the war started to intrude on everyday life in East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich townships like never before. It went beyond the steady stream of killed and wounded local men, the aggressive recruitment efforts, the pressure to increase agricultural production, and the constant pleas to donate more money and material. People also faced growing government intervention in their daily lives. This ranged from frequent calls for people to be “thrifty” and to “serve by saving” materials required for the war effort, to the federal government’s taxation of business profits (late 1916) and personal incomes (1917) for the first time in the country’s history.¹²⁰ The explosion of the government’s budget from a prewar level of \$185 million to a wartime peak of \$740 million, and the increase of the national debt to \$1.2 billion, led the government to solicit



Canadian Food Board advertisement

loans from the public. As the *Norwich Gazette* explained, these loans, first called the war saving certificates and then Victory Loans after November 1917, gave everyone the opportunity to finance Canada’s war effort. The newspaper insisted that contributing to the loans “should appeal strongly to Canadians because they offer to those who must serve at home a splendid opportunity for a most important patriotic service.”¹²¹ Across the country, the public’s willingness to loan money to the government exceeded expectations.

While the government asked citizens to save more and loan more, township residents faced worsening fuel and food shortages. In the midst of the freezing conditions of early February 1917, only one railway car of coal arrived to serve the heating needs of the town of Norwich and surrounding areas, prompting the *Gazette* to label the situation “very critical.”¹²² By the middle of the month, “the scarcity of coal and intensely cold weather have caused a very great deal of inconvenience to the residents of the village and surrounding country.”¹²³ People in the surrounding towns also faced steadily rising food prices, especially for meat and sugar, which were often in short supply in Canada as the government exported them to Britain and the front. The farmers, however, who were making more money than ever before and who often had their own supplies of food, could afford luxuries certain townspeople could not, deepening the divide between the two segments of society. In March 1916, the *Gazette* put a spotlight on the issue, noting that “it was a common sight on Tuesday to see a farmer going home with two to six bags of sugar in his rig. Few citizens in town can gather together sufficient funds for to purchase one bag and yet some will tell that there is no money in farming. It is certainly not the case this district.”¹²⁴ Scarcities, and the attendant social friction between rural and urban Canadians, would only grow more acute in the last year and half of the war.

While the war effort demanded that people make greater sacrifices in almost every aspect of their lives, patriotic societies also asked the people to give more. Since the beginning of 1916, the societies noted that community members were increasingly hesitant to donate time and money. To these people they delivered constant messages about the need to sacrifice, applauding examples of individuals who went above and beyond the call of duty. In Otterville, for instance, 67-year-old Ann Smiley knitted over seventy pairs of socks for the boys

in the trenches,¹²⁵ while 82-year-old Mrs. L. Hunt of Norwich produced 30 pairs.¹²⁶ To elicit monetary donations the townships’ patriotic societies filled the calendar with fun events and excursions where they could solicit funds. During the hot days of summer 1916, they put on a steady stream of patriotic box socials, garden parties, teas, and dances.¹²⁷ A particularly successful party, held on the school lawn in Springford under the auspices of the Ladies’ Patriotic Club, utilized the talents of the Otterville Band and raised \$207.09.¹²⁸ Thinking big, the Women’s Patriotic League convinced the Norwich town council to make Wednesday, 19 July a patriotic holiday for the community and then organized an excursion to Port Stanley with all proceeds going to various war-related funds.¹²⁹ In the fall of 1916, the volunteers of Burgessville decided to focus on raising money for the Red Cross and put on a series of weekly teas, followed



Young Max Lazenby knitting for the soldiers, 1916

by a Women's Institute Red Cross bazaar in December which featured a Japanese tea room, a home-made candy booth, a table of needlework, and Christmas gifts for purchase.¹³⁰ Around the townships, the holiday season of December 1916 and January 1917 inspired a deluge of patriotic activities and giving. For example, one Norwich Sunday school class chose to donate money to the Prisoners of War Fund rather than buy each other gifts,¹³¹ a Christmas festival was held in Springford's town hall,¹³² and a New Year's themed Patriotic Box Social in Otterville rounded out the holiday season.¹³³

The new year brought a county-wide campaign to raise money for the British Sailors' Relief Fund. In late 1916, the patriotic societies in Woodstock had tried unsuccessfully to fundraise for this cause through several events in the city.¹³⁴ To expand the potential catchment area, county council issued a broad appeal to support the sailors, whose blockade of the German coastline was crucial to allied victory. If voluntary donors failed to raise the money raised, council explained that it might raise income and property taxes instead.¹³⁵ People responded, donating thousands of dollars and providing sailors with more care packages. The ladies of Norwich's WPL contributed directly to the effort and eventually received a warm thank you from British sailor G.H. Richards, who had spent a few years working in the town before the war (and whose mother still lived there):

Dear Ladies: It is almost impossible for me to adequately express my thanks for your splendid gift, but as a slight token of my gratitude and appreciation, I am writing these few lines.

We are at sea fourteen days at a time and your parcel arrived by motor launch on the twelfth day so you will easily understand how doubly welcome it was. I think it is fine, the choosing of the many articles showed wonderful forethought and the packing was splendid. Though the tin was slightly damaged all the contents arrived in first class condition.

I drank to your health in a delicious cup of cocoa while I was on the midnight watch, followed by one of the cigarettes. I am afraid that my thoughts were not all of mines and submarines, but far away in that little Ontario town, where I spent four very happy years.

I could not help thinking of two of your finest young men who have been called away, and how those who are spared to return will appreciate home so much more after this war is over.

When I was in Canada, England seemed like home to me, but now it is vice versa, and though I shall always have fond thoughts for the Mother Country, I feel sure that if I ever reach old Canada again, it will be good enough for me.

Thanking you all once again for your kindness and wishing you a similar success in all your other undertakings.¹³⁶

The notes of appreciation from sailors and soldiers, which usually appeared in the newspapers, played a significant role in motivating the community to continue giving.

The primary focus of the Oxford Patriotic Association (OPA), and by extension the patriotic societies in the townships, was the Patriotic Fund. Since the first months of the war, the Fund had provided supplemental income to the dependents (wives, children, mothers) of the soldiers serving overseas who were in need. By the end of November 1916, the OPA reported that the fund supported 478 beneficiaries in Oxford County: 238 in Woodstock, 96 in Ingersoll, 73 in Tillsonburg, and 71 elsewhere in the county. Four hundred of these beneficiaries were wives, 73 were mothers, and 5 were near relatives, and the average monthly disbursement was \$15.25 per family (with most beneficiaries also receiving a soldier's separation allowance of about \$20 a month). Adding together the direct beneficiaries and their children, the Patriotic Fund assisted 1357 people in Oxford County.¹³⁷

In dispersing aid to dependents, members of the OPA exercised significant control over the female recipients in their communities, often deciding which families should get more or less (or nothing at all).¹³⁸ The story of Mretta Campbell is illustrative of the power wielded by the distributors of the Fund. Her husband, Ernest, had been working at Borden's Condenser when he enlisted with the 168th Battalion in January 1916. The couple had just adopted a little girl, Dorothy, from the Children's Aid Society and Mretta moved to Tillsonburg to be closer to Ernest's parents who lived in Courtland. With Ernest gone, each month Mretta received \$13 from the Patriotic Fund, a soldier's separation allowance of \$15 from the government, and \$20 in assigned pay from her husband.

A few months after Ernest deployed overseas, rumours reached the OPA that Mretta was "not a fit person to have custody of a child" and that she had been unfaithful to her husband. The OPA reached out to two local members – G.M. Creighton, the Chief Constable of Tillsonburg, and Victor Sinclair, a lawyer and MPP of Oxford South – to investigate. Creighton advised that he "did not get a very good report of her conduct ... while in Tillsonburg her name was not of the best." They determined that "she does not deserve anything."¹³⁹ Sinclair took the time to speak with Mretta, who claimed "not to have been guilty of any misconduct" and insisted that there was "no reason why she should not receive her allowance." Another member of the Tillsonburg branch of the OPA also vouched for her, explaining that "he has many times seen the child with her in the store and that she seemed to be well looked after."¹⁴⁰ With conflicting reports, the OPA may have chosen to grant the full allowance to Mretta – had the Children's Aid Society not received word of the investigation and decided to take Dorothy away from her adopted mother. Soon after, Creighton gave Mretta twenty-four hours to leave the community, forcing her to settle in Brantford before she moved on to Hamilton.¹⁴¹

It is impossible to know if the stories about Mretta Campbell's infidelity and fitness as a parent are true based on the available evidence. Certainly Ernest's parents believed the rumours. "Pa says that you had better will your life insurance to someone else or will it to him and send him your will he will get it straightened so as she won't get it and your wages," Ernest's mother wrote him. "[D]on't let Ret have anything if you can stop it for she has all gone to h--- and she has moved her stuff to Brantford keeping home with another man and is having a good time for a

person that is writing back and forth to her says so.”¹⁴² Despite the warning, Ernest – who suffered a debilitating gunshot wound to the shoulder as the drama unfolded back home – kept sending his soldier’s allowance and assigned pay to Mretta until his discharge.¹⁴³ Nevertheless, the strangers from the OPA had already decided her fate – just as they did for all the women who requested access to the Patriotic Fund.

By the end of 1916, the OPA had gathered \$68,300 for the year and had disbursed \$66,338 in relief payments. Funds were running low. East Oxford had promised \$2721.50 but delivered only \$2370. South Norwich guaranteed \$1941.70 but raised \$1672. North Norwich promised \$5000 and delivered \$5000 through a patriotic fund tax levied by the Township Council. The town of Norwich raised \$1000 as promised.¹⁴⁴ With more soldiers from the county deploying overseas, however, the Patriotic Fund required money and the OPA launched a new fundraising campaign around Christmas 1916. The *Daily Sentinel-Review* kicked off the campaign by highlighting that Christmas was “the time of giving” and calling on the public to give their gifts “to those who have dedicated their dearest and their best to our service and the service of humanity.”¹⁴⁵ The *Norwich Gazette* picked up this theme, urging its readers to replace Christmas gifts with donations to the Patriotic Fund. This meant sacrifices, to be sure, “but certainly none to compare with those made by the women who have sent their husbands to face the German bullets. It should be our pride, as it is our duty, to see that these brave women do not suffer privation by reason of their patriotism – for it must be remembered that no married man has left Canada for the front without his wife’s consent.”¹⁴⁶

After collecting donations at Christmas, the townships’ patriotic societies initiated a series of teas, concerts, bazaars, and calls for donations in the new year. The results were unimpressive. Although the Norwich WPL put on a concert involving the choirs of the town’s four churches that brought in \$85¹⁴⁷ and a concert in Burgessville raised \$57,¹⁴⁸ the Oxford County Council felt that the amount raised in the campaign was insufficient. In February it established a monthly grant of \$6,000 to aid the OPA and provide money for the Patriotic Fund.¹⁴⁹ In Norwich, the Women’s Patriotic League responded by shaming and challenging the community:

In Norwich we have not been called upon to contribute very much for the past year and it is about time that we were doing something. When the representatives of the League calls upon you next week have your mind made up as to what you can give each month and try and make the donation of sufficient size that it will help provide for some poor fellow who has taken your place on the firing line. IF YOU CANNOT FIGHT IT IS CERTAINLY UP TO YOU TO PAY.”¹⁵⁰

The women of the WPL then systematically canvassed the town throughout February and, going door to door, collected an impressive \$1508.78. To reward those who contributed and to shame those who did not, the WPL published the names of all contributors in the *Gazette*.¹⁵¹

The fundraising campaign for the Patriotic Fund made abundantly clear what had been evident since the beginning of 1916 in East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich townships (and across Canada): without the constant efforts of the

female volunteers in the patriotic societies, little money would have been raised for the war effort. "Right here would it not be in keeping to heartily thank the Norwich Women's Patriotic League for the great work they are doing," praised the *Gazette*. "Too many of our citizens overlook what is being done by the League, an organization which has been steadily at work since the commencement of the war, nearly three years ago." At the memorial service for Clark Beattie in November 1916, the Reverend delivering the sermon noted that "women would have their status in the future, they have done noble work so far – and will continue until the battle is won."¹⁵²

For many Canadian women, a sure sign of "their status" was the right to vote. Since the beginning of the century, the women's suffrage movement had been gaining strength and the war proved a major catalyst for practical gains. In January 1916, Manitoba women became the first in Canada to win the right to vote provincially, followed shortly thereafter by Saskatchewan and Alberta, then British Columbia. Throughout the winter of 1917, it became clear that Ontario's Conservative government was also seriously considering granting women the right to vote in the next provincial election, prodded on by the Dominion Women's Enfranchisement Association and Canadian Women's Suffrage Association. By the end of February, a bill for women's suffrage had worked its way through the Legislative Assembly and gained the support of Premier William Howard Hearst. During the bill's second reading, the MPP who first put it forward, J.W. Johnson, noted that "the war has changed many conditions and has crystallized public opinion on many subjects." Public opinion on women's suffrage had changed dramatically since 1914. "The splendid part they [women] have taken and the splendid sacrifice they have made have broken down the prejudices that existed in the minds of many men and women, too," Johnson observed. Premier Hearst echoed these sentiments, noting that "having taken our women into partnership with us in our tremendous task, upon which the success of the future of the British Empire depends, and of the civilization of the world, I ask, can we justly deny her a share in the government of the country, the right to have a say about the making of the laws she is so heroically trying to defend?"¹⁵³ On 12 April 1917, the women of Ontario officially attained the right to vote in the next provincial election. Their wartime sacrifices had been acknowledged and rewarded, at least in this particular political form.

"Encouragement was almost a necessity in time of war"¹⁵⁴

By the end of March 1917, the entire country was in need of the encouragement that Canadian women were receiving. Fred Furlong, still sitting in England and waiting to be sent to the front, captured the feeling when he wrote his mother: "You were asking if I thought the war as going to end soon. Of course I don't know much more about it than I did when I left Canada, but...I sincerely hope it will for I am sure getting sick of this life."¹⁵⁵ Back in Canada, people also had grown sick of the war and the strain it imposed on their lives. They needed something encouraging to happen – some sign that the war might end.

December 1916 had brought peace proposals from the American President

Woodrow Wilson and Kaiser Wilhelm II, but these came to nothing. The Russian Revolution of March 1917 brought instability and political upheaval to an ally already reeling from numerous military setbacks. The only encouraging sign in the news was the growing tension between the United States and Germany. Since the Germans had adopted unrestricted submarine warfare in February 1917, Washington appeared closer to declaring war. In one of his last speeches before heading back to the front, Lt.-Col. Donald M. Sutherland argued that if the U.S. came into the war, "it would mean peace earlier. If the states came into the war it would mean encouragement for our boys and encouragement was almost a necessity in time of war."¹⁵⁶

On 6 April 1917, U.S. Congress finally declared war on Germany. The *Norwich Gazette* offered its readers a tongue-in-cheek commentary of the long-awaited American declaration in its Town Talk section. "An American soldier went into the London saloon to get a glass of beer. It was served warm as is the custom there and addressing the barmaid he said: 'Isn't that beer a little stale?' To which the barmaid replied, 'Why shouldn't it be? Its been waiting for you for two years.'¹⁵⁷ Despite the U.S.'s late entry, no one could deny that the American declaration of war was an encouraging development – although everyone knew it would take time for the powerful nation to mobilize its forces.

After the Somme, Canadians hoped for encouraging news from the front. The newspapers had been filled with casualty reports as more Canadians died in raids, shelling, and sniper fire that characterized everyday life in the trenches. But there had been no major offensives, breakthroughs or victories – just an endless cycle of death that seemed to accomplish nothing. By the spring of 1917, Canadians desperately needed a win.

Pte. Harold Innis, who had arrived in France at the end of 1916 and still awaited his baptism of fire, likely felt the same way. Billeted in a draft, hole-ridden barn, Innis's letters were filled with complaints about the miserable weather and the endless mud: "working in mud, sleeping in mud and eating mud if the grub happens to touch anything." Nevertheless, he noted that this situation was an improvement over the dull, relentless routine at Shorncliffe. As new additions to the 1st Canadian Division's Artillery Column, he and his mates "were given odd jobs. I had the duty at the beginning of seeing that a mule with a cracked heel was properly fed, and tended daily, but these were matters of routine in first arriving in France." In his letter home to his mother on 7 January 1917, he encouraged his family not to worry about him and emphasized the more pleasant aspects of this "rest period" after the battles of the Somme. "With our pay and with parcels including all sorts of food and socks, we had a reasonably comfortable time, our chief duties being those of feeding the horses morning, noon, and nights," he recalled. Two weeks later, the weather had taken a turn for the worse, with three inches of snow having fallen and exceptionally frosty nights chilling the troops.¹⁵⁸ His routine would soon change, however, as the Canadian Corps prepared for a daunting operation that spring: wresting Vimy Ridge from the Germans.

Notes

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- 4 Crabbe, "As it was in the Beginning," 12.
- 5 G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1962), 166.
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- 7 "Letter from Pte Frank Boyle," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 28 September 1916.
- 8 "Military Notes," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 28 September 1916.
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- 10 "Sneath, Thomas Darcy, Maj 5 C.M.R - Military Cross 30 October 1916," *London Gazette* 2nd Supp. #29837 25 11 1916; "Thomas D'Arcy Sneath," Canadian Virtual War Memorial, <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/detail/296924?Thomas%20D'Arcy%20Sneath>.
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- 12 "Lieut-Col. Sutherland Home To Recuperate," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 2 November 1916.
- 13 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 176.
- 14 Crabbe, "As it was in the Beginning," 12-13. Punctuation changed from original for readability.
- 15 Crabbe, "As it was in the Beginning," 13. Schoolteacher Frederick Leonard Bickford suffered a gunshot wound to the forehead on 17 September 1916, and Pte. Reginald Percy Cattell was wounded the same day with the 46th Battalion.
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- 21 Canadian War Museum, "The Somme," <https://www.warmuseum.ca/firstworldwar/history/battles-and-fighting/land-battles/the-somme/?anchor=118>.
- 22 Roy Marr to his Mother and Dad, 16 March 1917, "Letter from Roy Marr," printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 24 May 1917. By the time he wrote his letter, Marr had been transferred to the 10th Field Company Canadian Engineers, with whom he would serve until returning to the 44th on 2 April 1917.

- 23 Roy Marr to his Mother and Dad, 16 March 1917.
- 24 Soldier file, Marr, Percy Leroy, 126842, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 5936 – 24.
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- 32 Fred Furlong to his Mother, 14 November 1916, authors’ collection.
- 33 Fred Furlong to his Mother, 20 January 1917, authors’ collection.
- 34 Fred Furlong to his Mother, 4 December 1916, authors’ collection.
- 35 Fred Furlong to his Mother, 23 and 26 December 1916, authors’ collection.
- 36 Bruce Poole to his cousins, 5 January 1917, NDMA, 2005.090, Range B, Shelf 5, Box P2, File World War I.
- 37 Bruce Poole to his cousins, 5 January 1917.
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- 40 Fred Furlong to his Mother, 10 December 1916, authors’ collection.
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- 45 Fred Furlong to his Mother, 14 November 1916 authors’ collection.
- 46 Fred Furlong to his Mother, 22 November 1916, authors’ collection.
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7 “We have gone through the whole gamut of human experience”

The Battle of Vimy Ridge

The experiences of the soldier himself [are] another matter and can never be fully told. It is all over now for a while anyway and I don't know what to say. I feel as though we have gone through the whole gamut of human experience. There were moments, which went quickly, while some hours seemed an eternity.

- Pte. Stanley Vanderburgh (1917)

In the fall of 1916, the French proposed a co-ordinated Anglo-French attack designed to encircle and destroy large elements of the German army. The first plan was to continue the Somme offensive on a larger front and maintain a focus on attrition. However, the new General in Chief of the French armies in the north (Robert Nivelle) had a different operational philosophy than his predecessor. He proposed a more ambitious plan in which he promised to rupture the German lines using the shock tactics that he had employed at Verdun, and he pledged to destroy all of the German forces using what he called a “mass of manoeuvre.” The British concurred in a plan to attack the “shoulders” of the Somme, with the French taking the southern Aisne sector (the Chemin des Dames) and the British reopening an offensive at the northern shoulder of the salient at Arras and Vimy Ridge. As it turned out, before Nivelle could launch his offensive, the Germans decided to withdraw their forward defences across the front some 20 miles to the east. This shortened the German frontage considerably, and allowed them take up new elastic defences prepared in late 1916 known as the “Hindenburg Line.” This strategic withdrawal gave the Allies the land they planned to acquire through Nivelle’s offensive action, but the French and British decided to proceed with the operation anyway.¹

The British part in the April offensive, known as the Battle of Arras, planned to take the Arras sector in the north as a supporting offensive to the main French thrust, intending it as a diversion to tie up German divisions more than as a basis for the breakout. Part of the plan involved capturing Vimy Ridge, a feature which dominated the great Lens-Douai plain to the east. While the ridge rose high above the plain, it fell off behind the German lines to the east in front of the village of Vimy. Most of the ground facing the Canadians sloped gently upward, with a few small towns and forests in between the opposing German trench lines. It was eminently defensible terrain. Accordingly, the Germans held the ridge when they withdrew to the Hindenburg Line because they considered the ground important and their defences impenetrable.



Harold Innis with gas mask, just off duty and visibly fatigued

The soldiers from East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich townships who found themselves in the Vimy sector had not participated in this planning, of course, and their perspectives on the battle-field were more immediate. Writing from Bully Grenay (now Bully les Mines) in the Pas de Calais region of northern France in early February 1917, artilleryman Harold Innis noted that “the clear cold weather brought bright frosty nights and hard roads in place of the mud and rain.” Although this carried the threat of frozen toes and fingers, it had the benefit of reducing the amount of sickness in the units. In his letter, he referred to “the clicking away of the machine guns like riveters or woodpeckers all through the night and the more or less continuous roar of the guns.” The soldiers had become “gradually accustomed to the conditions of war at the sight of ruined

buildings, barbed wire, and the maze of trenches.” From there, his unit moved to Camblain Chatelain “under the most miserable weather conditions with heavy wet snow falling on the horses and men and melting almost as quickly as it fell.” It was here that preparations began for the attack on Vimy. “We had selected a site in a little valley just ahead of the road running from Arras to Bapaume,” he recalled:

It was not an ideal spot since the Germans were constantly firing at the road and shells which dropped short would inevitably land near our battery. Camblain Chatelain was located at considerable distances from the unloading station to the battery. A night's work was sufficient to exhaust both riders and horses. It meant working steadily in the direction of the battery, through inconceivably dense traffic going and coming in complete darkness except for the bursting of shells sent over the Germans designed to disrupt the traffic. Horses could last under these circumstances only a comparatively short period of time and their places were constantly being filled by new recruits.²

Logistic preparations for the coming battle were critical. The roads and general conditions behind the lines at Vimy Ridge were so horrendous “that horses and mules had to be mercy-killed by the hundreds as they were worked to death.”³

While stationed with the artillery at Camblain Chatelain, Innis noted that “if one were not involved in gunnery or in driving one had a reasonably pleasant time.” It was a severe winter, and with few blankets at their disposal the men did their best using hay in the barn to keep warm while watching over their horses. “There developed a sort of communism among the troops,” Innis noted, offering the following anecdote as an illustration:

I had been issued a pair of long leather boots which took the place of shoes and puttees which we had brought to France and rather distinguished one from a new arrival. Instead of wearing them on the day in which they were issued, I hid them under my pillow in the barn. At night I found that they had disappeared. It was some months later that one man whom I came to know well told me of stealing a new pair of boots from the individual who slept next to him and selling them to the French for much needed food or drink. I never ventured to tell him that they were my boots that he had stolen since he seemed to regard the adventure as one of many and since it became a well known device for exchange with French peasants, particularly someone else's equipment, for a night in the estaminet.

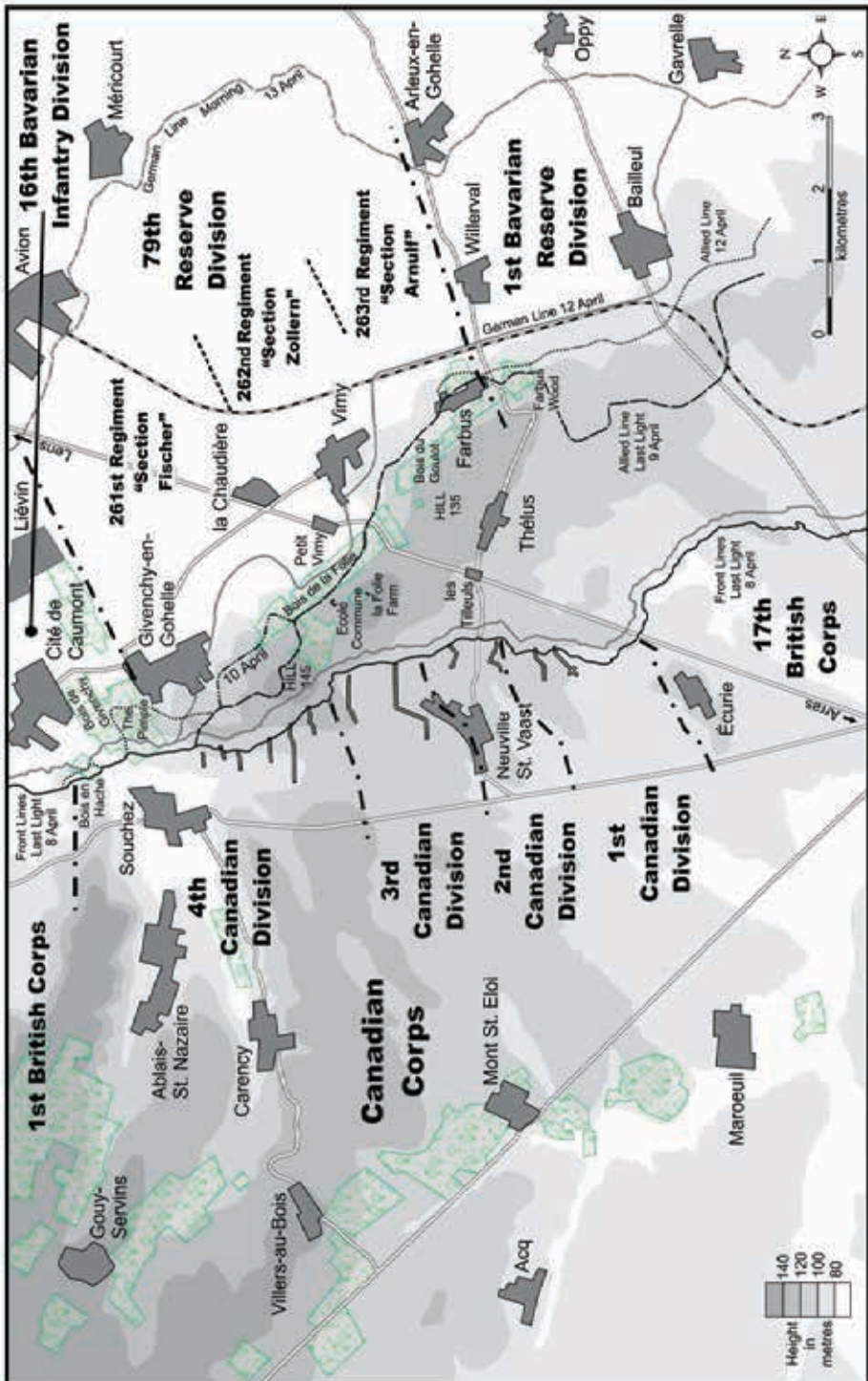
For the most part, Innis observed that many of the older men in his battery had been promoted to the ranks of corporal or sergeant but then subsequently demoted either by request or because of drinking.⁴ As much as Innis steered clear of the “demon rum,” it was a core part of army life.

Vimy Ridge overlooked the French city of Lens, situated in a “rolling country dotted with coal mines. One could see a small mine working away on our side of the line and one opposite on the German side.”⁵ Once in the trenches, however, the image was less picturesque. Pte. Sydney J. Eaton, who had lived in Norwich for a few years working for the Poole family at Gore, wrote to Henry Poole on 1 February 1917 after a second shift in the front lines at Vimy. “It is an awful job coming through the trenches after dark, there are small narrow boards to walk on; of course some places the walks are about two feet deep in water or mud, and walking in the dark you might step off and maybe fall into a shell hole full of mud and water that is when it tests a man to see if he can use bad language or not,” Eaton described. “Wet feet, of course, is a trifling thing now, we work all day or night and think nothing of wet feet and the only way to dry the socks a bit is to sleep with them on.” There was little optimism in the letter, and the soldier opined: “If we were to live the same way in civilian life, we would be dead in a month. Nevertheless we try to be pleasant and keep smiling.”⁶

Under such dismal conditions, it is unsurprising that soldiers writing home to friends and family highlighted the challenges of trench life and the coping mechanisms to endure it. Acting Lance Cpl. Douglas Schell, writing to his uncle William from France (and reminding him up front that censors limited what he could write), explained that “to say the least [life in the front lines] is very strenuous and demands the best in you to keep in health. Only an iron constitution can stay with us long without being seriously affected.” The war took its toll on soldiers, both physically and mentally. “Whatever our temporary discomforts and privations may be, everybody bears them patiently and cheerfully knowing it is all part



Sydney J. Eaton



The Vimy Sector, winter-spring 1917

of the game,” Douglas insisted. “When we come out of the line and go back to billets for a rest, it is almost surprising how everybody can brighten up and enjoy oneself with such common place comforts as may be at our disposal.” He even described a concert party made up of battalion members (some of whom were professional performers) that supplied them all “with real good fun when back from the line.”⁷

These concert parties, like other recreational activities on the battle front, were more than mere frivolities, serving the interests of raising and sustaining soldiers’ morale. Performers routinely mocked the military system and its high-ranking officers, giving ordinary soldiers a temporary respite from the seriousness of the war. “The sonic assault of artillery bursts, alongside the prevalence of death and its unmistakable stench, always complemented the makeshift stages erected along the front lines, where troops watched one of their own channel a popular song from the music hall, act out a humorous and topical skit, or enjoy the most cherished component of the concert-party’s repertoire—the female impersonators,” one historian summarized.⁸ These concerts offered a welcome diversion from the hardships that the soldiers were enduring in the field.

Time on the front lines also made Douglas Schell and other soldiers both nostalgic for and appreciative of life back home. “Only the other day I was sitting thinking of some of my recent experiences and comparing them with my life of a little over a year ago, at Old Clairmont,” Schell described. “One gets accustomed to regarding such trivial things here as comforts, that a further comparison with what we would regard as real necessities at home, makes these necessities of home life seem distant indeed. While at home I may have appreciated all I had access to but never as I do now.” His mind swept him back to South Norwich Township, and what his uncle the farmer, following a typical seasonal cycle, would be doing in the month of March:

Spring will be approaching and with it the radious [*sic*] sunshine and the rain. You will be making your plans of the work that will soon begin. I can see it all so plainly, the brown fields with here and there a patch of yellow earth where the sun has dried some knoll more quickly than the rest. Then the meadows just turning green that has a freshness which seems to almost thrill you with pleasure. The wheat, which has been sown the previous fall, will under the culturing influence of the warm sun begin to grow rapidly. The black and white cattle so common in Oxford county will soon be out in the fields enjoying their first freedom after a long winter in the stables and adding an unequalled picturesqueness to the variegated landscape. I can see the long rolling hills to the west with farms here and there, the woodlands which seem to present a skimmer of green so delicate you can hardly see it but still an indication of new life. As I think of these things I cannot help but long for a peep around the old farm and surrounding country I know so well. It is also with the pictures brought to mind that I fully realize what my home really meant to me. It takes privation to make us enjoy comfort, it takes sickness to make us fully appreciate good health, it takes hunger to make us enjoy a well laden table, it takes danger to make us appreciate safety. I think the value we put on those things may be measured by just the extent we have at some time

been forced to do without them. In other words our valuation of the comforts and blessings which surround every good home is the measure of our past experience without them. The times when we are permitted to return to our homes will certainly be one of great anticipation to us all.

With ample time to reflect on life while surviving in the trenches, Schell decided that after the war he would become a farmer. He had studied chemistry at university, but now saw it “more as a hobby than as a profession.” He wanted to work outdoors, “so I spend my idle moments planning my future along these lines. Hoping I may be permitted to return with sufficient strength and good health to spend a liberal number of years in this work.”⁹ Fate, however, would have something else in store for Douglas Schell.



While the soldiers from the townships thought of the comforts of home and life after the war, senior military planners sought to figure out a way to bring the conflict to an end. Vimy Ridge was but one small piece in a much bigger puzzle. The task of taking Vimy fell to the Canadians, but the campaign planning in late 1916 had been done by French and British commanders-in-chief and politicians. They assigned the Canadians a primarily diversionary role in the Arras offensive. The operational objective for the corps was to capture and control the ridge, not to annihilate the Germans, nor to spearhead the allied armies to victory. The plans and preparations reflected this limited but highly ambitious goal. The heights of Vimy, particularly Hills 135 and 145 (numerical designations suggesting their height in metres), offered the German defenders miles of visibility over the surrounding battlefields, leaving the Canadians little possibility for operational surprise. Certainly the enemy could see large-scale troop movements above ground that would warn them of an impending attack. The gradual incline would force the Canadians to attack over open ground, where they were susceptible to enemy artillery, machine gun, and rifle fire. Furthermore, the reverse slope provided ideal cover for the Germans, who positioned their artillery out of sight from Allied ground forces. To add to these natural advantages, the Germans had years to build three main defensive lines: complex, mutually supporting systems incorporating concrete machine gun strongpoints surrounded by barbed wire, dugouts, all connected by elaborate trenches. Vast underground chambers would also shield German troops from Allied shells.

Although the German lines at Vimy were impressive, they were not laid out according to the most up-to-date German defensive doctrine.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the Germans had every right to be confident. The British and French had already suffered more than a quarter-million casualties trying to take the ridge, their offensives degenerating into attritions battles in which the British and French took the lion's share of casualties. Capturing and holding Vimy Ridge was a daunting task that required intricate planning and preparations from the corps level right on down to the individual soldier. General Byng recognized this, and his plan for the Canadian

attack was ready by 5 March. The four divisions would attack the ridge across a front of seven kilometres. The four stages were dictated by the German zones of defence. There was little attempt to keep the offensive a secret, apart from the date and time of the attack, so preparations and training commenced in earnest.

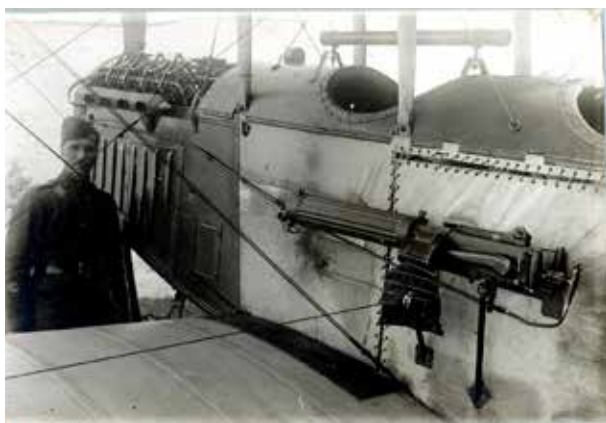
In a letter home on 15 March, Harold Innis revealed that the Canadians were working much harder and preparations for the spring campaign were well under way. His crew had left Camblain Chatelain and were working up at the Battery, “chiefly filling sand bags with the hard chalk of the district.” It was hard work: “a case of pick and shovel with most of the emphasis on the pick.” It reminded him “of digging post holes in the clay during a dry summer such as we had when putting up the line fence,” he explained to his family on the farm in Otterville. The uncomfortable weather persisted, with his letters dominated by reports about the rain, cold, and mud. Soldiers constantly needed to clean their boots and avoid the endless piles of mud, he recalled, with “wet feet and wet greatcoats” a persistent feature of the cold, rainy season. During this period he worked mainly at night, when squads of men slipped up to just behind the front line “carrying large bundles of small wooden trees and other material preparatory to the attack.” The heightened frequency of shelling and aeroplane fights broke some of the monotony, but “work, work, work and more work is the order of the day.”¹¹ Innis described in his memoir:

Looking back it was clear that the whole period was being enlivened by the constant arrival of new batteries prepared to put over a terrific barrage, which was to mark the beginnings of the Battle of Vimy Ridge. It was hoped that there would be relatively dry weather and that immediately after the infantry had silenced the German guns that our artillery would be moved forward to advance positions. Our task, therefore, was that of bringing material to the front line so that a bridge could be thrown over the line immediately after the attack and that the guns would be moved over these bridges to a new front. This was, of course, highly speculative and dependent on the weather and became a complete fiasco because of a heavy snow fall on the night of the attack and the impossibility of moving the guns forward in the mud. Most of our time spent in carrying this material to just behind the front line meant heavy night work, occasionally digging into pools of mud with the German star shells illuminating the whole area and altogether was an unpleasant and as it turned out rather fruitless work.¹²

In the skies, the air forces were more active, and Innis watched dogfights with excitement and curiosity. “One came to have more and more respect for the Air Force,” he noted in a March letter, “particularly at a period when they began to gain ascendancy over the Germans.” He found it fascinating when “now and then one comes tumbling down,” and he found it hard to imagine what that sensation would feel like to be a pilot plummeting to his death.¹³

Similar thoughts were certainly on the minds of the men serving in the Royal Flying Corps (RFC), including Lieut. Joseph Leslie Dickson, who found himself flying as a gunner with 43rd squadron above the front lines in France. On a rainy April day when the flyers were grounded, Dickson wrote to his mother about the

challenges and excitement of his work. Whether on a line patrol or in the skies doing reconnaissance, he explained how an airman had to keep “one’s eyes open for hostile air-craft for they seem to come down upon one when one is not looking.” The enemy could come upon you very quickly, as he discovered first hand. During one week Dickson had three dangerous encounters. “On Tuesday I was out over the lines and was flying at a height of about 300 feet,” he recounted. “This is a very dangerous height to fly at, and is not nearly so safe as it is at 13,000 feet or 14,000 feet.” During his flight, Germans machine gunners in the trenches below fired on his aircraft. After returning to base, Dickson learned that they had hit their mark. “When we looked over the machine at home we saw that the propeller was shot through and badly splintered,” he reported. “The pressure pump was also shot up some.” Unperturbed, Dickson returned to the air three days later. “On Friday I did another reconnaissance and again we were fired at from the trenches, and one of our steel struts shot almost in twain,” he recounted. “We knew nothing much about this damaged strut while we were in the air and were using the machine rather roughly on the way back to the aerodrome. We did nearly everything except to ‘loop.’” Continuing with his harrowing tale, Dickson informed his mother that “to set things off properly I went out again Saturday and besides having a bullet hole dangerously close to my seat, I think it was twenty-six patches that had to be put on the plane in other places.” Much to any parent’s chagrin, the young aviator ended his story with the following line: “Other than this the week has been most uneventful.”¹⁴



Lieut. J.L. Dickson alongside his plane, which is littered with bullet holes after a sortie behind enemy lines, 1917

While Innis spoke optimistically of the RFC gaining “air superiority,” the month would prove costly for pilots and aircrews. The air force continued to support the army throughout the Arras offensive with up-to-date aerial photographs, reconnaissance information, patrolling, bombing raids to harass the enemy, and artillery spotting which was valuable in counter-battery. But April 1917 became known as “Bloody April” as British aircrews suffered devastatingly high loss rates in the Arras sector. The German air forces, which boasted superior planes to the British,¹⁵ were outnumbered and thus confined their operations to friendly territory. They only engaged when it was favourable to them. Manfred von Richthofen (the famous “Red Baron”) and his *Jasta* (fighter squadron) 11 claimed 89 of the 245 British aircraft shot down that month (compared to only 68 German losses). Overall, 211 British aircrew were killed or missing and 108 end up as prisoners of war.¹⁶ Nonetheless,

the German air force failed to stop the RFC from carrying out its missions, and the skies above Vimy were the scene of bitterly fought battles for air dominance.

Although the Canadians were free from major operations after their arrival at Vimy, they established a regular pattern of limited offensives against the Germans to gather intelligence. These trench raids were exactly what the name implied: parties of various sizes raided opposing trenches to destroy dugouts, gun emplacements, inflict casualties, and most importantly to capture prisoners who could be interrogated for intelligence about enemy dispositions and defences. Some of these raids were elaborate affairs. The largest, on the night of 28 February-1 March, comprised 1700 all ranks from 4th Division who were tasked to recce and damage the German defences on Hill 145. It proved almost a complete failure because the chlorine gas intended for the enemy blew back in their faces and the division sustained almost 700 casualties.¹⁷ Twenty-two-year-old Pte. George Ede Dennis, a carpenter whose father lived in Burgessville, was one of them. He moved to Saskatchewan before the war and enlisted there in January 1916. He participated in the raid with the 72nd Battalion and went missing on 1 March. His body was never found.¹⁸ Trench raids were indeed a risky business, accounting for roughly 1400 Canadian casualties in the two weeks prior to the Vimy offensive. Nevertheless, the raids gave soldiers a chance to walk over the ground they would be covering during the major assault, and secured vital information about enemy strengths and weaknesses that undoubtedly saved lives on the day of the attack.¹⁹



George Ede Dennis

In order to succeed where so many British and French assaults had failed, senior leadership in the Canadian Corps embraced the need for operational and tactical innovation. Planners needed to come up with a way to implement fire and movement – having one element maneuver (move) while another element provided suppressing fire (to reduce the enemy's ability to return fire) at the same time. This would require better coordination of various weapons systems and tactics. First, counterfire would be critical. Artillery would be key to the success of the operation, and operational planners devoted considerable attention to artillery preparation and support. One part of the plan sought to destroy as much of the enemy's defences as possible by a two-week bombardment prior to the assault. At Byng's request, the Canadians more than doubled the heavy and field gun support that had been the standard on the Somme.²⁰ The fire plan targeted the enemy's trenches, dugouts, concrete gun emplacements and strong-points, ammunition and supply dumps, and road and communication networks. A new contact fuse would allow the guns to cut the German wire in the forward areas. Furthermore, counter-battery – bringing heavy and accurate fire on enemy batteries to protect the infantry

- would be essential, but it was one of the most difficult pursuits on the Western Front, even under perfect conditions. Fortunately, the Canadian Corps was ably served by Andrew McNaughton, a prewar scientist at McGill University who applied his scientific mind to this question and identified enemy targets by pioneering innovative, efficient techniques. In the end, more than eighty-three percent of enemy guns were identified and destroyed by the time the ridge was taken: an incredible achievement.²¹

During the two weeks prior to the attack, the heavy guns and field artillery produced an almost continuous barrage of shells to destroy the German positions as much as possible. Nevertheless, the commanders of the Canadian Corps did not assume that the troops would be able to walk into empty enemy positions on the day of the attack. How could the Canadians force the German defenders who survived the artillery barrage to keep in their dugouts until the attacking infantry had reached their objectives? Part of the solution was the creeping barrage, which the British had adopted as a standard practice in late 1916 but not yet perfected. The Canadian plans for the creeping barrages at Vimy were timed to the minute, and proved effective in neutralizing many German positions (particularly forward trench defences) until the infantry could deal with them directly. Furthermore, the Canadian Corps adopted a new platoon organization that more efficiently combined the existing weapons systems of the infantry battalion and worked them in at the platoon level. Now each platoon contained riflemen, rifle grenadiers, Lewis gunners (to serve as a section firebase), and rifle bombers (using the Mills bomb).



Canadian troops testing a Vickers machine gun

This specialization dramatically increased the firepower that a platoon commander could bring to bear on his objective. Thus, Byng's earlier enthusiasm for inspiring greater initiative on the part of junior officers and other ranks during training exercises perfectly suited the evolving tactical doctrine of the Canadian Corps: the artillery would paralyze German defenders long enough for the infantry platoons to come to grips with them and conquer them with their own firepower.²²

Pte. William Crabbe, who had served with the 28th Battalion through the battle of the Somme, noted that before moving to the Vimy front his unit had a long period of rest, refit, and training. One day, he saw a notice posted on the unit order board asking for volunteers to join a new grenade-throwing battery being assembled at the brigade level. The new battery would consist of 48 men, including one signaller from each battalion. "I did not know what I was getting into—but anything was better than a number in a battalion who did not like you because you

were not a ‘Western’ Canadian, Crabbe noted in his memoirs. He put his name in, was selected, and received instructions to pack up and report to the brigade gunnery school. “We had several weeks of learning all about the set up [and] effectiveness of what they called a “Stokes Gun Battery,” which was capable of throwing a fifteen-inch bomb 500 to 600 yards and was a deadly weapon.” They seldom saw the brigade officer who supervised their unit, so “discipline was almost non-[existent]. As long as we were on hand when we should be, everything was dandy.”²³ The skills that they learned would prove instrumental on the battlefield.

For dispersion and small unit independent manoeuvre to work in practice, Byng and his divisional commanders gave the troops unprecedented opportunities to prepare for the battle. Early in the development of the plan, subordinate commanders were fully briefed on the details and rehearsed their units in their roles. Orders were translated into terms that could be understood by the affected units, and everyone was expected to know their objectives. To the rear of the Canadian sector, Byng had the German defences reproduced in plasticine with full-scale detail using aerial photographs. Tape marked trenches and flags marked strongpoints, and the diorama was updated daily using new intelligence. Officers and non-commissioned officers were given ample time to study it and work out plans to deal with problems they would encounter. All ranks became acquainted with their sector and the No Man’s Land they would have to cross. In reserve, every unit (from platoon to division) rehearsed their tasks, with an emphasis on realism. Mounted officers with flags moved forward at the pace of the rolling barrage to ensure that the timing would be well entrenched in the soldiers’ minds. Finally, units received hundreds of detailed maps produced to distribute to the soldiers. This was a truly innovative practice: maps and intelligence details before Vimy had been carefully protected and retained at higher levels. Before Vimy, they were given to corporals to share with their men so that everyone knew the details and could process the information accordingly. Thus, when the battle began, everyone knew his role in the assault, as well as those of his neighbour and his commander. Even privates felt trusted and shared in the responsibility for the enterprise—and the outcome.



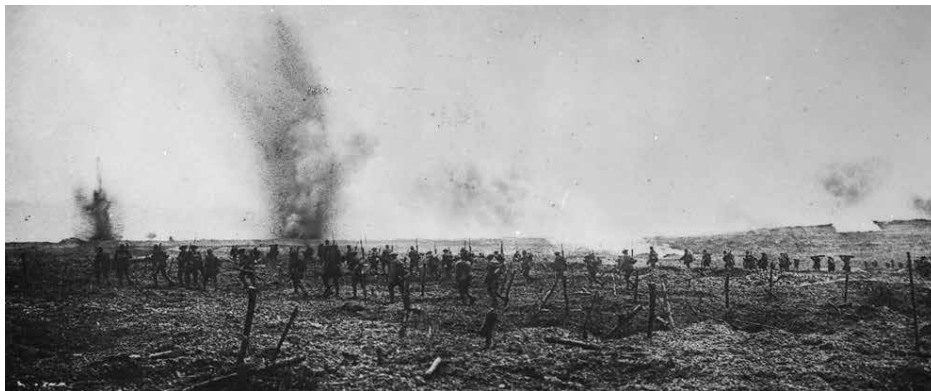
Canadians study a model of the German lines before the Battle of Vimy Ridge

The final way to reduce exposure to hostile firepower is through cover and concealment. On the tactical level, small units could make use of the topography—for example, shell holes could be used by a Lewis gun section to serve as a firebase for the unit. On a grander scale, however, the assaulting forces also benefited from concealment in protective tunnels that underlay much of the Vimy sector. Before

the Canadians arrived in the area, the British and Germans had long engaged in mining and anti-mining activities.²⁴ Canadian engineers dramatically expanded, improved, and reinforced these tunnels to provide security for the troops. Tunneling companies cut large dugouts into the chalky ground so men could mass in safety, and even laid electrical, water and telephone lines. Almost four miles of tunnels stretched to the front lines and the Canadians used them to bring forward men and supplies in the weeks before the attack. They played a vital function in keeping many troops out of the range of German weapons, and also helped the corps to conceal its movements. During the assault, they allowed for speedy evacuation of the wounded.

"The day of the attack everything had been prepared by weeks of toil and heavy work, [or] Vimy never would have been the success it was," Innis later noted. "The Canadian casualty list would have doubled and tripled had it not been for the painstaking preparation." Everyone, from staff officers to privates, had played a role: shovelling, sandbagging, calculating ammunition needs, "wearing out horses one by one" in carrying shells to the batteries.²⁵ The soldiers also found time, amidst the arduous work, to get into mischief. William Crabbe recalled his unit carting its own equipment (four guns, one in each cart) over a country road one day, with each man pulling in turn. "Along a very country road we saw a mule in a field next to the road with a halter on," he recounted. "Knowing that all mules must belong to the army, we decided to put it to work. Another lad along with myself went over and had no trouble in leading it onto the road where, with a series of ropes and straps, we attached it to the leading cart." They linked the other three to it and found themselves with "a very agreeable source of transport." Much to their dismay and disgust, the brigade major "appeared on the scene riding on his horse, attended by the usual groom." The officer immediately "demanded to know what kind of an army we thought we were, and to get rid of that damn mule and act like soldiers." Faced with no other choice, they complied reluctantly. Crabbe believed that they "managed to, in a sense, get even for that night" with an episode soon afterwards. "We had billets in an old dance hall in a small village," he reminisced. "Across the street was a fine good looking [chateau] which the brigade staff took over for themselves and, to put on a somewhat military appearance, assigned our unit to sentry duty ... [with] one soldier doing two hours pacing up and down in front of their quarters. Unfortunately, next to our billets there was a wine shop which was soon discovered, and anyone [who] had any money on them were very popular." One lad, when his turn to pace the walk came, "was loaded with French wine and performed his turn as sentry marching up and down, singing his favorite songs and dragging his rifle by the muzzle, it going 'clit cant' over the stone sidewalk." In due course the officers noticed and dismissed the inebriated soldier from his duties, and Crabbe noted with pleasure that "we had no more sentry duty that night."²⁶

The upcoming operation itself required more serious and sober activities. According to the plans drawn up by Byng and his divisional commanders, the Canadian Corps would attack on a front of seven kilometres stretching from Ecurie to west of Givenchy. The four Canadian divisions would be arranged side by side,

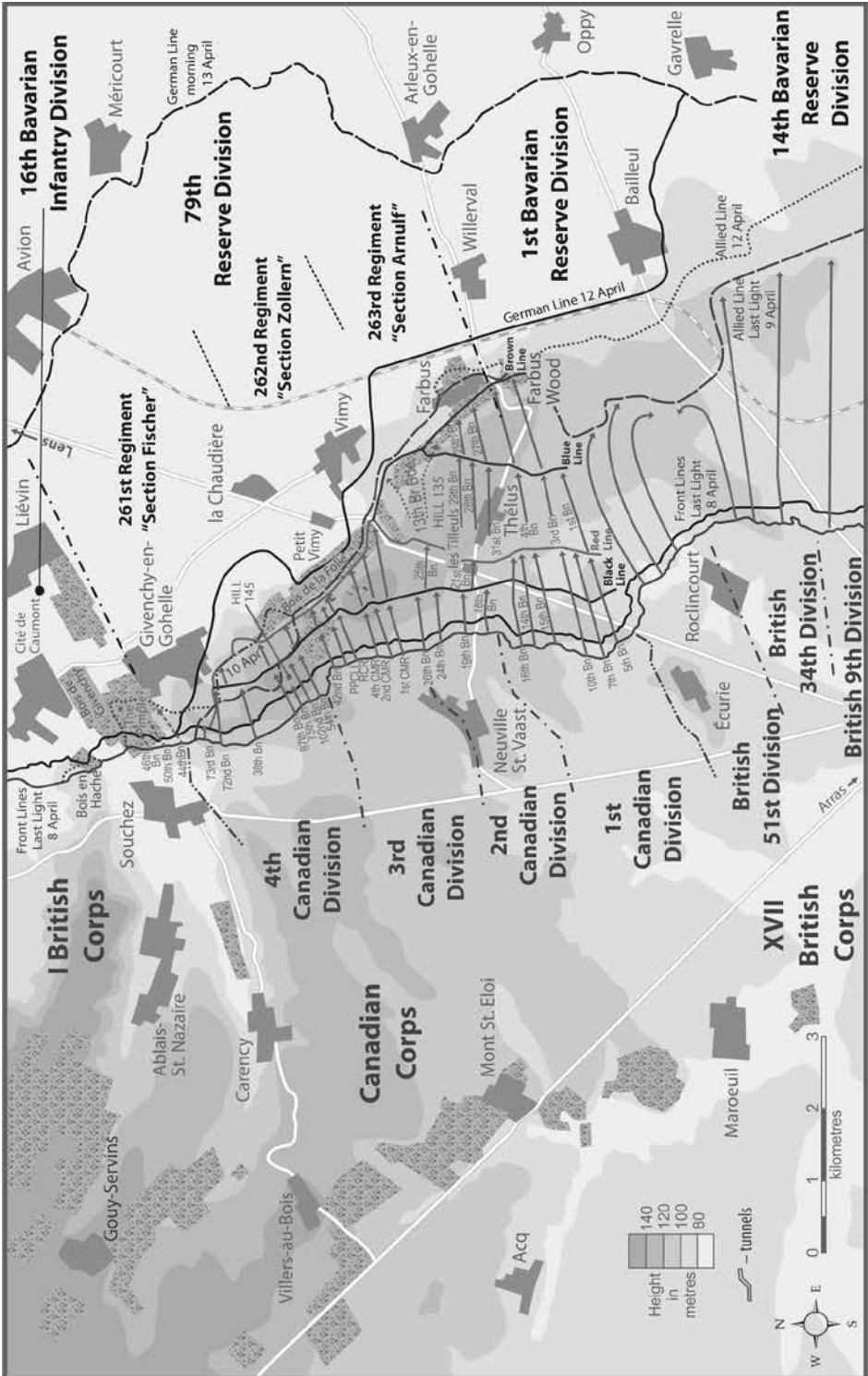


Canadians advancing through German barbed wire under heavy fire, April 1917

in numerical order from right to left. The operation would be conducted in four stages, and fresh troops would take over the advance from other units at planned intervals. The tasks of the Canadian divisions differed in scope because, while their trenches ran north and south and their advance was to be eastward, the Ridge ran from southeast to northwest. Divisions were to attack on two-brigade frontages, and capture of the first objective would carry the whole across the three enemy forward trenches for an average gain of 700 yards. The soldiers on the ground, who had practiced and rehearsed their roles, had no idea of when the attack would take place until the night before.

An old military adage holds that the “best laid plans never survive contact with the enemy.” In the case of Vimy Ridge, the plans generally worked. To an unusual extent the course of the Vimy assault can be followed by the orders issued. The Canadian artillery rained an almost endless stream of shells on top of the German positions in the weeks prior to the attack, and the villages of Thélus, Farbus, and Givenchy were systematically destroyed to deny them to the enemy, and at many points trench lines were completely demolished. In all, more than one million rounds of heavy and field ammunition battered the battlefield into a pock-marked wilderness of mud-filled craters. German ration parties found it difficult to even get to the front lines, where many companies went without food for days on end. The defenders aptly called the first week of April 1917 “the week of suffering.”²⁷

On the evening of Saturday, 7 April, the Canadian infantry battalions began to move forward to the assembly areas, and the barbed wire along the Canadian lines was cut so that the forward companies could move into No Man’s Land. By 04:00 the troops were in position, without alarming the German outposts barely 100 yards away. At 05:30 the batteries opened fire, and after three minutes of rapid fire on the German forward trench the field artillery barrage began to creep forward, lifting 100 yards every three minutes. Ahead of it, 150 machine guns created a bullet-swept zone. Simultaneously the heavy guns slammed the German battery positions and ammunition dumps with high explosive and gas shells to curtail their mobility. German observation posts that had not been destroyed were clouded by smoke and their telephone communications disrupted. The artillery fire plan went



The Battle of Vimy Ridge, 9-12 April 1917

well, and McNaughton's counter-battery work took out more than eighty percent of German guns before battle by using innovative spotting techniques. The Canadians were off to an auspicious start.

Harold Innis, whose battery had moved forward to just behind the line, "had an excellent view of the preliminary openings." He recalled:

Promptly at 5:30 a.m. all the guns along our stretch of the line opened up in a terrific barrage on the German front line. Immediately there were enormous numbers of signals going up from the German line and the German batteries began to play on our front line. Most of the work preparatory to the attack so far as the batteries were concerned had been that of systematically cutting the barbed wire in "No Man's Land" so that it would be easier for our infantry to get through. Patches of wire which had been missed or machine gun nests which had not been located held up various parts of the advance at different times. But immediately we were set to work digging the clay and preparing for the construction of the bridges across the trenches. At first, when the barrage lifted, the skyline was filled with a line of men who had gone over the top and were in the German trenches before the Germans had a chance to recover from the effects of the barrage. Small groups of German prisoners began almost immediately to filter back, as did groups of the wounded and of course the dead were to be found scattered over the whole area, both German and ours. The advance continued steadily as the second and third lines of German trenches were taken. The barrage lifted and the dugouts either mercilessly bombed and the men inside killed or the men allowed to come out and be taken prisoner.

Pte. Milfred Holdsworth, brother of Aubrey, who had sailed over to France with the Divisional Artillery Column the previous month, recounted to his mother who lived in Vandecar that "we knew to a minute when the boys were going over..., and it would have done your heart good to have heard the guns start the bombardment just before they began to advance. The first results were noticed about nine o'clock, when the prisoners began to pour in, and by noon they could be counted by the thousand."²⁸



Milfred Holdsworth

Although the Canadian artillery pounded the Germans with devastating effect during the Vimy battle, the situation was still dangerous for Canadian gunners. In a letter home to his family, Innis explained that he had "plenty of narrow escapes" on 9 April. "We were building bridges across the front line to get our guns over and talk about shells, one shell knocked the handle off the spade a fellow was carrying. Another shell whizzed past my coat and landed between the legs of the fellow next to me; luckily there was plenty of mud and they were gas shells. The most we did was to choke and spit and get our gas masks on." The bombardier with his crew received the Military Medal which, in Innis's view, proved that "we had no picnic." One German 59 shell "came over and nearly broke my eardrum," killing the second fellow behind him, "but we went on and as luck would have it our casualties were

few.”²⁹ Although “shells [burst] around us continuously,” Innis noted that the deep mud meant that, unless the Germans scored a direct hit, the damage was negligible. By late afternoon, Innis recalled that “the advance had reached a point where German batteries were being captured and only an occasional shell came over. The whole tension of our district had completely changed and it could be said that Vimy Ridge had been taken.”³⁰

The foot soldiers had a different experience than the artillerymen. The morning was snowy, and a driving wind blew the snow into the German defenders’ faces. This protection compensated for the discomfort felt by the Canadians as they shivered their way across the soggy, devastated landscape in the wake of the artillery barrage. The initial barrage caught the enemy by surprise, and by the time the German defenders tried to get out of their deep dugouts many found the Canadians already upon them. Pte. Stanley Vanderburgh,³¹ a 28-year-old druggist whose parents lived in Norwich and who fought with the 28th Battalion at Vimy, described to his mother in a letter soon after the event:

The work of the artillery is unsurpassed. The report is that it was the most intense of the war. At the exact tick of the watch it opened up words cannot express what happened. Before many seconds the sky was lurid. Apparently the enemy was surprised. He sent up an observation balloon and soon after we got something in return. He hadn’t anything strong enough for our boys and before long the prisoners started to come in on the run.

It was hard to wait for the word but finally it came and we were away. There was scarcely a bit of ground beyond the German front line that our shells had not turned over. I tried some of the German rations and found them not too bad. I also appropriated a great coat, which came in very useful, for three nights in the open without sleep is rather trying. The provoking part was that when the opportunity came, my eyes would not stay closed.

One thing I remember during the advance was a chap turning a moving picture machine. I was walking right into it at the time, so were you to cultivate the ‘movie’ habit, you might see it all and save my telling you.

When we reached our objective we had to dig in for cover. I think those holes went down a little faster than the post holes father and I used to dig. My first attempt was unfortunate for location. I crawled in with my legs sticking out and tried to sleep a little. I was awakened by an explosion and a sharp pain in my right leg. I was just congratulating myself on a trip to the hospital when I discovered it was only a clod of earth that had travelled from a new shell hole. The place looked unsafe so I moved away. My judgment was vindicated later in the afternoon when I saw my former residence disappear.³²

The events of that morning were also recounted in great detail by 36-year-old Cpl. Arthur Thomas Smallman. Born in Kent, England, he had moved with his wife Gertrude to Eastwood, Ontario, where he worked as a railway section man when war broke out. He enlisted with the 71st Battalion in January 1916, soon after Prime Minister Borden pledged to increase the Canadian Corps to a half million men. He

served with the 44th Battalion at the Somme, received a gunshot wound to the face in early February 1917, and returned almost immediately to his unit only to sustain another wound in action on 3 March. By the end of the month he was back and preparing for the much-anticipated battle to take the vaunted ridge. His description of the Vimy assault is worth quoting at length:

It was late afternoon on April 8, 1917, when we marched from our billets at Bovigny to take up our old position on Vimy Ridge. At last, after nearly four months of weary waiting, we were going to try something definite – nothing more or less than storming the famous German stronghold which she had held so long.

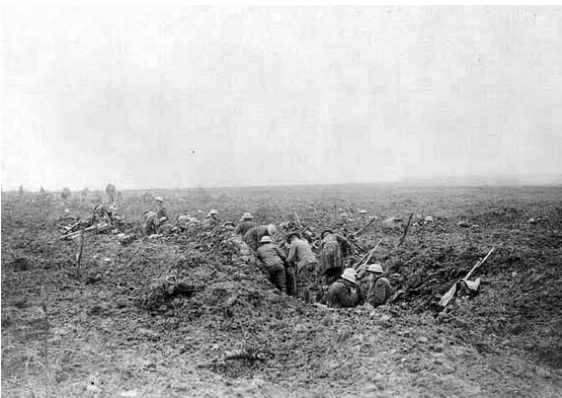
Every officer and N.C.O. knew the part his platoon or section had to play in the great game. We went into a tunnel that night as the 11th brigade on our right was going to advance first and open the attack. At about 4:30 a.m. on the 9th, hell seem to be suddenly let loose, when the 11th brigade blew a mine and advanced. They made their objective and held on in fine style. We were lucky to be underground, for the enemy certainly hammered our side of the Ridge and Zouave Valley with his artillery in retaliation of our barrage. Away to the right at Farbus Wood, the enemy had, by means of strong batteries with machine guns placed in the Wood partly held up the advance, and we were ordered away to reinforce.

We started from the old Music Hall Trench about noon on the 9th and proceeded overland in extended order toward the German line. As we advanced we passed on our road comrades who had fallen that morning, cut down by the heavy machine gun fire. Everything was fairly quiet, when at last we arrived in our frontline trench and took up our positions.

We were settling down in our new quarters and making ourselves comfortable, as only a soldier can, in any old place, when down the trench came the order, “get ready to advance.” Rifles and bayonets were examined, pins of bombs straightened ready for pulling, and everything made ready for Fritz’s comfort. Then came the awful wait, which is always worse than the actual “going over.” In these few moments I remembered studying the faces of the men in my section. I was rather anxious about them, as most of them are new and have never been over before, and I was an NCO, I knew what we were up against here. We were going to rush a strong enemy position in broad open daylight. However, there was no sign of wavering anywhere. Perhaps a little more serious than usual was the expression of those faces, but everywhere the old bulldog breeding plainly showed. Some were actually living the last moments of their young lives, though of course they did not know it. Suddenly the signal came; the barrage opened up and just above our heads we heard the whining roar of the shells as they sped on their way to Fritz. Then everyone commenced to climb out of the trench. We ran forward a few yards and down we flopped as instructed, and opened up rapid fire at the enemy, who was also getting out of his trench to meet us, and his machine guns were all ready thinning our ranks.

Then we got the signal to advance and with the hoarse yell which could be heard above the din of bursting shells, we ran steadily forward, down the hill toward the sinister grey figures which were advancing to meet us. These were the famous Prussian Guard, whom Kaiser Bill thought were the best infantry in the world. Perhaps they were, but they could not stop the thin relentless Canadian khaki line which came on and on and fairly overwhelmed them. Soon we were right amongst them, shooting and thrusting, and cleaning up things generally. It sure was lively while it lasted. Four pent-up months of waiting on the ridge was coming out. I had the supreme satisfaction of putting my bayonet clean through a big squarehead who was in the act of potting a comrade on my left. He suddenly lost all interest in surrounding events. We jumped into the enemy trench and the day was ours. We could see Fritz "beating it" away over the plain towards Avion and Lens. We were relieved the same night by another battalion and made our way back to our old position. The next day, 10th April, was spent in re-organizing our platoons, for there was more grim work for us to do. We were to take "the pimple" at dawn the next morning. At midnight we filed across the duckwalk from Souchez Dump and climbed Coberg Avenue, then took our position in Wilson Street, as our front line was named. Here we waited for the dawn or zero hour. It was bitterly cold and snowing heavily and we were very miserable as we lay and crouched in the saps which formed the jumping off point. Hour after hour we waited, our limbs numbed and frozen, the soft so snow settling on us and covering us as we lay there, almost motionless.

About five o'clock up she started, and at last the show was on. We started over in a whirling snowstorm, which fortunately for us was in our backs and fairly blinded the Germans in front of us. Our luck was sure in that morning, for we took the first three lines of the enemy trench with hardly a single casualty. It was rather weird to see a bunch of Fritz's suddenly bob up here and there with hands flying up and howling a chorus of "mercy, kamerad." We made our objective just as morning broke and quickly dug in, about a quarter of a mile from the ruined village of Givenchy, which the enemy still held, but evacuated during the day as our artillery began to level the ruins and made the place untenable.



Canadians dig in under heavy shell fire, 9 April 1917

You should have seen us "dig in" that morning, talk about shovel dirt; why a steam digger had nothing on us. We knew that if we did not get out of sight before broad daylight we would be targets for German snipers and artillery. There were not any shirkers that morning. Everybody seemed anxious to work, officers and all. After a bit, the

enemy began to get busy on our position, and things got lively for us. They got several direct hits on our trench but we hung on grimly. I had my machine gun placed in a large shell hole, in a position which afforded a clean field of fire and at the same time gave excellent cover for the gunners. I was making my way down the trench to see to something else, when a heavy shell burst right in the emplacement and killed the whole gun crew, nine men and blew the gun to pieces. It was an awful site that greeted me when I rushed back. Just mangled pieces was all that was left of the comrades with whom I had been chatting but a short minute before. We buried them on the spot, marking the place as best we could marking the place with a rifle stuck in the ground upside down, a very familiar sight on the battle fields of France. The next day we were relieved by Imperial troops, and marched back to our billets, tired out but triumphant, for we had accomplished one of the greatest achievements of the war – the taking of Vimy Ridge.³³

As Smallman intimated, the attack by Currie's 1st Division on the right side of the corps front went like clockwork – so much so that the Army Commander praised the division as the “pride and wonder of the British Army.” Within thirty minutes, the six assaulting battalions had cleared all three German forward defence trenches. They paused as planned, consolidated the objective, and then the rear companies leapfrogged to continue the advance under a creeping barrage and captured the German intermediate line. Twenty-five-year-old Pte. Edgar Beeney, an insurance agent from Holbrook (who, like Smallman, had been born in Kent, England), had enlisted in late August 1914 and went overseas with the first contingent, serving with the 9th Battalion throughout the war. In a letter to a friend back home after the battle, he extolled “the splendid work of the first Canadian division in the recent fighting.” As he summarized, “briefly, its record is this: it attacked on the widest frontage, penetrated to the greatest depth, took more guns, more machine guns, more prisoners, and suffered the heaviest casualties of any of the Divisions.” The fighting had been “very severe, and should not be misconstrued in the light of a walk over.” In his assessment, the division succeeded principally because it had a good plan. Second, the artillery preparation and support “was simply splendid. The new 106 fuse work splendidly, and consequently no one was held up by wire. The barrages were also excellent,” he emphasized. “The men had also been all thoroughly instructed as to what this mission was to be before they under took the work, and many rehearsals of the attack had been held previously. Close study was made of the best method of overcoming every trench, every centre of re-



A wounded Canadian soldier gets bandaged up

sistance and meeting every possible counter-attack.” When the attack actually happened, the officers had proven “real leaders, as the casualties will testify.” Beeney noted another factor, one that was harder to quantify: “the confidence the men had that they were going to win.” He recounted how pipers played some Highland regiments across the battlefield, and later returned to do the same for other units. “It will be a grand story to tell when the time comes,” the soldier added.³⁴

Across the Vimy front, the Canadian Corps performed admirably. The experience of the 2nd Canadian Division, advancing on a frontage of 1400 yards, was similar to that of 1st Division. Despite taking severe machine gun fire from point-blank range, its soldiers also reached their second objective — Thélus — right on schedule and there, through the snow and smoke, they could see the rounded summit of Hill 135. No one could be certain that the Germans were retreating, so the Corps stuck to the pre-planned artillery program. At 08:35, the reserve brigades joined the attack. By 11:00, these divisions had captured their third objectives, including the decimated village of Thélus and the fortified ground north of it. At midday they cleared the second system of trenches on the reverse slope of the ridge and passed through Farbus. By late afternoon, patrols penetrated to the railway embankment and the divisions consolidated their gains in anticipation of a counter-attack.

Cpl. James Patrick “Jim” Maher, an Irishman from Tipperary who had worked for Jim McNally in Burgessville before enlisting, told his father in Tillsonburg about “the big drive and the way we pulled it off,” describing the action as being “like taking taffy from a baby, the way we went after the Germans.” Unfortunately, he lamented, “we lost quite a few good men.” Maher had joined the 168th in early January 1916 and was taken on strength by the 21st (Eastern Ontario) Battalion in France in early February 1917. His actual descriptions of the battle as part of a unit in 2nd Division conceded that it had been far from easy. “Say, it was an awful day that,” he wrote to his father, “It was Easter Monday, and at 5:30 a.m. all the big guns started on the dot. There were 1,500 guns behind us. You should have heard them. It was awful. I will never forget that day as long as I live.” He summed up the casualties succinctly. “A lot of the 168th boys got it. Some got a R.I.P., and some got blightys, and some got slight ones, so they will be back in the firing line soon.” He was a direct witness to various casualties, including “five killed not two feet away from me. One was from the 168th Battalion. Five or six were wounded. One was Bruce Mayo [a local Ontario Hockey Association star] from Tillsonburg. He got his in the arm, but a good one.” Maher’s final flourish offered typical optimism:

Well, dad, we have got them on the run this time, and I think they will soon throw up the white flag, for they can’t stand it much longer with all our artillery firing at them all the time. All they can do is to meet us and throw up their hands and yell, ‘Mercy, kamerad.’ They won’t fight us at all. They are fed up with fighting, I guess.³⁵

This hardly proved the case.³⁶

3rd Canadian Division was fortunate in that the artillery had destroyed so much of the enemy defences that the Germans could not mount any serious resistance on their front. By 07:34 a.m. on 9 April, 7th & 8th Brigades had secured their final

(second) objectives, comprising roughly a mile of the crest of Vimy Ridge. Units sustained casualties from snipers as they moved down the wooded eastern slope, and their susceptibility to enemy fire owed to the problems encountered by 4th Division, which endured the hardest fighting of the day. 11th Brigade (on the right) ran into a serious German strongpoint on Hill 145 – the highest and most important feature on the entire ridge. The Germans had repaired their position after an earlier bombardment, and the Canadians found it difficult to overcome the battered landscape as they attacked on an upward slope. Without the benefit of surprise (and with German trenches left intact because one of the assaulting battalion commanders had asked the artillery not to destroy a portion of the German trenches in anticipation that it could be used after capture), machine gun fire and uncut wire pinned down the Canadians and impeded their advance. On the left 12th Brigade had made good progress at first, but could not advance owing to the resistance at Hill 145. It was not until the following day that two fresh battalions were able to take the summit of that key feature.³⁷

The Canadian Corps sustained 7707 casualties on 9 April and early 10 April, making it the costliest day in Canadian military history. More Canadians lost their lives on the first day of the Vimy battle than during the battles of Dieppe (1942) and D-Day (1944) combined. “The high casualty rate does not detract from the victory,” historian Tim Cook notes somberly, “but it is worth remembering that the sober work of the Canadian infantry in the days following the capture of the ridge was often made up of scouring the battlefield for their fallen comrades, sewing them in their blankets, and burying them in mass graves.”³⁸ No one on the battlefield could fail to notice the casualties. “The burial parties and ambulance corps had taken care to a very important extent of the wounded and the dead,” Harold Innis recalled. “But the snow of the night of April 9th fell on great numbers of dead men whom we saw the next day.”³⁹ When community members back home eventually read the casualty lists in the *Norwich Gazette* on 17 May, the costs were obvious. Pte. John Stewart, who had been born in Scotland and immigrated to Canada to work at the Hillcrest Fruit Farm before moving to Norwich, had enlisted locally with the 168th and was the first member of the unit to arrive in France. He was killed at Vimy on 10 April. Pte. Harvey Searls, whose parents lived in Norwich, received a gunshot wound to his chest and shoulder. Pte. Harold McLachlan, who was living in Norwich when he enlisted with the 168th, suffered a gunshot wound to his shoulder. Lieut. Samuel Hudson Johnson, the son of Dr. Johnson (who gave up his medical practice in Burgessville to enlist for overseas service), had received a gunshot wound in the chest. Furthermore, Lieut. Arthur Barton Rowe, a former clerk at Molson’s bank in Norwich, was wounded by shrapnel while advancing with the 27th Battalion at Farbus on 10 April.⁴⁰ Even this partial list makes the basic point: victory came at a price.

“It is one thing to take ground and another to hold,” Stanley Vanderburgh noted in a letter home immediately after the battle. “At one time things looked dark and an officer said to me in looking back over the distance covered, ‘God help the man who tries to relieve us,’ and I could only reply, ‘God help us if we do not get relief.’”



Canadians on the crest of Vimy Ridge overlooking Douai Plain and the retreating Germans, April 1917

The stresses and strains of sitting on captured ground, anticipating German counterattacks, and preparing for the next push, taxed everyone's nerves. "The hours that then passed were more trying than the advance," Vanderburgh described. "We were cold and hungry. I used my last drop of water and some letters for fuel to make a cup of tea." When the soldiers, already "beaten through fatigue and exposure," received word that

the enemy was massing for a counter-attack, he recalled that "there were few complaints as we silently cleaned our bayonets and looked to the ammunition." They had gone three nights without sleep at this point, but could hardly rest with the prospect of a German attack. Private Vanderburgh extolled that "nothing could make one more proud of our Canadian boys than the way they faced the word that we would have to wait." When he wrote his letter on 12 April, exhausted and with shattered nerves, he was explicitly grateful to the soldiers that relieved his unit on the front lines. "Thank God relief came and we are back in billets [sic] and I wish them luck. We are preparing for the next time."

The Canadians managed to hold the ground captured on the first day of the battle and consolidated their gains in the days ahead. The German army commander had held back his reserves far in the rear, expecting that his front line units would be able to defend their positions for an extended period. Accordingly, when the Canadian Corps attacked, he did not launch an immediate counter-attack. When he realized that the Canadians had gained substantial ground, he tried to move his units forward but artillery reconnaissance aircraft harassed them over the Douai plain, helping to ensure that effective counter-attacks never materialized. The German positions became increasingly untenable. On 10 April, the reserve brigade of 4th Division assaulted the two remaining German trenches on the reverse slope of Hill 145 using a creeping barrage. The Canadians overran and cleared both within thirty minutes. By this point, the Canadian Corps occupied nearly all of its original objectives. From the "Pimple," however, the Germans continued to rain down fire on 3rd and 4th Divisions. During the early hours of 12 April, the Canadians surprised the Guards Regiment manning the position. Heavy fighting followed, and by 6 a.m. the Canadians had captured the position. The ridge was now wholly in Canadian hands: a remarkable feat given the failure of previous British and French attempts to take what had seemed to be an impregnable German position.

For some soldiers, such as Pte. Clare Dougherty of Curries Crossing, the battle

had brought near continuous action, and his “conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty” at Vimy earned him a Military Medal. A cheese maker prior to enlisting with the 33rd Battalion in August 1915, Dougherty joined the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles (CMR) in France on 9 June 1916. He had fought at the Somme and endured the rainy winter that followed, breaking the monotony with sports and special scout training in preparation for the Vimy assault.⁴¹ His citation explained that he volunteered for night raids whenever he could, entering the enemy’s trenches on 3 January 1917 and “bringing back most valuable information,” and bombing a German working party on 4 February, “causing them severe casualties.” During the battle itself, he continued with aggressive patrolling to great effect:

On the night of the 9th April, he led a patrol through La Folie Wood, across the Battn Frontage, bringing back most valuable information. On the afternoon of the 10th April, he volunteered and accompanied the Scout Officer on a battle patrol, and helped to locate the presence of the enemy in La Folie Wood, bringing back valuable information, as to their disposition and numbers. It was largely due to him that the patrols returned without a casualty. On the morning of the 11th April, he again volunteered and accompanied the Scout Officer on a battle patrol, when they penetrated to the bottom of the wood, without finding any signs of the enemy. On the evening of the 12th April when it was reported that the enemy were in La Folie Wood, he again led a patrol through the wood, bringing back the information that the enemy had retired.⁴²

For troops like the members of the 4th CMR who had been in the line continuously since the battle began, “under the most trying weather conditions without blankets or greatcoats and with a very meagre rest the night before the attack,” the end of the battle brought welcome relief. The hastily improvised Dumbell Camp, with its mediocre tents pitched on muddy ground without floorboards, was hardly comfortable, but the exhausted troops could at least rest “after this unusually arduous time.”⁴³

The German defenders were clearly stunned by the Canadians’ rapid success. They could not counter-attack without going up the actual face of the ridge where they would meet the Canadian machine guns. The Canadian Corps had also practiced using German artillery, and turned the German guns on the retreating forces. Holding positions in the front lines remained dangerous – Pte. Harry Sackrider of Norwich, serving with the 4th Canadian Machine Gun Company, was hit by shrapnel on 13 April and died of his wounds shortly afterwards.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the Germans made a general withdrawal to new lines about three miles east (to eliminate the advantages of observation offered by the ridge) that same day. The whole Corps advanced their front accordingly, but patrols came up against stiff resistance along the forward defences of the German lines. The Allied heavy guns could not be moved forward to support another infantry attack until the obliterated roads were rebuilt, so the Canadians stayed put for the moment. No one planned to exploit the breakthrough. The Corps dug in on the line of the Lens-Arras railway, a gain of 4500 yards. They had advanced two and a half miles in rapid succession and cap-

tured the ridge, 54 German guns, 104 trench mortars, and over 4000 prisoners in a stunning tactical victory.

The Canadian operations at Vimy were not intended to be a strategic breakthrough, so the decision to halt them after taking the ridge does not diminish the achievement. "For the next period neither the Germans nor the Canadians in the vicinity of Vimy Ridge could move," Harold Innis recalled. "It was only with time that roads were built and the batteries carried up to the front or behind Vimy Ridge and observation posts established on the ridge." The German guns were either blown up or destroyed, and the Canadians did not immediately establish their new front line below the ridge. For its part, Innis's battery moved up first "from a position near what was called Seven Elms," where it remained "for a considerable period."⁴⁵

The first phase of the Battle of Arras ended on 14 April 1917. During the first battle of the Scarpe, Third British Army had good success in front of Arras but failed to penetrate the Hindenburg Line. Nonetheless, their advance - combined with the Canadian advance at Vimy - resulted in the capture of more ground and more prisoners than any previous British offensive on the Western Front. By contrast, Nivelle's French offensive on the Ch  min des Dames was a bloody failure and was followed by so-called "mutinies" within the French armies. The British Army, including the Canadian Corps, would have to take over the rest of the year's campaigns, prompting their focus to shift north to the blood-stained fields of Flanders.

Vimy Ridge was a famous victory. The media in Britain, France, and in Canada painted it as a triumph of arms - and so it was. On the lower "tactical" level, the



Soldiers celebrate their victory and their return to the rear after the Battle of Vimy Ridge

operations represented a sound plan carried through successfully. All of the arms and services had accomplished their objectives in a creative and meticulous set-piece attack that acquired the limited objectives that the Corps had been asked to take. Understandably, the victory at Vimy sent Corps spirits soaring. The Canadians had captured a hitherto impregnable position: arguably the most resounding British success to that point in war. With the strategic failure of the April 1917 offensives more generally, this bright light attracted significant attention. British newspapers trumpeted it as a *Canadian* victory, suggesting that the senior dominion was truly coming of age. Promotions and accolades followed. Byng became commander of the Third British Army - and he explicitly thanked the Canadians for getting him there. Arthur Currie, militiaman turned professional soldier, was knighted by King George V on 4 June and was promoted to command the Canadian Corps on

9 June.⁴⁶ Taking Vimy Ridge did not tilt the outcome of the war, but it marked the Canadian Corps' maturation from an amateur force to a professional allied formation.

Stanley Vanderburgh's letter to his parents, penned on 12 April from Vimy Ridge and later printed in full in the *Norwich Gazette*, offers a touching and personal account of what the victory meant to the Canadians and the rollercoaster of emotions that the battle evoked:

Dear Father and Mother:-

There is great joy in the Canadian Camp tonight.

Long before this I suppose you have news of the 9th and 10th. As I saw the day approaching, how I wanted to write and tell you all about it. However the thing is on now and the Canadian papers will be sensational enough.

Before going in, I did write and left the letter to be mailed – tonight I can burn it, thanks to our beneficial Father.

With all of our rejoicing one cannot but feel humble gratitude for His Mercy.

The real story of these things can never be written. From a military view point the precision and judgment was marvelous and full justice will probably be done in the paper. The experiences of the soldier himself [are] another matter and can never be fully told.

It is all over now for a while anyways and I don't know what to say. I feel as though we have gone through the whole gamut of human experience. There were moments, which went quickly, while some hours seemed an eternity.

The long wait for dawn, the preliminary barrage of our artillery, the firing of the enemy when he found our range, the steady advance shoulder to shoulder, then gaining our position, and finally holding it against an enemy gaining in strength is a lot for a few hours – but a man lives years.

Vanderburgh came away particularly impressed with “the keenness of a man's faculties under fire.” He explained that, in the midst of battle, “every sense is responsive and receptive. I don't think I missed anything. The expression on men's faces made an indelible impression. The features of one face stood out so clearly. I can never forget. Men I never noticed before. I shall never forget.” Individuals' responses varied to the stresses of combat. “Some sing snatches of songs, others smoke, others smile, while some curse,” he described.⁴⁷ Whatever the coping mechanism, no one came away unmarked by the experience.

Twenty-five-year-old Pte. Frank Edwin Malcolm, who was raised in South Norwich Township and whose name appears on the Otterville cenotaph, came out of the Vimy battle uninjured – but clearly marked by the experience. Leaving his job as a grocer and enlisting in Calgary in October 1915, he had joined the 10th Battalion in France in September 1916⁴⁸ and had fought at the Somme. In his eyes, Vimy was something truly special – despite the severe losses that the battalion sustained

and the ever-changing winter conditions that the soldiers endured while manning semi-destroyed positions near Farbus Wood after the battle.⁴⁹ “It will be a long time before I will forget Vimy Ridge,” he wrote to his father soon afterwards. “That was the day we went over the top and made a good success. You will see by the papers that the Canadians won a great victory, and they sure did, and I am glad to say I went through it all right, but one big piece of shrapnel hit me on the back. It knocked me out for a few minutes. My haversack on my back saved me from a wound and no doubt it would have been a nasty one.”⁵⁰ Malcolm also wrote to his father about his cousin Harold Nethercott,⁵¹ who had enlisted with the 133rd in Simcoe and had arrived overseas only a few weeks after Frank. They had met up near Vimy, where Harold was preparing for battle with the 14th Battalion. “I have never seen Harold since the advance, but think he will be all right,” Malcolm wrote hopefully. “Will look him up as soon as I can.” Alas, his relatives in Norwich had the unpleasant task of informing Frank that his cousin had indeed been killed at Vimy.⁵²

The newspapers back home, however, echoed the “great joy” that Stanley Vanderburgh had predicted rather than dwelling on the sorrows associated with great sacrifice. In Woodstock, the *Daily Sentinel-Review* told readers that “The King Congratulates the Canadians on the Capture by Them of Vimy Heights.” The ridge was not just a national achievement, but one worthy of celebration across the Empire. “The big London papers are loud in their praise of the Canadians for capturing Vimy Heights, which have been held resolutely by the Germans as the great bastion fortress of the western front lines since the third month of the war,” the local paper boasted.⁵³ While the newspapers initially indicated that the losses were “surprisingly light,” a regular stream of casualty lists told otherwise. For Martin Swance, a farmer from Springford who received the devastating telegram informing him that George, one of his three serving sons, had been killed on the second day of fighting at Vimy Ridge, the victory was bittersweet at best.

For historians, Vimy represents a crucial transition in Canadian self-esteem and national identity. The battle was the first time that all four divisions of the Canadian Corps fought together, providing a tremendous boost to morale. Although more than half of the Canadian Corps were British-born in 1917, this did not make the force inherently British rather than Canadian. Nearly every commentator on the battle—then and since—has recited the views of the soldiers who were there that something special happened: that the soldiers *became* Canadian in that particular battle, giving the Corps a unique identity that it would retain through to the end of the war. Historian Pierre Berton suggested that the Canadian national identity was forged on the slopes of Vimy, with the soldiers going up the hill as colonials and coming down as Canadians:

It has become commonplace to say that Canadians came of age at Vimy Ridge. For seventy years it has been said so often – in Parliament, at hundreds of Vimy dinners and in thousands of Remembrance Day addresses, in newspaper editorials, school texts, magazine articles, and more than a score of books about Vimy and Canada’s role in the Great War – that it is almost an article of faith. Thus it is difficult to untangle the reality from the rhetoric.

Was Vimy the source of Canada's awareness of itself as an independent nation or the product of it?

... Does it matter? What counts is that in the minds of Canadians Vimy took on a mythic quality in the post-war years, and Canada was short of myths. There is something a little desperate – a little wistful – in the commentaries of the twenties and the thirties and even later, in which Canadians assured one another over and over again that at Vimy, Canada had at last found its maturity.⁵⁴

Vimy Ridge also had significant repercussions in political terms. In late 1916, Canadian prime minister Robert Borden met with the new British prime minister David Lloyd George, who conceded to his demands that since Canada was playing such a big part on the battlefield it deserved a say in the higher direction of the war. Canada had earned a seat in the Imperial War Cabinet by the time of the Vimy battle: it was at the centre of decision-making regarding the imperial war effort. The victory thus fed Borden's vision that the dominions, and particularly Canada, were saving the mother country and winning the war. At the Imperial War Council held in April 1917, Borden pushed (like usual) for a greater Canadian voice in the Empire. He helped to author the famous Resolution IX, stating that Britain and dominions agreed to a new constitutional status "based upon a full recognition of the dominions as autonomous nations of an imperial commonwealth." The formal change in status would wait until after the war, but this agreement-in-principle proved a watershed in Canada's constitutional development. The dominions would enjoy equal status to Britain herself and play a role in imperial foreign and defence policy.

The magnitude of this conjuncture of events cannot be underestimated. Canada won national recognition, and the blood Canadians spilled during the victory at Vimy symbolically earned the country its burgeoning status in the Empire. By linking contributions and gains, however, Borden could hardly retract his "sacred promise" to raise a Canadian force of 500,000 men. The victory at Vimy Ridge had been extremely costly (10,500 casualties in four days) and had drained the Canadian Corps. A growing infantry crisis ensued. There were only 3000 voluntary enlistments in Canada in April and May, and the British army was desperate for men. In London, Borden learned of widespread French mutinies, the collapse of the Eastern front, and German submarine warfare successes. It was not about wanting men—it was about needing men. The need for infantry replacements after the "Vimy drain" put Canada on the slippery slope to conscription, an issue that would bitterly divide the country in late 1917.



"Ghosts of Vimy Ridge," painting by Will Longstaff. Spectres in uniform appear at night, moving back towards the Canadian lines, in front of the Canadian National Vimy Ridge Memorial. The French donated a 250-acre portion of the former battlefield site to Canada, and the monument (designed by Canadian sculptor Walter S. Allward and unveiled by King Edward VIII on 26 July 1936) remains Canada's largest overseas war memorial. Longstaff's painting hangs in the Railway Committee Room on Parliament Hill, serving as a reminder of the sacrifices made by Canadians during the Great War.

Notes

- 1 See R.A. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005), and C. Fall, *Military Operations France and Belgium 1917: The German Retreat to the Hindenburg Line and the Battles of Arras* (London: Imperial War Museum and Battery Press, 1992 [1940]).
- 2 Harold Innis, "Memoir of Harold Adams Innis Covering the Years 1894 - 1922," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 29, no.2 (2004).
- 3 Tim Cook, *The Sharp End* (Toronto: Penguin, 2016), 81.
- 4 Innis, "Memoir."
- 5 William Barker Crabbe, "As it was in the Beginning," 13, Norwich and District Museum and Archives (NDMA).
- 6 S.J. Eaton to Mr. Henry Poole, "Letter from the Front," 1 February 1917, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 1 March 1917.
- 7 "Douglas Schell Writes from France," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 22 March 1917.
- 8 Jason Wilson, "A visit with the Dumbells, Canadian sketch comedy pioneers from the trenches of World War I," <https://www.ludwig-van.com/toronto/2013/06/12/a-visit-with-the-dumbells-canadian-sketch-comedy-pioneers-from-the-trenches-of-world-war-i/>. For a more detailed treatment, see Wilson, *Soldiers of Song: The Dumbells and Other Canadian Concert Parties of the First World War* (Waterloo: WLU Press, 2012). See also Patrick O'Neill, "The Canadian Concert Party in France," *Theatre Research in Canada* 4, no.2 (1983), <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/tric/article/view/7462/8521>.

9 Douglas Schell to William Schell, 2 February 1917, "Douglas Schell Writes from France," printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 22 March 1917.

10 This reflected topography—and the long-standing belief that the existing defences were already unimpeachable. Because the ridge tapered off on the far side and the British held the ground up to the forward slope to the west, defence in depth was difficult to conceptualize. The Germans planned to attack the Canadian lines later in the spring of 1917, in hopes of acquiring the ground necessary to build deep defences, but the Nivelles offensive came before these were put into place. The commander of the German Sixth Army, General von Falkenhausen, had seven divisions in line across the whole Vimy-Arras sector. He believed this would be sufficient to repel any attack; the Allies were to attack with 18 divisions (roughly a 2.5:1 ratio). Two divisions waited on the lines directly in front of the Canadians (a 1:2 ratio), and the remaining divisions were withheld far behind the German lines in strategic reserve, with the intention of committing them only if the front broke. When the Canadians attacked on 9 April, these reinforcements never came. The results proved calamitous for the Germans.

11 Innis, "Memoir." See also Innis letters, 10 March 1917 and 24 March 1917, in *Harold Innis Reflects: Memoir and WWI Writings/Correspondence*, eds. William J. Buxton, Michael Cheney, and Paul Heyer (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 144, 145.

12 Innis, "Memoir."

13 Innis, "Memoir"; and Innis letter, 24 March 1917, in *Harold Innis Reflects*, 145.

14 "Aviators Get Plenty of Real Excitement," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 19 May 1917.

15 The twin-1MG 08 machine gun-armed Albatros D.II and D.III were superior to the Airco DH.2 and F.E.8, Nieuport 17, and Sopwith Pup fighters charged with protecting the vulnerable B.E.2c, F.E.2b, and Sopwith 1-1/2 Strutter two-seater reconnaissance and bomber machines. Although the SPAD S.VII and Sopwith Triplane could compete more favourably with the German Albatros, they were few in number and sparsely dispersed across the front.

16 See Peter Hart, *Bloody April: Slaughter in the Skies over Arras, 1917* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005).

17 Tim Cook, "'A Proper Slaughter': The March 1917 Gas Raid at Vimy Ridge," *Canadian Military History* 8, no.2 (Spring 1999), 7-23.

18 Soldier file, Dennis, George Ede, 472944, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 2442 – 64.

19 At the Vimy front in early 1917, Lt. Reginald Cattell received the Military Cross for conspicuous gallantry with the 71st Battalion when he organized and led a successful raid and demolished a mine shaft, inflicting many casualties. Born in Paris, France, Cattell had lived in Norwich before moving on to work for the Bell Telephone Company in Woodstock. "Reginald Cattell has the Military Cross," *Norwich Gazette*, 15 March 1917.

20 The density was one heavy gun for every 20 yards of frontage and one field gun for every 10 yards. The daily quota was more than 2500 tons, and more than 42,500 tons in bulk.

21 That the artillery was able to take out the enemy batteries, particularly in light of difficult weather conditions, was because McNaughton and his staff also dedicated tremendous attention to overcoming accuracy limitations that had plagued the British gunners. An example: they calibrated each gun individually because of its distinct barrel wear depending on its age and use.

22 Bill Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps, 1914-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

23 Crabbe, "As it was in the Beginning," 13.

24 In the troglodyte world of mining, opposing forces tried to sneak huge quantities of explosives under enemy positions and blow them up. Massive craters, like the Grange Crater at Vimy Ridge, leave tangible reminders of this practice for visitors today. See Michael Boire, "Underground War: Military Mining Operations in Support of the Attack on Vimy Ridge, 9 April 1917," *Canadian Military History* 1, no. 1-2 (Autumn 1992).

25 Harold Innis, "Draft of a 4 Minute Men Talk," Harold A. Innis Fonds, University of Toronto Archives, B1972-0003, box 4, file 4.

26 Crabbe, "As it was in the Beginning," 13-14.

27 On the Germans at Vimy, see Andrew Godefroy, "The German Army at Vimy Ridge," in *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, eds. Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci, and Michael Bechthold (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), 225-38; Jack Sheldon, *The German Army on Vimy Ridge, 1914-1917* (London: Pen & Sword, 2008); and Holger Herwig, "'The Battle-Fortune of Marshal Hindenburg is not Bound up with the Possession of a Hill': The Germans and Vimy Ridge, April 1917," *Canadian Military History* 25, no. 2 (2016): 1-26.

28 M. V. Holdsworth letter in *Letters From The Front: Being A Record Of The Part Played By Officers Of The Bank In The Great War, 1914-1919*, vol.1, ed. Charles Lyons Foster (Toronto: Bank of Commerce, 1920), 189-190.

29 Harold Innis to his Mother, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 18 October 1917.

30 Innis, "Memoir."

31 Soldier file, Vanderburgh, Stanley, 466129, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 9901 – 19.

32 Vanderburgh letter to his mother, 12 April 1917, "Pte. Vanderburg Writes of Vimy Ridge Battle," printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 17 May 1917.

33 "How Canadians took Vimy Ridge," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 7 December 1918.

34 "1st Canadian Division Made Splendid Record," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 10 May 1917. See also "Military Notes," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 17 May 1917.

35 Letter from Corp. J.R. Maher, "Vimy Ridge," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 24 May 1917.

36 Maher himself would be wounded slightly with a gunshot wound to his thigh on 12 April. Soldier file, Maher, James Patrick, 675087, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 5844 – 15.

37 For details on the Vimy battle, see Pierre Berton, *Vimy* (Toronto: Penguin, 1987); Brereton Greenhous and Stephen Harris, *Canada and the Battle of Vimy Ridge, 9-12 April 1917* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 1992); Hayes et al, eds., *Vimy Ridge*; and Tim Cook, *Vimy: The Battle and the Legend* (Toronto: Penguin, 2017).

38 Cook, *Shock Troops*, 144.

39 Innis, "Memoir."

40 "Norwich Boys in the Casualty Lists," *Norwich Gazette*, 17 May 1917. Rowe's medical file states that he received a gunshot wound to the head on 10 April. See also H. Coles, letter to parents, 31 January 1917, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 8 March 1917.

41 Capt. S.G. Bennett, *The 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles, 1914-1919* (Toronto: Murray, 1926), 46-47.

42 A.F.W.3121. 15-4-17, Military Medal, Dougherty, Clarence Darcy (401754), 4th C.M.R., *London Gazette*: 30188, 18 July 1917; authority: R.O. 1248, Byng, 29 May 1917. Reproduced on Great War Centenary Association, "Clarence Darcy Dougherty MM," <http://www.doingourbit.ca/profile/clarence-dougherty-mm>.

43 Bennett, *4th Canadian Mounted Rifles*, 58.

44 Soldier file, Sackrider, Hugh, 108513, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box

Chapter 7

8607 - 26; and Circumstances of Death Registers, First World War, 31829_B016701, LAC, RG150, Accession 1992-93/314, Box 236; and files provided by the Sackrider family. Pte. Sackrider is buried in Lapugnoy military cemetery in France.

45 Innis, "Memoir."

46 As one military history described his traits: "Currie's career speaks more of organizational ability than heroic action, more of endurance than impulsiveness, more of intelligence than instinct, more of careful study and planning than of intuition and sudden action. Currie never had the benefit of a university education, but he never stopped learning. Perhaps he is proof of the proposition that the most important thing a professional soldier can have is an open mind."

47 Pte Stanley Vanderburg to his Mother, 12 April 1917, "Pte. Vanderburg Writes of Vimy Ridge Battle," printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 17 May 1917.

48 Soldier file, Malcolm, Frank E, 160497, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 5864 - 22. Approach this file with caution as it appears to contain some material on a different Frank Malcolm.

49 See J.A. Holland, *The Story of the Tenth Canadian Battalion, 1914-1917* (London: Canadian War Records Office, 1918), 28-30.

50 "Military Notes," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 10 May 1917.

51 Soldier file, Nethercott, Harold V., 797078, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 7277 - 12.

52 "Military Notes," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 10 May 1917.

53 "The King Congratulates the Canadians on the Capture by Them of Vimy Heights" and "Praises for the Canadians," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 10 April 1917.

54 Berton, *Vimy*, 294-5.

8 “The only question is men, money and material”

Conscription and the War Effort,
May-October 1917

“It costs men and money to gain a few hundred yards and there are miles to go before we get to German territory. They want men, men and more men as well as money.... But this is war and you cannot appreciate the circumstances unless you have been there. We are a long way from Germany and they still have a strong army. The hopes of starving are few. The only question is men, money and material.”

- Harold Innis, 18 October 1917

By the middle of May 1917, William Wright of Curries Crossing was exhausted. The 49-year-old farmer owned a 250-acre farm and had only two sons, 20-year-old Harry and 17-year-old Ray, to help work the land. Over the previous weeks, William and his boys planted 130 acres of grain, most of it wheat, and they would soon have to cut 65 acres of hay.

The Wrights had done their best to answer the constant calls for increased production since the war began. If William flipped through the pages of the *Norwich Gazette* and the *Daily Sentinel-Review* over the last few weeks, he read pleas from the Government of Ontario pushing farmers to even greater efforts. “Food production is the greatest problem the world faces today,” the appeals suggested. The government urged farmers to produce more to save Britain from the effects of the German submarine campaign and the world from a global food shortage. “Farmers have the incentive of patriotism, humanity and high profits to stimulate them to make two bushels of food grow during 1917 where only one grew before,” advertisements trumpeted. “The Allied armies and people have to be fed. The human race has to be saved from starvation.”¹ Placing even more pressure on the overworked shoulders of William and his fellow farmers, the Town Talk section of the *Gazette* offered a more local and personal plea a few weeks later. “What will be conditions in our towns and cities next winter,” it asked, “and what will be the effect upon all industry if food supplies are scarcer and dearer than they are now?”²

The Wrights had internalized the government’s message that farmers’ efforts to increase food production represented an essential war service. They believed Premier William Hearst when he said that “the farmer at work in the field is doing as much in this crisis as the man who goes to the front.”³ William expressed his own feelings on the matter in a letter to his Member of Parliament, Donald S. Suther-

land, explaining that “if we produce all we possibly can then we are doing more to win the war than if we were sending more men [to the front] to starve.”⁴ Yet William admitted that his family had been pushed to the limit by the ever-worsening labour shortage experienced by farmers across the country. Unable to find assistance, they had been forced to leave dozens of acres uncultivated. He agreed with the provincial campaign for greater production which noted that the amount of acreage under cultivation had actually declined in some areas because of labour shortages. Each farmer worked an average of one hundred acres of farm land in Ontario. “Many farmers cannot plant the acres they would because they cannot get the necessary help,” the government acknowledged,⁵ leaving the impression that Queen’s Park understood and respected the farmers’ labour dilemma. Consequently, Wright and his neighbours must have been shocked by Prime Minister Robert Borden’s conscription announcement on 18 May 1917.



Sir Robert Borden speaks to a wounded man in hospital in Britain, March 1917

Having recently returned from a lengthy trip overseas, Borden had visited France and attended the Imperial War Cabinet meetings in London. Through these conferences and private discussions with Britain’s Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, Borden learned the state of the allied war effort, which left him with “no confident hope that the war will end this year.” In response, Borden confirmed the promise he had made in 1916 to raise 500,000 men for the Canadian Expeditionary Force. After speaking with wounded Canadian soldiers in British hospitals, he came back with a simple message: “they need our help, ... they need to be supported, ... they need to be sustained, ... [and] reinforcements must be sent to them.” Borden would deliver. “The time has come when the authority of the state should be invoked to provide reinforcements necessary to sustain the gallant men at the front who have held the line for months, who have proved themselves more than a match for the best troops that the enemy could send against them, and who are fighting in France and Belgium that Canada may live in the future,” he proclaimed. To provide these reinforcements, Borden called for “compulsory military enlistment on a selective basis” to secure an additional 50,000-100,000 men.⁶

In the days that followed, Borden tried in vain to secure opposition leader Wilfrid Laurier’s support for conscription by suggesting a coalition Union government. In early June, however, Laurier committed his Liberal party to oppose compulsory service and suggested a referendum on the issue. In response, Borden slowly start-

ed to court prominent pro-conscription Liberals, urging them to desert Laurier and form a new Union government with his Conservatives. This set the stage for one of the most ferocious political struggles in the country's history. When Borden's *Military Service Act* came up for debate in parliament later in June, many prominent English Canadian Liberals went against Laurier to support conscription. The Liberal party started to fragment, as did the country, over an issue that towered above all others.

What shocked William Wright and agriculturalists across the country was that Borden's *Military Service Act* did not provide farmers with a blanket exemption from conscription so that they could continue their work. Most farmers did not oppose conscription – so long as it focused on collecting conscripts from Quebec and the cities and did not drain the dwindling agricultural work force. "The central issue that set the country against the city in Ontario during the war was conscription," historian Adam Crerar observed.⁷ Most Ontarians in English-speaking urban centres supported universal conscription. In Woodstock, for example, the people received Borden's announcement of compulsory service with "satisfaction," and the *Sentinel-Review* could "not find a single man who was not pleased that the Government had at last decided to take decisive measures to provide the necessary reserves of men for the fighting line."⁸ Most farmers across the country saw conscription as yet another example of urban Canada imposing its will without considering the needs of rural Canadians. The government's conscription plans led William Wright to send a strongly-worded letter to Donald Sutherland. "In regard to the military service act I consider you should use your best influence with the government to leave the boys on the farms as far as I am concerned," the farmer pleaded. "I think in such cases as mine and a good many other that it would be impossible to get along with any less help than we have." Wright predicted dire consequences for food production if conscription "robbed" the farmers of their "good help."⁹

Throughout the rural parts of Oxford County, farmers joined conscientious objectors, including the townships' Quaker population, in opposing universal conscription (thus adding their voices to those of French Canadians, labour unions, and others who resisted the measure across the country). On the other hand, serving soldiers and their families, British immigrants, and English-speaking Canadians generally supported universal compulsory service and denigrated those who opposed it as disloyal cowards. In East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich townships, the fight between pro- and anti-conscriptionists did not burn as openly or as brightly as it did in other parts of the country, especially in Quebec where mass protests, riots, and violence rocked the province. In communities already feeling the strain of three years of war, however, conscription and the political drama of 1917 threatened the unity of effort that had animated the townships' wartime support.

For William Wright, the issue was simple: without labour he could not increase his production, which he considered his war service. For Harold Innis and the soldiers at the front, the issue was equally simple: the Canadian Corps needed more men to fight battles and win the war. Wounded in hospital in England on 22 July

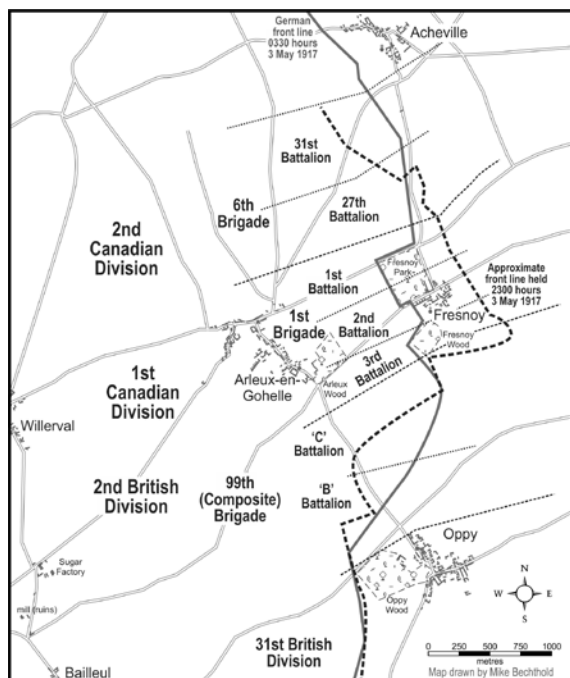
1917, Innis reflected the opinion held by many soldiers on conscription in a letter to his mother. It made his “blood boil,” he wrote, to “think of Englishmen in Canada who have not the backbone to enlist” and who were making “all kinds of money” while he and his comrades suffered. “One certainly cannot understand their consistency. Anyone having a firm grip upon the essentials of Christianity cannot but face the question seriously,” he argued. “Anyone with a love of country such as they should have ought not to be found wanting when the time comes. The Hun, the very essence of brutality, ... must be beaten if right is to prevail. And these people stand back while men die and suffer, wax fat and refuse to lend a hand. They may be conscientious objectors[;] well so am I and I object to that.”¹⁰ Bloody battles at Fresnoy and Lens/Hill 70 that summer only deepened the need for reinforcements and soldiers’ support for conscription.

The Road Past Vimy

With the victory of Vimy, the Canadian Corps – which had grown from an initial establishment of two divisions with approximately 35,000 troops to a powerful striking force of four divisions with 100,000 troops by early 1917 – had enhanced its reputation as an elite fighting force. The Arras offensive did not end with the taking of the ridge, however, and continued until 16 May. After claiming the ridge, the Canadians pushed their way forward, mopping up scattered outposts and advancing for two weeks in mid-April before stacking up against serious German resistance. Rather than resting, the Canadians continued minor operations in the Arras area to divert attention from the French front and to conceal from the Germans the

planned offensive in Flanders.

With the French Nivelle offensive floundering to the south, British army commander Douglas Haig ordered the Canadians to launch a four-battalion attack to eliminate the “Arleux Loop” between two salients along the Scarpe near Vimy on 28 April. The units launched the offensive against the village of Arleux-en-Gohelle at 04:25 a.m., pushing their way into the village under the cover of a weak barrage. “Desperate, chaotic battles of hand-to-hand fighting broke out, favouring the Canadians who were actually outnumbered,” a recent summary depicts. “Swarming through Ar-



The Battle of Fresnoy, 3 May 1917

leux's devastated streets, the German forces were simply overwhelmed; no sooner had they started to check one skirmish before another running firefight would break out elsewhere." By 06:00, the Germans began to retreat from the village, and the following day the German commander ended all counter-attacks and considered the village lost.¹¹ Arleux represented another Canadian victory (and what the British official historian called "the only tangible success of the whole operation")—but gained at a cost of more than one thousand casualties.¹² Amongst them was Sgt. Hugh Ross Collver, who had been a farmer on Nixon Road in Windham Township, (neighbouring South Norwich) and was taken prisoner on 28 April.¹³

With Nivelles continuing his offensive on the Aisne until the second week of May, the British resumed their attacks along the Scarpe on 3 May both to support the French and because their present position could not be held securely or economically. For the Canadian Corps consolidating its positions in the small salient created by their victory at Arleux, their next objective lay only two kilometres away – the heavily fortified village of Fresnoy-en-Gohelle and its accompanying Fresnoy Wood, an important part of the Oppy-Méricourt Line (one of Haig's main objectives for the Third Battle of the Scarpe/Battle of Bullecourt). To prepare for the battle, the Canadians practiced their attacks and prepared slit trenches leading into No Man's Land in hopes that would compensate for the limited room to manoeuvre in the area. On 3 May, the 1st and 6th Brigades went over the top at 3:45 am, and took Fresnoy within a few hours.¹⁴

Amongst the attackers was Pte. Roy Stuart Newton. Born in Burgessville and raised in Norwich, Roy (along with his brothers Percy and Fred) had been one of the first to enlist with the 168th. This 25-year-old "boy of quiet disposition and had always conducted himself in a most gentlemanly way," the *Norwich Gazette* extolled. "He was good to his aged parents, and greatly appreciated home life." He had recently written home, thanking the people of Norwich for their support to the boys at the front who were "only doing their duty."¹⁵ On 1 February 1917, having recovered from a bout of trench fever, he joined former members of "C" Company of the 168th members to hold a concert at East Sandling Camp in Kent, England, where he sang "*You can't Drive a Nail with a Sponge no matter how you soak it*" in a quartette with three of his pals.¹⁶ Two weeks later, he was drafted into the 2nd Battalion (Eastern Ontario) and immediately joined the unit on the battlefield in France.¹⁷ By his side was English-born Pte. Albert Duffield, who worked in Otterville at the outbreak of war and had enlisted with the 168th.¹⁸ At Fresnoy, both were part of the leading company that stormed and seized the German front trench and, in the face of intense rifle fire, knocked out three machine-guns on the western edge of the village. Neither was able to join their brothers-in-arms in consolidating the unit's position when it reached its final objective just east of Fresnoy, both having fallen to enemy fire.¹⁹

Capturing an objective like the village of Fresnoy was one thing. Holding a newly-acquired position was an even greater challenge. The Germans launched determined counter-attacks almost immediately, and bombarded the village with more than one hundred thousand artillery and gas shells over the next week. Unfortu-

nately, the German attacks pushed back the whole of the Fresnoy salient on 9 May so that it was practically in line with Arleux, erasing any gains—and issuing a serious blow to British morale. The battle of Fresnoy had claimed another 1259 Canadian casualties, including Pte. Lorne Percy Hainer. Born in Norwich and working as a driver in Brantford at the outbreak of war, Hainer arrived in France to join the 4th Battalion just as the Vimy battle came to a close. At Fresnoy on 7 May, he received gunshot wounds to the face, head, and left leg. He fell dangerously ill immediately and died from his injuries two days later.²⁰



Lorne Percy Hainer

“Although local actions extended the Battles of Arras 1917 to mid-August,” official historian G.W.L. Nicholson noted, “as a general offensive they ended with the Third Battle of the Scarpe and the Battle of Bullecourt.” The next main blow, Field-Marshal Haig told his army commanders, would be delivered from the Ypres front.²¹

The 2nd and 3rd divisions of the Canadian Corps launched raids along the Souchez River in May-June 1917 to try to break into the German salient between Avion and the western outskirts of the town of Lens.²² Pte. Emerson Glover, whose parents lived in Norwich and who had lied about his age when he enlisted with the 173rd Battalion at the age of sixteen in 1916,²³ joined the 3rd Battalion in May 1917. “We had to watch old Fritz as he cannot be trusted and stood chinning the parapet nights to terminize [sic] what he might be doing,” he described in a letter. “Sometimes he was very unselfish and would send over metal of various kinds and ‘Minnie Wafers’ [minenwerfers or trench mortars] which we watch very carefully, wondering where they would land, as they are very uncertain, they dive first one way and then another.” On one occasion, a mortar that “came down behind me shot in the earth and three of us went up in the air but as we were like so many cats we landed on our feet. The ‘Minnie Wafers’ as we call them do not explode until they strike and that one did not explode at all or we may have went farther and fared worse.” Glover survived to tell his tale. “We had many narrow escapes,” he concluded, “and I thank God for protecting me, as old Fritz has no regard for persons.”²⁴

Others had less luck in avoiding injury. Pte. John James Calvert of Norwich was wounded when a bullet passed through his right forearm at Vimy Ridge on 9 June, leading to erroneous rumours at home that his arm had been amputated below the elbow and that blood poisoning would bring him back to

Canada. Instead, he recovered in England and rejoined his unit (the 87th Battalion) the following year.²⁵ New Zealand-born Pte. Ernest Cole suffered a severe gunshot wound to his right buttock the following week which did not heal properly, and may have contributed to the ailments that plagued him for the rest of the war.²⁶ Australian-born Sapper Samuel Pascoe, who lived in Norwich and worked for Walter Siple in Newark at the outbreak of war, had initially enlisted with the ambulance corps at Hamilton but was rejected because of his poor eyesight.



Samuel Pascoe

His next attempt proved successful and he served with the 7th Canadian Railway Troops overseas. He received a relatively minor shrapnel wound on 26 June 1917 that took him out of action for two weeks.²⁷ Sapper Lewis Albert Fournier, a farm labourer from Otterville who had enlisted with the 168th and was serving with the 2nd Battalion Canadian Railway Troops, was gassed in early July. Back home, his father George (who was laid up with chronic bronchitis) and his mother Emma, who relied on him as their sole source of support, were relieved to learn that the wounds were minor, but they would lead to bronchial pneumonia and mysalgia in the months ahead.²⁸ Finally, Lieut. Percy Johnston, who had run the 168th's recruiting office in Norwich, was killed in action with the 38th Battalion on 28 June 1917. "It was his popularity that induced many of our boys to join the company," the *Gazette* reminded local residents. "Many friends will regret to hear of his death."²⁹ Even in relatively "routine" periods such as June and early July 1917, the battlefield took its toll.

Given the omnipresent risk of dying far from home, soldiers promised to write letters to families if their friends were killed in action. Pte. Ambrose Reavely of Otterville sent a letter to the father of his chum Erwin Pearson of Brownsville, Ontario, after Erwin was killed during the 12th Canadian Brigade operation on Avion Trench on 29 May:

It is with a heavy, sorrowing heart that I write you concerning the death of your son, Erwin, of which you have been advised before this. It was his wish while well and strong that if anything happened I should write to you and his wife. He and I were the only two of "C" Company of the old 168th here and we have been chums since our arrival in England and remained so to the end. We spent our leave in Scotland together.

Yourself and Mrs. Pearson, and his wife and family have my deepest sympathy in your hour of trouble, and may the good Saviour above give you all health and strength to bear your heavy loss and sorrow, and may we all meet in the end at the pearly gates above.

Erwin was well liked by all in the camp, and they all miss him as well as myself. He was wounded on the night of May 29th, between eleven and twelve o'clock, and lived only a few minutes after being struck. He was immediately rushed to the nearest dressing station, but passed away before reaching there. He was struck in the side by a piece of shrapnel from a German shell, at the time between acting as escort on one of our ration wagons, and they were on the way back to our billets when the poor fellow was caught. He was buried on the afternoon of May 30th and was given a military funeral, with a service at the grave.

It is a military grave, and a couple of hundred yards distant from the village church. The grave is marked and his name and number are recorded there. It is well looked after at all times. I was just coming from the trenches as they were leaving and went in and planted a spray of flowers on my dear comrade's grave. I will as long as I am here.



Ambrose Reavely

His personal belongings were returned to his wife and I am sure all were sent. The mail will also be returned. I wish you would take this letter and go and see Erwin's wife instead of me writing her too. I think it would be the better plan. You will kindly extend to her and the family my deepest sympathy.³⁰

Amidst the hot days and cold nights of early summer 1917, Gunner Harold Innis eagerly sought opportunities to break the monotony of life on a static front. "Routine seems to have become an obsession as time was spent in harness cleaning, particularly leather and steel," he recalled. On 7 July, signallers were sent as usual to their observing point at the gun posts on Vimy Ridge. "Since I was anxious to get out of the ordinary rut of signalling and one of the men was missing, I served double duty," Innis noted in his memoirs. "On our way up a slight elevation to the top of the ridge a small German shell burst some distance behind us and looking back I remember distinctly seeing a German observation balloon and had concluded that they were in touch with the Battery and were picking up groups of our men whenever they could be located."³¹ In a letter to his mother, paying explicit respect to censorship restrictions, he explained how he had been wounded:

An officer and a signaler were ahead while I and another signaler followed as we were going up.... Whether Fritz saw us or not is more than can ever be guessed. If he did he was doing some fine shooting. He had been shelling us more or less continually all day and as this was in the evening we got so we didn't mind shells in the least. A miniature railroad runs down the hill into the town. The first shell dropped about fifteen feet away from us, we walked over the track about the same distance, not paying any attention to the last shell, when whizz-bang. It blew us both over and I felt something burning in my leg. The other fellow was not hit at all, though shaken up and I hardly knew whether I was hit or not, but when I saw blood running out of the knees of my trousers there was no doubt about it. We got out of there and after wrapping the shell dressing, which we always carry with us, around the wound, they managed to get me back to the dressing station. Those were the only two shells at the time but I had a Blighty.³²

A shell splinter had gashed the inner side of Innis's right thigh but had not penetrated through all the flesh. After his comrades bound up the wound, two men carried him back to the dressing station in an old chalk pit just in front of Thélus. "I have forgotten whether the wound was re-dressed but in any case I was put on a stretcher to wait the night through for the morning's ambulance," Innis recalled. "My friends left me, congratulating me on all hands for my escape from the war at this point though I was not in a position to appreciate thoroughly the depths of the feelings." In retrospect, he became appreciative of how lucky he had been. "It is clear that I was protected from other shell splinters by my habit of carrying around great quantities of stuff in my rucksack," Innis reminisced. "At least one shell splinter was stopped by books and other equipment I had which might well have been more serious since it was carried around my side."³³ A leg wound was serious, but wounds to the abdomen or chest were usually fatal.

This wound was Innis's ticket out of the front lines. "Don't worry about me losing a leg as nothing like that has happened," he reassured his mother in a letter

from hospital. "Plenty of fellows have been killed and forgotten and nothing has ever been said, so with a Blighty like mine nothing can be said."³⁴ He found it uncomfortable and tiresome to have to lie in a hospital bed continuously, but it was "some picnic to what we have been accustomed to," he wrote to his mother on 14 July. "The grub is jake, and more, nothing to do but rest, write, and read.... Of course it will be some time before I can step lively but the consolation is that it will come in time and the longer [it takes] the more rest [I will have]." The next day, he left the hospital in France for the Endell Street Military Hospital, London. "You should have seen the reception we had here," he reported home. "Cheers and cheers long rows of women throwing flowers, cigarettes and everything at us. We were the boys. The hospital is run entirely by ladies and it promises to be some affair."³⁵



A recovering Harold Innis, his "first time out of bed," appears with a cane on the right

His subsequent letters sought to reassure his family that he was fine. "Your worrying is the only thing that bothers me. So for my sake don't worry," he wrote a week later. "There are some very bad cases in the hospital in comparison with which mine is child's play. One with arms and legs off and what not." In the weeks ahead, visitors brought him gifts of eggs, lettuce, fresh buns, plums, and other fruit. "You see I have been pretty lucky in putting in the time," he concluded. His leg healed, and he was soon attending concerts. By September he was convalescing at a hospital on the Hillingdon estate in Uxbridge, about eighteen miles west of central London.³⁶

For a wounded soldier like Innis who had the use of his limbs and full mental faculties, recovering in England had its benefits. That fall, Innis wrote home about the "the usual round of concerts and attendance at English fairs," as well as church parades and other social activities—so many that they became rather monotonous. "An English fair can be started with a merry-go-round suitably fitted with painted horses and a band with one tune or another, as well as the usual throwing of balls at coconuts and the dispersal of heaps of confetti," he described in his memoir. "Since we were on the Hillingdon Estate, Lady Hillingdon entertained us at teas and life seemed to be very pleasant with only the limitation of limited pay." Innis was frustrated that his injury left him unable to walk great distances, so he could not join his friends for trips to London. Putting his mind to work instead, he began to categorize the different soldiers whom he encountered:

Perhaps I came to see more of the individuals in the Canadian Army than others, and ... it might be divided into three parts, first those who were not tough and make no pretence of being so, second, those who would like to be tough but did not know how to go about it, though they flattered themselves that they were tough (these were really the worst of the lot) and thirdly,

those who were tough and say nothing. One arrival came into the hospital with several decorations won in France and probably an even greater list of crimes achieved in England. He invariably came to the hospital late in the night yelling at the top of his voice, fighting the military police and looking for trouble. In nearly every case he was arrested and thrown into the “clink” for various periods of time and fined. His fines were, of course, merely additions to large sums he had already piled up in debts to the government. In the main everyone was anxious to have as good a time as possible and in most cases this meant a continual fight between the authorities and the men. Every night officers inspected the hospitals to see that everyone was by his bed, but all too frequently one man would move from one bed across the main aisle to another bed and thus represent two individuals while the officers went to the other end of the hut. Again beds were stuffed with coats so that they had the appearance of being occupied to those giving a cursory inspection.³⁷

These shenanigans, and the traits of the Canadian soldier, would continue to fill Innis’s mind when he set to work writing his Master’s thesis the following year.

Not all shenanigans away from the frontlines were benign. During the war, a disconcerting number of Canadians overseas became casualties of sexually transmitted infections— venereal disease (VD) in the parlance of the day. Although the CEF increased disciplinary pressure in 1917 in hopes of dissuading soldiers from activities that sustained this plague, the temptation of visiting a French or English prostitute while on furlough or recovering from battlefield injuries proved too great for many soldiers. Indeed, individual soldier files are frequently marked with “VDS” (syphilis), “VDG” (gonorrhea), or non-specific urethritis, with an estimated 15.8% to 28.7% of Canadian troops contracting these infections at different points during the war.³⁸ These “self-inflicted” casualties not only raised moral and health concerns, they also tied up hospital beds that were already in short supply and depleted units by forcing Canadians out of action to receive long courses of treatment.³⁹ “The treatments available at the time were painful and distressing,” historian Kandace Bogaert describes. “Soft chancres were burned with various acids, such as carbolic and salicylic acid, which were used to cauterize the open sores. Gonorrhea was treated with a number of washes and solutions, such as silver nitrate and potassium permanganate, which were painfully forced through the urethra. Physicians treated syphilis with caustic chemicals, most infamously mercury, which had extremely adverse side effects and questionable efficacy.” The latter was a particularly difficult affliction to treat, given that initial sores would disappear and the disease would remain dormant until it progressed into its later (and dangerous) stages.⁴⁰ In any case, soldiers were segregated from their units during treatment in hospital, and had their pay suspended as a form of punishment.

The VD situation was serious enough for Prime Minister Borden to raise it during the Imperial War Conference in April 1917, where he suggested that he would not send a single man overseas in a future war if the VD situation was similar to that experienced in the current war.⁴¹ As the federal government launched a concerted campaign to combat venereal disease in the spring of 1917, the *Norwich*

Gazette joined in the chorus of voices lamenting the effects of these immoral afflictions on the war effort. “Canadians who come 3000 or 4000 miles in most cases are entirely lost when they arrive in England,” a 3 May 1917 story suggested. “Certainly they are lost in London, and very often in camp. They are much more liable to temptation thrown in their way.” Citing a situation where one camp saw 7,000 VD cases in sixteen months, the newspaper proclaimed that “it is time we recognize definitely the magnitude of the evil.” What had happened to the soldiers inflicted? “I imagine a large number have gone back to Canada and have not been able to play the part which they had hoped to play when they set out,” the story suggested.⁴² For most soldiers who contracted VD, however, they endured treatments overseas, returned to their units, and fought on – and hopefully did not bring the infections back to Canada with them at the end of the war.

Medical practitioners played a vital role in ensuring that soldiers survived diseases and wounds and, when possible, returned to their units in a timely fashion.



Oatman and fellow nurses aboard HMHS Letitia

They also succumbed to illness and injury – and needed rest from their onerous jobs. Nursing Sister Matilda Oatman, serving in Salonika, fell seriously ill with appendicitis on 1 December 1916. She was invalidated back to England the following month. A medical board determined that she had recovered from her operation by February, although she had lost considerable weight and was “somewhat anaemic.”⁴³ After a one-

month leave, she was back in service at the Duchess of Connaught Canadian Red Cross Hospital, tending to convalescing troops from across the British Empire on the site of the Astor family’s grand country estate, Cliveden, in Taplow, England.⁴⁴ On 20 July 1917 she reported for transport duty on HMHS *Letitia*,⁴⁵ escorting a shipload of invalided soldiers back to Canada before enjoying well-earned furlough at home. Following a smooth voyage, the ship ran aground on the rocks as it entered Halifax harbour, and she and the other nurses snapped into action to help offload the men from the stranded ship. After this excitement, she embarked on a train to Toronto and then onward to Springford, where she enjoyed a break with her parents and other relatives. “Notwithstanding the long period of hard work and her trying experiences,” the *Tillsonburg Observer* reported, “Miss Oatman is looking well and is as cheery as a lark, and eager to return to her duties.”⁴⁶ By September she was back in England at the Canadian General Hospital No.4 (University of Toronto) in Basingstoke,⁴⁷ where she found nearly all of her old unit reunited after their Mediterranean service came to an end. Their responsibilities would include a

growing number of casualties of mustard gas – a blistering agent that attacked both the lungs and flesh, affecting even soldiers wearing protective masks who had skin exposed.⁴⁸

Playing a prescribed role within the vast military machine did not always bring fulfillment to individual soldiers. John Paulding, who had been promoted to sergeant with the 1st Canadian Field Ambulance in late 1916, worked as a clerk in France – an important position that earned him a special rate of pay and utilized his administrative abilities but did not inspire him. His letters indicate a sense of loneliness and even boredom. Paulding lamented that he seldom heard from his farmer father, who proved “a very unsatisfactory correspondent,” but he kept in regular touch with other relatives and friends. He coveted any information he could get about life and times back home, but could offer little about his service in return. “They are very strict about censoring in my unit,” he explained to his Aunt Amelia in a 27 June 1917 letter. Sundays he attended a church parade and service in one of the wards. “Otherwise, we carry on as usual, patients arriving and leaving, and all the routine tasks to do.” Most of his “old pals,” who had started off as non-commissioned officers like himself, had secured commissions in the infantry, artillery, and the Royal Flying Corps (RFC). Noting that only one had died and one was missing, they had “done pretty well,” causing Paulding to consider a change. “I am thinking of trying for a commission in the R.F.C. myself,” he indicated.⁴⁹

Compared to the routine of administrative service or the dirty, bloody realities facing infantry or artillery on the front lines, the life of an airman seemed adventurous and romantic. The daring exploits of Canadians in the Royal Flying Corps featured regularly in newspapers, providing readers with exciting tales of their “knights of the air” in dogfights with German fighters, where skill and cunning meant victory or death. Airplanes also played

important supporting roles to the soldiers toiling away on the ground. “Over the flaming, bloody field,” the *Daily Sentinel* reported in August 1917, “British aeroplanes have been accomplishing miracles” by bombing the enemy, acting as “despatch riders between the advancing infantry and headquarters, ... [and] carrying orders and reports from the front lines to commanding officers in the rear.”⁵⁰ Even though pilots and their gunners flew as part of patrols or squadrons, their personal initiative set them apart in the popular imagination. As historian Jonathan Vance explained, airmen achieved almost divine status in wartime narratives because they offered “the ideal antidote to the frightening uncertainties of modern war, a figure who could be everything the war was not.” Air combat seemed “clean, clear and simple” compared to the “suffocating constraints of the trench-



Royal Flying Corps recruitment poster



Lieut. J.L. Dickson photograph of airplane manoeuvres

than their German adversaries – as the losses in “Bloody April” 1917 made painfully clear.⁵² Celebrated victories helped to justify the heavy costs. On the morning of 25 April, Dickson and pilot Lieut. C.R. O’Brien were patrolling in their Sopwith 1½ Strutter in unfavourable weather when they engaged three enemy Albatross scouts east of La Bassée. One of the German planes, painted red and piloted by the decorated ace Sebastian Festner of *Jasta 11*, was driven out of control and crashed. Dickson fired the fatal shots (his second credited victory to that point in the war) and the other two planes broke off the combat.⁵³ A few weeks later, however, Dickson was badly injured when his plane, piloted by Major W.S. Douglas, crashed on take-off, forcing him to hospital with a severe concussion. While in medical care, Dickson was diagnosed with neurasthenia: a state of physical and mental exhaustion, accompanied by headaches and insomnia, clearly brought on by the stresses and strains of aerial combat. He would relinquish his commission the next year as a result.⁵⁴

Casualty rates in the RFC bore hard testament to the intensity and danger of the war in the air. The lifespan of a typical Canadian pilot in action was about ten weeks.⁵⁵ Lieut. Percy G. Shellington, a 24-year-old telegrapher whose parents lived near Norwich in Hatchley, was serving with the 28th squadron, RFC, on home defence duty in England when he was killed in a flying accident during a German air raid in the summer of 1917.⁵⁶ Underage Second Lieut. Earl Henry Mulley, who was born in Norwich and received his early training locally, completed his Royal Air Force courses in Toronto and in Texas before heading overseas in January 1917 at age sixteen. Described as “one of



Even training flights were dangerous, as Lieut. J.L. Dickson records in this photograph

the youngest fliers in the force,” the flight lieutenant was burned in a crash in July 1917 and slightly wounded in the right arm and left foot a few months later on 9 October.⁵⁷ Lieut. George Mydhope Shaw, or Hope Shaw as he was known by his uncle J.C. Shaw of Norwich, enlisted with the 169th in 1916, fought in France with the 84th Battalion, and became a flying officer with the 25th Squadron in late September 1917. Conducting aerial photo reconnaissance early the following year, his plane was forced down behind enemy lines and he spent the rest of the war in a prisoner of war camp in Germany.⁵⁸

Canadians taken prisoner of war found themselves out of the action but suffered privations and tribulations in captivity that they could not have anticipated when they volunteered. Their letters home reassured loved ones that they were “well” (as enemy censors insisted they do), but their situation was usually more dire than they could safely report. Pte. Hugh Ross Collver, a young farmer who had enlisted in the 133rd Battalion in Simcoe and who had many relatives in Norwich and Otterville, was officially reported missing from the 14th Battalion in May 1917. He wrote to his mother and “home people” in late July from the Limburg an der Lahn (Stalag XII-A) POW camp in central Germany. “Oh, mother, could you but know that I am still alive and well I would feel much easier,” he explained:

Since being taken prisoner I have written home several times, but have reasons to doubt whether or not any of the letters and cards have reached you. I can realize how you would worry after my name appeared in the casualty lists first, but hope that by this time you have been informed as to my whereabouts. I was taken prisoner on the 21st of April, and have since passed through some very strange and, in a way, severe conditions. Of course all explanations must wait until after the war, which I hope will not be long.

His language was careful. “We have to work pretty hard here, but are treated well, much better than I ever expected,” he reassured his family. “Of course you can believe we do not get much to eat but have not suffered beyond what we are able to bear as yet.”⁵⁹

Although German authorities claimed to issue a range of protein, vegetables, and starches to prisoners each week, the typical daily ration comprised burnt acorn coffee for breakfast, a thick soup for lunch, and a watered down version of the same soup for dinner accompanied by a small piece of rye bread (half of which was water, wood fibre, and ashes).⁶⁰ With little food, it is not surprising that POWs’ minds often drifted to the culinary delights that they enjoyed back home. Collver wrote:

We get very little news here, so our principle topic of conversation is home-made food; that is something of which we never tire, telling one another what good cooks our mothers or sisters are, and exchanging recipes for fancy dishes. After supper, when the majority of fellows settle down for their smoke I will suggest that we take the car and run into town to the theatre or probably place an order for fancy drinks on ices. Ah we have to try in every way possible to keep from going crazy from the monotony of the life. However, we are all hoping and praying for the end to come soon.⁶¹

The soldiers in the front lines shared the same hopes for an end to the war. While they too faced their share of monotony, it was nothing like the stagnant life in captivity endured by POWs like Collver. Rotations into the front line ensured that. "If you are around Lens, there is no doubt but what you have all you want to do," Aubrey Holdsworth wrote to his brother in late August. "From the news derived from all the dailies [that he was reading in England], here the Canadians are having their share of the fighting in that sector. Canadians and their exploits occupy the most prominent parts of the daily pictorials here, that it has raised quite a lot of comment. They seem to have been 'the whole cheese' for some time and are lionized quite openly by the press."⁶² Holdsworth's celebratory message trumpeted the Canadian Corps' recent successes at Hill 70 and Lens in northern France, where "Byng's boys" proved that they would be equally effective serving under a Canadian commander.

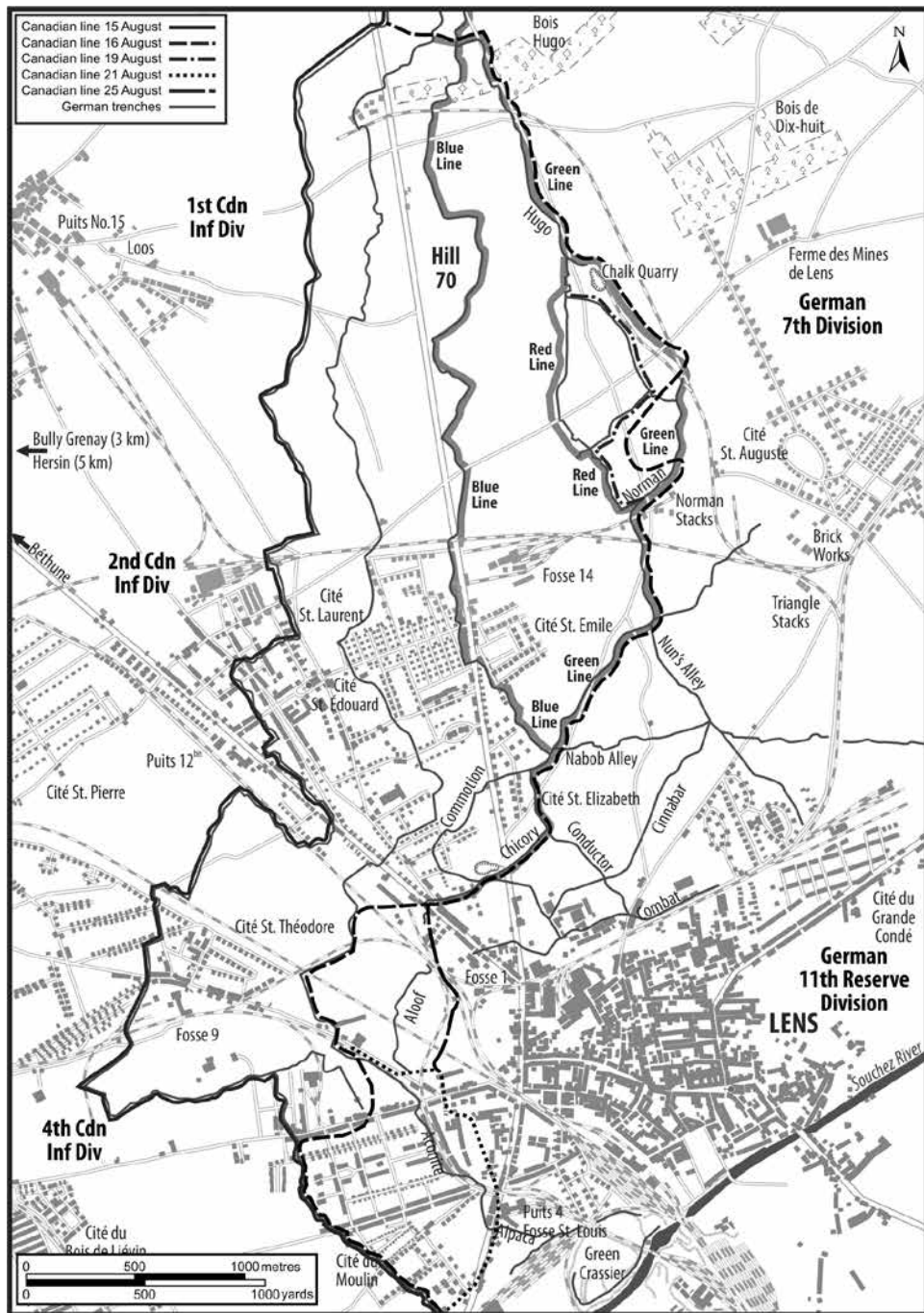
Hill 70 and Lens

In June 1917, Sir Julian Byng took command of the Third British Army, and Canadian Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie, a pre-war Reservist who had led 1st Canadian Division during the Vimy battle, assumed command of the Canadian Corps—a formation that had, for all intents and purposes, become Canada's national army under exclusively Canadian leadership. Currie's first major test was to plan and execute the capture of the city of Lens as a flank diversion for another British Expeditionary Force offensive action. After studying the ground, Currie convinced the British army commander that he would achieve the mission by capturing Hill 70, the tactically important high ground directly north of the city, rather than launching a frontal assault on Lens itself. If the Canadians took the hill, they could observe the German units below and direct fire onto them, obligating the Germans to counter-attack. To thwart the Germans, they would have to establish defensive positions as soon as possible.

Arthur Currie



The battle, which some historians consider one of the Canadian Corps' greatest achievements,⁶³ unfolded largely according to Currie's plan. After repeated rehearsals, the Canadian infantry advanced early on the morning of 15 August behind an artillery, gas, smoke, and machine gun barrage. While some units took their objectives within hours, others faced heavier resistance before they were able to establish strong points with wire and machine guns. The Germans launched twenty-one counterattacks over the next four days, but the Canadians held firm. "That was some battle," Pte. Emerson Glover of 3rd Battalion wrote of Hill 70/Lens. "We could hardly seem to satisfy them as they made seventeen counter attacks but did not come back again as we gave them plenty on their last visit." Glover was gassed during the ordeal, but not badly by his own assessment. "They had three different kinds or else it was flavoured different," he blithely informed his parents.⁶⁴ (He had



The Battle of Hill 70 and Lens, 15-25 August 1917

some discharge from his eyes following their exposure to the gas and would later complain that his eyes were weak in bright light, such as when the sun shone on the snow.⁶⁵)

Local newspaper coverage provided township residents with ongoing updates, reinforcing the image of the Canadian Corps as an effective military formation that was accomplishing great things on the Western Front. "Canadians Masters of All Gateways of Lens," the *Daily Sentinel-Review* proclaimed on its front page on 15 August 1917. In one great rush, it suggested, the Canadians captured all of their objectives, leaving the "famous coal city ... nothing more than a death trap for the Germans. If they continue to hold it their pride will cost them dearly in lives and blood."⁶⁶ Subsequent stories confirmed that the Canadians managed to thwart repeated German counter-attacks, leaving "Hill 70 red with German blood sacrificed in vain attempts to recapture it from the Canadians." For example, a story filled with the colourful language of the era, describing how 16 August brought "a night of death":

The Canadians fought valiantly, hanging on to every position with bull-dog like tenacity.

The Bavarians opened the counterattacks on the outskirts of Lens. They charged and counter-charged headlong against the Canadians in their mad endeavor to re-take Hill 70. The attack opened about dusk. They threw themselves together in close formation. The Canadian artillery and machine guns blazed forth. The attack was headed straight for the Canadian centre. It never reached this line. At 8.50, fresh German troops bolted out from their trenches. The Prussian Guards charged up the slope. Then came more and more and still more Germans in thick waves this time. By sheer momentum they forced back the Canadian posts to the left of the line that was held Thursday morning, but they did not remain the victors long. The Canadians came back. With vicious, determined thrusts they pushed forward towards the positions they had been forced to relinquish. With bayonet and bomb they charged over the shell-torn ground. There was a sharp fight and then the enemy began to give way. Slowly at first, then they went down the slope which they had just climbed at heavy cost.

The story ended with the German withdrawal, a "confused retreat," and the Canadians consolidating their lines along the entire front.⁶⁷ The story offered a narrative of desperate fighting and hard-earned victory. At a patriotic meeting in Woodstock



Canadians in a destroyed suburb of Lens, 1917

the next day, filled with the usual patriotic singing and purple prose of wartime politics, Oxford North MPP Newton Rowell applauded how the valour of the Canadian Corps brought glory to the soldiers and to Canada more broadly. “It is not possible to speak in too high terms of the incomparable service which the Canadian troops are rendering at the front,” he trumpeted. “Their valor and achievements have won for them and Canada incomparable glory.”⁶⁸

In the days ahead, newspaper stories emphasized battles featuring furious hand-to-hand bayonet fighting, the advance of tanks, or the daring exploits of the Royal Flying Corps overhead.⁶⁹ For the units on the ground, the new infantry platoon organization that had proven successful at Vimy remained unchanged. Even greater emphasis was placed on rifle grenades and Lewis guns (light machine guns) to support the infantry. Canadian probing attacks against Lens on 21 and 23 August proved unsuccessful, but they managed to secure the western part of the city and retain the high ground when fighting died down on 25 August. The Canadians had taken considerable ground and then inflicted enormous casualties on the enemy by creating deliberate “killing grounds” that the Germans would have to cross during their inevitable counter-attacks. While the fighting from 15-25 August cost the Canadian Corps just over 9000 casualties, the Germans lost nearly 20,000 men.⁷⁰ Such statistics might have offered little solace to Canadians who lost friends or family members, but they did point to gains in a war of attrition. Although the soldiers on the ground were not privy to the strategic context, the Corps’ successes had helped the broader BEF campaign in Flanders (the Third Battle of Ypres, more commonly known as Passchendaele) because the Germans withdrew two divisions from that front and redeployed them at Hill 70.

Casualty lists in local newspapers put the battle in human terms, confirming that men from East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich townships were fighting in greater numbers as more soldiers from the dismantled 168th made their way to the front – and sustained higher losses accordingly. Pte. Henry Priddle, best known as “doc,” was a broom maker in Norwich who played with the Norwich Main Street Band before he left

for Winnipeg, where he enlisted with the 4th Battalion Highlanders as a member of the band and sailed overseas in September 1916. He arrived in France in June and was killed on 16 August. The community felt the shock: his wife was from Norwich, and two of his sisters still lived there. Just days before his death, the Norwich Women’s Patriotic League had received a thank you from him.⁷¹ Pte. J. George, the adopted son of a couple who lived just outside of New Durham, had also been killed,⁷² and Pte.



William Hughes



Norman Foreman



Thomas Beeken

Harry William Revell of Otterville, who had been shot in the right leg during the battle, died from his wounds a few days later.⁷³

The list of wounded was even more extensive. In the newspapers, a soldier's name was typically followed by that of a family relation and a local community, thus bridging the battlefield and the home front. "The list of casualties in France and Flanders has been long every day this week," the *Tillsonburg Observer* noted on 30 August. Included in its list of sixteen men were: Pte. Clarence Armstrong of Norwich, who had been wounded in the right arm, the son of David Armstrong of South Norwich; Pte. Norman Foreman of Springford/Dereham, who had been wounded in the left arm, the son of John Foreman; and Pte. T. Beeken from Springford.⁷⁴ On 6 September, the *Norwich Gazette* listed several Norwich and area boys who had been wounded during the battle: Pte. John McDonald, son of Mrs. Angus McDonald of Norwich; Sapper Walter Myrick of Springford, the son of Robert Myrick of Springford and the brother of Mrs. M.W. Rice of Norwich⁷⁵; Pte. J.E. Pentecost, brother of Mrs. John Lovett of Norwich; and Pte. Harold Robinson, the son of Mrs. Robinson of North Norwich.⁷⁶ Other wounded included Pte. L.B. Lewis of Norwich and Pte. Clarence Young who lived in the southernmost part of South Norwich Township near Delhi.⁷⁷ Nineteen-year-old Pte. William Hughes of Burgessville, the son of Peter Hughes of Holbrook, had been killed by an exploding shell on 15 August 1917. The community of Holbrook held a large memorial service for "Willie" where the Reverend Wray Davidson commented that "in a number of Private Hughes' last letters it seemed as though he was preparing his friends for his departure as he seemed to realize that it was near and he was also ready to be offered." Willie had "fought a good fight and had finished his course."⁷⁸ His mates would have to finish the job in France and Belgium.

"After Hill 70 and the battles around Lens," historian Bill Rawling explained, "the Canadian Corps settled into its now normal routine of trench life, characterized by mud, boredom, disease, and misery, sometimes punctuated by the excitement and terror of an occasional trench raid or artillery duel."⁷⁹ In this context, the Western Front continued to take its toll. Capt. Lewis Henry, the nephew of Dr. McCurdy and F.E. Lossing of Norwich, was killed on 30 August.⁸⁰ Twenty-six-year-old Pte. John Sydney Boughner, a broom maker who lived with his mother on Stover Street in Norwich at the start of the war, had enlisted with 168th as a bandsman in April 1916. When the unit was broken up, he (along with other band members) had "bravely offered themselves for service in the ranks" and, in his case, joined the 1st Battalion in France in late April 1917. In the Lens sector on 6 September, Boughner sustained injuries when a bomb exploded near him, leading to the removal of portions of four ribs and the amputation of his left leg about eight inches below the knee.⁸¹

For Pte. Bruce Poole, who had dreamed of a "blighty" when he arrived overseas the previous year, the Germans finally granted his wish. Fighting with the 2nd Battalion, he was wounded "slightly" (by his own admission) in the right leg by a shell on 15 September 1917. He celebrated his arrival in "Blighty" six days later. "It was certainly a surprise for me when the Dr. said I could go to England," he told his cousin in a letter. "Was I sorry? I don't think." He found himself in a war hospital

in “a little town called Napsbury not so very far north of London” for about five weeks before he was transferred to Epsom. He visited his friend Sydney Eaton in St. Thomas’ hospital in London, and then ran into friends from back home once in Epsom:

I saw Jack McDonald this morning. He first came yesterday and was waiting a medical inspection when I saw him. I saw another Norwich lad here too. His father works at McKee’s or used to. He was in the ‘Gazette’ office for awhile but enlisted in the 147 from up around Owen Sound. He knew me but I didn’t know him till after he told me who he was. It is funny to see all the people you run up against out here that you know or have seen before.

Poole boasted about a twelve-day trip planned for “old Scotland nosing around to see what I can of it,” with a dozen “Pounds to spend so I guess I can have jolly time to make up for France’s discomforts.”⁸² He would enjoy his sick furlough to Aberdeen, and all the “bonnie lassies up that way,”⁸³ before rejoining his battalion in France the next fall.

Pte. Jack Furlong, who had enlisted underage and made his way to England in the spring of 1917, would never make it to the front lines, but he too enjoyed his time in the military. His letters home to his mother were certainly more carefree than his older brother Fred’s, containing ripped out cartoons indicating that he would defeat the Germans singlehandedly, relating funny stories about his interactions with pretty girls who had preacher fathers, describing his location as “wherever in Hell it is,” and signing his correspondence “Colonel Jack.” Once in England, Jack was enthralled with English women, telling his family that they “shouldn’t be surprised if I bring one home.” Self aware, he acknowledged that “every letter I write has some foolishness about girls but I can’t help it.” But his carefree days proved short-lived, and his brother’s earlier predictions came true. The army soon found out Jack was underage and refused to send him to the battlefield. To make matters worse, his hernia flared up, incapacitating him. He was fated to spend most of the war in English hospitals, recovering from his hernia operation and a case of diphtheria.⁸⁴

A chance meeting of the Furlong brothers that summer was a cause for celebration. Fred had long hoped that he would run into his younger brother overseas, and it so happened that both were in London on 2 July – Jack to attend a church service at Westminster Abbey and Fred on an unapproved leave from Witley Camp. Jack and his friend had stopped to look



Convalescent home staff and patients, including Bruce Poole

in a shop window and noticed another soldier doing the same thing. It was Fred, who he stopped heading into the shop to buy cigarettes. “You can’t beat that for luck, meeting in the streets of London and both stopping at the same window,” Jack wrote his mother. Fred was equally surprised to run into his brother “strutting down the street in a hospital uniform.” They spent about two hours together before Fred headed back to camp, and both signed a copy of the church service program and sent it to their mother.⁸⁵ Service was less enjoyable for Jack when he actually settled in to the training camp, and letters home indicated that he soon grew tired of the routine.

For the Canadian soldiers who remained on the Western Front, however, there was little respite from action. For the politicians at home, the burning question was how to replace battlefield losses and ensure that the Canadian Corps remained at fighting strength to see the war to completion.

A Time of Unity, A Time of Division: The Townships in Summer and Fall 1917

In the rural townships of Oxford County, the victory at Vimy Ridge and the subsequent successes of the Canadian Corps seemed to re-energize a spirit of patriotism. Communities continued to donate time, money, and energy to the war effort throughout the summer and fall of 1917, with patriotic societies filling the months with fundraising garden parties, teas, box socials, and luncheons, and with meetings to create care packages and knit clothing for the soldiers. The Women’s Patriotic League of Norwich used patriotic concerts to collect hundreds of dollars with which they purchased comforts for wounded Canadians in England and France. Meanwhile, the Curries Helping Hand Club sent a steady stream of care packages to the soldiers at the front and to the Red Cross.⁸⁶ The thirty members of Burgessville’s Women’s Institute received praise for raising \$517 for the Red Cross in an early summer fundraising campaign.⁸⁷ All across the townships, the patriotic groups and their legion of volunteers – almost always women – worked tirelessly to “do their bit” in support of “the boys” overseas.

The region’s biggest patriotic event of the summer and fall came in late August when the people of South Norwich held a large fair in Otter Park. The organizers brought in an orchestra, a soloist from London, a comedian, an impersonator, a brass band, and local politicians, including Conservative Member of Parliament for Oxford South Donald S. Sutherland. Each of the township’s patriotic societies set up a booth representing one of the allied nations, where they sold ice cream, flags and other snacks, with many of the participants drawn to the Japanese tea room. It was a notable success. The organizers had modelled the event off the successful patriotic fair held in Norwich in the summer of 1915, which attracted 1900 visitors and raised over \$700. While just over 800 people attended the event in Otter Park this time, they managed to raise over \$750, proving that people were still willing to give to the war effort.⁸⁸

Township residents also came together to welcome their veterans home. In August, for example, Norwichites Ed Chapman and Thomas Carrol Abraham received



Edward Chapman

a warm greeting when they returned from overseas duty. Chapman had enlisted with the 168th, but while in England he had grown sick with endocarditis, an infection of the inner lining of the heart's chambers and valves. Abraham, a farmer who worked outside Norwich, enlisted with the 71st and served in France before shrapnel crippled his leg at the Somme in October 1916. The citizens from Norwich who journeyed to Woodstock to welcome the returned soldiers saw tangible evidence of the war's hard impact when Abraham stepped off the train in a special boot that allowed him to cope with the damage to his leg. Others greeted the men when the train rolled through Norwich and many more came to meet Abraham when he spoke about his experiences at the town's Independent Order of Odd Fellows (an international fraternal order) lodge. The men also received a warm welcome from Oxford County's branch of the Great War Veterans' Association (a national organization founded in early 1917 with which the Oxford Returned Soldiers' Association chose to affiliate in March) and the Soldiers' Aid Commission, which promised to help them in any way possible.⁸⁹ Later that month, community members welcomed nursing sister Matilda Oatman when she returned home for a furlough after escorting a group of wounded veterans back to Canada. Many people from South Norwich – particularly her friends and family from Springford – visited with her and came to her public talk in Tillsonburg, where she recounted her two years of service in the Dardanelles and Salonika.⁹⁰

Perhaps the most dramatic example of volunteerism and cooperation in the townships came at harvest time when community members worked side by side with the farmers. The *Norwich Gazette* pointed out that “many farmers have no help whatever” and praised the response of “our townsmen” to the “urgent call for assistance in the harvest fields.” Many of the townsmen were retired businessmen and professionals who responded to the Oxford County Greater Production Campaign's requests for service that spring. Others took time off from their own jobs to help the farmers bring in the harvest. The *Gazette* reported that they entered the fields, “with a look of grim determination which no Hun could face, heroically assisting the farmers in the various lines of work that are so essential to the welfare of our country and the stability of the Empire.”⁹¹

The “townsmen” were joined by the first wave of Soldiers of the Soil – a nation-wide initiative of the Canadian Food Board that recruited 15-19-year-old boys to work on the farms – and by the members of the Ontario Farm Service Corps (OFSC), which recruited high school-aged youths but focused on bringing young women into the agricultural effort. In return for fulfilling their three-month terms of service, the Soldiers of the Soil received room and board, spending money, exemption from classes and exams, and, if they were lucky, a khaki uniform complete with harvester straw hat. The women of the OFSC – clad in their “smart and serviceable” uniforms of grey flannel, riding breeches, canvas leggings, and a straw hat – joined with local female volunteers to provide a wide array of agricultural ser-

vices (except “pitching as this would be injurious to their strength”) in return for food, housing, and a small wage.⁹² The sight of women, who people often called farmerettes, working in the fields became a common one across the townships. While in the spring of 1917 the *Daily Sentinel-Review* had noted that farmers generally scoffed at the idea of boys from the town being able to make a meaningful contribution on the farm,⁹³ now the papers were filled with praise for these same young men and women. Norwich put on a Boys’ Work Conference to recognize the young labourers for the work they performed to increase local production.⁹⁴ The *Gazette* applauded the “women at work in the field” and noted the excellent “manner in which they are working to take care of the crops.”⁹⁵ News of the field work performed by the women even reached the soldiers overseas. Fred Furlong noted his “surprise” that one of his female neighbours, “Miss Dorothy [was] working on the farm” but knew it was “a great fad around there, and if such was the case she would sure have to do it.”⁹⁶



Farmerettes in the field were a common sight in Ontario farming communities.

The combined efforts of farmers, community members, Soldiers of the Soil, and the Ontario Farm Service Corps delivered a “record yield of grain” across the townships. Wheat averaged 40 to 50 bushels an acre, while barley and oats averaged 50 to 60 bushels to the acre. In 1917 the price of wheat reached a record high of \$2.20 (roughly \$37 in 2018 dollars) a bushel – a dramatic increase from 1914, when the price was \$1.00 per bushel and even from 1916, when it averaged \$1.38 per bushel.⁹⁷ The *Gazette* reported that many local farmers had made a small fortune from the harvest.⁹⁸ William Wright had managed to plant 130 acres - if that was all wheat and if each acre yielded 45 bushels, he stood to make \$12,870.

Even with the outpouring of public assistance, the labour shortage remained a constant problem for township farmers: during the harvest, and as they milked their cows, cared for livestock, and completed daily chores. In August 1917, G.R. Green, the district representative of the Department of Agriculture, ventured through parts of the townships on his tour of North and South Oxford and announced that “the land had to be prepared for next season.” He “quoted specific instances which had come to his notice of farmers who, without additional help, would be quite unable to get everything done.”⁹⁹ Nelson Holdsworth, a well-known farmer from East Oxford with two sons (Aubrey and Milfred) serving in the CEF, said that the labour shortage on area farms threatened to become “untenable.” Even when farmers could find extra labourers they had to pay them “the most exorbitant” wages to compete with the money that could be made in city munition factories.¹⁰⁰ Another local farmer captured the exhaustion in an anonymous letter to the *Gazette*. “These days we farmers have a lot on our minds but very little time for getting our ideas into words suitable for a printing office,” he explained. “The war keeps agoing and

The Slackers

Not him that dies do we bemoan,
 But him that lives in selfish ease,
 Content to leave his world alone,
 Skulking behind th guardian seas,
 Blind eye, deaf ear, weak knee and trembling hand.
 Faint heart, and soul that cannot understand.
 Why dread a grave in sunny France,
 Where birds shall carol overhead.
 Where bugles sounding the advance
 Shall blow the requiem of the dead?
 But oh, the shame, the sickening, endless woe
 Of him that falters when he ought to go!
 Our sorrow yields to nobler pride,
 For them that did not fear to pay;
 Our world is better that they died
 To earn mankind a brighter day;
 Not, not in vain our clear-eyed sons have fought
 To bring the menace of the Hun to nought.
 But traitor to the race of men
 Is he who in a world in need
 Reads prospect of some easy plan
 To pander to his growing greed;
 Who sweats fat contracts from mankind's distress,
 And on the dying feeds his sordidness.
 Pity for him a prey to fear.
 Who dares not heed the insistent call
 Which nobler men are swift to hear
 Nor pause to calculate at all.
 Worthless the coward years he seeks to save,
 Only to fill at last a coward's grave.
 Strive for the glory of to-day.
 And if tomorrow shall not be
 For him who treads the higher way,
 To do, to dare and to be free.
 Think—Life is not a span of measured years,
 But action, progress, victory purged of fears.
 Better the pangs of shattered limb,
 Seared eyeball, lung that gasps for breath,
 Than the heart-agony of him
 Who living knows a double death,
 The palsied mind, the will beyond control,
 The ceaseless torture of a crippled soul.

American philosopher
 Benjamin Apthorp Gould

This poem is a sample of the derogatory hyperbole published in local newspapers during the conscription debate. *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 1 September 1917

it looks as if my wife and I will have to work the farm all alone again next year. It has been hard work for us this year - up early and to bed late. The days are so short now and there is so much to do.”¹⁰¹

The labour shortage and the frustrations it caused remained the central concern for most Canadian farmers and explains their opposition to Prime Minister Borden's plans for compulsory military service. In their view, William Wright rightly encouraged the politicians to “leave the boys on the farm.”¹⁰² A simple desire to keep loved ones safe was another factor, as were ongoing concerns about rural depopulation. Advertisements for the annual North Norwich Agricultural fair in the fall of 1917 reflected this desire to keep sons on the farm, asking the community to “urge the boys to exhibit something also. It will help keep them contented with farm life.”¹⁰³ Nelson Holdsworth – who sons were in harm's way overseas – likely spoke for many of the farmers in the townships in his letter to the *Daily Sentinel-Review*. He did not oppose selective conscription, as long as it did not drain the farm labour force. Had Borden's *Military Service Act* targeted young men in the cities and towns (especially in Quebec), most farmers likely would have supported the measure.¹⁰⁴ The government's plan, however, set the manpower allowance for farms at a man-and-a-half for each hundred and fifty acres. Holdsworth insisted that the *Military Service Act* should adopt a rate of one man per 50 acres or else

farm yields would fall by up to fifty percent. Better yet, he argued, the government should bolster the number of farm workers by conscripting men for military service *and* for agricultural service.¹⁰⁵ As it stood, conscripting young farmers would not only hinder increased production – it would cripple it.

Canadian city-dwellers alleged that farmers resisted conscription so that they could capitalize on the opportunities for profit created by the war. The Liberal MP for Oxford North, Holbrook-born native Edward Walter Nesbitt, highlighted this sentiment when he wrote to his counterpart from Oxford South, Donald Sutherland, suggesting that the only people who did not approve of conscription were “slackers and fathers and mothers of eligible sons would rather have their boys making money in Munition factories or on the farm and let those already at the front sink or swim.”¹⁰⁶ The farmers of Oxford County had made a lot of money from the war effort, and this generated resentment in some of the larger towns. The *Gazette*, for instance, highlighted farmers’ ability to enjoy luxuries like sugar, when other citizens could not afford them.¹⁰⁷ Local farmers could also afford the latest automobile models. When the editor of the *Huntsville Forrester* visited the town of Norwich in the summer of 1917, he noted the famers’ affluence by describing how, “on Saturday evening, as if on weekly parade, the huge automobiles come to town. The farmer who does not own a McLachlin ‘six’ is an exception. The street is congested with auto traffic.”¹⁰⁸ Some of the townspeople might have agreed with an angry city dweller who asked in the *Farm and Dairy Magazine* if there was “any bigger grafter in the country than the honest-living, landed farmer, who is the chief support of the automobile manufacturers at the present?”¹⁰⁹ In the eyes of urban Canadians, their rural counterparts shirked from conscription because it threatened their bottom line.

William Wright insisted that conscription did not threaten the profits of the farmers but their primary patriotic duty to “produce all we possibly can...to win the war.”¹¹⁰ Another farmer from Oxford East, Malcolm Schell, publicly subscribed to this view and, given his long political history (he was the Liberal Member of Parliament from 1904 until 1911 when he lost his seat to Conservative Donald S. Sutherland by only 24 votes), his opinion carried tremendous weight. Schell insisted that the young men who had stayed on the farms were “just as good” as the boys who went overseas – an interesting stance given that both his son Douglas and his nephew Rueben De Lemme Millyard were serving at the front. Many of these young farmers, Schell asserted, “would prefer to be in the trenches.”¹¹¹ For three years, however, the politicians repeatedly told the farmers that it was their duty to produce more for the war effort, and they had answered the call by planting more crops, raising more livestock, and producing more milk.¹¹² The United Farmers of Ontario (UFO) – a union of farmer organizations from across the province that formed in 1914 and boasted 350 clubs and 12,000 members by 1917 – explained that the farmers were:

not asking exemption from military service as a class. We realise that our blood is no more sacred than that of others but we do feel that food production in Canada is as necessary to the winning of the war as service in the

trenches in France. To take one skilled labourer from the farms means adding one more to the body of consumers. It does more - it removes from the land one who is in the position of being able to provide for six or eight others as well as himself. If we are to produce food to the limit, not only must we be allowed to retain skilled labour on the farm, but we must have a system of registration under which nonessential industries will be closed, and more labour provided for industries which are essential.¹¹³

Gauging the support for and opposition to conscription in the townships more generally is difficult. While training in England, Pte. Aubrey Holdsworth claimed to hear that many township residents opposed the measure, although it is unclear to whom he was referring. He wrote to his mother in August 1917 that he “always knew the attitude of some of the people around home, toward enlisting. If they were to change places with some of the boys in the trenches for a few weeks, they would probably have a wider outlook on the matter.”¹¹⁴ Aubrey was likely referring to the opposition amongst townspeople rather than farmers like his father. Otterville’s Charles Garthwaite – a prominent member of the community who had taught at the town’s high school – reported on this dissent.¹¹⁵ Garthwaite’s son Cecil had enlisted in the CEF before acquiring chronic bronchitis and suffering a nervous breakdown in England. Perhaps inspired by his son’s difficulties, Charles proved a strong supporter of conscription. He even wrote to his MP Donald S. Sutherland, offering to keep a list of those community members who supported and opposed conscription. “I hear of some of our friends who are afraid of Conscription or who fear that they may be sent, who are not coming our way,” Garthwaite conveyed. “Again I hear of some who have sons overseas that are with us. I will [keep] a tab on them or a list of persons that perhaps a call on them when you are here will be a help.”¹¹⁶

The Quakers of the townships had long opposed compulsory military service. While members of other pacifist communities (including Mennonites and Amish from North Oxford) went to Ottawa to seek total exemption of their men from armed service as conscientious objectors,¹¹⁷ the Quakers pleaded their cases



The Friends of Norwich (Quakers), 1919

as individuals. Amelia Poldon penned a letter to the *Gazette* documenting everything that the international Society of Friends, including the Norwich Friends, had already contributed during the war:

From Oct 31st 1915 to September 30th 1916, 916 Friends contributed in money \$34,489 which has been used for the relief of those suffering from the perils of the war. Norwich Friends have been generous contributors to this fund. In London, England, warehouses have established where articles of clothing are received, the total for the year received and dispatched was 371,836 garments and many thanks are expressed for the willing workers who have helped to deal with this large quantity, and the tireless workers all over the world whose industry has made this contribution.

Friends have organized an Ambulance Unit. There are about 1200 members in the Unit, 900 of whom belong to the ambulance section. This service involves risk, [as] two of the members were killed by shells and others lost their lives in other ways. During the year they carried 141,000 wounded and sick soldiers.

The work of the English Friend may be divided under four heads – Medical, Relief, Industry, Reconstruction and Agriculture. Medical: – They have a maternity Hospital at Chalons for refugees; children's hospital at Battincourt; Convalescent Home at Samoens; Hospital at Sermaize.... Kindergartens for children are opened out in many places, also centres for district nursing. Many thousands of sufferers have been cared for during the year.

In Holland Friends have given valuable assistance in Government camps. Many industrial places have been opened where women and girls are being taught dressmaking. Men are taught to make baskets, brushes, toys, hammocks, etc. Recreation rooms are opened with a piano and games and in one corner is looms where girls learn to weave. There is also a lawn for outdoor games. Refugee camps are organized where work is being provided for them and they are being homed, reclothed and fed. Much is being done for the Serbians to lessen their hardships and employment furnished the refugees to help them to fit themselves for the restoration of a national life.

The work in Russia has been carried on very extensively where the relief workers have found great destruction. Friends have done a great work in providing shelters for those whose homes have been destroyed. In the villages of the Marne and Meuse 1,530 have been homed. Groups of brick cottages have been built at Sermaize and Purgny...[and] a construction camp for making portable houses has been begun.

The Agricultural work consists mainly in the loan of machines, distribution of seeds and rabbits and chickens, and work in harvesting and threshing. Forty-six machines have been distributed for mowing and harvesting, and about three hundred chickens and fifty rabbits have been given away. The distribution of seeds for both gardens and farms...was very satisfactory in its returns.

This brief summary of last year's report of the Friend's relief work for the sufferers of the war gives a very inadequate conception of the vast amount accomplished by them, not only in hospitals, but the assistance given in the rebuilding of homes in devastated districts, industries introduced and employment given, and relief from all forms of destitution.¹¹⁸

The Friends also offered to help with wounded soldiers who returned home.¹¹⁹ They contributed to the war. They played their part. But they were not willing to serve and fight overseas.

Despite the opposition of many farmers, conscientious objectors, and other community members, conscription found strong proponents in the townships. Support was heaviest amongst those with sons or family members serving in the CEF and was generally higher in the towns than in the surrounding countryside (which was true across rural Ontario and much of the country). Norwich's Women's Patriotic League proved ardent in their support of conscription and in July shamed the women of the area who not yet "given a boy" to the conflict.¹²⁰ When Conservative MP Donald S. Sutherland visited the towns in his constituency he easily drew crowds who supported his pro-conscription message. Furthermore, East Oxford's John Nesbitt Chambers, a former officer in the No. 5 Norwich Company of the 22nd Oxford Rifles, stridently promoted conscription. The 60 year old was a prominent dairy farmer, thus making his ardent support for universal conscription unusual. Chambers elevated the debate over compulsory service to the grand strategic level. "Owing not alone to the collapse of Russia, but the possibility that the German prisoners held in Russia will be liberated and Russia become a fruitful field for the German recruiting sergeant, the pressure upon the western front may be so severe that the Canadian administration must call more men," he explained in the *Daily Sentinel-Review*.¹²¹ According to Chambers, the country needed to gather its conscripts before the Germans were able to muster their forces from Russia and send them to the Western Front – a prediction that proved all too accurate in the spring of 1918.

Other well-known political figures in the townships also came out in support of the measure. The representative of the townships in federal parliament, MP Donald S. Sutherland, whose son was serving in the Royal Flying Corps in Palestine, quickly announced his backing of the measure. He had first suggested that conscription might be necessary in the spring of 1916, during the recruitment of the 168th Battalion, so this announcement surprised no one.¹²² Predictably, Victor Albert Sinclair, the Conservative MPP for South Oxford, also eagerly supported Borden and his decision to impose conscription.¹²³ Less in line with traditional partisan politics was Edward Walter Nesbitt's avid and public support for compulsory service. The Liberal MP for North Oxford later explained to the *Daily Sentinel-Review* that "nothing except a death in the family could be so much of a wrench as breaking with his leader [Laurier]," but the country's interest was greater than any party's – and Canada needed more men in uniform to win the war.¹²⁴ He provided a far more candid explanation for his choice in a private letter to Sutherland, explaining that "the only thing I feel has been miscarried is that conscription was not applied long ago. Why should Canada desert the boys that have voluntarily sacrificed their jobs at home and great number their lives for those who are living here in ease and enjoying prosperous times?"¹²⁵ The Liberal MPP for North Oxford, Newton Rowell, the leader of Ontario's Liberal party, also supported the measure.

Faced with strong political and public support for universal conscription, farm-

ers organized meetings across the townships (as they did across the country) to ensure that their voice was heard. On 6 July the Progressive Farmers' Co-operative Club of Norwich attracted 1000 people to a meeting to discuss farmers' issues,¹²⁶ and various farmers' clubs convened another large gathering on 22 August in a grove near Beaconsfield. Speakers discussed the essential service provided by farmers as they strove to increase their production, as well as the imperative that farmers organize as a political force to offset the lawyers and doctors who dominated the provincial legislature. The meeting ended with a stirring call for farmers to "stand shoulder to shoulder and fight manfully for our interests."¹²⁷

The long-time Liberal farmer Malcolm Schell addressed the Beaconsfield meeting. He had been "busily engaged in farm work" on his 150 acres over the summer "owing to the scarcity of farm help," but still made time to attend a meeting of the Ontario Liberals on 20 July where he joined with Laurier supporters calling for a referendum on the conscription issue. With Prime Minister Borden still trying to cobble together a Union government of Conservative and pro-conscription Liberals, the newspapers projected a possible federal election in the fall.¹²⁸ With this in mind, Schell spoke at more public functions, especially when farmers were present, including the patriotic fair in Otter Park and the Norwich Fall Fair.¹²⁹ At the farmers meeting in Beaconsfield, Schell tried to curry favour by emphasizing the common labour problems that they faced. "Who is entitled to more benefits, holidays or good clothes than the farmer, who is today working more hours of any class of workmen," he queried.¹³⁰ With his strong pro-farmer message, Schell presented himself as the agriculturalists' candidate in the townships.

The farmers would need one. Through the summer of 1917, farming families pleaded for mass exemptions for their young men but they had little effect as the *Military Service Act (MSA)* wound its way through Parliament. The Conservatives, supported by pro-conscription Liberals, rejected Laurier's suggestion to call a national referendum. Instead, the *MSA* became law on 28 August 1917 and applied to all male British subjects in Canada between the ages of 20 and 45. The act established six classes of men who could be called up for service, with the first made up of all men, single or widowers between the ages of 20 and 34 without children, and the last class being married men and widowers, between the ages of 40 and 44, with one child.¹³¹ The *MSA* granted mass exemptions to honourably discharged servicemen, Mennonites, Doukhobors, and clergymen. It also provided the chance for individual exemptions from service if a person could prove that he worked in an essential occupation, the importance of his continuing education, or that his enrol-



Men who were not eager to fight overseas had their loyalty, character and masculinity called into question by recruiting posters such as this one.

ment would create excessive financial, business, or domestic hardships. To the relief of the Quakers in the townships, the act also provided an exemption to anyone that adhered “to a religious denomination of which the articles of faith forbid combatant service” – although they would have to prove their membership to win an exemption. Farmers, however, were not given the mass exemption for which they had lobbied all summer.¹³² With autumn approaching, the men of the townships – like their counterparts across the country – waited for their class to be called.

As Prime Minister Borden pushed the MSA through Parliament he built momentum for his Union government. Many Ontario and Western Liberals continued to express their support for Laurier in August, and Borden sought alternative options to ensure his electoral success.¹³³ The *Military Voters Act* extended the franchise (the right to vote) to all Canadians in military service, both male and female, regardless of age. The *Wartime Elections Act* gave the vote to the wives, mothers, widows, sisters, and daughters of Canadians serving in the military or who had served overseas. In short, the legislation created a new block of voters who would tend to support conscription while stripping the vote from conscientious objectors and people who had immigrated to Canada from enemy nations since 1902. The political deck was strongly stacked in favour of Borden’s Unionists and their conscription agenda.

On 6 September 1917, MP Donald S. Sutherland wrote a letter to Lt.-Col. Donald Matheson Sutherland summarizing the political situation in the country from the perspective of a Conservative Unionist:

We are evidently face to face with a Dominion election, the Opposition apparently thinking this to be an opportune time for them, with practically a solid French Canadian vote backing them in their opposition to conscription, also those who might be opposed to the measure in the ranks of the Conservative Party, together with the Alien enemy sympathisers, and the old time Liberal who always votes with Sir Wilfrid.... The absence of the soldiers overseas, together with the lack of the influence which they would exert if they were here, will be a great loss, but this has been met so far as possible by giving the soldiers overseas, regardless of age, the right to vote, and also giving the votes to the mothers, wives and sisters of the soldiers.¹³⁴

By mid-October, Borden had secured the support of enough Liberals to announce the formation of a Union government and called a federal election for 17 December.¹³⁵ The election would essentially serve as a national referendum on conscription.

A day after Borden’s announcement, the *Military Service Act* came into effect. All Class I men were ordered to appear before medical boards. Medical examinations started in the town of Norwich almost immediately, overwhelming staff and making it “considerably difficult” for men to actually get an exam.¹³⁶ Accordingly, many of the men headed to nearby cities, such as Woodstock, Brantford, London, or St. Catharines, for their medical assessments. A doctor in Woodstock classified James Lammiman of Curries Crossing as “A2” – in good physical condition and a candidate for conscription.¹³⁷ A medical board in St. Catharines also classified

23-year-old John William Bowerman of Otterville, the oldest son helping his father on the family farm, as “A2.” With few exceptions, young and healthy farmers from the townships were ruled “A2” and deemed ready for service.

William Wright’s son Harry found himself amongst this wave of Class 1 men. His father’s appeal to “leave the boys on the farm” had failed. On 22 October, Harry took the train to London, Ontario for his medical examination, which ruled him physically fit for conscription.¹³⁸ Soon after, he went to the post office in Woodstock to pick-up an application for exemption, believing that his place was at home working on the farm.

At this juncture, Harry Wright’s plight would have received little sympathy from Gunner Harold Innis. Facing a return to the front lines, Innis remained convinced that conscription was an absolute necessity. Winning every yard of hard-fought ground entailed heavy human losses. When the Canadian Corps moved into Belgium in October to attack a new objective – the village of Passchendaele – a high toll of casualties seemed inevitable. To succeed on the battlefield, Innis recognized that the Corps needed “men, men and more men.” Conscription seemed like the only option to hasten the end of the war and allow his return home.

Notes

- 1 “An Appeal for Increased Production of Food,” *Norwich Gazette*, 3 May 1917.
- 2 “Town Talk,” *Norwich Gazette*, 17 May 1917.
- 3 Adam Crerar, “Ontario and the Great War,” in *Canada and the First World War*, ed. David MacKenzie (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 234.
- 4 William Wright to Donald Sutherland, n.d., Oxford County Archives (OCA), COA63, Donald Sutherland Fonds, Series 2, Subseries G – Military, 1917.
- 5 “Famine and World Hunger are on the Threshold,” *Norwich Gazette*, 3 May 1917.
- 6 Prime Minister Robert Borden’s Speech before the House of Commons, 18 May 1917, <https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/primeministers/h4-4072-e.html>.
- 7 Crerar, “Ontario and the Great War,” 237.
- 8 “Woodstock has 528 in ‘Eligible’ List,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 19 May 1917
- 9 William Wright to Donald Sutherland, n.d., OCA, COA63, Donald Sutherland Fonds, Series 2, Subseries G – Military, 1917.
- 10 Innis to his Mother and all, 22 July 1917, in *Harold Innis Reflects: Memoir and WWI Writings/ Correspondence*, eds. William J. Buxton, Michael Cheney, and Paul Heyer (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 155.
- 11 Vimy Foundation, “Arleux-en-Gohelle,” <http://www.vimyfoundation.ca/arleux-en-gohelle/>.
- 12 G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1962), 274.
- 13 Soldier file, Collver, Hugh Ross, 796542, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 1887 – 51. Hugh had a twin brother, Pte. Roy Ward Collver.
- 14 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 274-78.

Chapter 8

- 15 "Norwich Loses Another Son," *Norwich Gazette*, 24 May 1917.
- 16 "How the Boys Keep Fit in England," *Norwich Gazette*, 1 February 1917.
- 17 Soldier File, Newton, Roy Stuart, 675256, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 7302 – 32.
- 18 Soldier file, Duffield, Albert Samuel, 675175, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 2703 – 3.
- 19 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 276.
- 20 Soldier file, Hainer, Lorne Percy, 773033, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3923 – 31.
- 21 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 278.
- 22 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 279-80.
- 23 Soldier file, Glover, Emerson, 690450, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3590 – 16.
- 24 "Pte. Emerson Glover Home from France," *Norwich Gazette*, 11 April 1918.
- 25 Soldier file, Calvert, John James, 126629, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 1396 – 47; and "Town Talk" *Norwich Gazette*, 5 July 1917.
- 26 Soldier file, Cole, John William Ernest, 675616, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 1852 – 28; and "Town Talk" *Norwich Gazette*, 5 July 1917.
- 27 Soldier file, Pascoe, Samuel Sandrie, 1102295, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 7621 – 25; and "Town Talk" *Norwich Gazette*, 21 July 1917.
- 28 "Otterville Boy Wounded" *Norwich Gazette*, 2 Aug 1917; and Soldier file, Fournier, Lewis Albert, 675173, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3244 – 18.
- 29 "Lieut. Johnston Killed in Action" *Norwich Gazette*, 5 July 1917.
- 30 Pte. A. S. Reavely, "Death of Erwin Pearson," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 19 July 1917.
- 31 Harold Innis, "Memoir of Harold Adams Innis Covering the Years 1894 - 1922," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 29, no.2 (2004).
- 32 "South Norwich Boy Writes from England," printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 18 October 1917; also excerpted in *Tillsonburg Observer*, 18 October 1917.
- 33 Innis, "Memoir."
- 34 Harold Innis to his Mother, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 18 October 1917.
- 35 Innis to his Mother, 14 July 1917 and 16 July 1917, in Buxton et al, *Harold Innis Reflects*, 153-4.
- 36 Innis to his Mother and all, 22 July 1917, 27 July 1917, 11 August 1917, and 18 August 1917, in Buxton et al, *Harold Innis Reflects*, 155-57.
- 37 Innis, "Memoir."
- 38 Jay Cassel, "Making Canada Safe for Sex: Government and the Problem of Sexually Transmitted Disease in the Twentieth Century" in *Canadian Healthcare and the State: A Century of Evolution*, ed. David Naylor (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 147. Cassel argues that the 15.8% figure for the whole war (66,083 cases out of 418,052 Canadians in the CEF overseas) is too high because it counts relapses as multiple cases. See Jay Cassel, *The Secret Plague: Venereal Disease in Canada 1838-1939*, Social History of Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 123, 140. On Ontario's reaction to the VD crisis during the war, see Mary Louise Adams, "In Sickness and in Health: State Information, Moral Regulation, and Early VD Initiatives in Ontario," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 28:4 (1993): 117-30; and Suzanne Buckley and Janice Dickin McGinnis, "Venereal Disease and Public Health Reform in Canada," *Canadian Historical Review* 63, no.3 (1982): 337-54.
- 39 The 66,346 recorded cases of VD amounted to 40% of the Canadians wounded and gassed on the Western Front. Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up* (Toronto: Ran-

dom House, 1993), 200.

40 Kandace Bogaert, "Patient Experience and the Treatment of Venereal Disease in Toronto's Military Base Hospital during the First World War," *Canadian Military History* 26, no. 2 (2017): 7.

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46 "On Furlough," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 9 August 1917.

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51 Jonathan Vance, *High Flight: Aviation and the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Penguin, 2002), 57, 71.

52 S.F. Wise, *Canadian Airmen and the First World War, Volume 1, The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 397-98, 407. Dickson is mentioned in the footnote on page 398 of Wise's official history. The British lost 285 aircraft in "Bloody April" 1917 and 211 aircrew were killed or missing, with another 108 taken prisoner. The number of Canadian aircrew casualties during this period has never been tabulated. Major Bill March, "Air power and the battle for Vimy Ridge," RCAF news article, 8 April 2016, <http://www.rcf-arc.forces.gc.ca/en/article-template-standard.page?doc=air-power-and-the-battle-for-vimy-ridge/i89a1wkc>.

53 Chaz Bowyer, ed., *Royal Flying Corps Communiqués 1917-1918* (London: Dimensions, 1998), 32.

54 Soldier file, Dickson, Joseph Leslie, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 2542 - 8; "Another Oxford's Own Man Killed in Action," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 19 May 1917; and "Pilot Lt. C. R. O'Brien, Obs 2/Lt. J. L. Dickson," <http://www.theaerodrome.com/forum/archive/index.php/t-61116.html>.

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56 "Killed in Action," *Norwich Gazette*, 13 September 1917.

57 "Lieut. Mulley Killed," *Norwich Gazette*, 21 November 1918.

58 Shaw, George Mydhope, British National Archives, Kew, file AIR 76/457/129; and http://www.airhistory.org.uk/rfc/files/names_combined_S-V.csv. Shaw's uncle shared with

the people of Norwich that “Hope” had given the Hun planes many a tumble and had had many narrow escapes. In Shaw’s last encounter with the enemy at a tremendous height his comrade was killed and his plane riddled with bullets. During an air raid on the Germans on 26 February, while conducting photo reconnaissance at an altitude of 17,000 feet at Laon, he encountered a German plane. During the ensuing fight he and his 2nd Lieut. C.H.S. Ackers were both wounded, forcing them to land their craft behind enemy lines. The airmen were reported as missing on 26 February 1918 and their families were notified that they were officially prisoners of war days later. Of his initial capture, Shaw reported that “the German soldiers were kind to them and showed him every attention in the matter of dressing his wounds and making him comfortable.” He was taken to Zerbst, then moved to Magdenberg, Hofjager, Karlsruhe, and Landshut A/Isar before his final repatriation at Leith on 18 December 1918. http://www.airhistory.org.uk/rfc/files/names_PoW.csv; “Town Talk,” *Norwich Gazette*, 11 April 1918; and “Prisoner in Germany,” *Norwich Gazette*, 30 May 1918.

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61 Collver to Mother, 28 July 1917.

62 Aubrey Holdsworth to his Brother, 26 August 1917, NDMA.

63 For the latest and most comprehensive book, see Douglas Delaney and Serge Marc Durflinger, eds., *Capturing Hill 70: Canada’s Forgotten Battle of the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016). See also Geoff Jackson, “‘Anything but Lovely’: The Canadian Corps at Lens in the Summer of 1917,” *Canadian Military History* 17, no. 1 (2008): 5-20; and Matthew Walthert, “Neglected Victory The Canadian Corps at Hill 70,” *Canadian Military History* 19, no. 1 (2010): 21-36.

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66 “Canadians Masters of All Gateways of Lens,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 15 August 1917, 1.

67 “Canadians Holding Firmly Against Repeated Attacks,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 17 August 1917, 1.

68 “Valour of Canadians Has Won Glory for Them and Canada,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 18 August 1917, 1.

69 See, for example, “Canadian Boys Win Favor for Valor at Hill 70,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 20 August 1917; “The Canadian Army in Action and the Advance of the Tanks,” *Norwich Gazette*, 23 August 1917.

70 J.A. Swettenham, *Canada and the First World War* (Ottawa: Canadian War Museum, 1973), 178.

71 “Norwich Boy Killed in Action” *Norwich Gazette*, 6 September 1917.

72 “New Durham,” *Norwich Gazette*, 6 September 1917.

73 Soldier file, Revell, Harry William, 797508, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 8201 – 60.

74 “Casualties,” *Tillsonburg Observer*, 30 August 1917.

75 “Mr. and Mrs. Robert Myrick have received official notice that their son Pte Walter Myrick is wounded, but a cablegram received from England informed the that he is recovering rapidly. The young man enlisted in the 1st Canadian Engineers at Ottawa where he had been teaching.” “News Articles,” *Tillsonburg Observer*, 6 September 1917.

- 76 "Casualties," *Norwich Gazette*, 6 September 1917.
- 77 "Casualties," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 13 September 1917.
- 78 "Holbrook," *Norwich Gazette*, 8 December 1917.
- 79 Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare*, 143.
- 80 "Capt Lewis Henry," *Norwich Gazette*, 13 September 1917.
- 81 "Pte John Boughner Wounded," *Norwich Gazette*, 20 September 1917; and Soldier file, Boughner, John Sydney, 675858, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 919 – 47.
- 82 Bruce Pool to Cousin, Military Convalescent Camp, Surrey, England, 6 November 1917, NDMA, 2005.090, Range B, Shelf 5, Box P2, File World War I. See also "Pte. Bruce Poole Wounded," *Norwich Gazette*, 27 September 1917.
- 83 Bruce Pool to Cousin, 6th Cdn Res. Btn., Sussex, England, 28 February 1918, NDMA, 2005.090, Range B, Shelf 5, Box P2, File World War I.
- 84 Soldier file, Furlong, John Matthew, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3340A – 63. His personnel files explains that the "soldier states that he has had a right inguinal hernia from infancy, but that it was barely perceptible up to time of enlistment. It is now quite marked. He states that it does not bother him, except when he tried to lift any heavy object."
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- 86 "Curries," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 14 May 1917.
- 87 "Splendid Work of the South Oxford Institutes," *Norwich Gazette*, 28 June 1917.
- 88 "Successful Garden Party," *Norwich Gazette*, 30 August 1917; "Otterville Red Cross G. Party," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 27 August 1917; and "News from Oxford County," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 30 August 1917.
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- 90 "On Furlough," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 9 August 1917; "Tillsonburg," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 11 August 1917; and "Springford," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 11 August 1917.
- 91 "Town Talk," *Norwich Gazette*, 20 September 1917.
- 92 "Girls Prepare for Farm Work," *Norwich Gazette*, 26 February 1918. The article described how girls could work up to ten hours per day, with up to two for house work "so they won't be a burden on the "already overworked farmer's wife." These farmerettes were not to do any scrubbing or washing, however, "as it would be too great a tax on their strength to do the heavy work of both the farm and the house."
- 93 "High School Boys Are Not Wanted on Farms," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 31 March 1917.
- 94 "Boy's Conference," *Norwich Gazette*, 26 July 1917.
- 95 "Town Talk," *Norwich Gazette*, 23 August 1917.
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- 97 Average Annual Wheat Prices and Index Numbers of Wholesale Prices in Canada, 1914-1923, Dominion Bureau of Statistics.
- 98 "Wheat Averages 40 Bushels," *Norwich Gazette*, 23 August 1917; and "Town Talk," *Norwich Gazette*, 6 September 1917.
- 99 "Campaign is on For Men to Help Harvest Crops," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 7 August 1917.
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- 101 "From a Farmer's Point of View," *Norwich Gazette*, 1 November 1917.
- 102 William Wright to Donald Sutherland, n.d., Oxford County Archives, COA63, Donald Sutherland Fonds, Series 2, Subseries G – Military, 1917.
- 103 "Town Talk," *Norwich Gazette*, 6 September 1917.
- 104 Young, "Conscription, Rural Depopulation, and the Farmers of Ontario," 304.
- 105 "Farmers Facing Serious Problem," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 14 November 1917.
- 106 W.H. Nesbitt to Donald Sutherland, 28 May 1917, OCA, COA63, Donald Sutherland Fonds, Series 2, Subseries G – Military, 1917.
- 107 "Town Talk," *Norwich Gazette*, 15 March 1917.
- 108 "As Other See Us," *Norwich Gazette*, 13 September 1917.
- 109 Young, "Conscription, Rural Depopulation, and the Farmers of Ontario," 302.
- 110 William Wright to Donald Sutherland, n.d., OCA, COA63, Donald Sutherland Fonds, Series 2, Subseries G – Military, 1917.
- 111 "Ovation given Malcolm Schell," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 26 November 1917.
- 112 "Sutherland and Schell Start the Ball Rolling," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 20 November 1917.
- 113 Young, "Conscription, Rural Depopulation, and the Farmers of Ontario," 305.
- 114 Aubrey Holdsworth to his Mother, 7 August 1917, NDMA.
- 115 Soldier file, Garthwaite, Cecil, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3431 – 26.
- 116 George Garthwaite to Donald Sutherland, 24 November 1917, OCA, COA63, Donald Sutherland Fonds, Series 2, Subseries G – Military, 1917.
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- 118 "War Relief of the Society of Friends," *Norwich Gazette*, 30 August 1917.
- 119 "Town Talk" *Norwich Gazette*, 10 May 1917.
- 120 "Women's Patriotic League" *Norwich Gazette*, 12 July 1917.
- 121 J.N. Chambers, "A Plea for Candor," Letter to the Editor, 3 December 1917, published in *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 5 December 1917.
- 122 "Conscription May be Near Possibility," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 10 April 1916.
- 123 "Ontario's Premier Urges Support for Union Government," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 1 December 1917.
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- 125 W.H. Nesbitt to Donald Sutherland, 28 May 1917, OCA, COA63, Donald Sutherland Fonds, Series 2, Subseries G – Military, 1917.
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- 129 "Norwich Fall Fair Beats All Records," *Norwich Gazette*, 4 October 1917.
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9 “We cannot hide from ourselves the fact that this will be the most critical period of the war”

Passchendaele and the Khaki Election,
October-December 1917

In the last months of 1917 the Canadians Corps fought its brutal battle at Passchendaele, the first class of conscripts prepared to be called up or sought exemptions, and the country hurtled towards “the most bitter election” in its history.¹ In the midst of these momentous events, Chaplain John Hilary Barnett took a moment to reflect on their importance in a letter to his Presbyterian congregation in Norwich. He had spent the last few months comforting wounded Canadians in the hospitals of France and England and understood first-hand just how many soldiers had been killed and wounded in 1917. The sacrifices of the soldiers at the front and their families at home had been extreme. “Weariness,” Capt. Barnett noted, “cannot but be felt after so long a time of struggle and hardship. The war has become a test of endurance and the side with its whole soul steeled for victory will win.” This was the moment, at home and overseas, when Canadians would prove their resolve. “We cannot hide from ourselves the fact that this will be the most critical period of the war.”²

People in East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich townships understood that Canada had reached a critical juncture. Many viewed conscription and the federal election as a test of Canada’s soul and its commitment to the war. The *Norwich Gazette* wrote that “not since the stormy days of Confederation has there been a contest in which so much was at stake” – a sentiment echoed by other newspapers and politicians.³ During a pro-conscription rally in Tillsonburg, Victor Sinclair, the Conservative MPP for South Oxford, told the audience that “this was indeed a critical time, wherein people must come to a conclusion and decide their course. The only issue of importance today was effective and immediate action to ensure the backing of the men at the front. This was the all-important question, and even Confederation was dwarfed into insignificance by the moment of the question now before the people.”⁴ On 17 December, would Canada choose Borden’s Union government and conscription, or Laurier’s Liberals who promised to steer Canada back to voluntary enlistment?

“Too Much Mud to Suit Me”: The Third Battle of Ypres and Passchendaele

The state of the allied war effort on the Western Front was disconcerting in the early fall of 1917. Nivelle’s French offensive on the Chemin des Dames had proven

a disaster. His promised breakthrough had failed to materialize, and a wave of mutinies swept through the beleaguered French Army, rendering it incapable of anything more than defensive activities. The British armies, including the Canadian Corps, would have to pick up the slack. In late July, British commander Sir Douglas Haig launched a major drive in Flanders which sought to seize strategic rail heads and capture the German submarine bases on the Belgian coast. The Third Battle of Ypres was announced with a massive artillery barrage, leading to impressive gains on the first day which soon bogged down in political and logistical delays. By this point in the war, the battlefield had been fought over so many times that repeated shelling and mining had destroyed the agricultural drainage systems developed to manage the high water table. Unfortunately for the British, unusually heavy rains began to pour down on the night that their offensive began, and in no time the landscape became a quagmire — an impassible swamp. As the British soldiers struggled to overcome the endless mud, the Germans who dominated the high ground in this sector inflicted frightful casualties from defensive lines fortified with machine guns firing from concrete pill boxes. The British adopted new “bite and hold” tactics to answer the German defensive systems. Rather than trying to drive deep into enemy defences and break through, the British Expeditionary Force limited its advances to the range of its artillery cover, driving into the enemy trenches, digging in quickly, and then defeating the inevitable German counter attack. This, in turn, inflicted heavy casualties on the defenders, but gains – often measured in inches – came at the price of devastatingly high casualties.⁵

In early October, many of Haig’s strategic objectives remained in German hands. British and Australian troops had wrested a significant proportion of the high ground from the Germans, but they were exhausted and had been reduced to skeleton formations by their attempts to seize Passchendaele ridge under such awful conditions. Two of Haig’s army commanders recommended that he end his offensive drive, but Haig was adamant to push one more time. He called on the Canadian Corps to move to the sector, relieve the exhausted troops in the front lines, and take the city of Passchendaele.⁶ By this point, his strategic goal of advancing to the Belgian coast was no longer feasible. Choosing to send the Canadians into the maelstrom was clearly geared towards attrition: continuing to pin down and wear out the Ger-



*The poet Siegfried Sassoon later wrote:
“I died in Hell; they called it Passchendaele.”*

mans.

After inspecting the muddy battlefield, Currie protested vigorously against his assignment, even trying to draw Prime Minister Borden into the issue. He assessed (correctly, it turned out) that any operation would entail heavy losses. Haig convinced him that it was necessary, however, and Currie – who greatly respected the British commander – acquiesced and set to work conceiving a plan. The conditions were atrocious, the weather awful, the ground impassable, and the Canadians would have to fight an uphill battle—literally. To defeat German “elastic defences” or “defence in depth” (implemented to respond to the British “bite and hold” tactics in the cat and mouse game of gaining an upper hand on the battlefield), the Canadians demanded more, and more effective, artillery. Engineers built roadways, tracks, and railways to try and make the battlefield more passable. The infantry refined and practised their platoon fire and movement tactics, emphasizing the use of

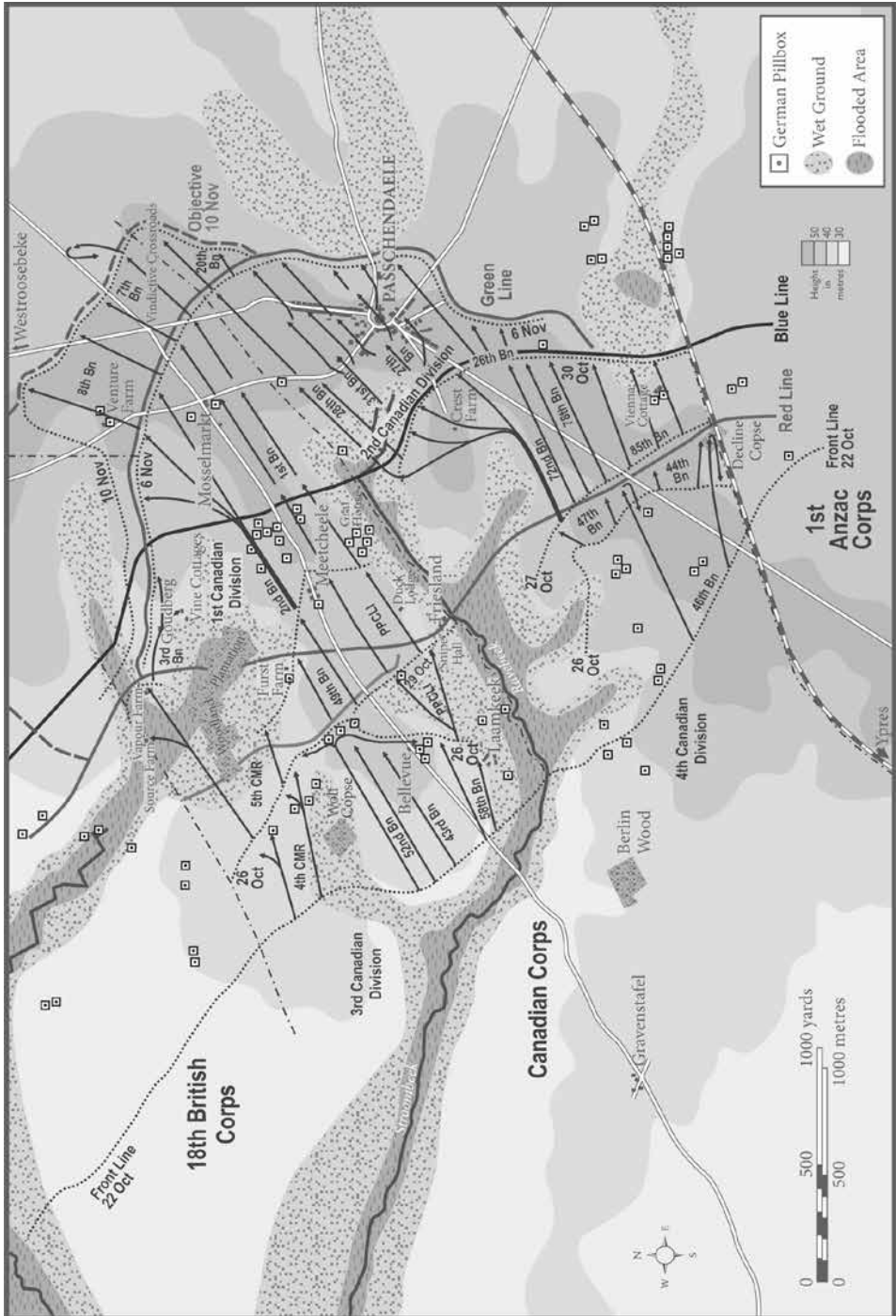
rifle grenades and Lewis guns to destroy enemy strong points so that the infantry could move in and finish the task with rifle and bayonet. For the soldiers on the ground, the sights and smells were the stuff of nightmares. “The summer scenery of green grass and yellow and blue flowers decorating the hills and valleys has faded away



A classic image of the quagmire through which Canadians advanced at Passchendaele

for fall weather,” Pte. Monroe Purdy told his mother in Norwich. “But the land is mostly cut up by shell holes. I have seen shell holes that you could drive a team of horses and a wagon into and you wouldn’t be able to see them either.”⁷ It was actually far worse than he was allowed to describe for audiences back home. The area was littered with the detrius of war. “Unburied dead men, mules, and horses were everywhere, grotesquely swollen,” historian J.L. Granatstein narrated. “Mud stretched all around, with a powerful suction effect that could swallow men and machines; rain-filled shell craters and submerged heavy equipment mixed with the remains of tree trunks and rats abounded.”⁸

The Canadian Corps plan called for three phases of the offensive, each adopting “bite and hold” tactics to ensure that the attackers did not overextend and could consolidate hard-earned gains. On 26 October, the first wave of 20,000 soldiers in the Third and Fourth Divisions inched their way from shell hole to shell hole in the face of heavy fire, only to move the line forward 1200 yards. “The slaughter ... swallowed platoons and companies whole,” Granatstein noted. Currie called for a halt after three days of fighting had claimed 2500 killed and wounded.⁹ On 30 Octo-



The Battle of Passchendaele, 26 October-10 November 1917



A Canadian soldier in a gas mask - an accountment of warfare that addressed the realities of the chemical battlefield but also added another element of "friction" in combat.

ber, the resupplied Canadians renewed their assault on Passchendaele, advancing another 1000 yards in a violent rainstorm. The Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI) faced an uphill battle, with the Germans holding the ruins of a few houses on the ridge from which their machine gunners could sweep the battlefield. "The infantry was faced with one of those awful cases where the artillery had not done its job," historian Tim Cook recounted. "As the lead formations rose from their slit trenches and muddy holes, they were mowed down by machine guns left unhindered by the barrage."¹⁰ Cousins Lance Cpl. Douglas Schell and Lieut. Reuben Millyard, who had grown up together in East Oxford and joined the PPCLI together, both became casualties. As an officer leading his platoon's advance, Lieutenant Millyard was shot in the right forearm, which forced him out of action until the

following September. Even when officers like Millyard fell, the PPCLI pushed on, capturing pillboxes and consolidating their positions. The Germans bombed the Canadians with poison gas to delay the advance, infesting the slimy battlefield with yet another danger. The Canadian soldiers were growing accustomed to operating in this kind of chemical environment, but hundreds still fell ill from the effects of gas – including Schell, who was forced out of action and would have to recover in hospital.¹¹

For the next five days, the Canadians held on to their new "line" – not front-line trenches, but listening posts and battle posts scattered throughout the pock-marked landscape, where soldiers often wallowed waist deep in mud and were vulnerable to an endless rain of German artillery shells.¹² Pte. Bruce McNaughton,¹³ an "old Milldale boy," was fighting in France with the 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles in the same platoon as Pte. W.G. "Steve" Stephen, whose mother lived in New Durham. "Well, Mac, has been recommended for a medal for devotion to duty and courage in the field," Stephen reported in a letter in mid-November:

The week before last was about as trying as any that our battalion has had to go through and Mac, on account of his ability to find his way about the country, which is little more than one huge mass of shell holes and bog, was chosen to act as guide. The work is terribly hard, going from front line to supports and vice versa, guiding search parties, reinforcements, etc. through mud up to their knees and waists, and under fire the whole time. To be under fire for a few hours at a time is trying enough, but imagine ten days of it steady. For three days and nights he got no sleep, and of course was unable to take his clothes off during the whole time the battalion was in action.

Although McNaughton stood only 5' 2-½", he had proven a giant on the battlefield.

“On one occasion Mac and a small party were almost run into by a party of Germans, but they kept still and waited until the enemy was within fifty yards of them,” Stephen recounted. At that moment, the group “used their rifles with such effect that any Huns who were not killed beat it back to shelter as fast as the mud would let them.” There is no indication that “Mac” actually received a medal for gallantry, and like so many others his courageous actions went officially unrecognized. Exceptional service was not lost on his brothers-in-arms, however, which was the most important consideration for most soldiers in the field, and McNaughton was soon promoted to lance corporal.¹⁴

The third phase of the battle began on 6 November, with the First and Second Divisions taking their crack at Passchendaele. Pte.

Harold MacLachlan, a student from Norwich who had enlisted in April 1916 at the age of eighteen, described his experience in a detailed letter to his mother. In early May he had sustained a slight gunshot wound to his right shoulder, but had recovered quickly and was back with his unit before the month was out.

After a couple of trips to the hospital with impetigo,¹⁵ he was back with the 2nd Battalion in time to detrain at the city of Ypres – “now only a mass of ruins – on 2 November. From there they marched to St. Jean where they were billeted in tents and other shelters. “We were within easy range of the guns of the enemy but luckily he bothered us very little,” MacLachlan described in



Harold MacLachlan

a letter to his mother. They trained there for two days before he moved with part of his battalion into the front lines. “On the evening of the 5th we took up a position slightly in advance of the front line,” he explained. “We hid in shell holes until the time came to pay our little visit to Fritz, just to show him we were not down-hearted over the Italian reverse.”¹⁶ (The Italians, who had joined the Allies in 1915, had retreated 19 kilometres in late October 1917 after the Austrians and Germans hit them with chlorine-arsenic agent and diphosgene gas at the Battle of Caporetto.¹⁷)

On the cold and misty day of 6 November, MacLachlan and his battalion were thrust into the muddy morass. At about 4:00 in the morning, German artillery “started to bombard us heavily for a couple of hours,” MacLachlan recounted. He discovered two pieces of shrapnel lodged in the stock of his rifle, which had been lying by his side. Fortunately, he had somehow managed to escape injury (as did most of his unit, which had massed slightly forward of the German barrage line¹⁸), which allowed MacLachlan to take part in the Canadian offensive:

Exactly at 6 a.m. our artillery opened up a creeping barrage and over we went with a steady roar of the guns behind us and a deluge of bursting shells in front. All we had to do was to follow the barrage. It did most of the work for us. Every two or three hundred yards there was a pillbox. By the way a pill box is a strong concrete fortification. The ones we captured were about forty feet long, twenty feet wide and fifteen feet high. They are used for machine gun emplacements. Often ten or more machine guns have been found in one pill box. However had but little difficulty as most of the occupants were dead, in all probability they were killed by the concussion of our shells bursting on

their fortifications. Prisoners were coming in quickly and were sent to the rear where they were employed as stretcher-bearers. While waiting for the barrage to move forward we dropped into shell-holes and sniped at fleeing Fritzes. Near our objective there was a pillbox with a Red Cross flag flying. It was in first class condition. Evidently our gunners had avoided it as far as possible. We captured over fifty prisoners in it.¹⁹

The Canadians' initial advance was so rapid that German artillery fire fell behind them, allowing them to reach the enemy trenches before German machine gunners had manned their pillboxes. In less than three hours – and after sustaining another 2238 casualties – the ruins of the village were in Canadian hands. MacLachlan and his mates started to dig in on the crest of a ridge. While doing so, he was hit in the right thigh by a sniper bullet. "A stretcher-bearer was called to dress my wounds, and when within two yards of me, he received a bullet wound in the hip," MacLachlan recalled. His wound was quickly dressed in the field and he began to wind his way back to seek medical attention. "For a while I had to dodge from shell-hole, to shell-hole to avoid being sniped again," he wrote. "I rested at pillboxes on



Canadian soldiers carry a wounded comrade over muddy terrain to an aid post during the Battle of Passchendaele

my way, but as they were all being heavily shelled, I did not tarry long at these points." Along the way, he "had many narrow escapes" – one shell exploded on the road right beside him, showering him with mud and leaving him temporarily blinded and deafened. Ultimately, he shook off the shock and sustained no additional injuries. "Wounded Germans were also coming my way," he recounted.

"I gave one a drink of water. He seemed surprised and said 'bon Komerad'" (good or kind comrade). MacLachlan was thankful to reach the Australian Field Ambulance Station, where the staff again dressed his wound before sending him on to the casualty clearing station and then to No.3 Stationary Hospital near the northern French city of Boulogne. His wound would heal in the coming months, and he took great pride in what the Canadians accomplished at Passchendaele. "In this drive the Canadians gained from the enemy valuable territory a mile in depth on a front of about ten miles," he informed his mother.²⁰

Pte. Munroe Purdy, who had enlisted with the 168th in Norwich in April 1916, was also serving in the 2nd Battalion. The 5'3" tall infantryman²¹ recounted to his mother after the battle how:

We went "over the top" early in the morning, just at dawn. Fritz thought because the ridge was well prepared with pill-boxes and innumerable com-

manded with guns of every description, especially machine guns, with which he commanded the slope, the place was impregnable, but, although we had to advance through a foot of practically what was glue or slime, we made the distance with stubbornness of resolution and drove fritz back a mile and a half. It was comical to see them come running toward our machine guns with their hands up yelling "Mercy Comrade." We merced them alright, capturing very few prisoners.²²

Evidently, not all the Canadians were "bon komerads." The Canadians had a reputation for taking few prisoners,²³ and Purdy's reference seemed to confirm that many Germans were killed even after they had surrendered – a clear violation of the laws of war. Pte. Emerson Glover, fighting in the machine gun section, seemed to confirm this tendency. He insisted that the British mantra was "play up boys, play fair and play the game and those in the right will win," but the raw realities of battle suggested that this was not always respected in practice. "While engaged in the great battle at [Passchendaele] we were under heavy fire for a number of days and nights and found it necessary to call for help from the artillery, and when it all got going and they were getting quite satisfied, we would take a trip across at night to see what had been done," Glover described. "We would not walk nor go on our hands and knees but as flat to the earth as we could get until we reached the final spot." When they captured enemy guns they "always tried to get ammunition to go with them" so they could turn the weapons "on the enemy and show them what their German guns could do." After harassing the enemy in this fashion, the Canadians would return to their own trenches "with some prisoners who, as a general rule are a hearty and robust looking lot of men." The Canadians employed the "most intelligent" German prisoners as stretcher bearers, to dig trenches, and to help the construction battalions with physical tasks – all legitimate uses of prisoners of war – and fed them well. Although one prisoner looked to be about sixty-years-old, Glover noted that "the majority are of a good military stamp." This was a worthy enemy, but one that feared the Canadian Corps in particular. "The Germans did not like to face the Canadians and would get down and beg for mercy but it was not within our power to grant them that," Glover wrote dismissively. "War is war."²⁴

Although the Canadians had succeeded in taking the ridge, the village, and its eastern environs, the losses were very high: 15,654 casualties (almost exactly the 16,000 that Currie had predicted). The townships were hit



Personnel of the 16th Canadian Machine Gun Company holding the line in shell holes during the Battle of Passchendaele



Andrew Messecar

hard. Glover's brother-in-law, Pte. Andrew Messecar, a broom maker who enlisted with the 133rd in Simcoe on 1 July 1916 and had spent eight months in the trenches with the 29th Battalion, was killed in action on 6 November. He left behind a widow, Lavina, and two young girls in Norwich.²⁵ Pte. Lorne Hansel, a 29-year-old telegraph operator born and raised in Otterville, enlisted with the 133rd in Simcoe in February 1916 and joined the 1st Motor Machine Gun Brigade in France in September 1917. He was killed in action on 31 October.²⁶ Mrs. Samuel Avey of Norwich learned that her brother Kenneth McLeod died from wounds sustained

in battle on 4 November, and William Barnett of Norwich received word that his son Earle had been killed in action the next day.²⁷ Pte. Fred Spinks, who lived in Eastwood and enlisted with the 168th, was killed in action with the 21st Battalion on the night of 3/4 November.²⁸ Even after the Canadians took the ridge on 6 November, ferocious enemy shell fire continued to take its toll, with many original 168th enlistees (now dispersed into various units) finding themselves wounded. Pte. James Dake Haylow, a farmhand from Curries Crossing who had enlisted on 19 February 1916, had joined the 2nd Battalion and took shrapnel to his right shoulder on 7 November.²⁹ Pte. Karl Clayton Shelby of Eastwood, fighting in the 18th Battalion, suffered a shrapnel wound four days later



Fred Spinks

that severely fractured his right femur and sent shell fragments into the surrounding tissue, forcing him back to Canada to sit out the rest of the war.³⁰



Karl Shelby

For soldiers who had become casualties, family members back home anxiously awaited news of their fate in the weeks and months after initial reports. Lance Cpl. James Shellington, a 20-year-old machinist and farmer who lived with his aunt Elizabeth Wheatley at the Gore when he enlisted with the 168th in May 1916, was killed in action with the 21st Battalion on the night of 3/4 November 1917. A shell splinter hit him behind the right ear. Half buried by the explosion, he died immediately after his mates managed to dig him out.³¹ Mrs. Wheatley received a letter of condolence a month later from the Minister of Militia and Defence:

Dear Mrs. Wheatley,- I desire to express to you my very sincere sympathy in the recent decease of your nephew, No. 675933, L. Cpl. James Shellington, C.E.F., who in sacrificing his life at the front in action with the enemy has rendered the highest services of a worthy citizen.

The heavy loss which you and the Nation have sustained would indeed be depressing were it not redeemed by the knowledge that the brave comrade for whom we mourn performed his duties fearlessly and well as became a good soldier [*sic*], and gave his life for the great cause of Human Liberty and the Defence of the Empire.

Again extending to you in your bereavement my condolence and heartfelt sympathy.

Another message from the British Secretary of State for War communicated that “the King commands me to assure you of the true sympathy of his Majesty and the Queen in your sorrow.”³² Mrs. Wheatley took solace in these words and shared them with the broader community through the *Norwich Gazette*.

Although historians depict the costly offensive for the ridge line east of the city of Ypres as a monument to failure and futility second only to the Somme, it was not seen as such at the time. The death of Shellington, and the many other local boys killed and wounded, are reminders of the human costs of Haig’s overall attrition strategy—of wearing down the enemy through continuing operations, even when they had little chance of success. In the townships, however, residents held more optimistic views of the Passchendaele battle. (At the time, no one could have known that the British would abandon the hard-fought ridge during the German spring offensive of 1918.) Instead, local newspapers trumpeted “another British advance on the front in Flanders” where Canadians fervently held their ground against feverish German counter-attacks.³³

The Canadian Corps, exhausted and depleted by the hard fighting at Passchendaele, returned in mid-November to a relatively quiet sector near Arras, the defensive line near Vimy and Lens. It did not participate in the first large-scale tank battle in history, fought at nearby Cambrai, which seemed to hold the possibility of a long-awaited breakthrough—until German counterattacks reclaimed most of the ground that the Allies had captured.³⁴ Instead, the Canadians took the time to rest, re-fit, and re-train. For his part, Pte. Munroe Purdy was happy to be out of Belgium. “Too much mud to suit me,” he pithily explained to his mother Arletta. “France is better but there is still one place better than that – Norwich.” But home was a long way off, and there was a war to be fought. “When we are back [behind the lines] we don’t have very much time for fun as we must train and keep in shape like an athlete, so that when we meet old Fritz we can take our own part,” the soldier described. “You see when Fritz attacks we do not wait for him in our trenches, but when he is about a dozen yards away we go right out to meet him and certainly give him all that is going by way of bullets and bayonets. That is where we machine gunners come in handy.”³⁵

Despite these harsh realities and the discomforts of trench life, soldiers like Purdy tried to find some comfort and faith in their surroundings. “I had the pleasure of being out in a terrible thunderstorm last night,” he wrote sarcastically. “We were out working. It seems funny to work at night and sleep in the day time, but funnier still to come home from work and have things exploding on either side of you and to be expecting to be hit any moment. However, Fritz has not got my number yet.” He penned his letter in the front line where he sat, “listening to the merry songs of the birds that keep watch for us over the German lines and see that no attack is launched as a surprise.” Nature seemed to offer protection, as did faith in God. Monroe reassured his mother that he regularly read the small copy of the New Testament that he had been given on the eve of his departure from Norwich. She

had marked the verse from John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." Purdy had not lost faith. "I believe in it too," he wrote. He also believed that the war was far from over, but he had already survived Vimy and Lens, and planned to have silver rings engraved with those battle honours.³⁶ Tellingly, he made no mention of Passchendaele – perhaps simply wanting to forget it.

Conscription and Exemption

As their countrymen faced the mud and blood of Passchendaele, tens of thousands of Canadians back home applied for exemptions from conscription. Of the 401,882 Class 1 men, 93.7% immediately applied for exemption (with 97.4% of farmers called up in this class seeking exemption)³⁷ and appeared before one of the 1387 local tribunals established across Canada. Each tribunal had two members – one appointed by a parliamentary selection committee and the other by a County or District Judge. If a local tribunal rejected a request for exemption, a conscript could then plead his case before one of the 195 appeal tribunals composed of a judge appointed by each province's Chief Justice. Finally, a conscript could appeal an unfavourable decision by the appeal tribunal to the Central Appeal Judge.³⁸ Within this process, the tribunals had a great deal of personal discretion. They judged if conscripts were in ill-health, if their religion forbade military service, or if conscription would cause undue financial or domestic problems for their families. More difficult were the cases in which they had to determine if a conscript's education or the work in which they "habitually engaged" – such as farming – was in the "national interest."³⁹

Most of the conscripts in East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich townships appeared before the exemption tribunals set up in Norwich, Otterville, Tillsonburg, Brantford, and Woodstock. In Norwich, 63-year-old customs collectors Jabez Daniel Hogarth and Dr. Frain served on the tribunal. In Otterville, it was comprised of two farmers: 57-year-old John R. Johnson and 60-year-old William Bell.⁴⁰ Each tribunal in Oxford County also had a veteran attached to represent the military's interests during the hearings – in Norwich and Otterville these veterans came from Woodstock (Lovel Edward Lowman and George Hayland).⁴¹ The ex-

emption boards understood that many of the men coming before them would be farmers and that they would have to determine if their labour was required on the farm. The government provided members with instructions to inform their decisions based on each applicant's "physical condition, the health of their father, the number of daughters at home who might be able to do a portion of



Exemption Tribunals.

Drawings of stern looking men accompanied the published instructions for conscripts attending tribunals.

the work, [and] the number of boys at home or going to school who might be called into service at the farm.”⁴²

The experience was nerve-wracking for the conscripts applying for exemptions. The farmers who went to the tribunal in Otterville must have taken some solace from Johnson and Bell’s agricultural backgrounds. Conversely, those who went to Norwich must have wondered what the customs collector and doctor actually knew about the requirements of farm life. For their part, conscripted farmers from East Oxford must have worried if they would get a fair deal from the tribunal in urban-oriented Woodstock. After all, what seemed like obvious realities to rural residents still seemed to surprise city folks. After the exemption board started its hearings in Woodstock, the *Daily Sentinel-Review* reported that the city-dwellers were shocked to hear that “there is a manifest scarcity of help in the rural districts.”⁴³

The experience of 21-year-old farmer Delloyd Lewis Brough, who was one of the first conscripts to be seen by the exemption tribunal, is representative of what many of the young men who appeared before the tribunals went through. Brough and his 62-year-old father James worked a 150-acre farm outside Norwich, milked twenty cows, and raised pigs.⁴⁴ Brough had to bear the prospect of his aged father shouldering all of the farm work on his own as he made his way to Norwich and entered an upstairs room in the town’s post office – a cold room given the lack of coal that continued to afflict the townships in the winter of 1917-1918.⁴⁵ Tribunal members Hogarth and Dr. Frain would have asked Brough to “tell his story,” then followed up with specific questions related to his agricultural work: what kind of farm he worked on, its size, the name, age and sex of the people working on it, his special duties on the farm, the kind and quantity of the crops raised in the last year, how much uncultivated land they had, the number of livestock they cared for, and, perhaps most importantly, what would happen if he left the farm.⁴⁶ Here the young farmer must have emphasized just how much help his father needed.⁴⁷ Brough’s case was clear-cut: the tribunal granted him an exemption.

Other applicants faced similar scenarios. On 19 November, 21-year-old Richard Potter went before the exemption board in Woodstock. He worked alongside his 51-year-old father Thomas on a 175-acre farm near Curries Crossing. They cared for 21 head of cattle, 23 hogs, and 9 horses with no additional help. The board granted Thomas an exemption.⁴⁸ In fact, the Woodstock tribunal – which heard the cases of many farmers from East Oxford – disallowed only 59 of 490 applications.⁴⁹ In Otterville, Johnson and Bell granted 42 exemptions and disallowed only two. One of the farmers they exempted was 21-year-old George McElhone – whose brother Moses had just been killed overseas – even though his father Joseph also had the help of George’s two younger brothers on the farm. McElhone may have been granted an exemption on compassionate grounds – much like Fred Sackrider who was given an exemption by the Norwich tribunal because his brother Harry had been killed at Vimy Ridge.⁵⁰

The relative ease with which tribunals granted exemptions made local and national news, which quickly made its way overseas. “Don’t suppose that there are very many of them that will have to join up,” Fred Furlong wrote home on 13 De-



Edwin Schell

ember. "I guess that the majority of them will claim exemption. From what I hear I guess it is not very hard to get exempted."⁵¹ Given the high number of Class 1 registrants who applied for exemptions, Prime Minister Borden worried the he had miscalculated the popular support for conscription across the country. Worried about the votes he required to win the upcoming election, Borden instructed the exemption tribunals "to be exacting when applying the guidelines for exemption in Quebec where Unionists had little chance, and to be flexible in the Unionist stronghold of Ontario."⁵² The call for flexibility ensured that, by the end of 1917, the tribunals had granted 278,779 of the 380,510 applications for exemption. Nationally, only 12.6% of farmers' exemption claims were refused.⁵³

Nevertheless, the local tribunals refused some conscripts' pleas for exemption. 23-year-old Frederick and 21-year-old Edwin Schell of East Oxford both farmed with their father John, along with two teenaged brothers. The father came with his sons to the Woodstock tribunal and together they pleaded their case. When the tribunal asked John which son he could spare, he answered that "they are both good boys and he needed both of them." The board disagreed and decided to reject Edwin's exemption request. Faced with the prospect of his younger brother going to the war, Fred asked if he could take his brother's place, which the tribunal accepted. (Ironically, there is no record that Fred was drafted, while Edwin was called up for service on 11 June 1918.⁵⁴) The Otterville tribunal rejected the exemption claim of 23-year-old farmer John Earl Brown because he had a teenaged brother to help his 47-year-old father on the farm.⁵⁵ Wilbur Morley, a 23-year-old farmer from North Norwich, went before the Norwich tribunal and also had his exemption disallowed, as did Stanton Bradley, a 23-year-old insurance agent (whose work the tribunal ruled non-essential). Hogarth and Frain convinced John Schram, a teamster from St. Thomas working in Norwich, to abandon his quest for exemption altogether. Consequently, Schram would find himself in England by the beginning of February.⁵⁶

Harry Walton Wright was one of the last farmers to go before the exemption board in Woodstock. Harry's father, William, was the farmer from Curries Crossing who had written to MP Donald S. Sutherland asking that his boy be left on the farm because he could not "get along" without him.⁵⁷ Harry had a teenaged brother and an able father, however, and as a family unit they exceeded the manpower allowance for a 250-acre farm. With no other extenuating circumstances, the tribunal ruled that Harry Wright would have to go to war.⁵⁸



Harry Wright

“A Critical Time”: The Election of 1917

As conscripts started to appear before their exemption boards, the federal election campaign of 1917 began in earnest. While the candidates would at times delve into economic policies and the local concerns of their ridings, the “Khaki Election” was essentially a national referendum on conscription. Borden’s Unionists, supported by the vast majority of the English-speaking press, attacked the patriotism, courage, and loyalty of Wilfrid Laurier and his Liberal supporters, claiming that they had broken faith with the soldiers fighting and dying overseas. Quebec was derided as a threat to Canada’s war effort and national unity. When farmers spoke out against universal conscription, the press and politicians accused them of disloyalty and war profiteering.⁵⁹ Historian Tim Cook observed that the election campaign “mirrored the war overseas: vicious, unrestrained, and with blood everywhere.”⁶⁰

The electoral race in Oxford South reflected the maliciousness of the broader campaign as long-time political opponents – 54-year-old Donald S. Sutherland and 62-year-old Malcolm Schell – fought a bitter and personal battle. The two men had much in common: both were agriculturalists, both had sons fighting overseas, and both had served their country in parliament before. In 1908, Schell had defeated Sutherland by a hundred votes, while Sutherland had won by only 24 votes in 1911. Their long and antagonistic history flavoured every one of their debates and exchanges during the election.

Surprisingly, the election campaign in Oxford South started with Schell suggesting that he and Sutherland agree to a compromise that would avoid a divisive political battle at a time when the war demanded unity. At a meeting of the Oxford South Liberal Association in early November, Schell proclaimed that he would support the Union government despite the failings of its leader, Robert Borden. Although Schell faced opposition from Liberal members who wanted to remain loyal to Laurier, he convinced the association to support the Unionists and drop their candidate (himself) if the Conservatives would agree to do the same. A joint convention of Liberals and Conservatives could then select a mutually agreeable win-the-war candidate. The Conservatives, however, argued that Sutherland was a consistent supporter of Borden and the Union government. While he believed that the “whole energies of the country [should] be devoted to winning the war rather than the alternative policy of winning the election,” Sutherland would not withdraw from the race. He rejected Schell’s offer and, with the support of Borden, ran as Oxford South’s Unionist candidate. In response, Schell accepted the nomination as Oxford South’s Liberal candidate.⁶¹

Schell came out swinging with blistering verbal attacks on Sutherland and the Union government. He questioned Sutherland’s ability to fight for the people of Oxford South as “there had never been a more servile, partisan man than he had been.” To make matters worse, Sutherland was “servile” to an ineffective government that had failed the people of Canada since the opening days of the war. Time after time, Schell argued, Borden had mishandled the war effort. In a well-received speech in Tillsonburg, attended by 75% of the women qualified to vote in the region, Schell



MALCOLM S. SCHELL, SOUTH OXFORD

Schell's 1917 South Oxford electoral campaign photo from the *Daily Sentinel Review*

the candidate proclaimed that "the rich must pay and contribute their share."⁶⁵

Schell's prior role as chair of the federal standing committee on agriculture and colonization from 1909-1911 allowed him to launch informed and incisive critiques of the Borden government's agricultural policies. He highlighted the labour shortages faced by farmers and the government's inability to come up with effective solutions. In a speech in Burgessville, Schell questioned Sutherland's support of farmers and attacked his government's failure to combat Britain's fixing of cheese prices. In turn, the federal government outraged cheese producers when it refused to place similar controls on condensed milk producers, who were "free to sell their goods at whatever price they could get" and thus could pay farmers more for their milk."⁶⁶ Sutherland published a letter he wrote to the federal agriculture minister defending cheese producers, but the results spoke for themselves. The Conservatives' price fixing unquestionably hurt the cheese producers in Oxford South.

Both Sutherland and Schell attracted support for their respective and polar opposite opinions on Borden's electoral reforms – the *Military Voters Act* and the *Wartime Elections Act*. Sutherland praised the government's decision to extend the vote to women with male relatives serving in the military. He also tapped into the xenophobia of some of his constituents when he praised the disenfranchisement of naturalized citizens who had immigrated to Canada from an "enemy" nation after 1902. Why would anyone "grant the vote to Austrians that were in sympathy with those who were ready to strangle the sons of Canada who were at the front?" Later, he advocated "disenfranchis[ing] the whole breed" – every German and Austrian in Canada. This thinly-veiled barb struck at Schell's German ancestry, and Sutherland insisted that immigrants "had made no sacrifice, they were not fighting, and he felt that no sane man would say their disenfranchisement was not an act of justice."⁶⁷ In response, Schell argued that to strip away citizenship rights was disgraceful. Many of these foreign-born men were farmers who had worked hard to increase their production and provide food for the soldiers at the front. Others had freely given their money to the patriotic funds. In taking away their

criticized the malfunctioning Ross Rifle, the quality of the boots that the government provided the soldiers, and its general handling of war-time finances, while asserting that corruption ran rampant in the Conservative ranks.⁶² Most damningly, Schell insisted that the government had completely failed in its attempts to establish an effective system of voluntary enlistment.⁶³ The recruitment system had been broken for at least a year and the government had taken no action to fix it.⁶⁴ If the government was so willing to conscript men to address the recruitment problems that it had itself created, Schell questioned, why was it unwilling to conscript the wealth of the rich? If Canada wanted to sustain its war effort,

right to vote, the government threatened to turn Canada's democracy into "Kaiserdом" – one of the worst insults to use during the war. Schell had to be more careful in criticizing the *Military Voters Act*, knowing that the move to extend the vote to the soldiers serving overseas and to their female relatives at home enjoyed popular support. Instead, Schell cleverly argued that the government should have extended the vote to all women in the country given their extraordinary accomplishments in raising money and goods for the war effort.⁶⁸

The election of 1917 ultimately hung on conscription and it was on this critical issue that Schell's campaign sunk. While he started the campaign indicating that he was a pro-conscriptionist Liberal, his speeches often included lukewarm and inconsistent support for compulsory military service. From the start, Schell emphasized that he did not believe conscription should apply to farmers. In his opening debate with Sutherland, he exclaimed that:

The spirit of the boys at home was just as good as that of the boys who went and this in spite of the fact that he had relatives, including one son of his own, who had gone over. The government was at fault here too. The farmers were being enjoined to produce more ... everything they possibly could, and in quantities as large as they could, still the Government was going up and down the country taking the young men away from the farms who could ill be spared. I am with the men who are against conscription in this regard.⁶⁹

Throughout the campaign, Schell focused on securing the farmer vote, emphasizing their support to the war effort on the home front and validating the decision of those who chose not to enlist.⁷⁰

If Schell had only opposed the conscription of farmers, he may have avoided much of the criticism that his opponent, veterans, and the press leveled at him during the campaign. In several speeches, however, Schell stated that he supported the *Military Service Act* only because it was now the law in Canada and as a dutiful citizen he had to "make the best of it."⁷¹ During his first official address as a candidate, Schell insisted that Borden had demanded only 100,000 conscripts. As a result, Schell "would not tolerate one more" conscript beyond that number.⁷² In other speeches, Schell changed his message to intimate that he was "behind" the *Military Service Act* because he believed that the Canadian Corps required reinforcements. At times, he also softened his stance on the government conscripting more than 100,000 men, reserving "the right to exercise his independent judgment" if that situation ever arose.⁷³ But even as he admitted there was a need for more men, he



The Union Government appealed to women voters with sons overseas, promising not to "desert" the soldiers and instead to bring in conscription

argued that the voluntary recruitment system still could be fixed and there would be no need for conscription – the same message delivered by Laurier and his anti-conscriptionist Liberals.⁷⁴ In his first debate with Sutherland, Schell even suggested that “if Sir Wilfrid Laurier was returned to power, he would secure the necessary number of men in the way in which they should be raised, and that would surprise his most bitter enemies and please his warmest friends.”⁷⁵ This message proved particularly confusing because Schell repeatedly said he was not running as an anti-conscriptionist Laurier Liberal but as an independent Liberal.

Schell's inconsistent stance on conscription provided no defence when he was accused of telling a crowd in Ingersoll: “We have done our share in the War. Now let the United States do their part. I am with the man who is opposed to Conscription, heart and soul. I am behind Sir Wilfrid Laurier and all that he stands for.”⁷⁶ Schell denied ever making such a statement, and given the vicious nature of the “Khaki Election” it is possible that Schell's opponents put those words in his mouth, but his unclear position on compulsory service left him vulnerable to the attacks. When pressed to account for his statement, Schell would only cryptically concede that “he did not know whether he had inadvertently said something else to give anyone a different impression.”⁷⁷ Schell never repeated an explicit rejection of conscription, but the damage had been done: Sutherland and the press published the quote on an almost daily basis in the Union-supporting *Daily Sentinel-Review*.⁷⁸

Throughout the election campaign, Sutherland defended his conduct as the federal representative for Oxford South and the Borden government's war effort, but he devoted most of his energy to hammering his opponent's inconsistent support for conscription and the “reckless statements” that Schell made about the *Military Service Act*.⁷⁹ In almost every address and letter that Sutherland published in local newspapers, he alleged that Schell was against conscription “heart and soul” and insisted that his opponent would betray the soldiers serving overseas by rejecting conscription if elected. He labelled Schell a “political acrobat” who was actually

a Laurier Liberal in disguise and asked his audiences “Whom does Schell Represent in this Election, and Where Does he Stand on the Issue?”⁸⁰ By the end of November, Sutherland even questioned Schell's commitment to the war effort writ large. The Unionist candidate dug up (or was given) an old newspaper report from January 1913 of a speech that Schell delivered at a South Oxford Liberal event on whether Canada should build its own fleet of battleships. Schell had stated that “personally I am a peace man at all costs.” Were these the words of a man who was truly committed to winning the war, Sutherland asked in a letter published in the *Sentinel-Review*?⁸¹ This personal attack infuriated Schell, particularly because he had learned only a week before that his son Douglas had been gassed and his nephew Lieut. Rueben Millyard (who Schell had raised



Sutherland's 1917 South Oxford electoral campaign photo from the *Daily Sentinel-Review*

like a son for more than a decade) had been wounded on the battlefield.⁸² Sutherland was unrelenting, however, and continued to question Schell's patriotism and commitment to victory as the bitter campaign went on.

While Schell supported Canada's war effort, his inconsistent statements made him difficult to place: was he was a pro-conscriptionist Independent Liberal, a Liberal Unionist, an anti-conscriptionist Laurier Liberal, or something else entirely?⁸³ The same classification problems plagued candidates in other ridings who did not openly profess to be a Liberal Unionist or a Laurier Liberal. At the meeting of Ontario Liberals in July, Schell had vocally supported Laurier and a referendum on conscription. At some point in the fall, he either decided that the Canadian Corps really did need more troops, or he realized that he would have a far better chance of winning in Oxford South if he supported conscription – or at least a selective form of it that exempted the farmers. When he urged the South Oxford Liberal Association to support the Union government and conscription in early November, however, he had faced a strong backlash from local Liberals loyal to Laurier. Schell faced a perplexing choice. In the hours before his first election debate with Sutherland on 19 November, the press and his opponent reported that Schell was still asking his friends and associates for advice on the stance he should take towards the *Military Service Act* and the Union government.⁸⁴ While these allegations could have been slander, Schell did seem genuinely confused about where he fit in the new political spectrum of 1917. Confusion would explain his inconsistent approach to conscription and his initial praise for Laurier as “the noblest statesman Canada ever had” – a sentiment that became more subdued as the campaign wore on.⁸⁵

At the end of November, Schell tried to set the record straight when a voter asked him whether his support for conscription meant that he could have “come out” as a Liberal-Unionist. “I could but I did not choose to,” the candidate side-stepped. He insisted that he wanted to avoid old-style “partyism,” reiterating that he was “behind the Union Government for the enforcement of the *Military Service Act*. Otherwise I am an Independent Liberal.”⁸⁶ Schell conceded to the crowd that his position as a candidate was “a very delicate one. But I have enough honor and enough consistency to maintain that position.”⁸⁷ Eventually, Schell took to calling himself “the people's candidate” and claimed the “right of an absolutely free and independent privilege to support only such legislation as he conceived to be in the best interests of the country” – a move that did little to clarify his political position.⁸⁸ In response, the *Daily Sentinel-Review* labelled Schell as “the man who tried to please everybody and eventually succeeded in pleasing nobody.”⁸⁹

John Nesbitt Chambers, a 54-year-old, pro-conscriptionist dairy farmer from East Oxford, was not pleased. He wrote a letter to the *Daily Sentinel-Review* attacking Schell's appeal to reserve “the right of independent judgment” and the candidate's decision to support “a certain policy up to a certain point and no further.” Schell's policy of “not one man more” sabotaged the efforts of the Union government and supported Laurier and “Quebec domination,” Chambers asserted. Those in Schell's camp had “no moral foundation on which to stand” so they made “frenzied attempts to becloud the issue.” If Canada was to uphold the “high praise” it had

received so far in the war, the farmer wrote, “we must make no mistake about the attitude of the man we vote for.”⁹⁰ The Union government would not survive if the men elected only supported its decisions part of the time.

By contrast, Sutherland appeared sure and firm in his support for conscription, for Borden, and for the Union government. He repeatedly issued a simple message to his constituents: vote Union or risk losing the war. “It had come to a time when the people of South Oxford would either have to mark their ballot in favor of Canada continuing the war aggressively, or dropping out of it altogether,” he asserted,⁹¹ wholeheartedly towing the Unionist line on conscription.⁹² This message seemed to please voters in the towns of Oxford County. On 7 December, for instance, the women of Norwich flexed their new political power and held a meeting in support of Sutherland at the Lyric Theatre, which quickly filled to capacity. Sutherland spoke to the crowd about the need to move past party politics and to unite to support the soldiers at the front. “The boys who so quickly and willingly responded to the call of the motherland will never return as long as England needs them,” he extolled. “If we are led away to vote any way but to help our boys, it will not only be a disgrace to Canada that we don’t support them, but a disgrace to the women of Canada as they have the balance of power in their hands.” Moved by Sutherland’s plea and the need to act, a large group of townswomen pledged their vote to him and created the Norwich Women’s Union Government League, which included the mothers Pte. Stanley Vanderburgh, Pte. Bruce Poole, and Pte. Roy Marr.⁹³ Sutherland received another warm welcome during a campaign stop at the Springford Town Hall on 6 December, where Oxford South MPP Victor Sinclair and a returned soldier also spoke. The trio rallied the crowd with a call that they all had 33,000 reasons to vote for the Union government – the young Canadians lying in the fields of Flanders who had died fighting.⁹⁴

The *Daily Sentinel-Review* proved its worth as Sutherland’s ally throughout the election campaign. Although the newspaper had “always been a Liberal paper,” like almost every daily in Ontario it defected to the Unionist government and announced its endorsement of Donald S. Sutherland early and often during the campaign.⁹⁵ The newspaper often emphasized the strength of Sutherland’s support for conscription and Schell’s alleged unwillingness to abandon “partyism,” suggesting that the Liberal should have pledged his full support to Borden and the Union government as had Liberal MP for Oxford North Edward Walter Nesbitt.⁹⁶ By early December, the editor unambiguously told readers that the newspaper “was in favour of a Union Government long before there was a Union Government” and that, if voters were prepared to place the “interests of the country above those of any party in a crisis like the present,” it would be a “simple choice: vote Sutherland.”⁹⁷

While this bitter election campaign unfolded in the riding of Oxford South, township residents also followed the situation in Oxford North given the involvement of one of Norwich’s favourite sons: Lt.-Col. Donald Matheson Sutherland. When Sutherland had been home in Norwich convalescing from his wounds in the spring of 1917, the Oxford Returned Soldiers’ Association had asked if he would be willing to run as the Conservative candidate for Oxford North if a federal election

was held.⁹⁸ Sutherland's Conservative pedigree was strong: he had served as the president of the North Oxford Conservative Association before the war, and his distinguished war record made him a logical choice – except for the fact that he was overseas again. At a farewell dinner in his honour in early 1917, Sutherland “expressed the hope that [his Conservative friends] would look after his interests while he was away.”⁹⁹ After he returned to England, Lt.-Col. Sutherland was fully engaged as the commanding officer of the 160th Battalion. When it became clear that an election would be held, however, he reiterated his desire to be a candidate. His Conservative counterpart and namesake, Donald S. Sutherland, even wrote to the serving officer suggesting that his chances in North Oxford were good and offered to help his campaign in any way possible.¹⁰⁰

These deliberations came before the sitting Liberal MP Nesbitt decided to pledge his support to the new Union government, which he announced on Friday, 27 October. Nesbitt had been a vocal supporter of conscription since June and while he noted discomfort at being one of a handful of old men with the power to send the young men of the country to war, he had voted for the *Military Service Act* in the House of Commons. He maintained that the state needed more soldiers and only the Union government would be able to deliver. The Liberal Association of Oxford North approved his decision, “having in mind the absolute of necessity of supporting the boys at the front.”¹⁰¹ Borden had been clear: in situations where both the Liberal and Conservative candidates decided to support the Union government, one man would be chosen to centralize the vote. Immediately after Nesbitt's announcement, the Liberal Association telegraphed Ottawa to ask that he, as the incumbent, be designated the Union government's candidate for North Oxford.

The weekend that followed Nesbitt's proclamation “considerably complicated” the North Oxford electoral race. Neither the Conservative Association of North

Oxford nor the local branch of the Great War Veterans' Association (with which the Oxford Returned Soldiers' Association had chosen to affiliate in March 1917) trusted E.W. Nesbitt.¹⁰² They questioned how long it had taken the politician to publicly support the Union government. With no evidence, they argued that he only half-heartedly supported conscription and that he was still a Liberal at heart who would actively seek to undermine Borden's coalition.¹⁰³ At Lt.-Col. Sutherland's direction, representatives from the GWVA quickly went to the Conservative Association and asked if the two parties could find a mutually agreeable candidate. They suggested Oxford North MPP Newton Rowell, who had broken ranks with the Liberals to support the Union government and needed a federal riding in which to run. The Conservative Association agreed, but when the veterans went to the Oxford North Liberal Association they ran into opposition. The Liberals already



Edward W. Nesbitt's 1917 North Oxford electoral campaign photo from the Daily Sentinel-Review

supported a Union government and backed Nesbitt as their candidate. Unwilling to stomach Nesbitt, the local GWVA executive held a meeting on Sunday afternoon and, with the support of the Conservative Association, they nominated Lt.-Col. Sutherland as a “Union Win-the-War candidate.”¹⁰⁴ The *Daily Sentinel-Review* (which supported Nesbitt) and a few local veterans questioned if the GWVA should play such an active role in politics,¹⁰⁵ but the provincial secretary of the organisation noted that if the local association believed the “conditions warranted putting a candidate into the field” then the GWVA would endorse the move.¹⁰⁶

In the days that followed Lt.-Col. Sutherland’s nomination, the majority of returned soldiers declared their support for him.¹⁰⁷ The GWVA organized a series of public meetings in the first weeks of November in which the veterans explained why the serving officer should be elected. In their eyes, “Sutherland had proved himself a man... [and] had gone overseas for a third time to fight for the ideals held dear by the returned soldiers.” He had been “one of the first men in Oxford County” to volunteer and was in the field winning the war while Nesbitt “sat on the fence” as a member of the opposition. Harry Munn, the head of the local GWVA, proclaimed that “he had fought and bled [with Lt.-Col. Sutherland] and loved every hair in his head.” Another veteran said that Sutherland “was a man who treated officers and men alike and who had a good word for everyone.” The lone voice of dissent at the public meetings came from D.R. Ross, a Liberal Association member, who questioned the wisdom of nominating two candidates standing for the principles of the Union government.¹⁰⁸ Ultimately, the meetings confirmed Sutherland’s nomination with near-unanimous support and on 2 November the officer accepted it via cable.¹⁰⁹ North Oxford would have to pick between two Unionist candidates.

Throughout the electoral campaign in Oxford North, Nesbitt, the Liberal Association and the *Daily Sentinel-Review* alleged that Lt.-Col. Sutherland “had been

used by a few politicians in Woodstock for the purpose of turning a political trick.”¹¹⁰ The idea spread that the officer had been hoodwinked into running by the Conservative Association and by Conservative members of the GWVA, who wanted to stop a Liberal MP from taking a seat with the Union government. Nesbitt wondered if Sutherland even knew that he had come out as a Unionist.¹¹¹ The *Daily Sentinel-Review* argued that “nobody who knows Col. Sutherland will believe ... that in the most critical period of Canada’s history he would insist on playing the part of a Russian Nihilist, repudiating leadership and defying organization.”¹¹² While the colonel’s supporters maintained that they kept him fully informed of their progress in the campaign, the newspaper insisted that the limited words on a cablegram offered little more than perfunctory information.¹¹³ Lt.-Col. Sutherland’s silence during the election seemed to confirm the al-



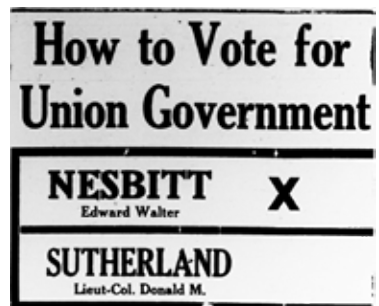
Lt.-Col. Donald M. Sutherland

legations – he never sent a letter to the newspaper or to his representatives laying out his position.

It is difficult to determine exactly what Lt.-Col. Sutherland knew about the election campaign. In the middle of November 1917, he took temporary command of the 15th Canadian Infantry Brigade, which was then training in England. This role occupied all of his time, but he read updates from his representatives back home and he definitely knew that Nesbitt had come out in favour of the Union government. He floated the idea that both he and Nesbitt should withdraw their candidacies to open space for Newton Rowell,¹¹⁴ but when this was not acted upon – and it became apparent that Borden supported Nesbitt – Sutherland refused to remove his name from the ballot. One of his supporters rationalized that the colonel simply stood for the “ultimate good of Canada rather than the success of any party.”¹¹⁵

With the two candidates set – Nesbitt and Lt.-Col. Sutherland – the campaign started in earnest. The opening debate set the tone for the entire campaign. In it, J.R. Shaw, a prominent member of the Conservative Association, and Harry Munn of the GWVA spoke on Lt.-Col. Sutherland’s behalf. They lauded his war record as an officer, while attacking Nesbitt as a weak leader. They alleged that Nesbitt’s support for conscription was tepid, that he remained secretly loyal to Laurier, and that he had only sided with the Unionists once it became clear that they had a better chance of winning than Laurier’s Liberals.¹¹⁶ By contrast, Nesbitt attempted to tread more gently, realizing the danger of insulting the veterans of the GWVA or Lt.-Col. Sutherland himself. The sanctioned Unionist candidate strongly defended his political record and his support for conscription, and asked whether Sutherland could even serve in parliament when the military required his services overseas. Nesbitt vowed to support the Union Government “in any measure that, in his opinion, were for the welfare of the whole country and which looked to the successful carrying on of the war.” Nesbitt ended his speech by highlighting his experience serving in parliament, which Lt.-Col. Sutherland did not have. This last point invited a rebuttal: the serving officer had plenty of experience serving his country, but he had done it with “a sword rather than a pen and was a man all the way through.”¹¹⁷ Who could help govern a country more effectively in wartime than a man who actually had fought in the war?

No matter the attacks levelled against him, Nesbitt had a strong card to play: Borden, who wished to appeal to Liberal voters, had endorsed him as the Union candidate for Oxford North. “We are asking Liberals in a great many ridings of Ontario to support Conservative Union Candidates,” Borden explained in a letter published in the *Daily Sentinel-Review*. “It is equally the duty of Conservatives to support Liberal Union Candidates in the ridings for which, under arrangement with my Liberal colleagues, a Liberal Union candidate has been selected.”¹¹⁸ A local resident



*Instructive advertisement printed in
the Daily Sentinel-Review on 15
December 1917*

responded that, while he had the utmost respect for Lt.-Col. Sutherland, this was not the time to break ranks with the Union government. Voting for Nesbitt was “obviously in the best interests of the country. Party is nothing now, Grit, Tory, Conservative, Liberal, stand for nothing, means nothing in the present crisis. It is only by uniting that the boys at the front can be relieved in this, their hour of need.... Damn party and all its evil ways. Help the boys at the front. Do it now. Win the war. United we stand, divided we fall.”¹¹⁹ When the official list naming the candidates came out, Nesbitt was Oxford North’s Unionist candidate and Lt.-Col. Sutherland was labelled the “soldier-candidate.”

While the drama and conspiratorial undertones of Lt.-Col. Sutherland’s election nomination fired up emotions in the townships, so too did the acrimonious battle between the old political rivals Schell and Sutherland in Oxford South. Some township residents may have simply decided to vote in the same manner as they had during the close elections of 1908 and 1911. Local farmers contemplated which candidate would do the most to further their interests, and Schell vocally endorsed the exemption of all farmers from conscription while Sutherland remained as silent on the issue as his government. This stance changed at the end of November when Borden, realizing that he risked losing the English-speaking rural vote if he did not address farmers’ concerns over conscription, had his defence minister promise “that if any farmer’s son, honestly working on a farm for the production of food, is drafted, he will be discharged from the Canadian Expeditionary Forces if he goes back to the farm.”¹²⁰ On 2 December, Borden’s government issued an order-in-council granting a mass exemption to young farmers and agricultural workers.¹²¹ Furthermore, the order encouraged farmers who had exemptions disallowed to appeal the decisions of their tribunals.

Now that the Borden government had decided to exempt farmers from conscription, Sutherland had an easier message to sell to farm families in Oxford South. On 7 December, he promised to ensure that “every attention would be given to the young farmer who was doing his share in the food production of the country at the present time, and who would be hereafter.” He noted that “this was an all-important question, inasmuch as he firmly believed that even yet this war would be largely decided by the shortage of foodstuffs, and that it would be the side nearest starvation that would down its guns first.” In a comment that clearly pandered to farmers – especially given how lenient the exemption boards had been throughout Oxford County –



Notice of exemption as it appeared in the Norwich Gazette on 3 October 1917

Sutherland suggested that “there had been many cases where the tribunals had not dealt fairly with these men.”¹²² Sutherland’s words, coupled with the actions of the federal government, eased worries amongst some of the townships’ farmers who, in turn, shifted their vote to the Union government.

On 15 December, the candidates gave their last speeches, the newspapers printed their last endorsements, and the voters made their final decisions. Despite the non-partisan and non-political ideals allegedly espoused by the Unionists, the discourse was unabashedly biased in favour of their particular cause. S.J. Bullock, the President and General Manager of the Otterville Manufacturing Company, shared his opinion on the candidates in Oxford South and Oxford North in the *Daily Sentinel-Review*. For years, Bullock and his family had produced high quality carpet sweepers, bicycles, piano stools, and other wood products in Otterville. They employed many local workers, and the business had made the Bullocks a prominent and influential family in Oxford County. His message was simple. What “Canada requires today is a strong government,” Bullock concluded, “which can only be secured by a union of the best men of the two old parties” – Donald S. Sutherland and Edward Nesbitt. Lt.-Col. Sutherland would not knowingly be “disloyal to his commander-in-chief” (Bullock meant Prime Minister Borden, but the commander-in-chief in Canada is actually the governor general), he suggested, and would “feel greatly mortified” and drop out of the election if he knew all the facts. As for Malcolm Schell, he had always been a “Laurier follower – JUST WHERE HE NOW STANDS.” A vote for Schell would be a vote against conscription, the soldiers, and victory. “We prefer ‘one good, clear-cut, honest rubber stamp,’” Bullock asserted, not a politician who was “so mud-died that you cannot tell where or what they stand for.”¹²³ The final election editorials in the *Sentinel-Review* repeated Bullock’s sentiments, insisting that



The silver-tongued Liberal leader Sir Wilfrid Laurier addresses a crowd during the 1917 election campaign, but most of English Canada would side with his Unionist opponents

Lt.-Col. Sutherland’s supporters did not want a Union government but a Conservative one, and thus threatened the unity so essential to a successful war effort. In short: vote Nesbitt. In South Oxford, the paper insisted that voters faced an even easier choice: Donald S. Sutherland was a stalwart Unionist and Malcolm Schell an inconsistent Liberal. A vote for Schell would mean a vote for Laurier, a vote against the war effort, and a vote against Canadian unity.¹²⁴ On Monday, 17 December the people of Canada went to the polls and made their choice.

The Borden government considered the soldier vote essential to its electoral success and had even asked British army commander Haig – who was finishing up

the Passchendaele campaign – if the Canadians could be pulled out of the line so that the soldiers could have a chance to vote.¹²⁵ While Haig did not comply, the Canadian Corps had moved to a relatively quiet sector near Arras in early December where its members received a steady stream of official pamphlets extolling the virtues of the Union government. Soldiers also received official lists from the government that presented the candidates by riding – although not all soldiers were able to see this information and there were allegations that certain candidates had been left off the lists, including Lt.-Col. Donald Matheson Sutherland. When the soldiers overseas started to receive their ballots on 1 December, they did not list named candidates but presented “five choices: a write-in [to vote for a specific candidate], the Government, the Opposition, an independent, and Labour.”¹²⁶ Once they made their decision, soldiers could apply their votes to any riding that they listed on the ballot or they could leave it up to a party of their choice to assign their ballot to a riding where it was needed – a strategic move by Prime Minister Borden to ensure that the votes of the overwhelmingly pro-conscription soldiers could be allocated to ridings where the Unionist candidates needed their support.¹²⁷

At the training camp in Witley, England, Aubrey Holdsworth cast his vote. “We had the privilege of casting our votes here, in Camp,” he wrote his mother. “Think that the troops in England will have their voting completed before now, and that they voted strongly for the Union government. A number of French Canadians, however, voted for Laurier.”¹²⁸ Fred Furlong was living in a tent while on training manoeuvres in England at the end of November, and the election gave him a short reprieve from the mud, rain and cold. He walked 28 miles with heavy pack to cast his ballot. Earlier, Furlong had received a letter from Malcolm Schell asking for his support. “Ha!ha!” Fred noted. Like most soldiers, he would only vote for the Union government and for conscription.¹²⁹ “You may be sure I made it the right & only way a soldier could vote,” he told his mother. “You know it’s not right that we should be toughing it when fellows who should be here are having a rosey time of it.” Given the circumstances, Furlong was certain he would “never forget [his] first voting.”¹³⁰ Both Holdsworth and Furlong, and 90% of the other soldiers in the CEF, voted for the Union government.



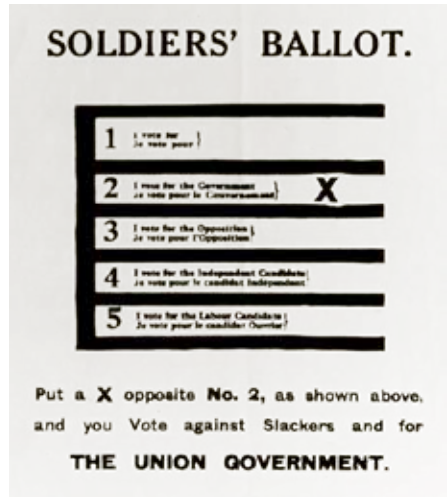
Soldiers voting “up the line”

The soldiers’ vote was beset by controversy on multiple levels. Accusations of vote switching, tampering, and uncounted ballots abounded, some of them undoubtedly true.¹³¹ Allegations also surfaced that the names of the win-the-war soldier-candidates had been left off some of the

official candidate lists sent to the soldiers overseas.¹³² The *Toronto Evening Telegram* accused the government of leaving Lt.-Col. Sutherland's name off a special election nomination issue of the *Canadian Daily Record* – a free newspaper distributed to the soldiers. Shortly after the election, Lovel Edward Lowman, the secretary of Oxford County's local branch of the GWVA, insisted that there was "reason for very serious thought on the part of all citizens of North Oxford, whether Liberal or Conservative, who honesty had the welfare of Canada at heart." He reported that "the soldiers overseas had not a chance to vote for Col. Sutherland, because his name had been left off the list of candidates that was given to them." Although he asked Prime Minister Borden for an official explanation, he received no response.¹³³ In April 1918, Richard Reid, Agent-General for Ontario in the British Isles, confessed to Oxford South MP Donald S. Sutherland that a mistake had been made: "We tried to do our best here for both the Donalds, and I did work hard for North Donald, too. I am very sorry that he got such a rotten deal."¹³⁴

Despite the early start, the actual return of the soldier votes was not completed until March 1918.¹³⁵ Borden did not need them – he won his majority in English Canada with ease. Borden's Unionists captured 153 seats, but only three were from Quebec. Laurier's Liberals won 82 seats, 62 of them in Quebec. The Unionists won 14 of their seats by redistributing the military vote to ridings where the Liberals had a chance of winning. In Oxford North, for example, Nesbitt won by a majority of 762 votes after all of the soldier votes had been counted.¹³⁶ In Oxford South, Sutherland crushed Schell by 867 votes.¹³⁷ The *Norwich Gazette* reported that the election results confirmed popular support for the Union Government scheme, with its non-partisan agenda, as well as "overwhelming" support for conscription.¹³⁸

The electoral results in Oxford South, like those in the rest of rural southwestern Ontario, were not so clear cut. Historian Adam Crerar observed that the "most remarkable" part of the whole election was the "relative failure of the Union Government in rural southwestern Ontario. Despite their exemptions of farmers' sons from conscription, shameless smear campaigns against their opponents, manipulation of the ballot, domination of the press, and at least theoretical claim to represent both Liberals and Conservatives, Union candidates captured only a bare majority of voters in the rural southwest."¹³⁹ 70% of Toronto voters supported the Union government, but only 50.7% in the rural southwestern part of the province voted for Borden's candidates.¹⁴⁰ The results in Oxford South reflected this pattern. Donald S. Sutherland won his largest majority in the town of Ingersoll, where he beat



Sample of a completed soldier ballot

Schell by 555 votes, and enjoyed strong support in Tillsonburg and Dereham. In the town of Norwich, Sutherland only won by 44 votes, in East Oxford by 24, in South Norwich by 18, while Schell actually won the North Norwich poll by 62 votes.¹⁴¹ The townships were more divided than they appear at first glance, and many of the farmers who had voted for Sutherland and the Unionists after the promise that their sons would be exempted from conscription would come to regret their decision.

Christmas 1917

As the war entered its fourth Christmas, the soldiers overseas and the people back home looked forward to a brief time of peace. After the shattering experience of Passchendaele and a bitterly contested federal election, most would have agreed with Chaplain John Hilary Barnett's assessment that late 1917 represented "the most critical period of the war" thus far.¹⁴² Conscription had threatened to tear the country apart, while the steady stream of casualty lists at the front had grown longer and more disheartening. Families whose sons had been conscripted faced the reality that their loved ones would be forced to go to overseas early in 1918. To make matters worse, the Halifax explosion, which claimed the lives of 2000 civilians on 6 December, shocked Canadians across the country – even the soldiers overseas. In England, Aubrey Holdsworth wrote home about the tragedy, lamenting: "that was an awful catastrophe at Halifax, wasn't it. The explosion will bring the war quite close home to Canadian won't it. The high explosive that went up was the same kind as we use a great deal in bombs, demolitions, etc, and I can imagine what so many tons of it would do when I know the power of a few ounces of it."¹⁴³

It had been a year of triumphs as well: Vimy, Fresnoy, Hill 70, even Passchendaele. Canadians had continued to support the war effort with their time and money. The Victory Loan Campaign of 1917 had ended two weeks before Christmas, and the *Norwich Gazette* had filled its pages with calls to participate, reminding the people that it was a loan, not a gift to the government, and that they would be paid back in full with interest.¹⁴⁴ East Oxford raised \$65,400, while South Norwich raised \$68,600.¹⁴⁵ The canvassers of North Norwich managed to subscribe an impressive \$160,550 during the three-week campaign, dwarfing their goal of \$66,000. At Borden's Condenser, almost every employee bought a bond or two. That factory alone raised \$2000. The Norwich Cemetery Company asked all of its plot holders to pay their annual fee early so that it could invest the entire sum into the Victory Loan bonds.¹⁴⁶ The *Gazette* reported that "the people of Norwich are showing that they are into this war in earnest by subscribing every cent they can part with," revealing "a grim determination that the Hun must be beaten."¹⁴⁷ Altogether, Oxford County raised \$2,918,000 – one of the highest county totals in the country.

For many farming families in the townships, the last weeks of the year also brought welcome news when appeal tribunals overturned many of the disallowed exemptions. For example, Harry Walton Wright had his disallowance overturned. Some local voices expressed concern that the exemption would not last – that the government would go back on its word. *The Weekly Sun*, Ontario's premier farmers' magazine, anticipated "that city people would not long refrain from bringing

pressure to bear on the government to change a policy which resulted in their sons being drafted while rural boys remained civilians.”¹⁴⁸ Most farmers, however, saw the federal government’s mass exemption as official recognition that their efforts to increase production made an essential contribution to the war effort.

For the soldiers overseas, Christmas brought a brief moment of respite. The men enjoyed a new flood of letters and Christmas boxes from their families and the patriotic societies back home. “Besides your letter, your Christmas box arrived today in fine condition,” Aubrey Holdsworth wrote home on 16 December. “One apple had rotted about one third, but everything else was fresh. You certainly have not forgotten how to make Christmas cake and cookies, for which I must send my thanks. I have got five Christmas parcels; one from you, two from Pauline, one from the Muir Patriotic League and one from the 215th Ladies Auxiliary. So I have fared pretty well.” Holdsworth told his family about the festivities he would enjoy. “We are having a big dinner here on Christmas day, with a concert in the afternoon,” he wrote. “Christmas is the one day, in barracks, when all officers, NCO’s and men eat together. Last year the dinner cost about \$1000, but we do not expect it to run nearly as high this year as the government supplies all the eats.” He was on the decorating committee, which could draw upon a portion of canteen profits to make the celebration more festive. Holdsworth happily reported that he had received an early Christmas present – a new uniform to replace the one that he had worn every day since receiving it last month. He was thankful to periodically have fresh uniforms, unlike the Serbian soldiers he had met in camp who had worn the same clothes continuously for the last three years.¹⁴⁹ William Crabbe, who had received a Christmas parcel from the Norwich Women’s Patriotic League, expressed his thanks in hokey verse:



*Canadian Army Service Corps Christmas Dinner
at Shorncliffe, 1917*

A box I received, the contents were fine,
It arrived in good order, promptly on time,
My appreciation to show, I will send you a line,
The kindness was yours, but the pleasure was mine.

There was a pair of good socks, brown, soft and neat;
I hope to the goodness I’ll now have warm feet,
I ate of the dates and was given a treat
The pleasure was mine, again I repeat.

There was chocolate and cocoa and a package of gum.
By, dad, I'll be sorry when at last they are done.
Cigarettes and tobacco we never do shun,
Sometimes we have plenty, sometimes we have none.

Thanks for your kindness, in my pipe I will poke
A bowlful of tobacco and a spin a good joke,
Because for a week no socks need I mend,
To the ladies of Norwich my thanks I extend.

Compliments of the season,
Billie B. Crabbe¹⁵⁰

Pte. Fred Croxford, M.M., had returned to France in April 1917 after recovering from shell shock that he had sustained in 1916. "Hello Kid and all the rest," he wrote on 19 November from "somewhere in France":

just a line to let you know that I received the parcels o.k. You wanted to know whether I received your photo—yes—and when I show the Frenchmen it they say they are going over to Canada after you so you will have to look out. Well kid, tell them not to expect me home for Xmas as I think that I will be spending my Xmas in France. I have started a little souvenir on the way. I don't know whether it will reach its destination or not but I hope it gets there. We have been pretty busy lately as you will see by the papers. The weather is not too bad just at present.



Fred Croxford

... I suppose Jack told you that Fritz paid them a visit. We have got used to him. He's no stranger here and the presents he drops don't make very good Xmas boxes but I guess we pay him back with interest when we do go after him. Our artillery is fine. It's slow work but if you could only see what we are up against you would say that it could never be done. I guess that's what Fritz thought.

Well kid I don't know that I have any news. Give my best wishes to all that inquire and tell them that I will try and write them some other time. Wishing you all a happy Xmas and hoping to see you all again sometime with best wishes to you all. I remain

yours as ever, Fred.

Au revoir. So Long.¹⁵¹

As fate would have it, Fred Croxford would not get to spend Christmas in France. The 33-year-old had been wounded in the field, overcome shell shock, been decorated for valour, and lived through Lens and Passchendaele fighting with the 1st Battalion. Deserving of a rest, he and his mates had enjoyed a welcome bath and church service at the Chateau de la Haie in early December before heading by

train to the front lines to relieve the 14th Battalion near Avion. The enemy artillery shelled the Canadian positions regularly, but casualties were light. On 9 December, the Germans were “very quiet” for most of day until they decided to unleash a barrage right on the 1st Battalion’s front lines at 2:00 am.¹⁵² Croxford was killed instantly.¹⁵³

Fred’s family received notice of his death on 20 December, casting a dark shadow over their Christmas season. Newspaper coverage spoke of him in the fondest of terms, celebrating his altruism, kindness, and “gallant conduct at the front” that had won him a distinguished conduct medal (DCM).¹⁵⁴ A special service held in his honour at Trinity Anglican Church in Norwich extolled his virtues as a “Christian gentleman, loyal to his friend, his King and his country.”¹⁵⁵ He had been one of Norwich’s proud sons, and community solidarity in wartime also meant collective mourning. “In knowing Fred Croxford one always felt that they possessed a true friend to who a good name and reputation meant more than position and riches.”¹⁵⁶ For all of the Canadian Corps’ achievements in 1917, his death was a final reminder of the ongoing, devastating costs of total war.



Photograph of Pte. Fred Croxford’s original grave marker at Sucrerie British Cemetery, Ablain, St. Nazaire, 1/2 mile west of Souchez, France, sent to his family.

Notes

- 1 Michael Bliss, *Right Honourable Men: The Descent of Canadian Politics from Macdonald to Mulroney* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1995), 84.
- 2 Captain J.H. Barnett to Members and Adherents of the Norwich and Bookton Presbyterian Congregations, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 27 December 1917.
- 3 “Union Government Sustained by Large Majority,” *Norwich Gazette*, 20 December 1917.
- 4 “Ontario’s Premier Urges Support for Union Government,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 1 December 1917.
- 5 See J.E. Edmonds, *Military Operations France and Belgium 1917* (London: Macmillan, 1940); John Terraine, *The Road to Passchendaele: The Flanders Offensive 1917* (London: Leo Cooper, 1977); and Peter Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground* (London: Cassell, 2001).

Chapter 9

- 6 John Swettenham, *To Seize the Victory: The Canadian Corps in World War I* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1965), 184-187, describes the conditions facing the Canadians as they began planning for the Passchendaele offensive.
- 7 "Pte. Munro [sic] Purdy Writes from France," *Norwich Gazette*, 13 December 1917.
- 8 J.L. Granatstein, *Canada's Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 122-23.
- 9 Granatstein, *Canada's Army*, 122-24.
- 10 Tim Cook, *Shock Troops* (Toronto: Penguin, 2016), 348-49.
- 11 "Town Talk" *Norwich Gazette*, 22 November 1917; Soldier file: Millyard, Reuben, 487280, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 6224 - 8; and Schell, Malcolm Douglas, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 8690 - 52. On gas warfare, see Tim Cook, *No Place to Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011). Sapper Archie Farrell would also be admitted to hospital for gas poisoning at Passchendaele. "Four Local Soldiers, Killed Wounded and Gassed," *Norwich Gazette*, 22 November 1917.
- 12 Cook, *Shock Troops*, 356-57.
- 13 Soldier file, McNaughton, Robert Bruce, 826329, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 7144 - 41.
- 14 W.G. Stephen to Mr W.H. Sample, 13 November 1917, printed in the *Norwich Gazette*, 28 February 1918. Both soldiers managed to make it through the battle uninjured, but Stephen admitted that he was "glad" to avoid returning to the line with the others because he "got played out after a touch of trench fever and rheumatism and I'm left behind for a time."
- 15 Soldier file, MacLachlan, Harold Dewart, 675919, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 7024 - 10.
- 16 Harold MacLachlan to his Mother, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 13 December 1917.
- 17 Mario Morselli, *Caporetto, 1917: Victory or Defeat?* (London: Routledge, 2001).
- 18 War Diaries, 2nd Canadian Infantry Battalion, 5-6 November 1917, LAC, RG9-III-D-3, box 4913, file 354.
- 19 Harold MacLachlan to his Mother, 13 December 1917.
- 20 MacLachlan to his Mother, 13 December 1917. See also "Four Local Soldiers, Killed Wounded and Gassed," *Norwich Gazette*, 22 November 1917.
- 21 Soldier file, Purdy, Monroe, 675850, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 8025 - 56.
- 22 "Pte. Munro [sic] Purdy Writes from France," printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 13 December 1917.
- 23 Tim Cook, "The Politics of Surrender: Canadian Soldiers and the Killing of Prisoners in the Great War," *Journal of Military History* 70, no. 3 (2006): 637-665.
- 24 "Pte. Emerson Glover Home from France," *Norwich Gazette*, 11 April 1918.
- 25 "Four Local Soldiers, Killed Wounded and Gassed" *Norwich Gazette*, 22 November 1917; "In Loving Memory" *Norwich Gazette* 7 November 1918; and Soldier file, Messecar, Andrew, 797679, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 6137 - 1.
- 26 Soldier file, Hansel, Lorne, 796185, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 4025 - 29.
- 27 "Town Talk," *Norwich Gazette*, 29 November 1917; and Soldier file, McLeod, Kenneth, 406139, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 7087 - 14.
- 28 Soldier file, Spinks, Frederick, 675906, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 9197 - 61.
- 29 Soldier file, Haylow, James Dake, 675572, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box

- 4191 – 38; and “Pte Haylow wounded” *Norwich Gazette*, 15 November 1917.
- 30 Soldier file, Shelby, Karl Clayton, 675189, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 8838 – 42.
- 31 Soldier file, Shellington, James, 675933, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 8842 – 5; “Was a Good Soldier” *Norwich Gazette*, 27 December 1917; and “Killed by Shell Splinter,” *Norwich Gazette*, 9 May 1918.
- 32 “Letters of Condolence,” *Norwich Gazette*, 17 January 1918.
- 33 See, for example, “Another British Advance on the Front in Flanders,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 6 November 1917; “Canadian Troops are Holding On,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 7 November 1917; and “Enemy Failed in Two Attacks on the Canadians,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 12 November 1917.
- 34 At Cambrai, the Canadian Cavalry Brigade and the Newfoundland Regiment (which added the title “Royal” after the battle) fought with distinction with the British formations.
- 35 “Pte. Munro [*sic*] Purdy Writes from France.”
- 36 “Pte. Munro [*sic*] Purdy Writes from France.”
- 37 Robert Brown and Donald Loveridge, “Unrequited Faith: Recruiting the CEF 1914-1918,” *Canadian Military History* 24, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2015): 78-79.
- 38 G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1962), 347-348.
- 39 Government of Canada, *Military Service Act*, 1917.
- 40 “Oxford Tribunals for Conscription,” *Norwich Gazette*, 13 September 1917; and “Exemption Boards are Now Complete,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 20 October 1917.
- 41 “Returned Men for Tribunals,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 13 October 1917. The 28-year-old Lovel Edward Lowman was an English immigrant who had settled in Woodstock and enlisted in October 1914 only to be declared medically unfit while training in England. Soldier file, Lowman, Lovel Edward, 53478, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 5772 – 39.
- 42 “Exemption Board is Having Difficulty,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 14 November 1917.
- 43 “Exemption Board Concludes Labors,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 10 December 1917.
- 44 James Brough to Donald Sutherland, May 1918, Oxford County Archives (OCA), COA63, Donald Sutherland Fonds, Series 2, Subseries G – Military, 1917.
- 45 “Exemptions Returns from Norwich Tribunals,” *Norwich Gazette*, 22 November 1917.
- 46 Military Service Act, 1917, Questionnaire, *Wartime Canada*, <http://wartimecanada.ca/document/world-war-i/conscription/conscription-comes-canada-1917>.
- 47 Brough to Sutherland, May 1918.
- 48 “19 Applications Heard on Monday,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 20 November 1917.
- 49 “Exemption Board Concludes Labors,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 10 December 1917.
- 50 “Exemption Returns,” *Norwich Gazette*, 29 November 1917.
- 51 Fred Furlong to his Mother, 13 December 1917, authors’ collection.
- 52 John English, *The Decline of Politics: The Conservatives and the Party System, 1901-20* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 76.
- 53 Mourad Djebabla, “Fight or Farm?: Canadian Farmers and the Dilemma of the War Effort in World War 1 (1914-1918),” *Canadian Military Journal* 14, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 62-63.
- 54 “Eighty Per Cent. Get Exemption,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 15 November 1917.
- 55 “Exemption Returns,” *Norwich Gazette*, 29 November 1917.
- 56 “Exemptions Returns from Norwich Tribunals,” *Norwich Gazette*, 22 November 1917.
- 57 William Wright to Donald Sutherland, n.d., OCA, COA63, Donald Sutherland Fonds, Series 2, Subseries G – Military, 1917.

- 58 "Exemption Board Concludes," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 10 December 1917.
- 59 See Patrice Dutil and David Mackenzie, *Embattled Nation: Canada's Wartime Election of 1917* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2017), 180-181; and Patrick Ferraro, "English Canada and the Election of 1917" (unpublished Master's thesis, McGill University, 1971).
- 60 Tim Cook, *Warlords: Borden, Mackenzie King and Canada's World Wars* (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2012).
- 61 "The Situation in South Oxford," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 13 November 1917.
- 62 "Ovation Given Malcolm Schell," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 26 November 1917.
- 63 "Ovation Given Malcolm Schell."
- 64 "Malcolm Schell States His Position," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 7 November 1917.
- 65 "Sutherland and Schell Start the Ball Rolling," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 20 November 1917.
- 66 "Ovation given Malcolm Schell," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 26 November 1917. Historian Hayley Goodchild observed that the federal government's decision to create the Dairy Produce Commission to manage the sale of dairy products earlier in 1917 had a drastic impact on cheese producers. The commission had accepted a British proposal to sell cheese to Britain "at fixed prices ranging from 20 $\frac{3}{4}$ cents per lb. of cheese for 'third grade' goods up to 21 $\frac{3}{4}$ for first grade." See Hayley Goodchild, "Building a 'Natural Industry of this Country': An Environmental History of the Ontario Cheese Industry from the 1860s to the 1930s," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, McMaster, 2017), 264-266.
- 67 "Sutherland and Schell Start the Ball Rolling"; and "Disenfranchise Whole Breed," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 30 November 1917.
- 68 "Ovation Given Malcolm Schell."
- 69 "Sutherland and Schell Start the Ball Rolling."
- 70 "Ovation Given Malcolm Schell."
- 71 "Behind Government for Service Act," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 30 November 1917; and "Sutherland and Schell Start the Ball Rolling."
- 72 "Sutherland and Schell Start the Ball Rolling."
- 73 "Behind Government for Service Act," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 20 November 1917.
- 74 Malcolm Schell Asks for Support," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 28 November 1917; and "Behind Government for Service Act," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 20 November 1917.
- 75 "Sutherland and Schell Start the Ball Rolling."
- 76 "Malcolm Schell Asks for Support"; and "Donald Sutherland Repeats the Charge," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 20 November 1917.
- 77 Donald Sutherland, "The Electors of South Oxford," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 7 December 1917.
- 78 Schell also invited strident opponents of conscription to speak at his rallies, which further confused voters about his stance. At one event in Beachville, Schell brought a prominent local Liberal to the stage who angrily stated that "conscription was antagonistic to the principle of British freedom." While he thought that every young man should "do his bit," he also thought "that many were unable to go because of quite satisfactory reasons" and should be allowed to remain at home. "Behind Government for Service Act."
- 79 "Sutherland and Schell," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 20 November 1917.
- 80 "Says Schell is Laurier Liberal," *Daily-Sentinel-Review*, 7 December 1917; and "Whom does Schell Represent in this Election, and Where Does he Stand on the Issue?" *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 13 December 1917.
- 81 Donald Sutherland to the Electors of South Oxford, *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 7 December 1917; and "Malcolm Schell Asks for Support."

- 82 "Military Notes," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 22 November 1917.
- 83 Donald Sutherland to Electors of South Oxford.
- 84 "Sutherland and Schell."
- 85 "Behind Government for Service Act"; and "Sutherland and Schell Start the Ball Rolling."
- 86 "Behind Government for Service Act," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 30 November 1917. On ideas about "partyism" at this time, see English, *Decline of Politics*.
- 87 "Behind Government for Service Act."
- 88 "Whom does Schell Represent in this Election?"; and "Malcolm Schell States His Position," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 7 November 1917.
- 89 "In South Oxford," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 18 December 1917.
- 90 J.N. Chambers, "A Plea for Candor," Letter to the Editor, 3 December 1917, printed in *Daily-Sentinel-Review*, 5 December 1917.
- 91 "Sutherland and Schell."
- 92 Donald Sutherland to the Electors of South Oxford; and "Sutherland and Schell."
- 93 "Women's Union Gov't League at Norwich," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 8 December 1917.
- 94 "33,000 Reasons for Union Government," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 6 December 1917.
- 95 Editorial, "The Sentinel-Review's Position," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 4 December 1917; and Ferraro, "English Canada and the Election of 1917," 47.
- 96 Donald Sutherland to the Electors of South Oxford.
- 97 "The Sentinel-Review's Position," 4 December 1917.
- 98 "Military Notes," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 4 March 1917.
- 99 "Returned Soldiers Take Over Club Rooms," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 28 February 1917; and "Col Sutherland Says Good-Bye to the Returned Men," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 2 March 1917.
- 100 Donald Sutherland to Colonel Sutherland, 6 September 1917, OCA, COA63, Donald Sutherland Fonds, Series 2, Subseries G – Military, 1917.
- 101 "E.W. Nesbitt is Endorsed by the Liberal Association," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 29 October 1917; and "E.W. Nesbitt Announces That He Will Support Union Gov't," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 27 October 1917.
- 102 Record of ORSA Meeting held in Club Rooms, OCA, RG 2 County of Oxford, Series 12, Oxford Returned Soldiers' Association Minutes, 1916-1917.
- 103 "John R Shaw on the Situation," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 30 October 1917; and "Nesbitt's Effective Reply," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 6 December 1917.
- 104 "Colonel Sutherland Nominated by War Veterans," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 29 October 1917. Along with Sutherland, four other soldier-candidates were put forward as "win-the-war" candidates by other chapters of the GWVA. As historian Matthew Barrett has noted, "The result was often venomous campaigns which divided members of the GWVA, pitted returned soldiers against civilians and strained party loyalties." Matthew Barrett, "Soldier-Candidates and the 1917 Wartime Election," *Active History* <http://activehistory.ca/2015/10/soldier-candidates-and-the-1917-wartime-election/>.
- 105 "John R. Shaw on the Situation," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 30 October 1917; and "Nesbitt's Effective Reply," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 6 December 1917.
- 106 "Unconstitutional for Veterans to Mix in Politics," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 1 November 1917.
- 107 "John R. Shaw on the Situation"; and "Nesbitt's Effective Reply."
- 108 "Colonel Sutherland Gets Endorsation of Mass Meeting," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 12 November 1917.

- 109 "Col. Sutherland has Accepted," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 2 November 1917.
- 110 "Big Audience at Princeton Hears About E.W. Nesbitt," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 7 December 1917; and "Colonel Sutherland's Candidature," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 5 December 1917.
- 111 "Big Audience at Princeton Hears About E.W. Nesbitt"; and "Colonel Sutherland Has Been Misled Says Col. Young," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 15 December 1917.
- 112 "Editorial," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 15 December 1917.
- 113 "Colonel Sutherland's Candidature."
- 114 Colonel Sutherland to Donald Sutherland, 29 October 1917, OCA, COA63, Donald Sutherland Fonds, Series 2, Subseries G – Military, 1917; and "Colonel Sutherland and the Elections," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 15 December 1917.
- 115 "Colonel Sutherland and the Elections."
- 116 "Two Candidates in North Oxford," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 19 November 1917.
- 117 "Claims of Rival Candidates in North Oxford Presented," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 20 November 1917.
- 118 "Letter from Premier Borden to his Friends in North Oxford," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 10 December 1917.
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- 145 "Victory Bonds," *Norwich Gazette*, 6 December 1917; and "Victory Total for County," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 5 December 1917.
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10 “War is a great devouring machine and it is hard to tell when it will be satisfied”

January-July 1918

“I am enjoying good health at present and I’m still in merry old England, which is lucky or unlucky as one looks at it. However I expect to be at the line in a few weeks now, perhaps before this reaches you, for it only takes some chaps 24 hours to make France and back to Blighty again.... I am one out of a dozen of the 133rd Battalion that is fit and has not been in the big show yet. I hope to do my bit though even if I have been detained in this country too long. War is a great devouring machine and it is hard to tell when it will be satisfied.”

*- Robert Martin in a letter to his father,
Tillsonburg Observer, 21 February 1918*

“The prospect of an Allied victory appeared remote in January 1918,” historian Terry Copp observed. The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia prompted negotiations to end the war on the Eastern Front, with Germany dictating the terms of the peace treaty and securing vast tracts of territory from Russia. “The German army could now bring large numbers of troops to the Western Front and seek victory on the battlefield before the American Expeditionary Force was ready for combat,” he noted. “The French government and military believed the best they could hope for was to withstand the expected German attack and prepare to renew the offensive in 1919 relying on the full force of the American army.”¹

Although the members of the Canadian Corps could look back to the previous year with justifiable pride in their achievements, the toll had been heavy. The Canadians earned a strong reputation for battlefield success at Vimy Ridge, Hill 70, and Passchendaele but, as historian Tim Cook summarized, “the 40,000 casualties sustained since April had put a terrible strain on the corps. Not enough men remained in the training camps to make up for the debilitating losses, and enlistment in Canada had slowed to a mere trickle” in early 1918. At the start of the year, 139,915 members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force were in France. Since 1914, 150,000 Canadians had been killed, wounded, or taken prisoner.²

On the home front, despite or perhaps because of the devastation of the previous year, Reverend Lawrence Sinclair of Burgessville’s poem “A Happy New Year” sought to create a portrait of hope, faith, and glory for the year ahead:

A Happy New Year
Let the Sound be heard
Afar over sea and land.
May the roar of the cannon forever cease,
And the sword be sheathed for eternal peace.
Under heaven's supreme command.

A Happy New Year
To the soldiers brave, and the naval force,
Defenders of country and King—
To the ministers, doctors and nurses kind,
And the wounded and all distressed in mind.
May this year true happiness bring.

A Happy New Year
To all who mourn—
For the loved ones passed away
There is joy in the hope of the promised given –
To meet again for ever in heaven,
At the dawn of eternal day.

A Happy New Year,
To all the earth and soon
May this terrible war be done.
Let the struggle for right
Be triumphant in might,
And a glorious victory won.³

For families in South Oxford, however, the early days of 1918 saw a continuation of the struggles that had plagued the area for the last two years: food, coal and labour shortages, coupled with the continuous government pressure to conserve, produce, and give to the efforts of the patriotic leagues. An anonymous poet put these sentiments into verse, which he or she titled “Bad to Worse”:

My Tuesdays are meatless,
My Wednesdays are wheatless,
I am getting more eatless each day.

My home is heatless,
My bed is sheetless,
They're all sent to the Y.M.C.A.

The barrooms are treatless,
My coffee is sweetless,
Each day I get poorer and wiser.

My stockings are feetless,
My trousers are seatless—
My how I do hate the Kaiser.⁴

Only will-power and faith would allow people to see the proverbial light at the end of the war's dark tunnel. King George V had sent out a letter in November 1917 asking his subjects to spend 8 January in a special day of prayer and thanksgiving. "The world-wide struggle for the triumph of right and liberty is entering upon its last and most difficult phase," he proclaimed. "The enemy is striving by desperate assault and subtle intrigue to perpetuate the wrongs already committed and to stem the tide of a free civilization. We have yet to complete the great task to which more than three years ago we dedicated ourselves." In Norwich, the Presbyterian, Baptist and Methodist churches answered the King's letter with a joint service, prompting a tongue-in-cheek commentary in the *Norwich Gazette* which noted that it was not the royal request but the coal shortage that managed to bring the churches together – a reference to aspirations for Protestant union across denominational lines. "War and famine will do what years of agitation has failed to do."⁵

Township residents also wearied of politics. After the intense and divisive federal election campaign, some local citizens believed that the upcoming municipal elections were an unjustifiable expense in the face of material shortages and general hardship. Indeed, the majority of council and school trustee candidates across the three townships and in the town of Norwich withdrew their names so that the positions could be filled by acclamation. "Evidently the peoples' minds are busy with weightier matters or it may be that the excitement of the general election just over left them with no desire for anything so insignificant as a municipal affair," the *Gazette* observed.⁶ Further fallout from the federal election came when Ottawa called the second draft of conscripts to report in January. The men assessed as fit to serve during the fall of 1917, those whom the military tribunals and appeal judges decided lacked valid reasons for exemption, as well as a few volunteer enlistees, gathered in large military area depots to begin their training.

The *Gazette* speculated that the "Last Man May Count," preparing township residents for future drafts and hoping to entice more young men to volunteer. Compared to the previous year, volunteer enlistment during the first two months of 1918 dropped significantly (11,482 down from 21,799).⁷ The Military Service Council calculated that conscripts would make up the difference and provide more support than previous years. When it combined conscripts and volunteers, Canada had an estimated 47,000 reinforcements available to go overseas that winter,⁸ with 24,000 more men ordered to report in the second draft on 3 January.⁹ Bringing the results of the draft across the nation into sharp relief, the *Daily Sentinel-Review* published a national breakdown of the first call in February. The London depot boasted the highest rate of compliance at 93%.¹⁰ In this light, the Woodstock newspaper optimistically assured its readers that the government would not have to conscript farm labour. Despite public acquiescence to the government order, draft catchers

were spotted in London and all men of draft age were warned to carry their military papers, birth certificate, or marriage licence at all times to prove that they had not been conscripted. By the end of February, the same paper changed its tune and predicted that “there is soon to be a round-up ... and none will be spared.”¹¹

Conscription would be a pointless endeavour if the soldiers were not available as reinforcements in a timely manner. Historian Richard Holt credits the depot battalions with enabling the prompt deployment of men to England – a different experience than that of volunteers earlier in the war. In his sample, 57% of conscripts left for overseas having served less than ten weeks in Canada. (By comparison, only 5-10% of volunteer recruits left for England with so little time spent preparing in Canada in 1916 and 1917.)¹² Counted amongst the first draft of local men called to the 1st Depot Battalion, Western Ontario Regiment, for duty overseas were electrician Alfred Ottewell from Springford and farmers William DePeel of Otterville, Wray Rockett of Holbrook, and Leonard Wallace of Norwich. The previous fall the *Gazette* had singled out Pte. Wallace for choosing not to seek an exemption when drafted, even though he worked as a farm labourer at William Croxford’s farm.¹³ Ottewell and Rockett each had siblings serving while DePeel became the first member of his immediate family to enlist.¹⁴ The men shipped out by train to Halifax (as preceding waves of recruits had in years past) but their departure garnered much less fanfare. Indeed, departure times were withheld until the last moment so there were no large crowds to bid them farewell.¹⁵ When they arrived in England on 16 February 1918, the men left immediately for Bramshott in Surrey for quarantine before joining the other soldiers for training.

Given the acute need for reinforcements at the front, the military rushed the draftees through a truncated training program. Whereas the men from the 168th had grown tired of the endless days of marching and training and longed to see action, the conscripts were put quickly through the paces. In 1916 the Canadian Corps developed a condensed 14-week training program for soldiers to prepare them for the front lines. Now training was expedited to a 9-week minimum, which training officers felt would still produce troops of high quality.¹⁶ While many conscripts still received more than nine weeks of training, Pte. John Bowerman did not. The South Norwich farmer was the second oldest son in a family of

Canadian Conscripts as of February 1918			
	Ordered to report	Arrived to report	Compliance Rate
London	1291	1195	93%
Toronto	6160	5238	85%
Kingston	1585	1236	78%
Montreal	2234	1619	73%
Quebec	155	97	63%
Halifax	291	217	75%
St John	1124	974	87%
Winnipeg	2872	2225	78%
Vancouver	1750	1337	76%
Regina	1862	1497	80%
Calgary	1283	1147	89%

“Draftees Now Total 22,234,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*,
14 February 1918

twelve children. His older brother was married and his three other brothers were too young to be drafted. When called up in January, he reported to Niagara at the 2nd Battalion Depot, sailed to England, disembarked on 4 March, and began his training at Camp Witley. Nine weeks later the soldier found himself on the shores of France where he joined the 102nd Battalion on 11 May and promptly travelled inland by train to the Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp (CCRC) at Aubin-St. Vaast. Here, he was held in readiness until ordered to proceed to the front and taught some fundamentals of how the Canadian Corps operated, including the latest tactical changes and “training in open warfare.”¹⁷ Unfortunately, Pte. Bowerman had a tendency to lose “equipment” and was punished accordingly. (When he lost a knife and spoon on 30 May, it was docked from his pay. He lost a clasp knife two weeks later, and again it was taken out of his pay.)¹⁸ Only eight months after reporting, Bowerman would find himself on the battlefield with the 31st Battalion Infantry.

In the Canadian camps in England and France, orders were issued to stop the use of the diminutive term “conscript” for the new arrivals. Soldiers who ignored the policy faced strict disciplinary measures. Historian Patrick Dennis has highlighted the vitriolic letters home from veteran soldiers expressing their bitterness towards those “slackers” who had to be coerced to serve.¹⁹ In sharp contrast, Pte. Fred Furlong seemed neutral if not compassionate on the issue. Still training in England (his front-line service thwarted once again by organizational changes), Furlong observed the draftees’ arrival first hand. Instead of condemning the reinforcements, however, he noted the peculiarity of their situation as well as the unfairness of the distribution of exemptions. Writing home to his mother that March, he commented on the large number of conscripts, observing that they were being “used pretty good.” He related the story of a soldier who had tried to enlist three times voluntarily but had been deemed unfit each time,²⁰ only to bemoan to Fred that “now here I am a conscript.” Fred believed there were similar cases amongst the drafted men, but he emphasized that “a great many more” had never tried to “do their bit” overseas.²¹ As new men arrived, Fred looked for boys from Otterville. Private Walt Patterson’s situation piqued his interest. Although Fred had supported conscription during the election, he felt it was “tough on Pat” because the Patterson’s had two other sons serving and “there are a bunch of fellows getting exemption that haven’t anyone over here. It doesn’t seem quite fair.”²²

During the months of March and April, more men trickled into the depots in response to the second draft. The men leaving East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich townships came from a variety of backgrounds: grocers, clerks, electricians, linesmen, brick layers, harness makers, teachers, drivers, and farmers. The draft affected families and businesses with impunity. Twenty-four-year-old Pte. Charles Hibbert Harris, a harness maker and blacksmith, had worked with his father since before he was sixteen and lived above his family’s shop at the corner of Church and Front Streets in Norwich. His parents William and Mary lived there with Charles, Geraldine (22), and David (21).²³ The family did not lack patriotic spirit, even though two boys of enlistment age remained at home. William Harris

himself had attempted to enlist in 1917 at the age of 70 but was rejected for active service because of his advanced age. His eldest son, druggist John L. Harris, had enlisted in February 1916 and served with the 2nd Field Ambulance until he was killed in a tragic accident in January 1917. William was willing to serve himself, but he feared for his remaining sons. During the previous year's election campaign, he had offered his support to Oxford South candidate Donald S. Sutherland with the condition that the politician "help me out in my time of trouble. I am trying to keep my boy home." The senior Harris explained that he had applied for an exemption for Charles, "but if they take him, I don't know what I will do." The desperate father pleaded his case: "My son is a good worker and keeps all of my books, and I am in my 71st year. If you save my boy there will be three votes this election."²⁴ Sutherland won the election but, in the end, William Harris lost: his son Charles could not avoid the draft, especially with younger brother David still at home. On 24 April 1918, Charles joined the 1st Depot Battalion in London, Ontario, then went into the Canadian Engineer Pool. With him were other local conscripts, including Pte. Harold Eggman, Pte. Earl Lonsbury, Pte. George Overholt, Pte. Letson Hilliker, Pte. Hugh Jones, Pte. Harry Tabor, and Pte. Fredrick Crouch.

Attempting to allay families' fears about the likely fate of their conscripted sons, the *Gazette* published scientific evidence about a draftee's life expectancy. "Statistics say a drafted man's chance of life is as safe in France as on the streets of New York," the story suggested. A statistician from *Popular Science Monthly* calculated that a soldier serving with the heavy field artillery was no more likely to be killed than a person employed by the railway in Canada. The officers and non-commissioned officers who led the charges on the battlefield – the captains, lieutenants, and sergeants – were much "less safe" than privates. Furthermore, the death rate amongst volunteers was higher than that of drafted men. According to the statistics offered, only 60 men per 1000 were killed while serving, with 150 out of 1000 wounded.²⁵ Statistically, the story indicated, there was every likelihood their sons would return home.

Developments Overseas

For the soldiers overseas, the winter of 1917-18 was cold and gruelling. The Canadians held a seven-mile sector centred on Lens, including Vimy Ridge and its surrounding area. They converted the ridge into a defensive fortress, expanding the trench systems and barbed wire defences, constructing robust dugouts to protect them from artillery bombardments, building new artillery battery positions, and laying out tunnelled machine gun emplacements with overlapping fields of fire.²⁶ Their activities occurred under regular doses of poison gas (to which the Canadians responded in kind), leading to a consistent stream of casualties from chemical weapons. The soldiers learned to cope, protecting their lungs and faces with readily accessible respirators.²⁷ Concurrently, the Canadian Corps trained in earnest, refusing to rest on its laurels and instead implementing a new battle doctrine (developed in part with other British Expeditionary Force formations). Soldiers rotated in and out of the line regularly to attend battle schools and technical courses

that refreshed units and prepared them for the more open, mobile warfare that the corps commanders correctly assumed would come.²⁸

Manning defensive trench lines gave the Canadians ample time to think—and to long for home. Pte. Chester Barr's "Ode to Otter Creek," written "somewhere in France" and published in the *Norwich Gazette* on 28 March 1918, offers a case in point:

Speaking of Adventure,
On rivers grand and wide,
There's one in Old Ontario,
They all look small beside.

I've hunted on Mackenzie
Driven the Peud d'Oreille*
Along the great Columbia,
Have seen the deer at play

*Pronounce Poudaray



Canoeing on Otter Creek

I've rocked for gold in Salmon
Its waters swift and clear;
Rambled the Fraser's banks along,
And on the Red known cheer.

But Otter Creek, in Oxford,
Which flows to Lake Erie
Is the grandest and the widest
Of all the streams to me.

There are lakes on all the others
But no lake can compare
With Barker's pond on Otter
Or Wrights, which sparkles clear.

We hunted for the turtle,
Caught bass, and chub and ell,
Sometimes a snake would startle
And a crawly feel we'd feel.

Turtle eggs so round and pink
Such excitement, what a find
Otter creek, I truly think,
Leaves all other streams behind.

Frogs among the rushes,
Crane 'way overhead,

The spring where water rushes
Say I other streams are dead.

Swimming there we dared the deep
Lay on the bank, by sun caressed,
Forgot the school, for school will keep
Our aim to be the first undressed.

No other stream imparts the zest
No other prompts such radiant dreams,
Otter creek, forever blest
Glory sparkles in thy gleams.²⁹

Amidst the stench, filth, and perpetual danger of the trenches, the thought of a sun-drenched slumber alongside a flowing stream of sparkling water seemed downright idyllic.

“While no set-piece battles took place during this period, the trenches were alive with crash bombardments and harassing chemical attacks,” Cook explained. “Both sides raided furiously, vying for dominance of No Man’s Land.”³⁰ Trench raids remained a useful way to show initiative, practice small unit tactics, gather intelligence, and harass the enemy. Cpl. Clare Dougherty of Curries Crossing, who had been awarded a Military Medal for his actions at Vimy, added a bar to his medal for “conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty” during a daybreak raid with the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles on 5 March 1918. Armed only with revolvers, two officers, Dougherty, and a private entered into the wide “No Man’s Land” in the Méricourt Sector on a daring early morning reconnaissance mission to glean more information about an enemy post. “In the gap which extended for six hundred yards between the Battalion and the Imperial Division on the right, they suddenly encountered an enemy patrol of one officer and six men,” a regimental history recounted. “It was still dark and the unexpected contact was a surprise to both patrols.” Dougherty’s group pursued the Germans as they made their way through the wire, trying to cut off their retreat with a “revolver barrage” that killed one German. They captured another uninjured in a shell hole and took him back to the line for interrogation.³¹ Dougherty’s medal citation recounted how “the initiative and courage displayed by this N.C.O. when the unexpected situation arose, and against odds, was largely responsible for obtaining important identification.”³²



Claire Dougherty

Ten days later, a larger raid led by Major Thomas D’Arcy Sneath and the 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles managed to capture fourteen Germans – but at the cost



Thomas D'Arcy Sneath

of the popular officer. Sneath had fought at Ploegstreet, Second Ypres (where he was wounded and shell shocked), Courcellette/the Somme (where he was wounded by shrapnel and won the Military Cross for a gallantry in action), Vimy (again wounded and shell shocked), and Passchendaele. He had been mentioned three times in despatches. On 15 March 1918, the decorated officer led an early morning raiding party against the enemy's trenches about two miles south of Mericourt. After stealthy preparations, the whole raiding party crept to within 200 yards of the enemy's outpost line. In complete silence, the 156 soldiers crossed 900 yards of No Man's Land to reach the German trenches. "Too much cannot be said in praise of the way in which Major T.D. Sneath, M.C., handled the organization and preparation for the raid, and finally the Raid itself," the 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles war diary extolled. He had gone forward with his men as the officer commanding the raid and "personally supervised operations in the Raided Area, showing great gallantry and coolness in the conducting of the various phases." The entire raiding party displayed the "utmost confidence and steadiness," and this was a clear reflection of Sneath's leadership:

His bearing and understanding throughout commanded the implicit confidence of all who were to be in any way connected with the operation. The boldness, initiative and skill displayed by him cannot be too highly commended. It was due entirely to his thorough preparations, organization and personal qualities of leadership that the operation was so successful. His appreciation of the different situations which arose was most accurate, and he gallantly directed operations from the enemy's parapet until he was instantly killed by rifle fire.

Sneath was buried with full military honours.³³ Four other Canadian soldiers were killed during the raid and another 26 wounded, but the raiders managed to kill about 35 Germans and capture 19 prisoners.³⁴ Despite being minor operations conducted over the winter, raiding claimed a significant toll: more than 3500 Canadian casualties from 1 December 1917 to 21 March 1918.³⁵

Six days after Sneath's death, German General Erich Ludendorff launched the massive *Kaiserschlacht* ("Kaiser's Battle") or Spring Offensive to try and secure victory over the Allies before the United States could bring its overwhelming human and matériel resources to bear on the Western Front. Bolstered by nearly fifty divisions (500,000 men) transferred from the Eastern Front after the Russians withdrew from the war and using elite stormtrooper units to infiltrate and bypass front line Allied units, the German army attacked Fifth British Army near Saint-Quentin to try and separate the French and British forces, seize the Channel ports, and push the British into the sea. Outnumbered nearly eight to one, the British could not withstand the assault and were forced to fall back. To stop the retreat, the French sent nine divisions to the Arras-Saint-Quentin sector while the British rushed rein-



The German Spring Offensives, March-July 1918

forcements to France to bolster their beleaguered lines. Facing the serious threat of a German army dividing the British and French forces, Haig agreed to the appointment of Ferdinand Foch as Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Armies.

The Germans unleashed four major operations by June, achieving the deepest advances by either side since 1914 and recovering nearly all of the ground that the Allies had recaptured during the war. The Canadian Corps, holding ground in the Vimy sector far to the north of the main German offensive, avoided the brunt of the action (although, at one point, the corps held one-fifth of the entire British line).³⁶ Nevertheless, the German offensive threatened the integrity of the Canadian Corps as a unified formation. On 23 March, British high command ordered two Canadian divisions into general reserve, and two days later reallocated the remaining two Canadian divisions to the adjacent British corps. With his Canadian Corps headquarters thrust into reserve, General Currie protested that the Canadians needed to be kept together. Despite British divisions seriously weakened by heavy fighting, two of the Canadian divisions returned to Currie's command on 30 March, and a third soon thereafter. Senior British officers bitterly resented that Currie carried special political clout as a "national" corps commander, but the Canadian Government remained adamant that the Canadians should fight together.³⁷

The decision to keep the Canadian Corps a unified, strong formation proved fortuitous in the months ahead, setting it up to become the "shock army of the British Empire" in the late summer and fall of 1918. The decision to maintain all four Canadian divisions at full strength, rather than follow the British example and reduce the number of infantry battalions in each brigade, ensured that the Corps' combat power remained particularly strong. The British proposed to shrink the Canadian divisions, generate an additional Canadian division and corps, and create a Canadian Army led by Currie. The Canadian commander, however, recognized that rather than increasing the Canadians' combat power, this new structure would diminish his Corps' effectiveness. Instead of creating an army that he might command, he broke up the extra battalions in the Fifth Division in England to reinforce his current battalions on the continent, bringing each one up to more than 1,000 soldiers in strength. He added more combat support troops (artillery, engineers, and machine gunners) to the Corps, making it a large and robust formation. By the summer of 1918, each Canadian division had resources comparable to the average British corps.³⁸ By putting aside his self-interest as the prime candidate for a Canadian army commander position, Currie did what was best for the Canadian Corps. This allowed it to play a major role in operations later that year, far beyond its relative size.

Returning Home: Furloughs and Wounded

On 16 February, a long-awaited headline appeared in the Woodstock *Daily Sentinel-Review* proclaiming that soldiers from the First Contingent, who had been serving overseas for three years or more, would receive their first furlough home to Canada.³⁹ An additional 20,000 men who were medically or physically unfit for active service would return to Canada between 11 March and 1 June – a "radical

reorganization” of the military to ensure that men were not kept “on the pay roll unless usefully engaged.” The *Sentinel-Review* reported that “there is to be no more allowing of men to stay comfortably in England at the country’s expense for one, two, or three years without ever getting into real active service.... They must come home and re-enter civilian life.”⁴⁰

The potential return of large numbers of long-serving soldiers and seriously wounded combat veterans to homes and hospitals in Canada raised serious questions about how the country would cope with these “broken” men. In Ottawa, the House of Commons struck a committee to look at the needs of the men who served, suffered injury, and returned to Canada.⁴¹ Closer to home, communities prepared for the transition. In Milldale, the Patriotic League formed a plan to do what they could for wounded soldiers,⁴² while the Norwich Board of Trade was determined to do “their duty towards the returning soldiers and formulate plans for welcoming them back to Norwich.”⁴³ In the pages of the *Sentinel-Review* readers were instructed on “Caring for Soldiers Returning to Canada.” Readers were assured that, to smooth the transition, soldiers would come through a discharge depot, guided by experienced staff who had been overseas. The padre stationed there would “impress upon the minds of the men returning to Canada the necessity of adapting themselves as speedily as possible to a life in Canada.” Careful to recognize the wartime sacrifice of the soldiers, the paper prophesized that “their responsibilities of citizenship are about to begin anew and to assume a greater significance than ever before.”⁴⁴

Amongst the wounded returning to Canada were two men from South Norwich Township. “The citizens of the village [of Otterville] assembled at the town hall on Saturday evening to welcome Pte. Harold Innis and Pte. [Arthur Monroe] Oatman who have returned from overseas,”⁴⁵ the *Gazette* reported. Both men had enlisted in 1916, with Monroe leaving farming in Saskatchewan and Innis his university studies in Toronto. One served as a signaller and the other a gunner in the artillery, but both had their service shortened by injury and endured months of hospital treatments. Innis’s injury was clear cut (a gunshot to the thigh), with the particulars of the incident explained to his parents in letters penned during months spent in convalescent hospitals in Utbridge, Basingstoke, and Liverpool. Arriving home with a pronounced limp, a cane, and one gold wound stripe, Innis’s debility was obvious to everyone but would not hinder his return to academia.⁴⁶ By contrast, “Roe,” as his friends called him, wore the effects of his service deep within. Discharged as a result of chronic trench nephritis, caused by exposure to wet and cold, Pte. Oatman had suffered from this kidney disease on and off since 1917. After only a few months in the trenches, he was hospitalized at Vimy Ridge in May. Despite treatment in both France and England, Monroe’s weight fell by 30 lbs. and the disease left him with occasional headaches and back pain.⁴⁷ Doctors in Canada were unlikely to have encountered such a rare condition in civilian life, and one wonders what support and understanding soldiers such as Pte. Oatman would have received from medical doctors who had never experienced the Western Front. Medical officials overseas noted that “once a man suffered from acute nephritis he should never



Harvesting hay with a steel-wheeled tractor, 1918

return to more than light duty at home.”⁴⁸ Monroe, however, was categorized as an “experienced farmer” upon his discharge, and despite his debilitating condition he intended to return to farming – an occupation that would entail much more than “light duty.”

Government agencies saw the return to farming as a way to kill two birds with one stone. In the face of demands for increased

production and problems with the availability of farm labour (despite the Soldiers of the Soil program, urbanites assisting in the country, and the farmerettes preparing to take to the fields once again⁴⁹), newspapers promoted the idea of “returned men for the farm.”⁵⁰ The Canadian press reported how the returned soldiers represented an influx of “experienced farmers” landing in Canada, all of whom were expected to take up their former occupations. In Ontario, the government outlined a settlement scheme: 80 acres for returned soldiers, wages if they required training to learn how to farm, and loans for equipment and acre clearing.⁵¹ Soldiers such as Roe Oatman would ostensibly be able to make a living on the land.⁵² Harold Innis, however, had surveyed 500 soldiers in 1918 and discovered that of those questioned only 50 to 75 seriously considered farming after the war. Many veterans expected a homestead as merely security against a rainy day or in case the value of land should increase.⁵³ They were agreeable to possession, but not to cultivation.

There were large crowds at train stations and extended gatherings at family homes across the townships when it became known that a local soldier was returning. “Norwich turned out in full force” to honour Pte. John William “Ernest” Cole, for example. Not expecting a reception, Pte. Cole had settled at the YMCA in Woodstock where a crowd from home finally tracked him down and proceeded to drive him to Norwich in an automobile procession. Arriving in town, the *Gazette* reported that a “joyous shout went up, Borden’s mighty whistle blast carried the good news for miles around and in a few minutes the people of the country side learned the good news and rejoiced.” Cole was even pulled up onto the stage at the dramatic society play and officially welcomed by Reeve Henry Park, who read a letter filled with rhetoric typical of the time:

The citizens of Norwich are proud to join in welcoming you once more to Canada and this fair village, the home of your adoption. We have followed your footsteps with eagerness and your gallant conduct in the great struggle beyond the seas has more than upheld the glorious traditions of the old Mother Land and the Land of the Maple. Oxford’s Own, the 168th, have right loyally acquitted themselves and we tonight are proud of them and feel that no braver or nobler men have offered themselves in this great world crisis. You have been with them and helped to hold the line when the odds were

might against you. You have offered for your country all the strength of your manhood and your life itself.

We are thankful to kind Providence in that He has spared you to return once again to our shores and to home and loved ones, and trust that you may be granted renewed health and strength to enjoy for many years with us the liberty and justice in defence of which you so freely offered your all.

The happiest people in town were reported to be Cole's "little wife who has been bravely keeping the home fire burning for months in hope and fear and awaiting the return of her soldier husband to her and her little one," as well as his daughter who had been "patiently awaiting the return of her soldier daddy."⁵⁴

Friends and relations in Holbrook had long anticipated Pte. George Rockett's return, particularly as it closely followed the departure of his conscripted brother Wray to England. About a hundred people gathered at his brother Albert's home to surprise the returning veteran. They knew of George's short time at the front and had read the story of his wounding in the newspapers. (In the six weeks that followed his deployment to France in early May 1917, Rockett suffered minor shrapnel wounds on two occasions, before a gunshot wound severely fractured his right tibia).⁵⁵ His slow recovery in hospital over the previous year meant that he was able to walk, albeit stiffly, through the crowd that had gathered to celebrate his service. An evening of music and games followed, gifts were given, and Rockett was the subject of a formal address and a letter of thanks. "We are gathered here tonight to meet you and to welcome you back again to Canada your native land, and to home and loved ones," the note read. "During the long months that have passed since you last met with us and since we bid you a sad farewell, leaving our shores on that noble mission to other lands, offering your young life for the noblest cause man ever did battle for, our thoughts have followed you constantly and our prayers to Heaven have been that the God of Battles watch over and guard you in the hour of peril." The Christian references – and particularly the nod to the "God of Battles" – were common throughout Protestant Ontario.⁵⁶ "Your noble sacrifice has done honor for us all," Rockett heard, and the letter thanked him for his "noble stand and gallant conduct in this great world crisis." He had played his part "splendidly,"



Greeting returned soldiers at the Woodstock train yard

and his friends all hoped “that the struggle will soon be over and victory ours and that you may long be spared to enjoy the freedom, home and country you have so bravely defended.”⁵⁷

In Woodstock, where trains containing returned men were, at times, a daily event, the *Sentinel-Review* reported that one of the “most enthusiastic receptions yet recorded” was given to Lieut. Ernest LeRoy Underhill, one of the first men to enlist from East Oxford in September 1914. Arriving in England early the following February, Underhill spent the next year training in Shorncliffe and teaching signalling to incoming soldiers. He went to France in late January 1916 where “by reason of conspicuous gallantry he was soon promoted to the rank of Lieutenant.” Serving with the 1st Divisional Signalling Company on the front lines, a bullet passed through Underhill’s thigh on 6 May 1916. While recovering in hospital, Underhill contracted a bad case of “dermatitis (staphylococci) [that] resisted all treatment” and his medical board granted him a furlough to Canada in the summer of 1916 in the hopes that his infection would heal. Underhill rejoined his unit in France at the end of October and participated in the last stages of the Battle of the Somme. In the months that followed, however, he moved in and out of hospitals suffering from “nervous debility” and a “nervousness and general coarse tremor on any excitement.”⁵⁸ The military finally decided to send him back to Canada in the spring of 1918.

The *Daily Sentinel-Review* methodically tracked Underhill’s return, explaining to its readers that the soldier suffered from shell shock. Upon arriving in Woodstock at the end of April, he received a warm welcome from local dignitaries and his mother, Margaret. The newspaper’s report on Underhill did not describe the ebullient return of a shining war hero that readers had grown accustomed to – instead the paper provided an unforgiving description: “unfortunately Lieut. Underhill is very badly shell shocked and very pathetic, indeed, was the meeting between him and his mother.” Undeterred the crowd escorted the broken and overwhelmed 24-year-old man, with “due honor” (if not sensitivity), to his parents’ home with three more “ringing cheers.”⁵⁹

Lieut. Joseph Leslie Dickson, another Holbrook native, returned home to great

fanfare after a “disastrous fall with an aeroplane.” Friends and family learned that the young Royal Flying Corps flight lieutenant had been hospitalized overseas since June 1917, but they had no idea of the full extent of the danger that Dickson had encountered since taking to the skies: he had suffered severe concussions, head wounds, injuries to limbs, and amnesia.⁶⁰ He had survived being shot down five times, even though the observer who accompanied him was killed on each occasion. When a recovery team picked



A bad landing

him up after his final incident, “they thought him dead.” He recovered enough to be sent to Canada on convalescent leave, however, where the papers reported that although Dickson was “far from ‘fit’ he is a long way from a dead man.”⁶¹ When Dickson arrived at the Woodstock train station, he was greeted by Lt.-Col. W.T. McMullen, his former commander in the 168th Battalion. Soon after, the aviator made his way home. Friends celebrated with an evening at the Oddfellows Lodge in Burgessville and later another large gathering full of speeches, music, and readings put on by the Willing Workers of Zenda.⁶² Dickson spoke about the nature of aerial work and his specialty: reconnaissance. His ill health prevented a permanent stay with family, but Dickson was able to visit his family frequently from London while recuperating in yet another hospital.⁶³



J. Leslie Dickson pictured with cane

While Dickson wished to return to the war, months later, when he had healed enough to leave hospital, he was posted to the Aviation School at Beamsville where he served as an instructor.⁶⁴ One Sunday afternoon, “the people of Holbrook and vicinity were roused from their peaceful Sabbath reverie by a loud whirring sound and running out of their houses, discovered a large aeroplane flying gracefully over the neighborhood. It circled around a few times and then landed in a meadow near the farm home of Mr. and Mrs. B.O. Dickson, of the town line.” Out of the cockpit stepped Leslie, who had promised to visit his mom that afternoon – though he never mentioned how he would arrive. Word spread quickly, and soon 200-300 people “hastily took their cars, or any other way of conveyance, and were soon on the scene.”⁶⁵ Dickson’s aerial visit graced the pages of the newspapers in Tillsonburg, Woodstock, and Norwich – he was reported to be the first Oxford County boy to pilot an airplane in the area.⁶⁶

While Dickson’s story highlights the warm welcome given to many of the returned soldiers in the townships, there is some evidence that this enthusiasm waned as the soldiers attempted to re-integrate into society. As more men returned from the war, the *Gazette* reported that “the people of Norwich have been accused of being lacking in enthusiasm and being cold and reserved.” The author denied that this was the case, “for a more enterprising and patriotic people at heart can be found nowhere.” The outrage was followed by a note of caution, perhaps acknowledging a kernel of truth: “we must not forget our duty to the returning boy. Let the town ring with their welcome and publicly let each hero be given a certificate from the corporation for honorable service for us and the Allied cause.”⁶⁷ The returned soldiers, however, were looking for more than cheers and certificates.

“The right to work that has been advocated as one of the rights of the returned soldier is a direct charge on the government to perfect its organization,” penned the

thoughtful scholar Harold Innis while recovering in his hospital bed in England. Writing the ideas that would become his Master of Arts thesis on the “Returned Soldier,”⁶⁸ he identified potential problems facing Canada and the policy prescriptions for successful re-integration. He had considered the men he knew, collected statistics on 500 soldiers, and imagined the situations that they would encounter as “examples that will materially aid in the solution of the returned soldier problem.”⁶⁹ Innis argued that unemployment among soldiers must be kept to a minimum. Work was better than gifts. “The view that the soldier is entitled to a reward of pension, to charity or to philanthropy from the government, find small favor even among soldiers themselves,” he explained. Those willing to accept handouts in his mind were a certain type of soldier. “On a rough estimate, five percent have adopted this attitude and even these are not conspicuous for long service. Indeed, this attitude has received its quietus since the whole manhood of the nation has been conscripted.” In general, returning soldiers expected “fair play and a right to earn a decent living and they are entitled at least to these.”⁷⁰

In March 1918, families at home learned that the Department for the Rehabilitation of Returned Soldiers would provide “every returned soldier, whether a farmer or not,” a loan of up to \$2500 “to enable him to establish himself in the occupation in which he desires to spend his energies.”⁷¹ This was a loan, not the sort of “hand out” that Innis had denigrated, and many veterans would benefit from this support. When Pte. Clarence McKee returned to Canada, having sustained severe injuries to both legs and his hand during the battle of the Somme, the farmer’s body had been reshaped by the war. Hospitalized on both sides of the ocean, McKee was shipped from Dublin to Toronto where his right leg was amputated just below the knee in the spring of 1918. A return to farming would be challenging. During a visit home in March, McKee told the local paper that he sought a “meaningful and useful occupation in civil life,” with the *Gazette* reporting that “the brave lad intends to enter school and train along some line that he can handle.”⁷²

The reintegration process was difficult, and individual veterans had been dealing with it for some time. Departments like the Ontario Soldiers’ Aid Commission, set up to help the returned men, found that “complaints about pensions were very numerous and were increasing daily.” The Woodstock branch was increasingly discouraged, pessimistic, and overworked, and the branch’s secretary expressed his concerns to Oxford South MP Donald S. Sutherland. “As you know, the whole of my time for the past two years has been taken up trying to adjust complaints of returned soldiers or dependents of soldiers and in finding employment for discharged soldiers,” the aid commission worker wrote, “and it has also been my endeavour to follow up returned soldiers after I have found them employment so that I am able to tell in nearly every case as to whether a man is honestly trying to make good or whether he is in soldier talk ‘swinging the lead.’” He asked MP Sutherland for support, requesting pension officers in every district to oversee complaints, refer soldiers to doctors, and assess whether the “complaint is genuine or whether he is trying to ‘put one over.’”⁷³ The lauded sacrifice of the soldier overseas did not equal immunity from scrutiny at home.

Beyond worries about employment and reintegration, veterans also returned to communities that had little understanding of what they had gone through – even after four years of war. Harold Innis highlighted this disconnect when he was invited to accept a toast on behalf of returned soldiers in Chicago in the late spring of 1918. Innis had just completed his master's thesis at McMaster University and intended to continue his academic career in the United States at the University of Chicago. Rather than following the advice of the chairman to simply stand up, express that he was glad to be back home, and then sit down, Innis emphasized the divergence between depictions of the war on the home front and how it was experienced by the combatants overseas. Innis's notes for the speech, his biographer John Watson aptly described, might be characterized as "a form of black poetry":

As we imagined it:
afraid war would end
chasing Germans with bayonets
Pleasure of going over the top
Loaded down with German helmets [trophies]
As we found it:
Bully beef and hard tack
[railway] cars marked 8 horses or 40 men,
ditching ammunition
bayonets used to toast bread and cut wood
Filling of sandbags
Helmets to wash in
Damned dull, damned duty and damned monotony of it
continual mud
continual reading of sheets [maps]
continual bread marmalade and tea
continual shelling hide and seek warfare
With the monotony came fear
Instinctive location of deep dug-outs
Mathematical probability of shells
Landing in the same place twice
Flattening against the trench wall
Drinking poisoned water
How long we [were] at battery
Eating cordite [smokeless gunpowder]
Gradual longing for blighty
Before these influences all men are alike
Canadians
English
Scotch
Americans⁷⁴

While Innis and veterans like him attempted to adjust to life on the home front and

recover from the monotony, fear, and incessant danger they had experienced in France, another wave of men from the townships left to begin their own nightmares at the front.

Exemptions Cancelled

As more men trickled home from overseas, the manpower shortage grew increasingly worrisome to the federal government. Those men who had been approved for exemptions suddenly found their approvals questioned. Potential conscripts who had been granted temporary exemptions were pressed into service.⁷⁵ Judgements coming out of Ottawa determined that higher learning was no longer a justification not to serve (even for students who indicated that they returned to the farm when they were not studying), nor was teaching. Even the highly valued munitions workers would only be exempted if they could prove that their jobs were essential and that they were irreplaceable.⁷⁶ The government cautioned that “there will likewise be checking up of those who have been excused from military duty by reason of being engaged in agriculture or some industry classified as vital to the state.”⁷⁷ The government’s crackdown on men evading conscription incited the “Easter Riots” in Quebec City, which led to the deployment of soldiers on the streets of the city and the shooting deaths of four civilians.⁷⁸

As long as Borden’s promise to exempt farmers remained intact, there would be no serious backlash in the rural townships of South Oxford. In Norwich, a new medical officer, Dr. A. McCurdy, arrived to encourage voluntary enlistment and help process local boys on their way to the military depots.⁷⁹ Eighteen-year-old Harry Priddle desperately wanted to make it to the front and volunteered for the Army Service Corps as soon as he was old enough. “Harry’s khaki suit fits him well and he says that the soldier’s life is the only one for him,” the *Gazette* reported. “He is in the transport service and is anxiously awaiting the opportunity to get into the game overseas.”⁸⁰ Several local farmers also volunteered, including Lucas Peacock, Fred Pounds, and Cecil “Earl” Bowman. Other farmers embraced the exemptions promised to them during the federal election and focused their energies on increasing production.

The German Spring Offensives, however, dealt a death blow to the prime minister’s pledge. To the great surprise of the electorate, Borden rose in the House Commons on 19 April to ask for approval of an order-in-council cancelling the exemptions granted under the *Military Service Act* and authorizing the government to call up men for military service at its own discretion. All Class I men, now described as single and widowed men between 19 and 34 years of age without children, could now be called up for service. No claims for agricultural exemptions would be permitted.⁸¹ Borden understood that his decision would bring additional hardship on the farmers, but he concluded that it was “impossible to avoid these in war.”⁸²

The impact of the government’s decision was felt across the country. In Oxford County, the *Gazette* warned of a brakeman shortage upon the railroads,⁸³ but it was the farming industry that bore the brunt of the new policy. The *Sentinel-Review* chastened residents of Oxford County who believed that “when it comes down to

the fine point the Government will not take farmers, even should they come within the ages of 20-23, inclusive, unmarried. Such statements are entirely without foundation ... based on misplaced hope and a wrong reading of the new regulations." When the government cast its new net for conscripts, even those farmers who had already received an exemption would not be safe. The Minister of Militia would only grant agricultural conscripts temporary leaves of absence to assist with planting and the harvest – just as it had for recruits in previous years.⁸⁴

"The whole countryside of southern Ontario was aroused by this latest action of the government, aimed, rural people believed, directly at the farmers as a class," historian W.R. Young observed.⁸⁵ Fifty farmers of Oxford, including 20 signatories from the southeastern townships, immediately sent a resolution to the Members of Parliament for Oxford South and Oxford North, Donald S. Sutherland and Edward Walter Nesbitt. The farmers asserted that the latest Order-in-Council of the *Military Service Act* "is doing more to decrease production than all the efforts put forth by the Government to increase the same." Furthermore, because of this measure, seeding and "all plans for the season's crop are temporarily stopped." They pleaded for the Government to reconsider, to leave farmers "free to increase production as we have been advised and instructed that it is our duty to do." Warden Robert Fewster of North Norwich cited the conditions on his own farm in his criticism of the government's policy. "If new measures were adopted," his son Fred would join his brother George overseas, resulting in Fewster's 100 acres being neglected. "It is a shame to take men who are so sorely needed on the farms away from this important work, thus impairing production," he said. Reverend Davidson of Burgessville, having lived amongst farmers for years, summed up the situation neatly: if their sons were conscripted the "farmers would be in the soup."⁸⁶

In the days and weeks that followed the announcement, farmers continued to organize against the government cancellation of the agricultural exemption – despite being in the midst of the planting season. A petition circulated around Oxford County protesting the government's decision with the primary goal of protecting the farms that had only one son left to help. The response was quick and supportive. Over the course of two days in May, for instance, the canvassers for South Norwich Township collected 955 signatures.⁸⁷ Concurrently, a delegation of 150 farmers from the county joined a large protest march in Ottawa organized by the United Farmers of Ontario (UFO) and the Comptoir coopératif de Montréal representing Quebec.⁸⁸ Borden was dismissive of the farmers and their protest. "If a scattered and broken remnant of our Dominion troops, overwhelmed because not reinforced, should return to Canada, it would profit little to tell them that while they were being decimated our production had been largely increased," he rationalized.⁸⁹ In his view, the exigencies of war overseas trumped agricultural production at home. The farmers made their case to Newton Rowell (the former provincial Liberal leader and now a member of Borden's Cabinet) as well as T.A. Crerar, the politically inexperienced Minister of Agriculture. Neither gave the farmers the answer that they wanted.⁹⁰



Prime Minister Robert Borden addressing soldiers — both conscripts and volunteers, August 1918

When Borden finally faced the 5000 farmers in Ottawa on 14 May, they presented an “extremely aggressive” atmosphere.⁹¹ He listened to their arguments, and the *Sentinel-Review* printed the prime minister’s response for all of Oxford County to read. Borden claimed that

the “government’s ‘supreme duty’ was to the men who are fighting and who are sustained by the reinforcements that will enable them to hold the line.” He put delegates on their heels, exclaiming: “I do not understand that the farmers I see before me or any other body of farmers desire to be regarded as a class to whom special privileges should be given as individuals, without consideration of the national interest.” He understood that his decision would “produce hardships and must produce inequality” but he countered that “it is impossible for any Nation to take part in a war without bereavement and hardship and sorrow.” He had promised exemptions to farmers in December “in the national interest, as we understood it at that time.” In his assessment, the national interest had changed. “If the line breaks whether in the Canadian sector or elsewhere, and the Canadians will hold their line if their flanks are held—do you realize that under these conditions production here may not be of much avail to the Allied cause?” While the farmers spoke of a broken covenant between themselves and the government, Borden replied: “Do you imagine for one moment that we have not solemn covenants and pledges to those men, some of whom have been in the trenches for three years. Have we not pledge and covenant with them?”⁹²

Despite the patriotism of Borden’s words to the farming delegates, headlines in Oxford County read: “Farmers are Disappointed.”⁹³ Dispirited protestors and the larger farming community remained critical of the conscription order and MP Donald S. Sutherland felt the backlash, standing accused by the Norwich Farmer’s Club of lacking concern for the farmers’ welfare.⁹⁴ Concerned families also wrote individual letters to Sutherland pleading for him to intervene and save their sons. Thomas Potter of Curries outlined the impact his son Richard’s conscription would have on his farm:

Dear sir, it appears to me that some of the representatives of parliament do not understand [the] situation of the farmers in this community in regard [to] farm help.... In my own case I have 175 acres of farm land to work [and] I have one son and he is in this call and there are many in this naberhood (sic) in the situation.... Mr. Sutherland you know I have always been a strong supporter

of yours and I was led to believe that the farmers sons would be exempted and that is the grounds we elected you on.

Potter asked Sutherland to “look into the matter to the interest of the farmers.”⁹⁵

The government’s decision would cost Delloyd Lewis Brough’s father James not only his son but two additional labourers, resulting in “the most anxious time of” his life:

Pardon me for troubling you at the time when no doubt you are flooded with cares pending along the same line that I am writing about.... I have only one Son, he is twenty two years of age.... I would plead with you that he be allowed to remain with us at least until after Harvest. I am not able to work at all myself [and] have only one little girl to help [17-year-old Marion]. I have one hundred + fifty acres of working land, milk twenty cows, keep eight horses, besides young cattle + pigs. We have fifteen acres not put in yet, bought \$25 worth of seed corn to plant, but if our boy is taken from us now, it will be impossible to plant it.

Now we are not disloyal we work all the time for our country. But do you not think that our son could serve his country better right here than anywhere else.... Even if he [Delloyd] were at home we would need another good man and I don’t see how we can do much to help our country without him.⁹⁶

James had his doctor, Dr. Herbert Downing of Otterville, include a note confirming the old farmer’s ill health owing to rheumatoid pleuritic, an uncommon side effect of rheumatoid arthritis. The doctor ended with a damning indictment: “if his son is conscripted – Mr. J. Brough will not be able physically to do the work. If no help is attainable, I advised him to sell out.”⁹⁷

G.A. McKenzie of Curries also emphasized the help that he required on his farm and tried to remind Sutherland of his role as MP. “I urgently ask that you take a stand for us and see that we get our farmers’ sons and help [back]...until this coming autumn at any rate,” McKenzie asserted. “If the farmers cannot have trust in the man which has been sent to take their place and do their business for them why I say there are others in this district which we do trust and which if they were allowed to be trusted and had the law they would turn out to be true to their pledges.” When the United Farmers of Ontario asked the federal government to reinstate exemptions for farmers, McKenzie asked that Sutherland “stand up for all they ask.”⁹⁸

Sutherland did speak to his constituents’ concerns in the House of Commons, championing a provision that would grant leaves of absence for conscripts to help with planting and the harvest. He advised Prime Minister Borden that providing some protections to the farmers might help to mute public opposition to the government’s actions. “I could cite quite a number a number of such cases, the particulars of which will show conclusively that the time has not yet arrived to call out such men for service,” Sutherland argued, “while many others are still available who could be spared without creating undue hardship and suffering among many who are not in a position to take care of themselves, besides entailing a great loss to the country in the matter of food production.”⁹⁹ Borden was unmoved, forcing Suther-

land to respond to his constituents in a less than satisfactory manner.

Sutherland sent a fairly standard reply to the farmers who wrote to him, explaining that the “demands of the situation became so pressing, the need for men so great, and the abuse of the exemptions provided under the *Military Service Act* of 1917 was carried on to such an extent in some provinces, that no other course was left but for the Government to adopt other means of securing the men required.” The act of calling out all men between 20 and 23 “was done with the idea of compelling the province of Quebec to furnish her proper proportion of men for the service.”¹⁰⁰ Sutherland added in more personal messages to the farmers who offended him. “I must take exception to your statement that I was elected on the grounds that farmers’ sons would be exempted from military service,” he wrote to Thomas Potter. “I have not in the past nor do I now think that the farmers of Ontario as a class would consent to any such exemptions being made.... To exempt farmers as a class would cast a stigma and be reflection upon them, which I do not think they would tolerate for a moment.”¹⁰¹ Sutherland also took exception to McKenzie’s intimation that the farmer “could name others who are more trustworthy than myself” and could better defend rural interests. In Borden-esque fashion, the MP emphasized that “against the winning of the war nothing else matters.”¹⁰² To all correspondents he expressed hope that the government would make exception for cases of undue hardship and where serious losses in production would occur – but he could not make any promises.

Feeling that their elected representatives were ignoring them, many farmers turned to the United Farmers of Ontario. Several “auto loads” of local farmers from South Oxford went to a political rally in Toronto in June, and throughout the summer the large picnics in the rural townships became the backdrop for protest and provided a soapbox for politicians.¹⁰³ Three miles north of Norwich, residents attended a “monster picnic” on the Rodwell farm where a UFO speaker told the crowd that farmers would be justified in striking. “There should not be one code of conduct for rural people and another for urban people,” the speaker insisted.



A scene at the Norwich summer fair during the Great War

Familiar Fields to Foreign Soil

According to UFO president R.W.E. Burnaby, “farmers needed to get away from partyism and forget whether they were Tories or Grits.” Instead, he urged them to “unite and support a real live farmer, one who would understand and have the farmer’s interests at heart.”¹⁰⁴

Amidst the political posturing that summer, local employers and farm families tried to bridge the production-labour gap. In response to the cancel-



Ten-year-old James Edward (Ed) Arthur of Otterville received a special "Soldiers of the Soil" award for his contribution to the war effort

lation of the farmers' exemption, the *Gazette* noted that "the difficulties of farming will thereby be multiplied. The assistance that can be given by the citizens of our towns, cities and villages will count for much. It is hoped that the people of Norwich will hear the call for well organized co-operation." The merchants of Norwich offered to devote one half day a week between May and October to help allay the agricultural labour shortage, promising to show their rural counterparts that "they are serious and mean to do something."¹⁰⁵ In Otterville, 44 young Soldiers of the Soil received medals from the Dominion Government at the town hall. One local boy had given up his job at a munitions factory making \$70 a month to work on a farm for \$30 a month. The speaker received hearty applause when he affirmed the determination of the Canadian people to "do everything in their power to support the boys overseas and help win the war."¹⁰⁶ Knitting contests, patriotic concerts, bounty baskets, and a spring fair "with eats" continued to produce funds and goods to bring comfort to those overseas.¹⁰⁷

These patriotic efforts, however, were overshadowed by the harsh realities of conscription. Even before the final frost fell and the last seeds were sown in late spring, farmers from every community in the three townships had lost sons to the war effort. During May and June, young draftees left family farms and workplaces to report to 1st Depot Western Ontario Battalion. During this draft of local men, 44 out of 51 conscripts from the area listed farming as their occupation. Men who counted themselves lucky at the autumn tribunals lost their reprieves, including Henry Clark, Harry Walton Wright, Delloyd Lewis Brough, William Burtch, William Lamoure, and Wilbur Morley. The future that Warden Fewster had dreaded only months before came to pass: his own son Fred left with the draft, and his farm was one of many in the area with decreased production.

This surge of coerced “enlistments” prompted a spate of farewell parties akin to those held in the early days of war. Despite the venomous depictions of conscripts as “slackers” who had been avoiding service that often appeared in the press,¹⁰⁸ these men were generally treated respectfully in the townships and their contributions to agricultural production recognized. Historian Patrick Dennis contends

that everything about the administration of a draftee was designed to treat them differently. They were processed at a centralized depot with a different form stamped "M.S.A." across the top. In some cases, due to black outs of information, conscripts left their communities "unhonoured, unsung and even unwept."¹⁰⁹ In the townships of South Oxford, however, conscripts were celebrated side by side with volunteer enlistees. At the Westminster Guild, the residents of South Norwich gathered to attend an evening of music that sent draftees Barrie Stevenson, Cecil 'Earl' Bowman, Stanton Bradley, Harry McKee, George Losee, and volunteer Roy Arn off for training armed with the knowledge that their communities supported them.¹¹⁰ Perhaps inspired by the aerial exploits of Leslie Dickson, Stevenson, Bowman and Arn opted for positions with the newly restructured Royal Air Force (RAF),¹¹¹ while the rest of the men headed for general training in London, Ontario.¹¹² The brass band played for Herb Parson, while Walter Brown and Clarence Hansel were treated to an educational farewell at the school grounds featuring sports, "social chat," lunch, entertainment, and parting gifts. At the latter gathering, returned soldier Harold Innis stepped forward to provide an "instructive feature," speaking to the crowd about trench building and carrying on attacks, illustrating his descriptions with blackboard sketches.¹¹³

Many of these young men would never see service overseas. A handful were granted harvest leaves and then extended "leaves without pay." Farmers George Lowe, John W. Davis, Milo Hicks, and Frank Oatman were a few of the farmer soldiers who returned home. Edna Oatman, Frank's new bride (the two married during his leave from the Carling Heights training camp on 17 July, two weeks after he reported for service), must have been overjoyed. There is apparent reason why some conscripts were allowed to return home and others not. Both Pte. Richard Potter and Pte. Harry Wright were class one draftees who had lost the exemptions they granted in late 1917, and both came from large farms that desperately needed additional help. Wright was allowed an extended leave to return to his family farm, while Potter continued to train.¹¹⁴

While Richard Potter would never make it overseas, other farmers' sons drafted in May prepared to embark for England that summer. The short list still included names from farms across the townships: Pte. Fred Fewster, Pte. Sherman Degroat, Pte. Walter Brown, Pte. Emerson Chant, Pte. Lawrence Granger, Pte. Clarence Hansel, Pte. Carl Hilliker, Pte. Basil Harvey, Pte. Harry Lapier, Pte. George McElhone, Pte. Herb Parson, and Pte. Edgar Burill. Most of these farmer-conscripts would remain in England for the duration of the war, but Pte. Sherman Degroat, Pte. Charles Hibbert, Pte. Stanton Bradley, Sapper Irven Willsie, Pte. Ernie "Ratz" Shelby, and Pte. Clarence Hansel would find themselves in France, as would Pte. Bob Barham – a popular employee from Borden's Condenser. The 22-year-old draftee reported for duty in May 1918, leaving Norwich with a send-off from the Vigilant Rebecca Lodge and a special presentation from his co-workers at the train station. The *Gazette* reported that his friends and colleagues knew in the "great drama being carried on in the battlefields of Europe [that] Bob will play his part and play it



Basil Harvey



George Lowe



Lawrence Granger



Irvan C. Willsie

well.” He and the other conscripts who eventually made their way to the battlefield would enter the fray as the Great War entered into its final phase.

The Road to Amiens

At the end of March 1918, Pte. Aubrey Holdsworth finally left England to join the Canadian Corps on the battlefields of France, no doubt hoping he would finally get the chance to play a part in the conflict. His voyage across the Channel was relatively smooth, so he “didn’t cast up my accounts,” he wrote his brother Milfred. On 3 April he joined the 38th Battalion at Sainte Catherine’s just outside Amiens “after over a week of uninterrupted journeys” via livestock cars, lorries, and marching.¹¹⁵ When he wrote to his mother a couple of weeks later, he noted that he had “been up to ‘the line’” and “have had a taste of trench life at the front and have experienced a little of Fritz’s shelling and sniping.” Describing a typical day, Aubrey was “out on work parties, digging new trenches, and erecting barbed wire entanglements in no-man’s land for five consecutive nights last week. The experience is about what I expected, from accounts that I have heard from the trenches before.”¹¹⁶

While the full Canadian soldiers’ experience in the spring and summer of 1918 cannot be encapsulated in any one letter or anecdote, Cpl. Cyril Clarke’s remarkable letter to Mrs. Rose Holdsworth, the mother of Pte. Holdsworth, detailing their experiences in France from April to early August is probably as close as one can get. Written in response to the parents’ posthumous request for Cyril to share “every detail” of Aubrey’s life, the condolence letter sought to describe “the conditions under which he lived as well as how he lived.” It is a revealing document that gives a sense of life in the trenches, the philosophy of soldiers enduring the struggle on the front lines, and realities of men at war without conventional social restraints.¹¹⁷

Shortly after Aubrey joined the 38th Battalion, Corporal Clarke met him while “on a working party – trench digging. This is a very simple thing – more pick shovel work – but his manner of doing it first attracted my attention and gave me my first impression of his character – an impression which better acquaintance only served to strengthen and confirm.” Although the Third and Fourth British Armies had managed to check the German offensives on the Somme and Aisne fronts, they were waiting with anxious anticipation for “the next stroke & feverishly throwing up

defences and improving old ones wherever such work was required – and that was all along the front.” When the enemy’s attack came north of Arras, the Canadians saw “palpable evidence ... of the enemy’s advance, though we had borne no part of the blow.” Accordingly, the 38th prepared their defences. Cyril “noticed that Aubrey did rather more than his proper task & made his strip of



Trench repairs near Lens, January 1918

trench full width & depth, with a flat bottom - Things which the average soldier never does if he can possibly get out of it.” Even when soldiers were working on trenches that they expected to occupy for an extended period of time, most tried to “save half an hour’s labour at the moment” by handing the completion of any task to “two or three more working parties.” But Aubrey did the work himself, thus saving the unit the “infinite labour & fatigue which always attend the occupation of a badly constructed trench system.”¹¹⁸

“No one who has not experienced it can guess how greatly the hardships of trench life may be increased by having to carry heavy loads or move in full equipment about the trenches that are too narrow or where the footing is bad, and the dangers of a too shallow trench must be obvious even to those at home,” Cyril explained. Given this reality, he was aghast at how most members of the working party, comprised of “working men” who had spent months or even years in the trenches, took no pride or honour in their work and adopted a mantra of doing as little as possible – and even doing that badly. “Let the other fellow do it” was the prevailing mindset at the time Cyril first met Aubrey, even when everyone was “tense with dark threats.” Cyril described the soldiers’ disillusionment:

Most of us still kept repeating the old futilities which we had fallen into the habit of using as excuse to ourselves and to each other for our amazing indifference to- (for it was indifference? was it ignorance of?) what was taking place around us- ‘What is the use of it?’ ‘Where is the sense in it?’ ‘It will never be needed,’ ‘They will never attack us here.’ ‘Why can’t we be left alone in our billets when we are out of the line?’ ‘Why wasn’t this done before the _th [battalion] moved away?’ ‘The _th [battalion] never do working parties when they are out of the line.’ ‘We are only doing work for the Germans anyhow. They will take it from the __ as soon as we leave’ —and many more similar stupid thoughts expressed in language which may not be written.

Aubrey, however, never succumbed to such cynicism. “He heard it all & said very little himself,” Cyril assured the Holdsworth family, “but that little was enough to show that he was alive to the menace we were facing and to the urgent necessity for all the hard drudgery we were doing.” By casting Holdsworth as a dependable, considerate, and intelligent comrade-in-arms, Cyril imbued him with ideal soldierly and human traits that bridged the domestic and military spheres. “His questions indicated an intelligent interest in his new circumstances, & surroundings, his speech was quite free from those crudities of thought and expression which mark the conversation of soldiers in camp or in the field, and though his hands were blistered before he was through with his first work party he made no complaint.” Rather than suggesting that Holdsworth’s family could not understand his experiences on the front lines, Cyril offered examples that would be readily understood by non-combatants back home.

If war inevitably changed men, exposing the basest proclivities of some soldiers, it also offered the prospect of affirming or even revealing the virtues of others. “Soldiers are recruited from all starts & conditions of men,” Cyril reflected. “There is nothing whatever in our life at the front that makes for the cultivation of good & much that is evil.” He was dismissive of any notion that the war itself encouraged positive physical, mental, or physical growth. “Men thrown together under such circumstances released from all restraints & influences of their home life, must tend to degenerate, especially when their characters are weak or not fully formed,” Cyril explained to the Holdsworths. “Some men of strong character & well formed habits, like your son, come out of it unharmed — more than that, the resistance to the influences surrounding them may even bring to light good points that might otherwise have lain dormant or passed unnoticed.” Given what he saw in Aubrey, Cyril (as the company intelligence NCO) chose to train the newly-arrived soldier to per-



Aubrey Holdsworth

form his intelligence work in case Cyril was killed in action – a task that required “special qualities” and the utmost dependability. Aubrey “had had no experience in the trenches,” Clarke conceded, “but I expected that disadvantage to be more than balanced by his evident intelligence, his steadiness & fearlessness, for without these qualities a man may spend his whole life in the trenches and all his ‘experience’ would be worthless.”

In expounding on Aubrey’s character, Cyril also described what he saw as ideal soldierly and human traits: “He was always cool & self-possessed, his patience, fearlessness, & unselfishness were beyond praise, and he did all his work with the same careful conscientiousness that marked his trench digging.” Aubrey’s reports were always accurate, he never complained, and he always did the tasks assigned to him “cheerfully.” In his conversation and

habits, Aubrey did not resemble the men around him who seemed “incapable of speaking without using the most obscene of profanities, who drank to excessive whenever they got the chance & gloried in & boasted of these things” – and despised anyone who did not share their hedonistic tendencies. Not only did Aubrey avoid liquor entirely, but Cyril had never “heard him speak a single word which might not have been spoken aloud at any time or in any place.” Despite his admirable behaviour, “he was well liked & respected by all whom he met, regardless of their habits & predilections, for there never was a man with less of the prig about him than your own son.”

In addition to describing the social conditions that Aubrey endured on the front lines, Corporal Clarke also furnished a detailed overview of the reconnaissance and intelligence gathering activities that soldiers conducted on the battlefield. After leaving Ste. Catherine’s, the 38th Battalion had occupied the Allied trenches in front of Willenal for six days. The village of Arleux-en-Gohelle, the end of a low spur reaching into the Hindenburg Line at Quéant (twelve miles south-east of Arras), remained in the enemy’s hands a mere 500 yards away. From here the unit shifted to a reserve position at Thélus Caves, living a troglodyte existence in deep, underground passages carved into the chalky ground, Neuville St. Vaast (a small village near Arras), and Mont St. Eloi. Here Aubrey and Cyril began working together gathering intelligence (after Cyril dismissed the previous volunteer for “whimpering at having to go back to the front line”). Aubrey had been attached to a Lewis Gun section, where his NCO wanted him to remain. “The only advantage I could offer [Aubrey] was that the work with me would be interesting – which is more than can be said of the ordinary routine of trench life where one does working parties in a languid fashion one half the day & dozes or takes his turn at sentry duty during the other half, waiting – always waiting expectantly for the THING – bullet, or high explosive, or gas – that will one day put an end, in one way or another, by a wound or by sudden death, or, unhappily, sometimes by a lingering & painful one, to the dreary monotony of his squalid vigil.” Aubrey agreed, and never regretted doing so.

Oscillating between the front lines and reserve positions, Aubrey had opportunities to practice the methods of scouting and reconnaissance that Cyril taught him. “During our first occupation of the Willerval Lines the enemy delivered his attack in the Lys Valley,” which persisted for a week before the Allies checked their advance. The entire Canadian Corps then moved into quarters in villages near St. Pol, where they spent three weeks training for “open warfare.” Aubrey’s battalion then moved closer to the new German lines near Lozingham, where the soldiers continued with the same training. “Aubrey continued his own special training in addition to the general course laid down for all hands,” Cyril recalled. “It was well understood that the Canadian Corps was being held in reserve at this point to act as a counter attacking force if the enemy should attempt a further advance in a certain sector of the Lys Valley, and we had to be ready at all times to move off in battle order at a moment’s notice.” Although the Canadians were not involved in major operations, they had to remain vigilant and gather information about the terrain assigned to the various units if the Germans attacked. Accordingly, Aubrey and

Cyril spent a day at Mont Bernenchon – a small village near the La Bassée Canal – reconnoitering the terrain:

These out-of-the-line trips for training are always the most pleasant time a soldier has in France & we look forward to them & count the days that must pass before they come in much the same way that children look forward to the coming of Christmas. On these occasions we ‘train’ for a limited number of hours each day and are free to move around in the area during the remainder, though if one is going any distances he is required to have a ‘pass’. We have a chance to keep clean & are sure of a dry place to sleep in. Sports are always organized to provide interest for our spare time &, above all, we are free for the time being from the perpetual nervous strain of trench life. And this was by far the longest spell the Battalion had ever had out of the trenches. Also, it was the first time we were ‘out’ in such good weather or when the days were long; short days, cold rain or snow having spoiled, to a great extent, all our previous training periods. So that for a considerable percent of the time he was with us, Aubrey was able to enjoy as pleasant a time as a soldier on active service in France in these days could reasonably hope for.

While at Lozingham, Aubrey also managed to see his brother Milfred, whose unit was quartered at the nearby village of Ferfay. Because of censorship, however, neither brother knew exactly where the other was deployed, so they met up at Permes – an eight mile walk for each of them. The 38th then moved around from a bivouac site near Chocques, to the battered town of Bethune, then back to Lozingham, and then to the area around Écurie where Aubrey had first joined the unit. Their camp was shelled every night, Cyril reminisced, so they “usually left the huts at night & slept in the fields or in old trenches nearby.”

Although the Canadian Corps was not engaged in hard fighting, gas and explosive shells remained a regular – and deadly – feature of trench life. The diminutive 5'4¾", 113 lb. Pte. William Lossing, who had spent most of his life in Norwich before the war living with his grandfather, had enlisted with the 216th “Bantam” Battalion in Toronto in September 1916. The 19-year-old man had arrived in France that Spring. On 2 July, he sent a letter to his grandfather assuring him that he was fine and “in excellent health and enjoying military life and urged his folks not to worry.” Two weeks later, on the night of 15 July, he ventured out into No Man’s Land as part of a wiring party and was killed instantly by a rifle or machine gun bullet.¹¹⁹ In a letter of condolence, the chaplain of the 3rd Battalion described how “we buried him on the 17th of July in a British Military Cemetery behind the lines- one more cross to the many already there, which mark the graves of our brave dead, who gave their lives that our Nation and the world might be free.” It was a stock letter, but offered some reassurance to the family. “The graveyard - this bit of England and of Canada - is surrounded by quiet corn fields[,] and tall trees in regular line, guard the rods on either side,” the chaplain’s letter described, evoking a scene of peacefulness, order, and protection. “There is no sign of war excepting the [R]ed Cross flag of a nearby hospital and at night the flashes of the guns on the far horizon.”¹²⁰

The Western Front *writ large*, however, was hardly a peaceful, serene environ-

ment in the summer of 1918. During their Spring Offensive, the Germans had captured 250,000 Allied prisoners and inflicted more than one million casualties. Allied morale did not collapse, however, and the Germans failed to force armistice negotiations as their high command had anticipated. Despite initial German success during the *Friedensturm* (Peace Offensive) launched on 15 July, which attempted to break the French army north of Paris, the overextended and exhausted German armies soon ground to a halt. The Ludendorff Offensive failed to achieve a decisive victory, and the badly depleted and exhausted German forces found themselves in exposed positions owing to the ground that they had taken. Under Marshal Ferdinand Foch's command, the battered but unbroken Allied armies began to turn the table, with a combined French and American force seizing the initiative in a counteroffensive launched on 18 July. In what became known as the Second Battle of the Marne, the Allies achieved an important victory over the battle-weary Germans who tried in vain to defend shallow, hastily-prepared positions.¹²¹

With Allied morale bolstered by the strategic gains on the Marne that ended a string of German victories, Haig's headquarters notified the Canadian Corps, then in the line near Arras, to prepare for offensive operations around Amiens. "The Canadians, who had not fought in a major battle since Passchendaele, eight months before, were as fresh as any formation on the Western Front could be," historian Terry Copp observed. While the British Expeditionary Force had sustained hundreds of thousands of casualties during the Spring Offensives, the Canadian Corps was strong and intact. Its battalions and units built back up to full strength, integrating fresh reinforcements from the broken-up 5th Division and the more than 10,000 conscripts who entered the reinforcement stream in early 1918.¹²² Together they would spearhead the allied offensive in the last months of the war.

Twenty-two-year-old Lieut. John Rock, who had been born and raised in Rock's Mills in South Norwich, was a physician at a tuberculosis sanatorium in Detroit, Michigan, when he decided to join the U.S. Army as a medical officer in 1918. "I am getting settled into military life pretty fast," he wrote to his parents from a training camp in South Carolina that June. "It is a big game of men, and one has a whole lot to learn and has to learn it quickly." His description of the military machine, while gleaned from his experience in the American army, offered poignant insight into national needs trumping individual freedoms:

The military game ... requires a lot of study and experience. It is a class or station of life wholly different from civil life. It is a co-coordinated whole, with one object. Each individual is but a drop in the bucket, not a law unto himself as in civil life, where an individual has but one object – the success of himself or family. In this life it is the success of a nation and in this war the freedom of mankind. Each individual realizes that he is but a very small unit in a colossal machine, and each unit indispensable to the success of the whole. Of course units have to be replaced and the machine kept in operation.

Drawing an assessment of his birth country, Rock asserted that "conscription, etc., in Canada, is necessary to keep her machine in operation." After building up an "intensive organization" over more than three years, he emphasized that the Canadian

Corps must “be kept up to a standard or it is a weak and almost useless machine.” He also observed that war was a great leveller. “In this war we have millionaires as privates, because they have no training to make them more valuable to another place in the machine,” he explained.¹²³ Everyone had their prescribed role to play.

Many of the raw conscripts drafted in the spring of 1918 would be rushed to the battlefield to replace the casualties taken by the Canadian Corps in the months that followed. They would be essential to keep the military machine running efficiently. Some of these young and hastily-trained soldiers came from the farms and fields of East Oxford, North Norwich, and South Norwich. They played an important part in Canada’s final battlefield successes and, as historian Patrick Dennis has highlighted, the majority “performed their duties in a resolute and courageous manner.”¹²⁴ Looking back after forty years of studying conscription in Canada, J.L. Granatstein concluded that:

What we do know is that if the war had continued into 1919, as most Allied government and military leaders expected, the 100,000 conscripts Borden’s Military Service Act raised would certainly have been sufficient to keep the Canadian Corp’s division up to strength for that year. Politically divisive it most certainly was for a generation and more afterwards, but compulsory service had generated reinforcements when the voluntary system had broken down. Those reinforcements kept units up to strength, allowed the Canadian Corps to function with great effectiveness and efficiency in the final decisive battles of the Great War, and helped to minimize casualties.¹²⁵

Notes

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3 “A Happy New Year by Rev. Lawrence Sinclair,” *Norwich Gazette*, 10 January 1918.

4 “Bad to Worse,” *Norwich Gazette*, 10 January 1918.

5 “Town Talk,” *Norwich Gazette*, 10 January 1918. On the movement for church union in Canada, see Ernest Thomas, “Church Union in Canada,” *American Journal of Theology* 23, no. 3 (1919): 257-273; Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada, 1914-28* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971); N. Keith Clifford, *The Resistance to Church Union in Canada, 1904-1939* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1985); John S. Moir, *Enduring Witness: A History of the Presbyterian Church in Canada* (Toronto: Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1987); and David B. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

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16 Dennis, *Reluctant Warriors*, 53-54.

17 Patrick Dennis, “A Canadian Conscript Goes to War – August 1918: Old Myths Re-examined,” *Canadian Military History* 18, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 23, 25.

18 Soldier file, Bowerman, John William, 3314273, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 953 – 1.

19 Dennis, *Reluctant Warriors*, 222-23.

20 On rejected soldiers, see Nic Clarke, *Unwanted Warriors: Rejected Volunteers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015).

21 Fred Furlong to his Mother, 12 March 1918, authors’ collection.

22 Fred Furlong to his Mother, 17 March 1918, authors’ collection.

23 1901 census, Oxford South, Norwich, p.5, <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/census/1901/Pages/1901.aspx>; 1911 Census, Oxford South, Norwich, p.5, <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/census/1911/Pages/1911.aspx>.

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31 Capt. S.G. Bennett, *The 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles 1914-1919* (Toronto: Murray, 1926), 99.

32 “A.F.W.3121. 7-3-18, Bar to Military Medal, Dougherty, Clarence Darcy (401754), 4th C.M.R.,” *London Gazette* no. 30652, 25 April 1918. Reproduced on Great War Centenary Association, “Clarence Darcy Dougherty MM,” <http://www.doingourbit.ca/profile/clarence-dougherty-mm>. On the tools and techniques of raiding at this time, see Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare*, 172-73.

33 “Major Sneath Killed in Action,” *Norwich Gazette*, 28 March 1918 [reprinted from *Woodstock Sentinel-Review*].

34 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles War Diary, “Summary of Operations,” 15 March 1918, 1, and 17 March 1918, 14-15.

- 35 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 339.
- 36 Cook, *Shock Troops*, 375. Canadian cavalry brigades helped to fill in the Allied line, fighting fiercely at places such as Moreuil Wood, while machine gunners and railway troops dispersed to help check the enemy's advance.
- 37 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 379-81.
- 38 Schreiber gives a comprehensive discussion in his work, *Shock Army*, chapter 2, describing the organization and the changes to it.
- 39 "First Furlough for Men of the 1st Contingent," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 16 February 1918. Historian Barbara Wilson describes how the furlough of wounded vets from the first contingent was the result of a campaign by Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire (IODE) "to maintain the morale of the Canadian people." In the wake of conscription, Prime Minister Borden became convinced that a concession was needed to "appease public opinion, relieve tension," and prove "that the government at least is sympathetic" to soldiers who had been in the field for years. Wilson, *Ontario and the First World War 1914-1918* (Toronto: Champlain Society / University of Toronto Press, 1977), lxvii.
- 40 "To Demobilize 20,000 this Spring," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 13 March 1918.
- 41 "Committee to Deal with Problems of Returned Soldiers," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 7 February 1918; and "How Broken Soldiers are Fitted to Meet Life Again," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 18 February 1918.
- 42 "Milldale," *Norwich Gazette*, 22 February 1917.
- 43 "A Good Chance" *Norwich Gazette*, 21 March 1918.
- 44 E. Dewitt Hutt, "Caring for Soldiers Returning to Canada," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 9 March 1918.
- 45 "Otterville," *Norwich Gazette*, 4 April 1918.
- 46 Soldier file, Innis, Harold, 339852, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 4702 – 21.
- 47 "Say Roe Oatman is sure doing his bit isn't he this will be the third time for him. There aren't many go back as often as that." Fred Furlong letter, 31 March 1917, authors' collection; soldier file, Oatman, Arthur Monroe, 925520, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 7396 – 37.
- 48 Dr. Arthur F. Hurst, a British doctor who wrote *Medical Disease of the War* in 1918, was puzzled. "There is something about the conditions of life of the soldier as distinct from the civilian, which makes him especially liable to the disease," he wrote - a disease that struck down neither officers nor refugees living in the midst of soldiers but that could devastate previously healthy soldiers. In his opinion, "owing to the danger of relapse on exposure to the hardships inseparable from active service, a man who once suffered from acute nephritis should never return to more than light duty at home." Hurst, *Medical Diseases of the War* (London: E. Arnold, 1918), 296-306.
- 49 "Western Ontario Happenings: To Go on Farms," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 14 February 1918; and "Girls Prepare For Farm Work," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 26 February 1918.
- 50 "Returned Men for the Farm," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 14 February 1918.
- 51 "Ontario Govt. Outlines Settlement Scheme," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 7 February 1918.
- 52 "Plans to Help Returned Men," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 9 March 1918.
- 53 William J. Buxton, Michael Cheney, and Paul Heyer, eds., *Harold Innis Reflects: Memoir and WWI Writings/Correspondence* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 175.
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11 “Many Deaths - at Home and on the Field of Battle”

The Hundred Days, Influenza, and the End of the War

“Many Deaths - at Home and on the Field of Battle”

-Headline, Norwich Gazette, 31 October 1918

Cpl. Cyril Clarke, Pte. Aubrey Holdsworth, and the rest of the 38th Battalion spent the latter half of July 1918 in trenches along the Scarpe River near Arras. “All kinds of reports were current here,” Cyril recalled in a detailed letter to Aubrey’s parents. “Everyone seemed to expect something though none knew exactly what was coming.” The unit was shuttled by train through Arras to Mont St Eloi, then marched in a downpour of rain the next morning “to a point where a seemingly interminable line of motor lorries were drawn up.” They bounced from village to town to village, receiving “strict orders to keep off the roads & show our selves as little as possible.”¹

The experience of the 38th Battalion differed in specific details from the other units of the Canadian Corps, but it conformed to a broader pattern. German intelligence officers watched movements of the Corps closely, considering it an elite formation whose disposition would indicate the probability of an imminent attack. Accordingly, Currie kept nearly everyone around him in the dark about his intentions and set in motion an elaborate planning sequence for a corps-level attack on Orange Hill east of Arras, only telling his divisional commanders of their real objectives and attack area near Amiens at the last moment. Over the span of a week, the various elements of the Corps moved 60 km south from Arras to the Amiens area by road, rail, and marching at night, remaining hidden during the day to preserve operational secrecy.² “We left Heucourt on the second night after our arrival there & halted before dawn at another village where we rested during the day & continued our march at night,” Cpl. Clarke recalled:

Moving in this manner, after one more halt we arrived early in the morning of Aug 7th at a large woods on the River Luce, which we found crammed full of troops, the whole Canadian Corps being assembled there as well as numbers of French & Australians. All day long the roads were crowded with traffic of every description & it was evident to most of us that we must strike soon or be struck, though only those that planned it knew how soon it would be. Between 9 & 10 in the morning we were electrified by the arrival of battle orders! We were moving that night to the assembly point at the village of Gentilles and the attack would be delivered at 4:30 next morning. The open warfare training at which our grumblers had lately been scoffing at so loudly was about to be put to the test.



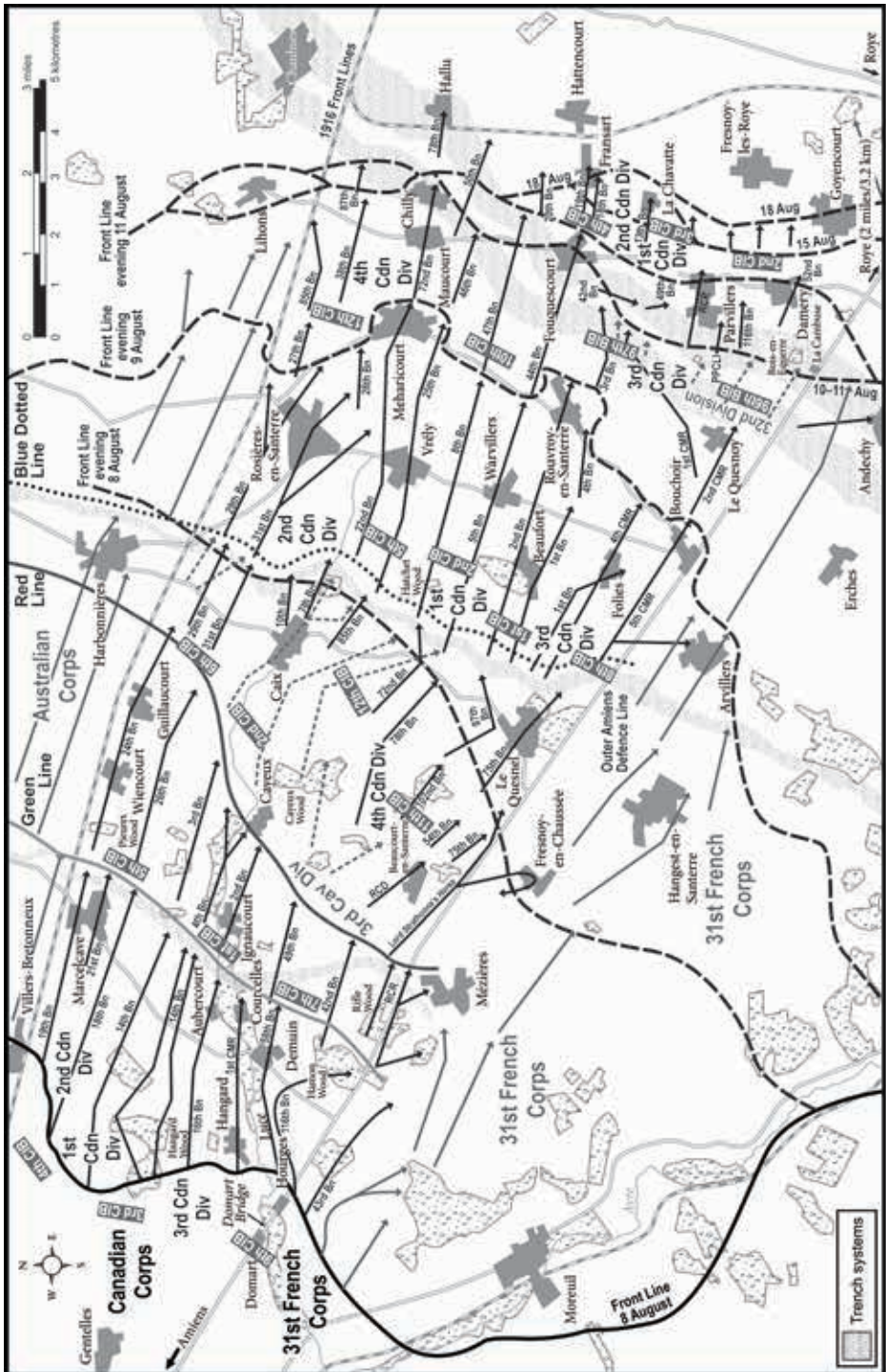
Motorized vehicles from the latter stages of the Great War

Having received formal orders from the company commander later that afternoon, Cyril and Aubrey went to the lines in front of Gentelles to discern first-hand the nature of the ground. “By the time we reached Gentelles it was too dark & foggy to see anything at all,” Cyril recalled, “& having had an eight mile walk with no results to show we returned to the woods to find that the battalion had marched.” In the pitch dark conditions, the two men became separated until four o’clock the next morning. They were awestruck by what they saw as they followed the road to the Gentelles through a small town on the Luce River. “For more than a mile before we entered this town the road was completely blocked by an amazing assemblage of every imaginable implement of war, every kind of vehicle & every branch of the service,” Cyril remembered vividly:

A tank & a mud-bespattered three ton lorry would have a glittering automobile sandwiched in between them with a heavy gun in front & [a Royal Army Medical Corps] limber in the rear. Mounted men were wedged in promiscuously throughout this mass, small bodies of infantry were caught in it & stood helpless where they were, unable to go ahead or to extricate themselves. Individuals, like Aubrey & myself who traversed it within an hour of each other, wiggled about here and there. Now & then a voice would shout out ... in the darkness ... directions to someone in French or English. What a chance the German gunners missed! But long before dawn came this seeming chaos had dissolved & each individual in it had reached his appointed place & lay waiting for the signal that would let loose an overwhelming storm on the enemy who were waiting in apparent ignorance of what was in store for them that day....³

Amiens

On the misty morning of 8 August 1918, the Canadian Corps, deployed alongside Australian and British formations, spearheaded an attack on an important salient near Amiens. All of the preparations for the battle were carried out at night to preserve operational surprise, and there was no preliminary bombardment to



Battle of Amiens, 8-18 August 1918

warn the enemy of impending action. At 04:20 a.m., supported by British tanks and following a massive artillery barrage, the lead units of three Canadian divisions began their advance on the German lines. The plan was to overwhelm the enemy “by means of maximum violence, manoeuvre and infiltration in whatever mix was necessary tactically,” a staff study explained. The battle of Amiens would contain many hallmarks of what the Germans would call *Blitzkrieg* (or lightning war) during the Second World War, using mobile forces and concentrated firepower to shock and overpower enemy forces. The critical factor was coordination. At Amiens, Allied air squadrons observed what transpired on the ground and provided close air support to infantry and artillery units. Tanks destroyed wire obstacles and enemy strong points, as well as quickly moving forward infantry, machine guns, and logistic lines. Motor machine gun batteries, cyclist units, trench mortars on trucks, and horsed cavalry moved quickly along the south flank, probing and plugging gaps in the front. These innovative tactics proved so successful that 8 April soon became known as the “black day” of the German army.⁴ By the end of the first day, the Corps had advanced eight miles – a staggering number in a war in which gains had been typically measured in yards – and killed, wounded, or captured about 27,000 enemy troops. This dramatic victory came at the price of about 4,000 Canadian casualties. “High as that was,” historian J.L. Granatstein observed, “the gains and the sharp shock dealt to the enemy made it all worthwhile.”⁵

For the soldiers on the ground, the objectives were narrower than they were for the strategists in army, corps, and divisional headquarters. Pte. Bruce Edwards, who had been a clerk at C.G. Hulet’s store and enlisted earlier in the war with the 71st in Norwich,⁶ had taken charge of 4th platoon of the 102nd Battalion in March. His extensive battle experience and “ability as a Lewis Machine Gunner rendered him invaluable in training the new drafts which reached the Bttn at that time,” one of his comrades noted.⁷ His unit had reached their assembly point behind Gentelles



Tanks advancing down Amiens-Roye Road, Amiens, August 1918

Wood just after midnight on 8 August, where they rested for a few hours before launching into action. Edwards, like the others, was anxious to put into practice the open warfare tactics that they had been exercising throughout the late spring and summer. At 12:10 p.m., the 102nd mounted a successful attack on the Sunken Road, and took the objective in the next three hours without serious difficulty. Edwards’ company then



Wounded Canadians after the battle at Amiens

pressed the attack to the second objective: the forward edge of Beaucourt Wood. As they approached the wood, the war diary recounts, they “came under terrific machine gun and trench mortar fire” and had to await the arrival of two tanks that had been unable to keep up with the rapid advance. Sections rushed forward under covering fire and, when they got to within 50 yards, they charged and captured the edge of the Wood. Edwards was hit by a machine gun bullet and died instantly – one of nineteen men killed during the assault (with another 92 wounded).⁸

The next day, the Corps committed 4th Canadian Division and 32nd British Division to press on with the attack. Thirty-one-year-old Pte. Ernest Cox, a British-born labourer who lived in East Oxford and enlisted with the 168th, was killed in action with the 1st Battalion at Boves Wood when he was hit by enemy artillery while on water detail.⁹ By the third day of the offensive, the forward troops began to encounter stiffer resistance, leading to another 2500 casualties. For Pte. Aubrey Holdsworth, undertaking dangerous reconnaissance work with the 38th Battalion, the counter attack proved fatal. Infantry in his unit (in cooperation with Whippet tanks and cavalry) had captured and held Cayeux Wood on 9 August before advancing to the western outskirts of Rosières. They launched their attack on the village the following afternoon, with the 38th pushing forward to help the 85th Battalion achieve its objectives when the latter came under intense machine gun and artillery fire. They managed to secure their objectives in the face of fierce opposition and, fearing that their left flank was exposed, received orders to reorganize and push forward to link up with the neighbouring battalions to consolidate a continuous line from Hallu to the Amiens-Nesle railway. It was a costly move.¹⁰ “While acting as a scout and advancing ahead of his company through Rossiere [*sic*] towards Hallu,” Holdsworth’s official death notice recounted, “he was struck in the temple and instantly killed by a bullet from an enemy sniper’s rifle.”¹¹ It was an abrupt end to a life of great promise. No more letters to Pauline or his family would flow from Aubrey’s pen. Holdsworth’s letters detailing his last few days of life are now lost, but he had retained his optimism and faith to the end. “It is unfortunate that except in the



Aubrey Holdsworth

case of [officers commanding,] those who fall in action are not even mentioned for their service,” Holdsworth’s friend Cpl. Cyril Clarke lamented to his family. “Had he lived a little longer he would certainly have received the recognition which he had undoubtedly earned.”¹²

While Holdsworth and the other ordinary infantrymen who fought the battles did not receive recognition commensurate to their ultimate sacrifice in Clarke’s view, the Canadian Corps certainly consolidated its reputation as a formidable fighting formation. General Arthur Currie, always predisposed to expend shells rather than men, received approval from the Allied high command to halt the offensive and

prepare for a set-piece attack – a deliberate, closely-timed attack under the cover of an intense rolling artillery barrage. By 12 August, the broader Allied offensive had lost momentum across the front after a gain of about 14 miles. Over the course of the following week, the Amiens front was dominated by localized fighting aimed at establishing a new front line, bring more casualties (including Pte. Ernest Vigar of Norwich).¹³ Haig agreed to break off the attack on 19 August, and the Canadian Corps moved north to the familiar area of Arras for their next operations.

Pte. Stanley Vanderburgh, the druggist from Norwich, managed to avoid the battles as he proceeded from hospital to rejoin the 28th Battalion on the front lines. His letter to his mother on 1 September noted, in a vague and general way, that “a lot has happened” and “it took us some little time to realize just how big a show was on.” After treatment for venereal disease in July 1918 (which he did not disclose to his family), he claimed to “have lost my battalion temporarily,” but as he made his way through the “innumerable towns” of the French countryside he regularly encountered the distinctive colours of his brigade and “frequently had short conversations with wounded boys I knew and every now and again a familiar voice would hail me.” He reassured his mother that his accommodations had been comfortable, and recounted finding an abandoned German package for one of the enemy soldiers that, when opened, contained four potatoes. Stanley found it peculiar – and a striking contrast to the treats that the women’s patriotic societies back home sent to him and his Canadian mates overseas.

“At a time when the whole scheme of things seems to be a chaos of pain and destruction it is peculiar what strange part ones memories and emotions play,” Stanley told his mother. He shared:

a little incident that impressed me as about the strangest yet sweetest thing that could have occurred under like conditions. One evening while going into a village with jaded nerves and weary legs I chanced to past an old cathedral with every mark of war upon it. Every few feet the walls were broken in and entirely gone and the images nearly all demolished. As I drew near,

impressed by the scene, I heard music. At first I could scarcely believe my ears, but a strange sense of familiarity took possession of me and actual music was peeling forth. Words which seemed very suitable started roaming through my mind. The music was real, and I supplied the words: Lord, kindly light amid the encircling doom. Lead Thou me on, the night is dark, and I am far from home; Lead Thou me on.¹⁴ On investigation, I found the organ to be in almost perfect repair and the organist – one of our own boys. He confessed to having played in some of the largest churches in the world. We had lots of music after that.

A few days later, a family of French civilians learning the town was retaken came to look at their home. It was my duty to escort them out of the place. As we passed the church an old lady asked permission to go in. I went in with them and one of our officers was sitting at the organ. He played for them and it was touching to see them all perform their devotions in so sorry a place. When we came out the old lady showed me her home across the street. It had been lovely once – but is a mass of ruin now. In the cemetery and cathedral some dastardly outrages had been perpetrated. I knew sufficient French to make her understand that it was the Germans – and not our Canadian boys.

Amidst the carnage, men like Vanderburgh retained a strong sense of humanity and empathy for the innocent civilians who found themselves ensnared in the

ravages of war. “For myself you must not worry,” he reassured his mother. “About the worst I have experienced in this push so far, is a headache, and a good sleep will put that right.”¹⁵

In hindsight, the Battle of Amiens marked the beginning of the Hundred Days, the final Allied thrust that culminated in the signing of the Armistice ending the war on 11 November 1918. Amiens was a significant bookend, representing how much the Corps had honed its operational and tactical capabilities over the preceding year. Headquarters demonstrated innovation, superb command and control, and a realistic appraisal of operations. To beat modern German defensive systems, “the infantry had been trained to be more self-reliant, engineering and machine-gun policies had been devised which did not draw strength away from the infantry, and finally, elements of German tactics had been incorporated into training,” historian Ian Brown summa-



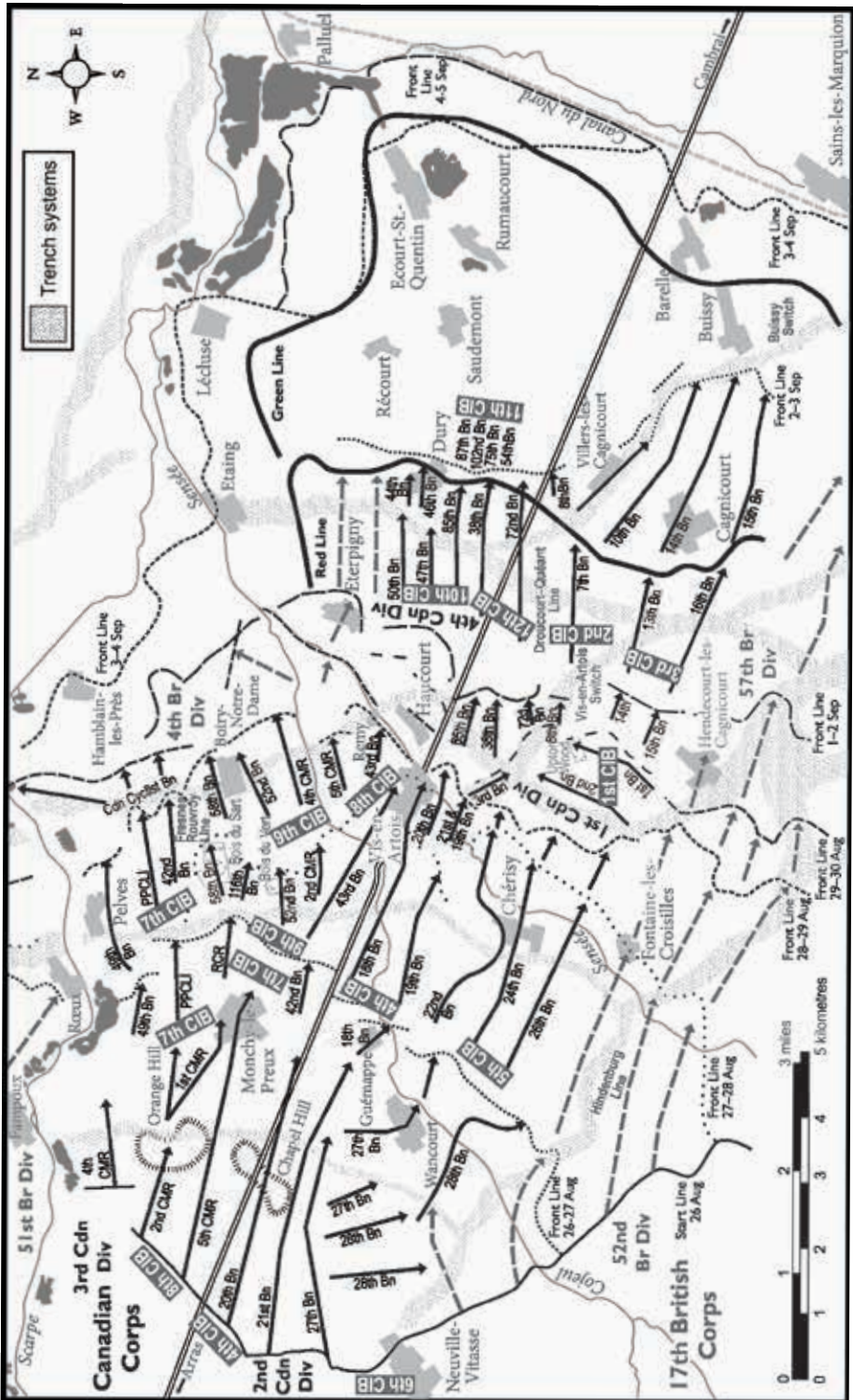
Canadians passing through a ruined church in Cambrai, 9 October 1918

rized. "These all combined to give the infantry more striking power in 1918 both on its own and when supported by machine-gunners, because it was familiar with the changes and could thus utilize them effectively."¹⁶ The soldiers, artillerymen, engineers, pilots, tank drivers, and airmen fought as part of an efficient team that was proving more than a sum of its individual parts. "Using armour, indirect fire, air support, deception measures, and chemical warfare," Granatstein summarized, "the Canadians had begun to fight a war of movement that looked very much like a modern battlefield."¹⁷

For Canadian volunteers waiting in England, the Amiens breakthrough generated confidence and excitement. "I would like very much to get up where the war is," Captain Charles Elias Frain, a physician overseas, wrote to his father in Norwich. "I'm told we are winning it in large chunks just now and everywhere we hear of the wonderful feats of the Canadians. The best fighting and best organized, trained and disciplined divisions in the whole British army. That's the reputation they get over here by unbiased observers. The French call them 'Foch's pets,' and it is not enough to be 50 miles behind the line where all these doings are going on." The doctor was excited that his "turn is about due now,"¹⁸ and he knew that, after the breakthrough at Amiens, the Corps would not be allowed to rest on its laurels. Almost immediately it received orders to return to its previous sector near Arras and turn its attention to German defences to the east. Incredibly, by 26 August it had completed the move, changed its command back to First Army, and initiated operations along the Arras-Cambrai road. During the battle of the Scarpe, part of the Second Arras offensive, the Canadians were given the difficult task of cracking the Hindenburg Line – Germany's main line of defence.

Cracking the Drocourt-Quéant Line

The vaunted Hindenburg Line, a defensive belt of trenches, wire and obstacles that the Germans had constructed earlier in the war, was central to their defences. Its capture would expose the city of Cambrai, a vital communications centre, and force the Germans to fall back on a wide front and fight on ground that they had not prepared to defend. Given their long occupation, historian D.J. Goodspeed explained, "the defences facing the Canadians were at least as strong as any on the entire Western Front." Currie's plan for 26 August was to break through the Hindenburg Line along the Arras-Cambrai road at a part of the defensive positions called the Drocourt-Quéant Switch, a series of trenches and wire obstacles often hundreds of metres in width. To reach the main German position, however, the Canadians first had to capture three enemy-controlled high features. "Directly ahead of them the town of Monchy-le-Preux stood on high ground, guarded by advanced positions on Orange Hill and Chapel Hill," Goodspeed described. "Behind Monchy was the Fresnes-Rouvroy Line, and behind this again ... lay the immensely strong Drocourt-Quéant Line, consisting of well-dug front and support trenches, protected by great belts of new barbed wire that glinted with an ominous blue sheen in the August sunlight."¹⁹ There was no chance for surprise, as the enemy expected an attack. Cracking the line would require "successive, frontal, grinding assaults



Arras, 26 August-5 September 1918

against well-established lines manned by tenacious, alert troops.”²⁰ Previous Allied armies had suffered heavy losses trying to take these positions. “However, the four Canadian divisions were by now composed very largely of veterans who had a long record of unbroken success to their credit,” Goodspeed observed. “Morale was as high as ever and confidence much higher, for after Amiens the Canadians realized that the enemy was near to breaking.”²¹

Between August 26 and September 2, in bitter and continuous fighting, the Canadian Corps launched successive attacks that broke through the German defences. Against the advice of some senior British staff officers, Currie decided to launch a night attack beginning at 03:00 on 26 August under a massive artillery barrage. While most Canadian operations had adopted “bite and hold” tactics, this time the Canadian troops were ordered to “push on” using narrow frontages, leapfrogging brigades one after the other, with lead elements proceeding to “roll up” enemy positions once they had been pierced. The innovative artillery barrage succeeded in cutting most of the German wire, tanks rolled over that which remained, and Canadian infantry found German front trenches choked with dead. By nightfall the Canadian Corps had punched through some of the most heavily fortified positions on the Western Front, captured the three high features, and advanced six kilometres before they outran the edge of Allied artillery coverage. They had yet to reach the Drocourt-Quéant Line, however, and vicious fighting – often at close quarters – continued over the next two days. Fresh brigades tried to break through the Fresnes-Rouvroy Line, but the Canadians halted when their attacks yielded mixed results. “Fighting through a maze of trenches, uncut barbed wire, and hundreds of machine-gun nests, the Canadians had clawed their way forward 8 kilometres all along the front through three days of brutal fighting,” historian Tim Cook summarized. They had shattered several German divisions, taken 3300 prisoners, and killed countless enemy soldiers. “Indeed, the Canadians had pounded the Germans, but they had paid for it on the most intense battlefield in the history of the corps,” Cook noted. “And still they faced the imposing Drocourt-Quéant Line.”²²



A portion of the Hindenburg Line - a huge mass of barbed wire

The vicious combat called on experienced Canadian soldiers to demonstrate their leadership and valour in the field. East Oxford native Sgt. Douglas Schell had been fighting in France with the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI) since July 1916.²³ Promoted to sergeant in May 1918, he led his platoon in fierce action at Parvillers during the Amiens battle, fending off desperate German counterattacks until the town was eventually secured. When the PPCLI shifted to Arras to smash the Drocourt-Quéant Line with the rest of the Corps, Sergeant Schell and his comrades were given the task of clearing the village of Pelves and Jigsaw Wood two kilometres beyond it. Under heavy bombardment, the Patricias sustained nearly two hundred casualties in achieving their objectives,²⁴ and Schell would earn a Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM) for his actions from 26-28 August 1918. His citation explained that:

when all the officers of his company had become casualties, he assumed command, and in an extremely gallant and capable manner continued to lead the men on, under very heavy fire. His good judgment in handling the company and his personal example of indifference to the enemy fire rallied the men at a very critical moment. He carried on until an officer was sent forward to take command. At all times he showed such a disregard for danger in carrying out his duty that he was an inspiring example to the men and assisted greatly in the success of the operations.²⁵

Such leadership and inspiration was needed at all levels. Lt.-Col. Donald Matheson Sutherland, who had taken command of the 52nd Battalion at the end of April 1918, was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) "for conspicuous gallantry in action near Bois-de-Vert [on] 27/28th August 1918, when he handled his Battalion with great tactical ability." The woods were situated on a commanding hill, and Sutherland – from his battalion headquarters in an old German dugout in Morocco trench – ordered an early morning attack with enveloping manoeuvres by companies on both sides of the objective. Just as his assaulting infantry set off, the commanding officer learned that the promised tank support had been delayed. Furthermore, a delay in the adjacent 2nd Division attack left his battalion's right flank exposed, and Sutherland wisely moved up his support company to form a defensive flank. Once they took the Bois de Vert, his forces consolidated their positions, repelled German counterattacks, and awaited their next move – an attack on Artillery Hill and Boiry on 28 August. Lt.-Col. Sutherland personally visited each of his company commanders to explain what was needed. His troops were "extremely exhausted," having had little sleep before or after the previous day's action which had required three moves. "Subsequent to the first attack which was in itself a very trying experience," a war diary narrative described, "they had been shelled very heavily all day, and secured very little or no rest, so that physically they were in very poor shape." They were also weak in numbers, with only 220 men in the battalion available for the attack. Sutherland adjusted his orders and directed his companies to press forward, south of the village of Boiry, to outflank the Germans and clear the town. By the time the 59th Battalion, following "close on the heels" of the 52nd, leapfrogged ahead to attack Artillery Hill, the four companies in Sutherland's



Norman Forman

52nd had been reduced to 100 men. Sutherland's DSO citation noted that "his personal courage and leadership were largely responsible for the success of the operation, at a time when casualties were severe and enemy opposition was most stubborn."²⁶

The Canadian fighting divisions suffered crippling casualties – just over 5800 men – in the fighting from 26-28 August. Pte. Norman Forman, who lived on a farm between Springford and Ostrander, wrote to his mother soon after the battle from a hospital bed in England. A 21-year-old farmer who had worked for Fred Cornell at the local cheese factory, Norman enlisted in Tillsonburg with "C" Company of the 168th Battalion in January 1916, along with many of the other boys from the area. When the 168th was broken up, he moved to the 21st Battalion, just prior to the Vimy Battle.²⁷ He sustained a gunshot wound to his left arm in August 1917, but was back in the field two days later. A year later, during the battle for Monchy-le-Preux on 27 August 1918, a machine gun bullet shattered the tibia in his left leg:

I was on a message when I got hit; Frank Clarke from Ingersoll was with me. It was when we advanced in front of Arras, it was our third day 'over,' hard running, and we had to go up to find the scout officer in the front line, which was an old sunken road. There had been a lot of snipers and several Fritzie machine guns and the crew, missed while going over, and we had to cross over the top and they got us with a machine gun. I do not know where the other lad is now but he had got ahead of me on the way out, as he could walk all right, and I had to hobble along with the aid of a couple of sticks but I got out all right. It was on the afternoon of August 27th when I got it. You remember me saying that our Colonel was killed. Well it was up in front of Amiens. I think you will have read of that battle that we were in; it was not so bad as this one was. We have had a lot of casualties in this scrap. I think there was only one officer left and two sergeants, and I don't know how many men.

In his report home, he downplayed the severity of his injury. "It is not a bad wound by any means, but it will hold me here for a while," he explained from hospital.²⁸ He would recover but never return to action.

Not all were so fortunate.²⁹ Twenty-eight-year-old Pte. Hubert Coles, a farmer born in England, also had enlisted with the 168th in Norwich in January 1916. He had been promoted to acting corporal later that year while in England, but was quickly demoted to the "permanent grade" of private for showing up improperly dressed and dirty for guard duty. Drafted into the 2nd (Eastern Ontario) Battalion soon after the Vimy battle, within two weeks of arriving in France he was shot in the left forearm during the battle of Fresnoy. The wound healed that summer, and he returned to his unit.³⁰ On 31 August 1918, he was killed in action while advancing with his battalion on Upton Wood.³¹ When the news arrived home, the *Norwich Gazette* assured his widow Edith,



Hubert Coles

who lived on Albert St. in Norwich, that she had the “sympathy of whole community.” Her husband had died in the “great drive on the Western front” and had “so valiantly conducted himself on the field of battle and so nobly died for the cause of right and justice.”³² Rev. T.E. Holland of the Norwich Anglican Church also “spoke in most beautiful terms of the manliness of the fallen hero,” praising his courage and selflessness – and asking others to emulate the same virtues.³³

For the Canadian soldiers who remained in fighting form, the “great drive” was far from over – and, after the gains over the previous week, there was no time to rest or to prepare methodically for the battle. With the Drocourt-Quéant (D-Q) Line in sight, the Canadians launched the next phase of the attack on 1 September. The German line was powerfully built, fully manned, and well organized, with abundant concrete shelters, machine gun posts, and dense masses of barbed wire, as was the Buissey Switch that connected it to the Hindenburg support system. It was also laid out to provide good fields of fire against attacking troops. The Canadians would have to capture both the village of Dury (which was built into the D-Q line) and cross Mont Dury, where they would be exposed to machine gun fire from its forward slopes and defences-in-depth on its crest and rear slope, as well as high explosives and shrapnel from German field artillery further back. Currie’s plan was to break the German line at the Arras-Cambrai road, then swing to the south and north to roll up the German defences.³⁴ The Canadian artillery faced such difficulties cutting the enemy’s barbed wire that the Corps postponed its offensive by twenty-four hours, and at 05:00 on 2 September three Canadian divisions pushed forward under the cover of one of the Corp’s trademark rolling barrages – this one with 762 artillery pieces, the largest number to support a solo Canadian Corps operation during the war. It was “a masterful piece of planning,” historian Shane Schreiber observed, that was intricately planned and well executed.³⁵ The fighting was bitter and casualties high, but the Canadians grimly pushed on and captured the Bussy Switch and overran the D-Q Line on a frontage of seven thousand yards. The outflanked enemy withdrew behind the Canal du Nord on the night of 2-3 September and blew the bridges.

In achieving these gains, historian Tim Cook noted, the Canadians “were bombarded mercilessly by enemy shellfire and raked by machine guns that caused terrible casualties.”³⁶ The sheer volume of losses can conceal the individual sacrifice that each fallen soldier represented. Pte. Leroy Buck, born in Norwich and raised there until the age of ten,³⁷ had enlisted underage as a 16-year-old high school student in February 1916, falsely claiming that he had been born in 1898 (not 1900) and was eighteen.³⁸ He was serving as a company runner with the 2nd Battalion during the attack on Buissey Switch on 2 September when he was killed in action. Soon after, his mother Annie received a letter from his pal Art Clark, a signaller in his unit. “Tim,” as Leroy was nicknamed, “was a good boy and had good nerve,” Clark offered. “He wasn’t the least bit afraid, while in the line and I expect to see a medal presented for the way he carried on under shell and machine gun fire. He was killed while doing his duty, taking a message to headquarters and I think he was hit by a machine gun bullet.” Reassuring the bereaved mother that her son had been

surrounded by friends, Clark explained that “Tim” had been “a favourite in the company and they all miss him.” Captain Smith, his company commander in the 156th, concurred that he had been “one of our brightest soldiers” and “was a good clean boy, very popular with officers and men.” He did not suffer, but was “instantly killed during the execution of his task.” Sergeant Major W.C. Jack offered similar condolences. “It will be with some satisfaction to you Mrs. Buck to know that Tim was recommended for gallantry during the two days of the battle of Amiens,” he explained. “Tim died a brave soldier; doing his duty to the last in what has proved to be Canada’s greatest fight for victory.”³⁹

German machine guns inflicted horrendous casualties on the Canadian Corps during the Hundred Days. Pte. Percy “Roy” Leroy Marr, the farmer son of William and Jessie Marr of Milldale, was a seasoned soldier who had fought with the 44th Battalion since joining it on the Somme in 1916.⁴⁰ Now part of the Canadians’ assault on the D-Q Line on 2 September, he passed with his platoon through the town of Dury under heavy shellfire, where all of the officers and nearly all of the NCOs became casualties, and then battled with the Germans in the trenches. The following day, in the heat of battle while helping to consolidate the ground that they had gained under intense enemy fire,⁴¹ he was shot in the right shoulder. Captain D.M. Marshall, his company commander, wrote to his parents on 8 September to report on his injuries and to applaud his contributions. “Just to put you at your ease at once, I will say it was only a slight wound in the shoulder,” Marshall explained. “I know because I tied him up myself and he went out immediately.” He had fought valiantly in intense, even brutal, conditions. “He certainly deserves a rest because he has been with me through thick and thin and I certainly appreciate the work he has done for me,” the officer extolled. “We had, in our show, a particular dirty



Guns captured at Arras, September 1918

piece of work to do. First crossing from one trench to another about 300 yds. Swept by machine gun fire and later when we arrived we were subjected to a very heavy bombardment in which my company suffered rather heavily.” For Roy’s actions, Capt. Marshall recommended him for a Military Medal and passed along a copy of the commendation letter:

Pte. Marr, P.L. 126842:- When all officers and most of senior N.C.O.’s were casualties he gave valuable help to Company Commander in the control of the company. Carried on for some time after being wounded. Showed good example to the men when under heavy M.G. fire. Note - Above man has been with his unit since it came to front and has taken part in the following operations: the Somme Oct ’16, Vimy Ridge April 10-12 ’17, Triagle May ’17, LaCoulatte Jun ’17, Lens-Aug ’17, Amiens-Aug ’18, Arras- Sept ’18.⁴²

When Marr recovered enough to write his parents a few days later, he was both cautiously optimistic and realistic about the costs of the Canadians’ victories. “The Germans seem more determined than ever now,” he felt, “but we have given them a pretty good shaking up and they were sore, but the Allies have not finished with them yet for they mean business now.” The Germans were “on the run,” so the Canadians “intend to bring it to some kind of a head soon.” Anxious to return to the front, Roy acknowledged that his unit had been badly depleted in the recent fighting. “As I heard there were only fifty came out of the line after the battle of the 2nd and 3rd [September] and I will be the oldest in the batt[alion] when I go back,” the 30-year-old soldier wrote. He had passed Lt.-Col. Donald M. Sutherland on the way to the fight, and reported home that “he looks just the same as ever.” Marr hoped that Sutherland would make it through, given that the 44ths commanding officer, second-in-command, and his company commander had been “hit,” as had Capt. Marshall who had assumed command of the unit. The battlefield was hardly devoid of emotion, as Marr’s letter revealed. “I hope [Marshall’s injuries are] not serious for he certainly was one grand fellow,” the private noted, “and he nearly cried when I left him for we stuck together all the way over.” Marr lamented that Pte. Bruce Edwards had been killed. “He was a fine chap and one of the best pals,” he wrote. Edwards “had never missed a trip to the line in two years and then he was unfortunate enough to lose his life, but he died a noble death for he never would turn back.”⁴³ Like Edwards, the Canadians Corps would not turn back. Fortunately, the “striking power” of Currie’s battalions was maintained through a steady stream of reinforcements – including many conscripts getting their first taste of battle on the Western Front.⁴⁴

While the infantry bore the brunt of the casualties, combat engineers played an essential role in maintaining the operational tempo. Without roads, bridges, and light railways to facilitate the flow of soldiers, supporting artillery, and the supplies and food needed to sustain the fighting (from bullets to bully beef), advances would grind to an inevitable halt. The Canadian Corps boasted an engineering organization nearly three times the size of that in a British corps, which helps to explain its superior mobility and successes during the Hundred Days.⁴⁵ Sapper Edgar Cohoe, a 35-year-old farmer who was born in Springford and lived in Burgessville before en-

listing in September 1917, had arrived in France in June 1918 and reinforced the 1st Battalion, Canadian Engineers in early August.⁴⁶ The troops were marching at night and resting in the day time, he recounted. “After one of those night marches, although the noise of battle was to be heard, they were all so tired they were glad to find a soft spot on the ground and very soon

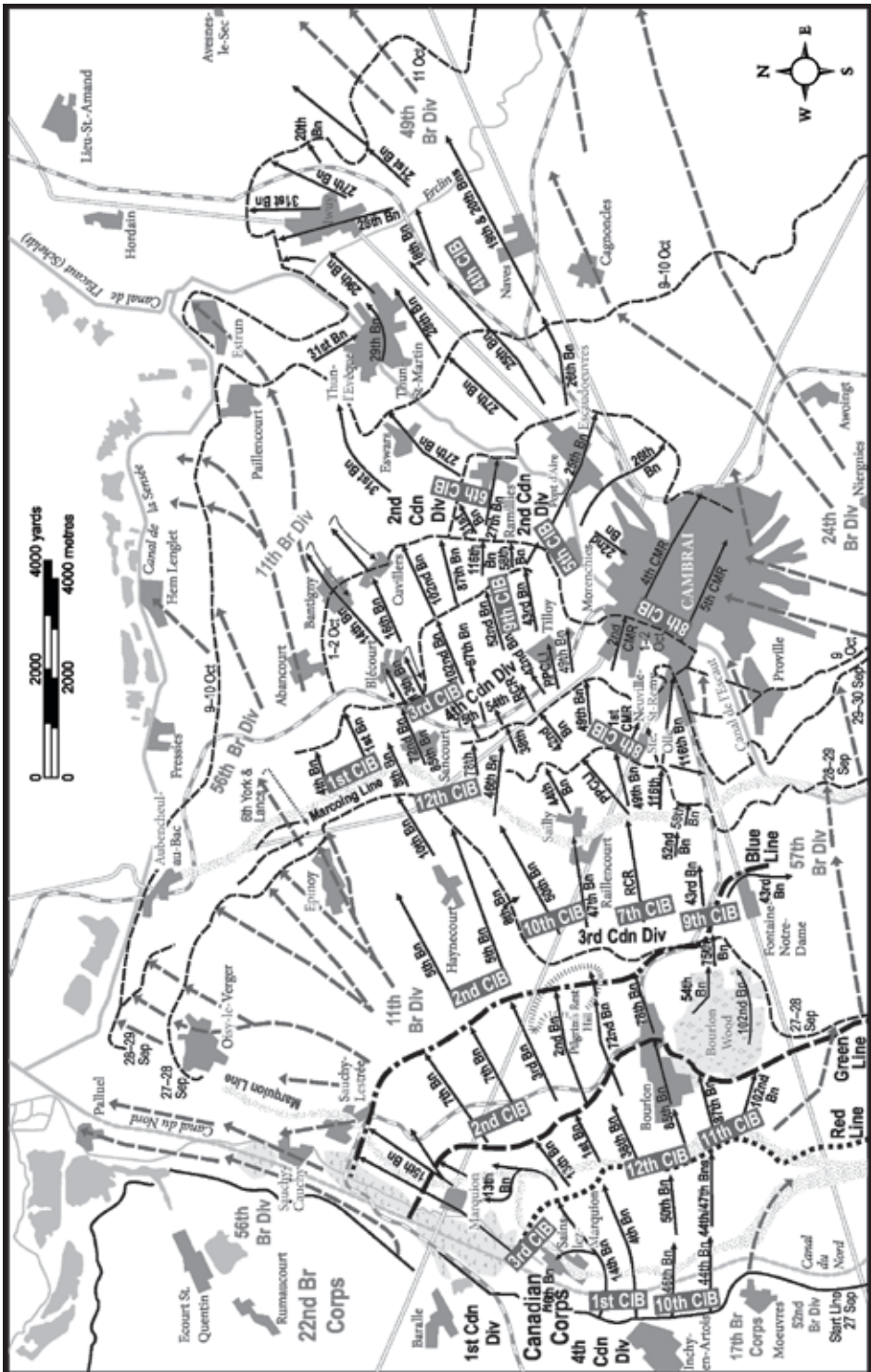


Canadian and French troops rest around a captured German gun

they were dead to all sounds of guns.”⁴⁷ When the 1st Canadian Division broke the Drocourt-Quéant Line on 2 September, Cohoe’s battalion busily worked to improve forward roads under severe shelling and machine gun fire. He sustained a minor gunshot wound to his right arm. Two days later, while working on horse traffic tracks alongside the Cambrai Road, Cohoe was hit by artillery fire and was forced him of the field.⁴⁸ “I have come away for a little from the battalion having got a small piece of shrapnel in my right arm,” he informed his father. The experience was certainly traumatizing:

Well I find it increasingly hard to tell you of the battlefield in the narrow limits ... which we are allowed. However, I can now more readily understand just what is withstood by our soldiers in the way of shell, machine gun and various other novel ways. The sights of battle are pitiable enough, more especially in the reflection, but the sounds make a harmony which is surely a full expression of all the hate possible.⁴⁹

Although the hateful sounds of the battlefield hurt Cohoe’s ears, historian Shane Schreiber likened the elements for the Canadian Corps’ success during the Hundred Days campaign to a great symphony: “masterful and innovative leaders, close, harmonious working relationships between all of its various ‘instruments,’ and an ability to orchestrate its workings to create the synergistic effects that make both great battles and great music.”⁵⁰ The Canadian approach to operations, which still relied upon the intensive artillery fire and set-piece attacks to get underway, had evolved to facilitate open warfare: new uses of machine-guns to provide fire support, fire and movement by infantry, infantry-tank cooperation, and close artillery support.⁵¹ Nevertheless, as Cohoe alluded, the fighting was intense, with the Corps suffering 11,423 casualties from 26 August – 2 September alone. In breaching the Drocourt-Quéant Line, however, the Canadians were effectively unhinging part of the main German Hindenburg Line. General Currie later regarded the breaching of the line as “one of the finest feats in our history.” Although the advance ground to a halt, the Canadians had achieved tactical success by cracking the German defen-



The Canal du Nord and Cambrai, 27 September -11 October 1918

sive system and, strategically, they forced the Germans to pour their few remaining reserves into their sagging northern defences and to surrender all of the remaining territory that they had gained during their spring and summer offensives. In its impact, this bloody battle contributed far more to the Allied victory than the great Canadian successes at Vimy and Amiens.⁵²

The efforts left the Canadian soldiers clearly exhausted. “The last few weeks have been pretty busy,” Cpl. Roy Melvine Bearse wrote to his aunt in Norwich in a typical understatement. He had been marching nearly every day, and the “heat and dust has been terrible.” He omitted all details about the battles, as the censors instructed him to do, and simply noted a close call when “Fritz blew my back yard fence away, it was as close a call as I want to be and if they come any closer I will be moving right away.” He thought of everyone busy with the harvest back home,⁵³ and perhaps longed for the simplicity of the physical work that would entail. On the battlefields of France, however, his body was intended for a different purpose. Bearse and the other Canadians, now in front of the main part of the Hindenburg Line, were on the eve of yet another great push. Their work was far from over, and the dreaded Canal du Nord loomed as the Corps’ next objective.

Canal du Nord

The importance of Cambrai to the German defenders is hard to overstate. It was the hub of the German logistical system in the Flanders theatre and the northern pin of the Hindenburg system. “There was no doubt that the Germans would defend Cambrai with ruthless, even fanatical, determination,” historian Daniel Dancocks explained; “its loss would be disastrous for the enemy because it would render the rest of the Hindenburg Line untenable.”⁵⁴ To get at Cambrai, the Canadians would have to storm the Canal du Nord and capture Bourslon Wood – a thorn in the side of the British Expeditionary Forces since 1916. When the British Third Army tried to capture it in November 1917, fierce German counterattacks using “stormtrooper tactics” reversed any gains.⁵⁵ Once again, the Canadian Corps would be called upon to do what previous Allied formations had proven unable to accomplish.

Exhausted and depleted by their actions in breaking the D-Q Line, the Canadian Corps was too weak to continue an all-out offensive – a reality faced across the British forces. Instead, during the pause in action after 3 September, a steady stream of reinforcements (mostly conscripts) replenished the depleted ranks of the Canadian infantry.⁵⁶ In mid-September, the Corps was assigned the objective of crossing the Canal du Nord – a formidable, seemingly intractable obstacle – before seizing the high ground to the east and proceeding on to Cambrai. The 100-foot-wide canal was surrounded by flooded marshes on both sides, and the Germans had infested their side with machine gun nests, trenches, and stockpiles of gas to fire or release at would-be attackers. Trying to achieve a water crossing under fire and then wade through flooded low ground would be tantamount to suicide. A small, 2600-yard dry section of unfinished canal was being built to the south, but the Germans had also fortified this ground. How could the Canadians funnel an entire corps of 50,000 men through a narrow gap, upon which the Germans had

trained their weapons?⁵⁷

Currie's approach was bold, complex, and daring. Despite great concern at Army headquarters (which required Haig to over-rule the British Army commander and authorize the plan himself), the whole Canadian Corps would breach the canal, stream across, and fan out to capture the German-controlled high ground. "This hugely complicated plan required skilled leadership and well-prepared troops," Granatstein



Canadian engineers bridging the Canal du Nord, September 1918

noted. "It also required surprise enough to fool the enemy: if the German artillery hit the Canadians bunched in the funnel, the result could be disastrous."⁵⁸ A commander who did not have tremendous faith in his troops would never have contemplated such an audacious and elaborate scheme. The operation would have to be executed precisely or, Currie was warned, the Corps would have to find a new commander. The planning was intricate. If the Germans could bring down an effective defensive barrage, the Canadians might lose most of two divisions in the canal bed. Firepower would be key, and so would logistics. Currie had to carefully position his guns, ensure that they could cross the canal, and direct them to provide supporting fire as the soldiers fanned out over a wider front once across. Combat engineers would play an essential role, hastily building bridges across the canal that would ensure a steady stream of ammunition and supplies to the Canadians fighting on the other side. The soldiers would have to know their roles and execute them exactly. It was incredibly risky.

Currie's gamble paid off, and he achieved what was arguably his "greatest tactical triumph of the war." 3rd Canadian Division drove hard through the gap under cover of darkness and artillery fire on the morning of 27 September, breaching the canal. Once the Canadians were across, elements of 4th Division approached Bourlon Wood and seized bridges over the Canal de l'Escaut after heavy fighting, ending up on high ground north of Cambrai. It was a resounding but bloody victory. Pte. John Louis Downey ("Lewis" Downey in the *Gazette*), whose father and sister lived in Otterville, was killed in action with the 1st Canadian Machine Gun Corps⁵⁹ – one of hundreds of Canadians who fell that day. For the commanders, however, the gains certainly justified the losses. "The Corps' achievements on 27 September easily rivalled its earlier triumph on 8 August," Schreiber observed. "In a single day, the Corps had crossed and bridged the Canal du Nord, had broken two defensive lines and threatened a third, and had seized the wooded height that had proven a bane to

the [British forces] for more than a year.” It was a complete success, with some units advancing as far as eight kilometres – “and this against well-prepared fortifications with the advantage of natural obstacle,” not the comparably weak defences around Amiens.⁶⁰

The next phase – capturing Bourlon Wood – proved more difficult. The Germans brought large numbers of reserves from other sectors to bolster their defences, and heavy German machine gun fire brought the 3rd Canadian Division advance on 28 September to a halt by midday. The assault continued under another artillery barrage, but fierce German counterattacks prevented a breakthrough. “The initial assaults, under a relatively well-organized barrage, would be successful,” Schreiber explained of this time of the war. “When the barrage ended, or became ragged, the direct firepower of the German machinegunners would reassert its superiority over the flat terrain around Cambrai, and the infantry advance would stall. The Germans would then counterattack,” forcing the Canadians to fend them off.⁶¹

As was the case throughout the Hundred Days, the hard-won Canadian victory at Canal du Nord came at a staggering price of experience and blood. Pte. James Kelso (born in Norwich) was shot in the right thigh, a wound that put him out of action for the rest of the war.⁶² Pte. James Dake Haylow, who had finally recovered from the gunshot wound he sustained at Passchendaele, returned to the 2nd Battalion in the field on 10 September 1918 only to receive a serious gunshot wound to his left thigh and genitals seventeen days later.⁶³ For Pte. Harry Barnett, whose father lived in Summerville, the wound that he received would leave permanent damage: an explosive bullet struck his left humerus, tearing the muscle and bone to such an extent that his left arm had to be amputated above the elbow.⁶⁴

Many conscripts who had recently arrived on the front lines also found themselves quickly thrust in, and then out, of action. Pte. Leonard Wallace, a 20-year-old, English-born farmer who worked for Fred Croxford, had not applied for exemption when he was called up in January 1918. He joined the 47th Battalion in France on 17 September and was shot in the foot twelve days later.⁶⁵ Pte. Sherman Aubrey Havens, a farmer whose parents lived in Newark, was shot in the right thigh.⁶⁶ Twenty-two-year-old Sapper Bert “Bob” Barham, a vacuum pan operator with the Borden milk company drafted in May alongside Pte. Hibbert Harris, had arrived in England in July and crossed the Channel to France on 20 September to join the 9th Battalion Canadian Engineers. “You will see by the heading that I am nearing the long expected goal, the firing line,” he wrote to his father two days later. “When a fellow stops and thinks, it hasn’t been so long after all.” Although a conscript, he had internalized his new military identity. “A soldier is not satisfied unless he is on the move,” he explained. “I have seen sights already that would make the women not used to war sights shudder. It only feeds our determination to play the game and play it to the best of our ability.”⁶⁷ He joined his engineering unit in the field on 29 September, only to be hit by bomb fragments two days later which blew off part of his right ear and fractured his right temporal bone. He would recover.⁶⁸

The battle for the Canal du Nord and Bourlon Wood proved particularly devastating for the Schell family in East Oxford. Cousins Douglas Schell and Reuben

Millyard had lived on the same farm before the war, enlisted together at the University of Toronto, and served in the same unit. Malcolm Schell, the unsuccessful Liberal candidate for South Oxford during the 1917 election, and his wife Josephine had spent the war worrying about the fate of the two young men overseas. Their worst fears were realized at the end of September 1918. General Currie had ordered the advance on Cambrai to continue through the night of 27 September and into the following day to prevent the Germans from setting up a defensive line west of the city. When the first Canadian units became pinned down under heavy German fire, the PPCLI were thrust into action in mid-morning. Sgt. Schell once again came under fire, and this time it was fatal. He was hit by German artillery fire passing through the hamlet of Raillencourt (where the German Marcoing Line crossed the Arras-Cambrai road) and was killed instantly.⁶⁹ (His parents received his Distinguished Service Medal posthumously.) The Canadians battled on, gaining little ground during hard fighting on 29 September. The next day, the PPCLI were in action again as part of a two-phased operation to seize bridgeheads over the Canal de l'Escaut. Lieut. Reuben Millyard, who had only rejoined the PPCLI in the field on 13 September after a long recovery from a gunshot wound sustained at Passchendaele, was commanding No. 2 company during its attack on Tilloy. Shortly after crossing the railway embankment, he was hit and killed instantly.⁷⁰ The cousins comparable journey ended up with the same tragic fate, and the two rested in nearby plots at Tilloy-les-Cambrai, with Schell in the Mill Switch British Cemetery and Millyard in the Canada Cemetery.

After bitter fighting, Corps operations soon ground to a halt. Currie recognized that his divisions were exhausted after four days of continuous action, but he launched a final set-piece attack on 1 October that he hoped would cause the Ger-



Fred Pounds

mans to collapse and allow the Canadians to reach the Canal de l'Escaut. In the face of vicious German counterattacks (including one that claimed the life of conscripted farm labourer Pte. Fred Pounds from East Oxford⁷¹), Currie broke off the engagement, realizing that it would be a waste to send more tired troops up against a determined enemy. The Corps had sustained nearly 20,000 casualties in a week and a half of fighting. Pausing his push towards Cambrai on 2 October to allow fresh troops to rotate into the line, Currie rested assured that his Canadian Corps had accomplished great things on the battlefield. "Since August 26, the Canadian Corps has advanced 23 miles, fighting for every foot of ground and overcoming the most bitter resistance," Currie boasted, engaging and defeating "decisively 31 German divisions in strongly fortified positions and under conditions most favourable to the defence. 18,585 prisoners were captured ... 371 guns

and ... over 116 square miles of French soil containing 59 towns and villages.”⁷² The Canadians’ refined battle doctrine was yielding an impressive string of achievements. “On balance, the Canadian Corps’ operations at the Canal du Nord were the best example of Canadian military professionalism” during the war, Granatstein concluded. “Currie, his staff, and his men has mastered the Great War’s demands: massive, accurate artillery support, using high



"Watch out! He's tasted blood," Daily Sentinel-Review, August 1918

explosives, shrapnel, and gas against the enemy trenches; provision of forming up areas, lines of communication, and artillery; and a tough, well-briefed infantry using fire and movement aided by their mortars, machine guns, rifles, and grenades.”⁷³ If battles since Vimy had indicated that the Canadian Corps was emerging as an elite fighting formation, the Canal du Nord proved it beyond any doubt.

The Influenza Epidemic

Back home in East Oxford, North Norwich and South Norwich, daily happenings continued to reflect the regular cycles and rigours of wartime life: patriotic society meetings and activities, victory bond campaigns, and the scouring of newspaper casualty lists for familiar names. Residents of the townships grappled with the effects of conscription on local farmers, inflation, and shortages on the home front as did rural Ontarians across the province.⁷⁴ Despite a better than expected harvest season, the Canadian Food Board asked Canadian households to restrict “their consumption sugar for personal use to 1½ pounds/month/person and to use a greater proportion of brown sugar,” and warned against the crime of hoarding which was “unfair, unnecessary and contrary to law.” With canning season well underway, fruit growers were particularly worried about the sugar restrictions that might dissuade consumers from buying their produce.⁷⁵ Coupled with labour shortages, which affected the actual harvesting of foodstuffs, rationing and other market forces compounded a sense of uncertainty.

The military did grant frequent leaves to conscripts from farm families, which brought some measure of relief to overtaxed farmers. Other new soldiers benefitted from indefinite “leave without pay” designations, the initiative that MP Donald S. Sutherland had told irate farmers about in the spring. Farmer Pte. Milo Hicks had visited South Norwich in June, telling everyone that he expected to go overseas shortly thereafter. Instead, on 8 August he was given leave until the middle of September, which was then extended to the beginning of December. Pte. Wilson Melbourne Ramie, a farmer from Springford, also received the notation on his file that his leave was indefinite. Despite these leaves, the support of farmerettes, and the

work of the soldiers of the soil, there was a national consequence to be paid for the conscripted farmers. Historian Mourad Djebabla calculated that conscription's impact was not upon cultivation (42 million acres of Canadian land cultivated in 1917 grew to 51 million acres in 1918) but came at harvest time, when the wheat bounty fell from nearly 234 million bushels in 1917 to 189 million bushels in 1918.⁷⁶

Prime Minister Borden's quest for men had already fractured his relationship with farmers across the country, but he still needed more soldiers – both for the Western Front and for a new theatre of operations across the Pacific. At the end of August, Borden's government announced that it was looking for 5000 Canadian men to volunteer to fight in support of the "White Russians" in Siberia. The Russian Bolshevik government's decision to withdraw from the war had allowed the Germans to redeploy its force from the Eastern Front, and the Allies promised to bolster Russian elements that wanted to continue to the war against Germany in hopes that this would distract the Germans.⁷⁷ Borden's initial call to Canadians to serve in this remote theatre was specifically aimed at physically-fit Canadian Corps veterans and "others not at present liable under the Military Service Act."⁷⁸ Long-time purveyor of household goods and local Norwich undertaker George S. Wilson had been waiting for his opportunity to do his part in "the fight for freedom," but his business interests would not permit his absence. Attracted by the prospect of adventure in the Far East, the "well known and popular business man" made his way to London, Ontario, to volunteer for the Canadian Siberian Expeditionary Force, leaving his wife and a recently graduated embalmer to carry on with funeral services. "The *Gazette* and all its readers will join in giving Mr. Wilson a slap on the shoulder and wish for him a safe return," his hometown newspaper trumpeted.⁷⁹ Once in camp, Pte. Wilson reported that he was "highly pleased with his new life and is enjoying the drill and work preparatory to the greater job on hand overseas." He applauded the diversity of the volunteers for Siberia – "Japs, Jews, French, English and Irish" — and boasted that "it was the proudest moment of my life when I donned the Khaki and became one who was doing his part in the worlds' greatest struggle for freedom and loved ones." The *Gazette* extolled that "his uniform fits and becomes him well, and no more enthusiastic Canadian has taken up arms for the great cause."⁸⁰ Ultimately, Wilson would never make it overseas because he had to tend to a wife suffering from the dreaded Spanish influenza – a pandemic that the Canadian volunteers for the Siberian Expeditionary Force had the unfortunate distinction of dispersing across Canada as they headed westward to the Pacific.

Studies on the 1918 outbreaks have linked the milder spring wave of influenza (which hit between March and April 1918) and the more deadly fall wave (which began in September and peaked in October in most places) to soldiers training for overseas service.⁸¹ The first wave seems to have started at a military camp in Kansas before spreading across the United States and then crossing the Atlantic.⁸² When it initially surfaced in the British Expeditionary Force in France in April, medical officials labelled it as pyrexia of unknown origin ("PUO") and sought to identify where it came from. "The Allies had been caught unprepared for chemical warfare in 1915 and when this seemingly new illness emerged in the spring of 1918 there

were suspicions that it might have been caused by a biological or chemical weapon,” historian Kandace Bogaert explains. “The environment surrounding Étaples, France had already been contaminated with 23 gases, including chlorine, phosgene, and mustard gas and there were worries that enemy troops had aerosolized bubonic plague and dropped it on the Allied armies.” By mid-May, experts identified this ‘pyrexia of unknown origin’ to be a relatively mild form of influenza characterized by various symptoms: high fever that lasted for several days, body aches, muscle and joint pain, headache, sore throat, nose bleeds, and coughing that sometimes brought up a thin, brownish mucous. Although thousands of Canadian soldiers would suffer through influenza that spring, few died from the virus. Compared to diarrhoea, dysentery, sexually transmitted infections, trench foot, and war-related injuries, it was a relatively minor health concern. Accordingly, “reports of influenza in army camps on both sides of the Atlantic received little public attention relative to the horrors of the trenches and growing opposition to a war of attrition that had dragged on far too long.”⁸³

A recent study suggests that Ontario’s soldiers experienced the first wave of influenza between March and May of 1918.⁸⁴ Twenty-six-year-old nursing sister Evalena Oatman, Matilda Oatman’s younger sister who enlisted with the Canadian Army Medical Corps (CAMC) Base Hospital in Toronto on 30 April 1918, was stricken just two weeks later with what her file recorded as “bronchitis” (a typical misdiagnosis for influenza at the time). She complained of a slight soreness in her throat and a cough, coupled with a headache “and a general feeling of malaise.” This eventually manifested as a pain in her side which caused her extreme discomfort. “She is pale” and “easily tired,” the medical officer assigned to her noted.⁸⁵ Many men serving overseas also contracted “the flu” that spring. Sapper Edgar Cohoe was struck down by Spanish influenza late in June as his unit left for France. “I was simply glad to lie on the sand floor of the tent and endure the experiences of what seemed like a horrible sea sickness,” he wrote to his parents.⁸⁶ Private George Hammond was similarly stricken and left 1st Battalion in the field to go to 7th Canadian General Hospital in Etaples, then to England (where he developed tuberculosis), and eventually back to Canada.⁸⁷ In Basingstoke, England, Harold Poldon was hit with the “flu” in July. “It started very deep in the chest and the next day I was all in,” he wrote his father. “The second & third days, which are the worst, soon passed as I was on the mend.” Most of the boys in his unit had fallen sick and had ten days rest in hospital.⁸⁸

While Canadian historians long assumed that the second, and much more deadly, wave of the pandemic arrived in Canada in July with soldiers returning from the European theatre of war,⁸⁹ historian Mark Humphries recently built a convincing case that this virulent strain of influenza was not introduced by returning Canadian soldiers but spread north with American recruits training in Canada. The disease surfaced in Boston in late August 1918 and swept throughout the eastern seaboard of the United States in September, with Polish Army volunteers destined for the Niagara-on-the-Lake training camp first carrying influenza north of the border. Weak military quarantine regulations at the camp, coupled with the density of young men

sleeping and eating in close quarters, led the airborne disease to spread quickly amongst the soldiers.⁹⁰ The need to recruit and train soldiers to replenish Canadian units overseas trumped public health concerns,⁹¹ Humphries argued, leading to a mediocre government response that put Canadians at serious risk.

This was not a “classic” form of influenza, involving fever, chills, headaches, weakness and muscle pain, and an accompanying cough or upper respiratory issues. The virulent strain that appeared in late 1918 brought terrifying additional symptoms: nosebleeds, coughing up blood, and heliotrope cyanosis which made a patient’s face turn purple or blue grey in colour, signifying that the individual was literally drowning in fluids in their lungs.⁹² In the end, most deaths owed to secondary bacterial infections like pneumonia,⁹³ thus complicating efforts to generate reliable statistics on how many township residents the pandemic claimed. Furthermore, rather than targeting the young and old, this strain of influenza proved most lethal for people between the ages of 20 and 45⁹⁴ – a devastating trait when recruitment and conscription practices funneled vulnerable young men, such as rural farmers from the townships, into over-crowded training camps, trains, and troop ships that served as hotbeds for influenza.⁹⁵ This took its toll on Canada’s soldiers, including recent conscripts. For example, Pte. Hugh Olmstead, a telephone operator who had been drafted in July and whose parents lived near Lasalette, died en route to England in October. Pte. Sherman DeGroat, a 27-year-old African Canadian conscript who grew up in South Norwich and had inherited his father’s gift of locating and digging wells, was infected when he arrived in England in mid-October and was hospitalized for nine days. Pte. Leonard Wallace, a recent casualty of the fighting at Canal du Nord, contracted the flu in late October while in hospital recovering from his wound. Sgt. Edward Jarvis Dennis, a 24-year-old Norwich-born chemist drafted into the Canadian Army Medical Corps in June, also was hospitalized in October, and Pte. Wilfred Eugene Edmonds (the 42-year-old son of the druggist in Norwich who had volunteered in August) died of influenza at Kirkham Military hospital in Lancastershire in November.⁹⁶

For township residents who were already “war weary” when the pandemic hit, the deadly virus struck hard. The miserable fall weather in southern Ontario did not help the situation: that September was the coldest and wettest month recorded in nearly eight decades, encouraging people to stay indoors where close proximity provided ideal conditions to spread the infectious disease. The start of the school year also brought children together, thus spreading infection between families.⁹⁷ Ironically, soldiers already serving in the Canadian Expeditionary Force had certain advantages, including access to better medical care than their civilian relatives back home. Sick soldiers had to report to a medical officer prior to morning roll call and then received prompt hospital treatment from physicians and nurses. Given that there was no cure for influenza, nursing care was the only effective treatment.⁹⁸ The impact of so many nurses and medical doctors serving overseas was keenly felt in rural parts of Ontario.

The *Norwich Gazette* began to publish sporadic lists of people falling ill in late September, referencing pneumonia and drawing no explicit linkage to influenza.

The first reports of the “Flu” appeared on October 9, when a Brant County study stated that 2500 people had died of “Spanish Influenza” (so named because the Spanish government was the first to officially acknowledge it as an epidemic). In its Town Talk section the *Gazette* reported that 75 percent of people dying with the flu were under the age of 35. At a time when so many young men were becoming casualties overseas, this new threat to the lives of young and otherwise healthy Canadians was nearly unbearable. A particularly tragic story of one local family made front page news on 10 October when, after harvest, George DeMontmorency’s barn burned to the ground and destroyed his entire crop. The farmer was not there to quash the fire because he and his wife had travelled to Brantford earlier that day to visit their son George Jr., who was severely sick with influenza. Their neighbours who spotted the fire barely had time to turn out the horses from the stable. A few hours later they received the sad news from Brantford that George Jr. had died at 22 years of age. The family was devastated, having lost the son who had remained ‘safe’ at home while their two other boys served “with the colours overseas.”⁹⁹

By the second half of October, the Town Talk and village news sections of local papers were filled with the names of families from across the townships that had been struck with the flu. Sometimes cases were reduced to numbers: the Beattie family and the Walker families had two and three ill members respectively.¹⁰⁰ Other times the struggles were narrated more fully. The Sherlock family, which only recently moved to Norwich from the Brantford area, was a case in point. That month, the entire family – mother, father, brother, and sister – were all struck down with the flu at the same time. With no relatives in the community to care for the family and no local medical care available, two women from the village went to their home and “faithfully and generously waited on and cared for them” while they were ill. Despite the “unselfish and voluntary” dedication of these women, they were unable to save 2-year-old Orville Sherlock, who died after only a few hours of sickness.¹⁰¹ The suddenness of death was shocking.

The medical system was completely over-taxed, forcing healthy family members and friends to nurse their sick or, where those supports were unavailable, to turn



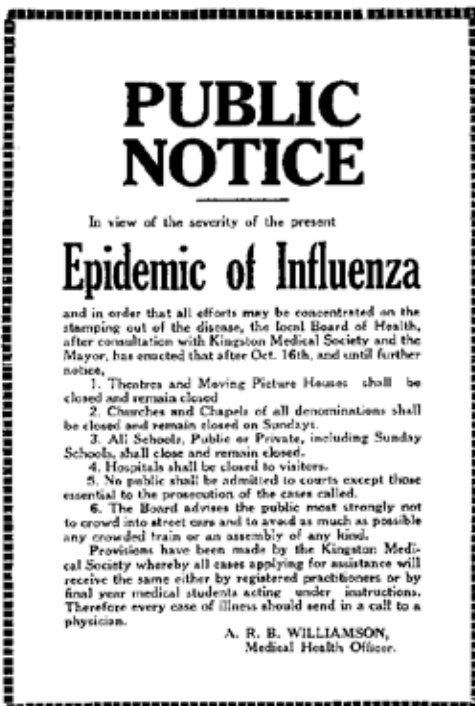
Canadians donned masks during the Spanish influenza pandemic in hopes of avoiding infection

to local women for help. The “Doctors have their hands full, some times more calls than they can handle,” the *Gazette* acknowledged on 24 October.¹⁰² Nursing associations shared emergency registries of trained local nurses and potential volunteers with medical knowledge, but women without formal qualifications had to step into the void to help many Canadians survive the epidemic – and frequently contracted the virus themselves.¹⁰³ Such efforts made altruistic community volunteers – such as Mrs. Frank (Margaret) Searles and Mrs. Andrew Glover, who had tended to the Sherlock family – into celebrated local heroes. “The citizens of Norwich owe them a large debt of gratitude,” Norwich town council noted at their next meeting. “We know these ladies are modest and perhaps preferred not having public mention made of their kindness,” but council could not refrain from applauding the women’s “services in the time of great need.”¹⁰⁴

Local charity was not enough to stem the tide of infection, however, and governments at all levels began implementing policy that had significant impacts on the residents’ daily lives. On 24 October, the regional chairman of the Board of Health announced that schools, churches and public places would be closed until the situation improved, and appealed to township residents to cooperate.¹⁰⁵ There were to be no public meetings of any kind: no picture shows, Sunday schools, or church services. Schools, pool halls, and public libraries were closed¹⁰⁶ and public services curtailed. Despite the measures, however, the flu continued to take a visible toll. In Norwich, the Royal Bank staff was reduced to two people, while the Grand Trunk Railway staff fell ill, severely limiting train service. George Wilson would have to

abandon his dream of service in Siberia when he was forced to return from the west coast where he had been training to tend to his ill wife in Norwich.¹⁰⁷ Compounding the strains of wartime life, the flu epidemic brought death as well as social and economic disruption to the townships. Many of the victims, both overseas and in Canada, were of prime working and child rearing age.

On 30 October, the front page headline in the *Norwich Gazette* broadcast that there had been “Many Deaths --- At Home and on the Field of Battle.”¹⁰⁸ Soldiers overseas followed both closely, compounding the anxieties that they faced in the bitter fighting that fall. “Isn’t it awful the way the flu has been raging thro’ Canada & the U.S,” Fred Furlong wrote his mother. “You want to take



Public Influenza Notice, October 1918

good care of yourself Mother & don't take too many chances." His friend "Hook" (Granville Hooker) had contracted influenza and "had quite a time of it," and Fred was relieved that "he is up & around again." He was crushed by the loss of Marsh Smith, a 42-year-old Otterville man. "Poor old Cappy, I always thought the world of him & I want you to convey to Mr. Smith my deepest sympathy," Fred conveyed to his mother. "It won't seem natural to me to come home and drop into the barber-shop without finding Cappy there."¹⁰⁹ Pte. Stanley Vanderburgh lost his sister, who had fallen ill with the flu and died while nursing her influenza-stricken husband. "She was of bright and cheerful disposition and made many friends where ever she went," the newspaper extolled. Now she was gone. Twenty-six-year-old Richard Lochart fought the illness for a couple of days yet but did not recover, leaving behind a young widow and two children in Burgessville. For others, death came remarkably quickly. Nineteen-year-old Maud Hyndman died of pneumonia (a common "side effect" of the virus) scarcely eight hours after becoming ill. The "lovely" young Royal bank teller Florence Cornwell died within 48 hours of contracting the flu.¹¹⁰ The epidemic was indiscriminate as it swept through town and countryside, leaving township residents in a state of confusion, shock, trauma, and sadness.

Despite the ravages of influenza and the ban on congregating, the community still prided itself on the strong welcome it gave to men returning from "the great world struggle." When news arrived by telegram on 5 October that injured Pte. John Boughner was returning home that day, it quickly spread throughout the entire town. Reeve Henry Park, Boughner's former co-workers from the broom factory, and other local residents hastily organized "a reception for the returning hero." Boughner had enlisted in the 168th with many other local boys in April 1916, was "dangerously wounded" at Lens in early September 1917, and then was hospitalized for a year. When he disembarked at the train station at Norwich Junction at 6:20 p.m. that evening, still breathing shallowly, his lungs and chest weakened by gas poisoning, his left shoulder drooping to compensate for the damage to his ribs, and his left leg amputated below the knee, he was greeted by music from the band, the blow of whistles, the ringing of bells, and "cheers of welcome." A procession of decorated autos escorted the soldier into the village, where more people had gathered

to greet him. Speeches followed, celebrating his bravery, the gallantry of the Canadian soldiers overseas, and the intense pride that Canadians at home had in their efforts on the battlefield. After the pomp and ceremony, Boughner went to his mother's house in town where he stayed for a short time before returning to the military hospital in Toronto for further



Broom factory workers, 1919

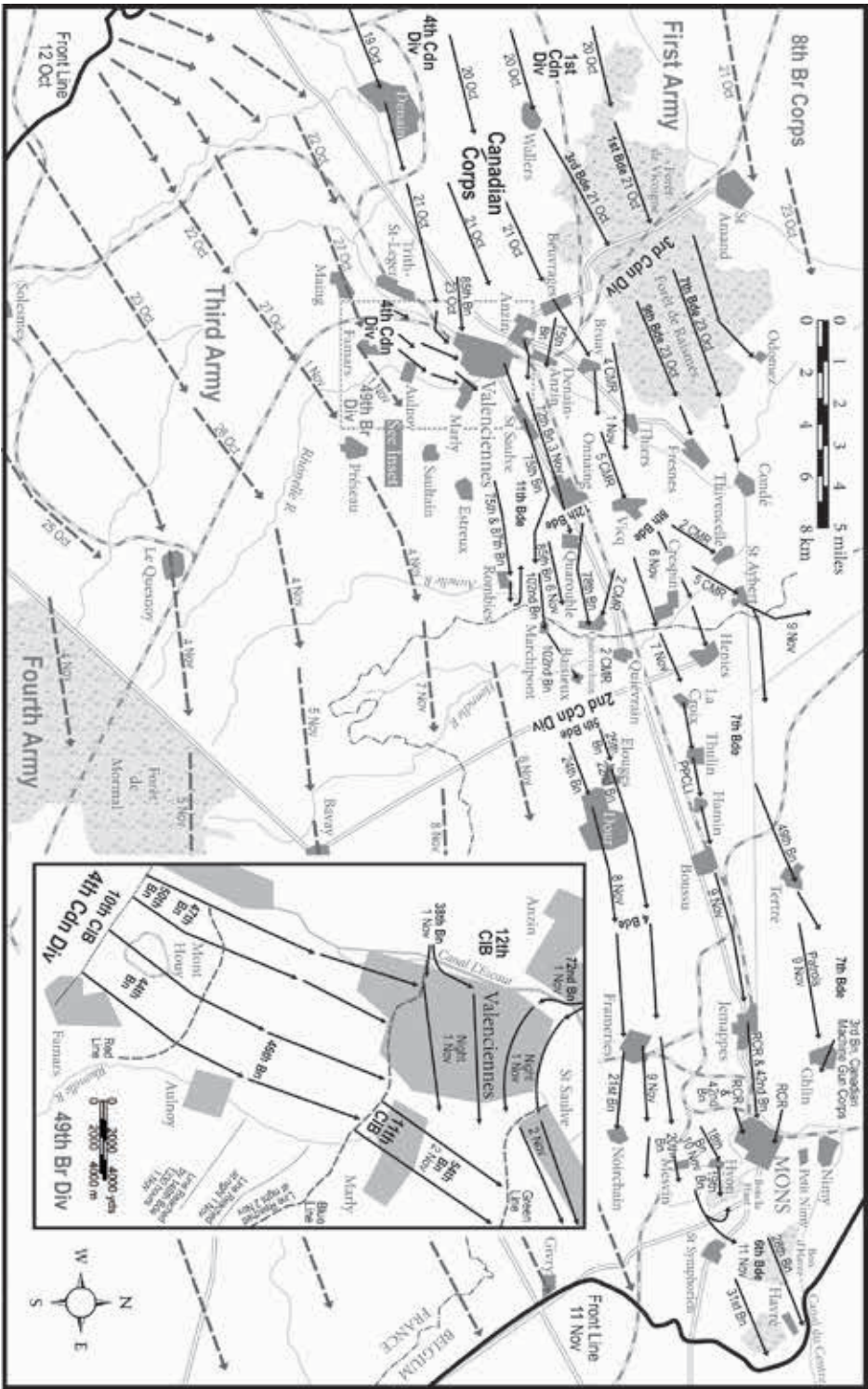
treatment. The soldier “came home marred but proud of the wounds he bears,” the *Norwich Gazette* reported, and “his only regret” was that “he could not stay to help the boys in the great task.”¹¹¹

At this dark time, the thought of the war ending lifted local spirits. “The news of the weakening of the forces of Prussianism and the whining of the Kaiser for peace was enough to let loose all the pent up feelings of the loyal hearted people of Norwich,” the *Gazette* reported following a Sunday, 6 October celebration in the town. The churches rang their bells for a full hour, and the evening festivities began with “the booming of anvils on the corner of Main and Stover streets” followed by a “mixed band of enthusiastic musicians that must have made the ruthless Kaiser quake.” Indeed, the Kaiser was there – in effigy, of course, and burnt by the citizenry to free “the world of his hated presence.” Although the news of the war’s imminent end proved premature, the *Gazette* noted that for the “heartless, lying” Germans the “end is nigh at hand. It is well to give the boys a ‘rehearsal’ for the big event coming, besides it will do the boys ‘over there’ good to know we are thinking of them. We’re the fans while they are playing the game.”¹¹²

In the Poole household, itself still wracked with flu, Ariel noted the false notification that the war was over in her daily diary. It was not, so the job of preparing care packages for the soldiers at the front continued. To avoid spreading the flu, the girls now packed their boxes at home rather than gathering with neighbouring women to complete the task and socialize at the same time.¹¹³ This was a time for perseverance. As long as the war continued, the soldiers overseas would need home front support. The Spanish influenza, however devastating its toll, could not inhibit the final push to victory. Canadians would see the war to completion – at home and on the battlefields of Europe.

The Final Push: Cambrai to Mons

After their dramatic success at the Canal du Nord, the Canadian Corps took a short rest from 3-8 October before embarking on the final phase of its march to Cambrai.¹¹⁴ Even during these pauses from major action, however, front line units continued to incur casualties. Sapper George Yeoman, a 22-year-old farmer born in East Oxford who worked with his father on the Park View Farm just outside of Woodstock when he was conscripted in October 1917, received his call up the following May. Serving with the Canadian Engineers in France, he was killed in action on 5 October 1918.¹¹⁵ Conscript Hibbert Harris, who had been drafted in late April 1918, was wounded the day before his fellow sapper. Harris arrived in England onboard the *SS Saturnia* on 22 July and joined the 5th Battalion Canadian Engineers in the field on 29 September. Five days later, he sustained multiple shrapnel wounds to both legs and his left foot while preparing defences at Bourlon Wood, was rushed to the rear for medical attention, and went under the surgeon’s knife two days later. Compound fractures, bone fragments, and exposed nerves made the healing process painful and protracted, but Harris considered himself fortunate.¹¹⁶ “My wounds are not of a serious nature but are very severe,” he wrote to his parents from a hospital bed in England. “My left leg and foot are getting along fine. They are



The Final Advance: Valenciennes to Mons, 23 October-11 November 1918



Canadians entering the battered civic square in Cambrai, October 1918

now trying to save my right foot. I don't know whether they'll be merciful or not. I have thanked God many times that I was one who came out alive."¹¹⁷

The Canadian Corps resumed its drive on Cambrai on 8 October. Having broken through the Hindenburg Line, the Corps proceeded to outflank the city on its northern side with the objective of securing crossing sites over the Canal de l'Escaut that ran through Cambrai.¹¹⁸ The first Canadians who entered it found the heart of the city ablaze, with captured German rearguard troops admitting that they had been ordered to set fire to the city to deny it to the Allies and delay their progress. Fortunately, the quick Canadian advance prevented this outcome, but the devastation of war was everywhere. "Like a tsunami receding back into the ocean, the German Army left in its wake a shattered countryside of blown bridges, cratered roads, and destroyed railway lines," historian Shane Schreiber evocatively summarized. "All this had been done in hopes of delaying, and if possible stemming, the onrushing tide of Allied forces."¹¹⁹ Although the enemy had largely abandoned the city, they had hardly given up the fight. Pte. Charlie Orum, a blond-haired, blue-eyed farmer who lived with his parents just southeast of Woodstock,



Charles Orum (left)

sustained a serious gunshot wound to his right leg on 8 October which had to be amputated in hospital a few weeks later. The former 168th enlistee would never return to farming as a consequence.¹²⁰ Lieut. Arthur Barton Rowe, who had survived a wide range of diseases (scarlet fever, diphtheria, gonorrhea, trench mouth) up to this point in the war, as well as a wound sustained at Vimy, was killed that afternoon while moving with the 11th Battalion to an assembly position north of Tilley to prepare for offensive operations. An overhead burst of shrapnel penetrated his steel helmet and entered his head, killing him instantly.¹²¹ His mother, who had moved to England to do war work closer to her three sons serving overseas, as well as his brothers Hugh and Frank, were hard hit by the news.¹²²

In the days ahead, further heavy fighting led to the capture of the entire city, the surrounding villages, and the Canal de l'Escaut south of the city. Pte. John Bowerman, a conscript from Otterville, had received only nine-weeks of basic combat training at Camp Witley before transferring to the 31st Battalion on 12 August and joining the unit in the field four days later.¹²³ The infantryman had battled for the Drocourt-Quéant switch, cracked the Hindenburg Line, crossed the Canal du Nord, and advanced to Cambrai with his unit.¹²⁴ Before dawn on 10 October, the battalion took the village of Thun l'Évêque, secured possession of the Canal de la Sensée, and spent the rest of the day pushing out enemy patrols and "keeping the enemy very busy all along the Canal." That evening, the 31st was hit with a severe gas bombardment and instructed that they would attack the following day. The morning was cool and cloudy when the battalion jumped off at 09:00 and was quickly "cut up by a very heavy enemy barrage." Private Bowerman and four of his fellow soldiers were killed.¹²⁵ He had played an instrumental role in ensuring that his unit was up to fighting strength and combat effective during the Last Hundred Days. But his participation had been dictated, not chosen. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

By contrast, Chauncey and Frances Poole of Norwich accepted that their son Bruce had volunteered with the 168th precisely to "do his bit for the great cause."¹²⁶ Once he recovered from the "blighty" that he had sustained at Hill 70 in September 1917, the avid letter writer had re-entered the reinforcement pool and joined the 18th Battalion in the field in France on 2 October 1918. Within a week he endured heavy enemy shelling, tasted life in the trenches once again, and prepared to establish a bridgehead over the Canal de l'Escaut with his new unit. On 10 October, the battalion initiated an attack under an artillery barrage that fired short (with "our own shells breaking just ahead of the jumping off position" – proving that even the lauded Canadian gunners were imperfect) and then faced heavy enemy machine gun fire during their advance. After spending the night in old trenches that they had captured, Poole and his comrades advanced again the next morning, turning



Chauncey Poole at home reading with a picture of son Bruce Poole proudly on display

back enemy tanks using concentrated rifle, Lewis gun, and machine gun fire. The battered battalion was relieved that evening, but Poole did not survive to rest and enjoy good billets in Thun l'Evêque the next day. He and ten other soldiers were killed during the battle, and another 72 wounded.¹²⁷

A German counterattack from northeast of Cambrai towards the Canadian Corps on 11 October failed, and the Canadians – having secured the Canal de l'Escaut and reached the Canal de la Sensée north of the city – would spend the next six days conducting “mopping up” operations in the area. Canadian infantry patrols fought hard to flank dreaded German machine guns firing from well-camouflaged, mutually-supporting shell holes, silencing these positions so that units could proceed. After the Germans began their retreat in earnest on 18 October, the Canadians pursued “open warfare” with cautious vigour. The pattern became quite predictable over the following weeks. The Germans would retreat at night, Canadian units would advance in the morning until they regained contact with the enemy, fights would ensue and stall the advance, and then the Canadians would consolidate their gains to thwart what were, comparatively speaking, “light” German counterattacks.¹²⁸ The Canadians reverted to their proven set-piece attacks when German rearguards mounted concerted opposition, thus continuing to embrace Currie's mantra of “shells rather than lives.” “Mobile warfare had thus become a structured science rather than an art,” historian Tim Travers observed,¹²⁹ with calculated, methodical advances propelling the Canadian Corps forward.

While this approach to fighting might appear mechanical in general terms, the experience for the ordinary foot soldier was hardly so. This “scientific” approach still entailed soldiers fighting their way forward on the battlefield and sustaining casualties. For example, Pte. Clarence Elmer Parson, a bookkeeper born in Otterville who had enlisted in Brantford in March 1916, pushed across the Canal de la Sensée with the 50th Battalion on 17 October. Two days later, the battalion received “an enthusiastic welcome” in the village of Roelux from French civilians, who provided their Canadian liberators with comfortable billets and a warm breakfast – the first sleep or food that the soldiers had enjoyed in days. The companies pushed forward in the early hours of 22 October, making unopposed headway until they were held up by enemy machine gun fire in the late morning and early afternoon. During this advance, Parson sustained a gunshot wound to his left foot – an injury that healed but which denied him the opportunity to finish the war with his unit.¹³⁰

German resistance stiffened as the Canadian Corps neared the Belgian border at the end of October. The enemy had concentrated their forces around the city of Valenciennes as well as Mount Houy, a long, low, wooded ridge that overlooked the surrounding region. These locations were pivotal to the Hermann Line, and the Germans had amassed five divisions (albeit considerably depleted ones) as well as additional counterattacking forces to hold the area. When a British corps' attempt to take Mount Houy failed on 28 October, Currie realized that the Canadians would “have to take that damned hill.” The Canadian Corps had already secured terrain on three sides of the hill when supporting the failed British offensive, and here it would fight its last great battle of the war as the “spearhead of the British Army.”¹³¹

When the Canadians launched their attack on 1 November, their artillery again performed brilliantly, obliterating the German defences on Mount Houy, silencing the German guns around Valenciennes, and leaving only scattered outposts to harass the Canadian brigade sent to capture the high ground. It was a clear case of sacrificing shells rather than soldiers – approximately a ton and a half of shells for each Canadian infantry soldier attacking. Canadian infantry units still sustained casualties, of course – such as 22-year-old Pte. Ernest “Ratz” Shelby of Eastwood, a conscript serving with the 47th Battalion who suffered gunshot wounds to his chest and right shoulder.¹³² But the Germans suffered a casualty rate nearly ten times that of the Canadians during the assault and, stunned by the carefully orchestrated barrage, many Germans surrendered in groups of twenty to fifty. It was a resounding victory, and after the loss of Mount Houy the Germans withdrew from the city of Valenciennes and abandoned the Hermann Line. The Canadians liberated the city on 2 November and pushed on towards Belgium.¹³³



Ernie ‘Ratz’ Shelby

Back home, local newspapers celebrated the achievement, praising the Canadians for capturing ground and battering the Germans, but also casting them as actual liberators of people. “Valenciennes Taken: Canadians Freed ‘Lace City’ From the Huns,” the *Norwich Gazette* reported on 7 November. This latest victory had released thousands of residents “who had been in bondage for four years.”¹³⁴ In that same issue of the *Norwich* newspaper, Pte. John Starr, a 25-year-old farmer from



John Starr

Holbrook who had initially joined the 168th, shared his experiences and reiterated the importance of the Allied gains for the French citizens. He had entered the fray in the days after Vimy, suffered a severe wound from a machine gun bullet at Fresnoy, and after a lengthy recuperation, which included intermittent periods of light duty with a labour battalion, he reacquired full use of his injured arms. A few weeks later, he transferred to the 2nd Canadian Infantry Works Company and supported the Canadian advance by building roads and bridges.¹³⁵ In a letter home, he reported on the Corps’ rapid advancement. “We are moving around a lot



A Canadian soldier does a quick wash in the field

these days, we are sleeping in a German dugout, which they occupied only two weeks ago and this is our fourth home in five weeks,” Starr described. “We have a Fritz’s stove and a Fritz’s steel helmet for a wash dish. My chum is taking a sponge bath in the helmet, it is my turn tomorrow night, we have to make the best of everything in times like these and I would sooner miss my meals than a bath of any kind when I have a chance.”

The devastation surrounding him struck him deeply. Despite the hardships he and his mates endured, he expressed deep sympathy for the French who had lost so much. "If you were only here and could see for yourself what this war means to so many French civilians, to see their homes and furniture and treasures that they have stored for a life time, it would make your heart bleed."¹³⁶

By November 1918, the Canadian Corps developed what historian Tim Travers described as "fairly rapid mobile warfare." Cavalry patrols, forward machine guns and artillery, trench mortars, motorized machine guns, and armoured cars all played a role in spearheading the advance, with the Canadians avoiding heavy fighting unless ordered to do so.¹³⁷ Using these cautious but effective methods, the Canadian Corps reached the outskirts of Mons, the Belgian city where the British had fired their first shots at the start of the war, by 10 November. It was a highly symbolic location to finish a gruelling war, with the Canadians fighting through to the very end. Indeed, just hours before the armistice, Currie ordered that the Canadians capture Mons "without many casualties" so it could be added to his Corps' battle honours. Although this decision proved controversial (with Currie later accused of seeking personal glory at the expense of soldiers' lives),¹³⁸ the rumoured German surrender was far from guaranteed. Hindsight is twenty-twenty, but decision makers at the time did not have the luxury of foresight. Had hostilities resumed, securing the best defensive ground around Mons would have been important. Instead, the war came to a close at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, 1918. No one lamented its ending, on the home front or overseas.



Canadians marching into Mons

Anticipating the Welcome News

Following the progress of the war through that autumn, the townships' many readers of the Woodstock *Daily Sentinel-Review* were buoyed by vibrant headlines proclaiming the achievements of the Allies. The Canadian boys had "Gained Everywhere," "Swept Ahead in Flanders," and were "Smashing the Kriemheld Line" with the "Huns Unable to Check Advance of Allies." Was there any doubt that the time for peace was drawing close? The titles in large bold letters, riding high on the page, seemed to overshadow the stories and lists of soldier casualties found below. On 31 October, when reports of the disintegration of the German alliances made the newspapers, excitement grew even more. The German retreat, Turkey's acceptance of the Allies' terms, the Austrian Army's request for an armistice, and popular demonstrations against the Kaiser had left "Germany, alone, deserted by all." Fortuitously, as the German war effort diminished, so too did the equally-dreaded influenza epidemic. Public health bans had not stopped the packing of Christmas boxes for the soldiers overseas¹³⁹ or community planning meetings, but headlines declaring that the "Flu Situation is Improving" left area residents in the mood to celebrate.¹⁴⁰

When the residents of the town of Norwich read a United Press bulletin report on 7 November that the Germans were sending a delegation to visit French Field Marshall Ferdinand Foch to negotiate armistice, they immediately planned "a monster celebration" in anticipation that "victory is forthcoming and at an early date." The fact that the actual signing was unconfirmed did not dampen their elation. Woodstock, the industrial and political centre of Oxford County, jumped the gun with factories blowing whistles and workers pouring out onto the streets, where automobiles raced up and down, their joy merging with a gala for the 1918 Victory Loan campaign. In Norwich, the revelry was more deliberate, and organizers began a subscription list to gather pledges to support the celebration and start a memorial fund for boys who had fallen. "Let community spirit prevail in this and everyone who has a car get ready to decorate when the good news comes," the *Gazette* called out. Norwich residents responded enthusiastically. People from miles around gathered in the village to watch and cheer the local band as it led a parade of beautifully decorated automobiles pass up and down Main Street. At about 9:00 p.m. the procession proceeded to the fairgrounds where a giant bonfire of pine stumps, donated by local farmers, was set ablaze. In the light of the huge fire, which cast a glare for miles, music and speeches trumpeted victory, followed by fireworks and the clashing of anvils.¹⁴¹

The *Gazette* later conceded that the celebration was once again premature, but "the people felt that a celebration would not be out of place at any time as every day there was a herald of good news of stupendous events."¹⁴² Local residents closely monitored flash reports heralding the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm on 9 November and Germany's impending surrender. Two days later, the headline that the nation had expected in 1914, and then longed to read for four long years, finally appeared:

*"The Great War Over."*¹⁴³

Notes

- 1 Cpl. Cyril M. Clarke to Mrs. Holdsworth, 15 December 1918, Norwich and District Museum and Archives (NDMA).
- 2 Canadian Forces College, "Case Study: Canadian Corps Operations – 1917/18," 14; and G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1964), 386-98.
- 3 Cpl. Clarke to Mrs. Holdsworth, 15 December 1918.
- 4 Shane B. Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire: The Canadian Corps in the Last 100 Days of the Great War* (London: Praeger, 1997); Canadian Forces College, "Case Study: Canadian Corps Operations – 1917/18," 14; Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 398-408; and Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1917-1918* (Toronto: Penguin, 2016), 419-36.
- 5 J.L. Granatstein, *Canada's Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 136. Soon after, Mrs. Robinson of Hatchley received word that her son Pte. Harold Robinson had been severely wounded (for the second time) on 8 August. "Town Talk," *Norwich Gazette*, 26 September 1918.
- 6 Soldier file, Edwards, William Bruce, 126746, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 2847 – 35; and "Town Talk," *Norwich Gazette*, 5 September 1918.
- 7 Lieut. John Palmer to Mr. Edwards, "A Brave Soldier," published in *Norwich Gazette*, 21 November 1918.
- 8 War diary, 102 Battalion, 8 August 1918; and "Edwards, William Bruce," Lakefield War Veterans, <http://lakefieldwarvets.ca/edwards-william-bruce/>.
- 9 Armstrong Family, *The Maple Leaf Forever* (Eastwood: self-published, 2011), 21; and War diary, 1st Infantry Battalion, 8 August 1918, LAC, RG 9-III-D-3, vol.4913.
- 10 War diary, 38th Battalion, Appendix I: 12th Canadian Inf. Brigade, 16 August 1918, LAC, RG9-III-D-3, vol. 4938, file 432.
- 11 Soldier file, Holdsworth, John Aubrey, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 4435 - 47. See also "Pte. J.A. Holdsworth Killed in France," c. end August 1918, clipping on file at the NDMA.
- 12 Cpl. Clarke to Mrs. Holdsworth, 15 December 1918. Holdsworth's family received a letter dated 26 August 1918 that he had been killed. Also killed that day was Pte. Marwood McIntyre. Born in Otterville in 1888, McIntyre had moved to Brandon, Manitoba before the war where he enlisted with the 181st in November 1916. On 10 August 1918, he sustained serious gun shot wounds to his face and shoulders from which he did not recover. Soldier file, McIntyre, Marwood, 865835, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 6908 – 20.
- 13 Vigar, serving with the PPCLI, sustained a gunshot wound to both legs on 16 August 1918. Soldier file, Vigar, Ernest William, 675665, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 9948 – 8.
- 14 1833 hymn "Lead, Kindly Light," words written by Catholic Cardinal John Henry Newman as a poem entitled "The Pillar and the Cloud." This hymn, "regularly at the top of the Victorian hymnological parade" according to Ian Bradley, was "essentially an expression of doubt-filled faith, penned by Newman, when he was at the height of the spiritual crisis" that led him to convert from the Anglican to the Catholic Church. Ian Bradley, *Lost Chords and Christian Soldiers: The Sacred Music of Arthur Sullivan* (London: SCM Press, 2013), 73.

Chapter 11

- 15 Stanley Vanderburg to his Mother, 1 September 1918, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 10 October 1918.
- 16 Ian Brown, "Not Glamorous, but Effective: The Canadian Corps and the Set-Piece Attack, 1917-1918," *Journal of Military History* 58, no. 3 (1994): 431.
- 17 Granatstein, *Canada's Army*, 138.
- 18 Letter from Capt. C.E. Frain writing from No 1 Canadian Stationary Hospital, France "Extract from Soldier's Letter," 3 September 1918, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 3 October 1918.
- 19 D.J. Goodspeed, *The Road Past Vimy: The Canadian Corps 1914-1918* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1969), 155-56.
- 20 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 427.
- 21 Goodspeed, *Road Past Vimy*, 156.
- 22 Cook, *Shock Troops*, 475.
- 23 Soldier file, Schell, Malcolm Douglas, 216395, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 8690 – 52.
- 24 On the PPCLI during this period, see David Bercuson, *The Patricias: The Proud History of a Fighting Regiment* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2001), 115-117.
- 25 487282 Sgt. M. D. Schell, P.P.C.L.I., 5th Supp. *London Gazette* #31128; Honour Roll – "University of Toronto / Roll of Service 1914-1918," 1921, available at <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/detail/567013>.
- 26 *London Gazette*, No.31158, 1 February 1919; "Narrative of Events, August 26th to 29th, (Both Inclusive), war diary, 52nd Battalion, LAC, RG9-III-D-3, vol. 4941, file 443. Although a medical board declared Sutherland unfit for further service "and the government paid no heed to his requests to be returned to the field, ... he was not daunted, but obtained passports and paid his own fare to and reported for service in England. In a short time he was given command of the 52nd Battalion and was with that unit when the armistice was signed." "Col. Sutherland Given the D.S.O.," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 20 February 1919.
- 27 Soldier file, Forman, Norman, 675008, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3198 – 25.
- 28 Norman Forman to Mother, 4 September 1918, printed in *Tillsonburg Observer*, 10 October 1918. "I am lying here in a bed just inside a window on the ground floor," he wrote. "I am able to sit up and watch the pretty girls go past out on the street, and make eyes at them. I had lots of fun watching them, but it is raining today, and then I have a splint on my leg which comes up past the knee and prevents me from sitting up, but the 'Sister' is going to change it sometime today, so I will be able to carry on with the good work."
- 29 Pte. Lloyd Ellis Lawrason, who had been born Norwich and was a clerk in Cayuga before enlisting in 1916, was killed in action with 2nd Battalion at Upton Wood on 30 August 1918. Soldier file, Lawrason, Lloyd Ellis, 739130, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 5457 – 42. Upton Wood is a small wood half-way between Hendecourt and Haucourt just southeast of Arras.
- 30 Soldier file, Coles, Hubert, 675237, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 1861 – 61.
- 31 CEF Circumstances of Death Registers, LAC, RG150, 1992-93/314, 165, available online at <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/mass-digitized-archives/circumstances-death-registers/Pages/circumstances-death-registers.aspx>, "Cleal to Connolly," 797/1384.
- 32 "Town Talk," *Norwich Gazette*, 3 October 1918.
- 33 "In Memory of Pte. Coles," *Norwich Gazette*, 10 October 1918.

- 34 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 434-35.
- 35 Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire*, 80-81.
- 36 Cook, *Shock Troops*, 495.
- 37 "An Ex-Norwich Boy Falls in Action," *Norwich Gazette*, 26 September 1918.
- 38 Soldier file, Buck, Leroy Maitland, 636711, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 1235 – 17.
- 39 Art Clark to Leroy Buck's Mother, 12 September 1918, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 14 November 1918 (along with two other letter excerpts from Capt. Smith and Sgt.-Major W.C. Jack).
- 40 Soldier file, Marr, Percy Leroy, 126842, LAC RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 5936 – 24.
- 41 See War Diary, 44th Canadian Infantry Battalion, LAC, RG9-III-D-3, vol. 4939, file 435.
- 42 D.M Marshall to Mrs. Marr, 8 September 1918, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 3 October 1918.
- 43 Roy Marr to his Mother and Dad, 11 September 1918, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 3 October 1918.
- 44 Dennis, *Reluctant Warriors*, 119.
- 45 Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire*, 100.
- 46 Soldier file, Cohoe, Edgar Francis, 2006707, LAC RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 1842 - 2.
- 47 "Extracts from Soldier's Letters," *Norwich Gazette* 14 November 1918. His parents received word on 16 September that he had been wounded but that it was not serious.
- 48 Soldier file, Cohoe, plus context from war diary, 1st Battalion, Canadian Engineers, LAC, RG9-III-D-3, vol. 4993, file 651.
- 49 Pte Edgar Cohoe to his father, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 31 October 1918.
- 50 Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire*, 4.
- 51 Brown, "Not Glamorous but Effective," 441.
- 52 Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire*, 83.
- 53 Cpl R.M. Bearse to his aunt, "Letter from Soldier," *Norwich Gazette*, 26 September 1918.
- 54 Daniel Dancocks, *Spearhead to Victory: Canada and the Great War* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987), 127-28.
- 55 T.H.E. Travers, *How the War was Won: Command and Technology in the British Army on the Western Front, 1917-1918* (London: Routledge, 1992), 19-33; and Bruce Gudmundson, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 139-55.
- 56 Dennis, *Reluctant Warriors*, 120; and Dancocks, *Spearhead to Victory*, 128.
- 57 Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire*, 96-102, and Dancocks, *Spearhead to Victory*, 132-33.
- 58 Granatstein, *Canada's Army*, 139.
- 59 "South Norwich Boy Killed in Action" *Norwich Gazette*, 24 October 1918; and Soldier file, Downey, John Louis, 252051, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 2642 - 50
- 60 Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire*, 103.
- 61 Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire*, 105.
- 62 "Town Talk" *Norwich Gazette*, 17 October 1918; Soldier file, Kelso, James, 772764, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 5067 – 34.
- 63 Soldier file, Haylow, James Dake, 675572, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box

4191 – 38.

64 Soldier file, Barnett, Harry, 797523, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 452 – 24.

65 “Town Talk” *Norwich Gazette*, 8 November 1917; and Soldier file, Wallace, Leonard, 3130582, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 10039 – 24.

66 Soldier file, Havens, Sherman Aubrey, 3131610, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 4159 – 9.

67 “Letter from ‘Bob’ Barham,” *Norwich Gazette*, 24 October 1918.

68 Soldier file, Barham, Bert, 3133081, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 428 – 37. See also “Town Talk,” *Norwich Gazette*, 17 October 1918.

69 “Town Talk,” *Norwich Gazette*, 17 October 1918; and Canadian Virtual War Memorial, “Malcolm Douglas Schell,” <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/detail/567013>.

70 Circumstances of Death Register, Millyard, Reuben De Lemme, 577/778; Soldier file, Millyard, Reuben Delemme, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 6224 – 8; and “Reuben Delemme Millyard,” Honor Roll – “University of Toronto / Roll of Service 1914-1918,” 1921, <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/detail/529449>.

71 Soldier file, Pounds, Frederick, 2453306, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 7936 – 10.

72 Arthur Currie, *Corps Operations 1918*, 61, quoted in Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire*, 107.

73 Granatstein, *Canada’s Army*, 141.

74 Barbara M. Wilson, *Ontario and the First World War 1914-1918* (Toronto: Champlain Society/University of Toronto Press, 1977), xviii.

75 “Town Talk,” *Norwich Gazette*, 22 August 1918. Not only farmers benefited from the “leave without pay.” Pte. Frank Maxwell Perry was given leave to run his family’s sawmill outside of Woodstock and Pte. Elton Clair Townsend, a cheese maker from East Oxford, who had been called in the spring draft was sent home two days after enlistment and spent the period from 15 June to 1 November on leave without pay.

76 Mourad Djebabla “Fight or Farm: Canadian Farmers and the Dilemma of the War Effort in World War I,” *Canadian Military Journal* 13, no.2 (Spring 2013): 66.

77 Russia had begun the war as an empire and an ally of the French and British but, during the Russia Revolution, the Bolsheviks mounted a successful coup in the fall of 1917, seized control of the government, and arranged a separate peace treaty with Germany. Around the time of the “Red” coup, the Allied governments pledged military aid to the “White” (imperial) forces and the Czech Foreign Legion that wanted to continue the war against the Germans. Britain and its allies would help to organize, supply, and contribute troops to support these forces so that they could attack the Germans occupying western parts of Russia and re-open pressure from the east. Prime Minister Borden committed to send an expeditionary force, raised from volunteers returning from the Canadian Corps, but volunteer participation was extremely low and his government eventually decided to send conscripts – a highly unpopular decision. Ultimately, the armistice in November 1918 ended the rationale for the Siberian and north Russian campaigns, and although the Allies had committed to helping the White forces battle the Red communist forces, Borden withdrew the Canadian troops in February 1919. On this episode, see Roy MacLaren, *Canadians in Russia, 1918-1919* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1976), and Benjamin Isitt, *From Victoria to Vladivostock: Canada’s Siberian Expedition, 1917-19* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010).

- 78 "Town Talk," *Norwich Gazette*, 22 August 1918.
- 79 "Geo S. Wilson Enlists for Siberia," *Norwich Gazette*, 28 August 1918.
- 80 "Remembered by Friends," *Norwich Gazette*, 12 September 1918.
- 81 Humphries, *Last Plague*; Alex Rewegan, Kandace Bogaert, Melissa Yan, Alain Gagnon, and D. ANN Herring, "The First Wave of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic among Soldiers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force," *American Journal of Human Biology* 27, no. 5 (2015): 638-645; K. Bogaert, J. van Koeverden, and D.A. Herring, "Tracing 'the Trail of Infected Armies': Mobilizing for War, the Spread of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic, and the Case of the Polish Army Camp at Niagara-on-the-Lake, 1917-19," in *Lives in Transition: Longitudinal Analysis from Historical Sources*, eds. Peter Baskerville and Kris Inwood (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 274-91; Magda Fahrni and Elspeth Jones, eds., *Epidemic Encounters: Influenza, Society, and Culture in Canada 1918-20* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012); H. Phillips, "The Recent Wave of 'Spanish' Flu Historiography," *Social History of Medicine*, 27 (2014), 789-808.
- 82 Alfred Crosby, *America's Forgotten Pandemic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); M.R. Smallman-Raynor and A.D. Cliff, *War Epidemics: An Historical Geography of Infectious Diseases in Military Conflict and Civil Strife, 1850-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004);
- 83 Kandace Bogaert, "Casualties of War? An Ethnographic Epidemiology of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic among Soldiers in Canada" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, McMaster University, 2015), 54-55.
- 84 Kandace Bogaert, "Cross Protection between the First and Second Waves of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic among Soldiers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) in Ontario," *Vaccine* 33, no. 51 (2015): 7232-7238.
- 85 Case History Sheet, 30 May 1918, Oatman, Evalena, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 7396 - 41.
- 86 "Extracts from Soldier's Letters" *Norwich Gazette* 14 November 1918
- 87 Soldier file, Hammond, Gordon C., 772448, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3997 - 38.
- 88 Harold Poldon to Father, 28 July 1918, NDMA.
- 89 See, for example, Janice Dickin-McGinnis, "The Impact of Epidemic Influenza: Canada, 1918-1919," *Canadian Historical Association Historical Papers* 12, no. 1 (1977): 120-140; and Eileen Pettigrew, *The Silent Enemy: Canada and the Deadly Flu of 1918* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1983).
- 90 "Town Talk," *Norwich Gazette*, 10 October 1918, noted that Niagara Camp was under quarantine owing to the outbreak of influenza. Historian Mark Humphries identifies an American delegation to a Eucharistic congress in Quebec as another source, as well as the arrival of American soldiers in Quebec and Nova Scotia. American troops entered into Canada in sealed American military trains over which the Canadian government had no jurisdiction. Humphries, "The Horror at Home: The Canadian Military and the 'Great' Influenza Pandemic of 1918," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 16, no.1 (2005): 235-60. For a detailed study of the Polish Army camp and influenza, see Bogaert et al, "Tracing 'the Trail of Infected Armies.'"
- 91 Mark Humphries, "The Limits of Necessity: Public Health, Dissent, and the War Effort during the 1918 Influenza Pandemic," in *Epidemic Encounters*, 21-47. The need to ship as many soldiers overseas as quickly as possible took precedence over both the health of soldiers and civilians, as evidenced by the decisions to let HMT *Hunstend*, *Victoria*, and *City of Cairo* depart from Canada for England, whereupon hundreds of soldiers became ill

with influenza, and dozens died on the Atlantic crossing. Troopship hospitals were small and did not have adequate medical supplies. "Cramped quarters, reduced air space, and shared accommodations all helped the virus spread," Humphries explained.

92 A. Morens and A. Fauci, "The 1918 Influenza Pandemic: Insights for the 21st Century," *Journal of Infectious Diseases* 195, no.7 (2007): 1018–28.

93 J.F. Brundage and G.D. Shanks, "What Really Happened during the 1918 Influenza Pandemic? The Importance of Bacterial Secondary Infections," *Journal of Infectious Diseases* 196, no.11 (2007): 1717–18.

94 See, for example, John Barry, Cécile Viboud, and Lone Simonsen, "Cross-Protection between Successive Waves of the 1918–1919 Influenza Pandemic: Epidemiological Evidence from US Army Camps and from Britain," *Journal of Infectious Diseases* 198, no. 10 (2008): 1427–1434; G. Dennis Shanks and John F. Brundage, "Pathogenic Responses among Young Adults during the 1918 Influenza Pandemic," *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 18, no. 2 (2012): 201–207; Sverre-Erik Mamelund, "Geography May Explain Adult Mortality from the 1918–20 Influenza Pandemic," *Epidemics* 3, no. 1 (2011): 46–60; and Ann Herring and Ellen Korol, "The North-South Divide: Social Inequality and Mortality from the 1918 Influenza Pandemic in Hamilton, Ontario," in *Epidemic Encounters*, 97–112.

95 Humphries, "Limits of Necessity," 29.

96 Soldier files, Olmstead, Hugh, 3355148, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 7456 – 55; Wallace, Leonard, 3130582, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 10039 – 24; Dennis, Edward Jarvis, 3060406, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 2442 – 13; DeGroat, Sherman, 3137517, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 2410 – 52. On Edmonds, see *Norwich Gazette*, 14 November 1918 and 5 December 1918. On DeGroat, see Joyce Pettigrew, *A Safe Haven: The Story of the Black Settlers of Oxford County* (Otterville: South Norwich Historical Society, 2006), 121, 174.

97 Bogaert, "Casualties of War?," 133–34.

98 Bogaert, "Casualties of War?," 94. On influenza amongst Canadian soldiers overseas, see D. Ann Herring and Janet Padiak, "The Geographical Epicentre of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic," in *Written in Bone*, eds. M Smith and M Brickley (London: Archaeopress, 2008), 1–18.

99 *Norwich Gazette*, 10 October 1918. Twenty-two-year-old Pte. Reeve DeMontmorency, recently conscripted on 8 May 1918, had sailed to England mid-August. Fortunately, he and brother Alfred would return home eventually.

100 "Town Talk," *Norwich Gazette*, 24 October 1918.

101 "Town Talk," *Norwich Gazette*, 31 October 1918.

102 "Town Talk," *Norwich Gazette*, 24 October 1918. In the larger centre of Brantford where many from the area went for treatment even the nurses and doctors were struck down. Arthur Catton of Norwich reported that his niece, nurse Pearl Vanvalken, had died along with eight others. "Town Talk," *Norwich Gazette*, 24 October 1918.

103 Linda Quiney, "'Rendering Valuable Service': The Politics of Nursing during the 1918–19 Influenza Crisis," in *Epidemic Encounters*, 62.

104 "Town Talk," *Norwich Gazette*, 31 October 1918.

105 "The Ban Still On," *Norwich Gazette*, 7 November 1918.

106 "Town Talk," *Norwich Gazette*, 17 October 1918 and 24 October 1918.

107 "Town Talk," *Norwich Gazette*, 31 October 1918; and "Town Talk," *Norwich Gazette*, 28 November 1918.

108 *Norwich Gazette*, 31 October 1918.

109 Fred Furlong to his Mother, 26 January 1919. Information on Marsh Smith is derived

- from the Census of Canada, 1911, LAC item number 6981803, <http://data2.collectionscanada.gc.ca/1911/jpg/e002010850.jpg>.
- 110 "Edith Maud Hyndman," *Norwich Gazette*, 31 October 1918; and "Richard Lochart," *Norwich Gazette*, 31 October 1918.
- 111 "Pte. John Boughner Returns," *Norwich Gazette*, 10 October 1918; and Soldier file, Boughner, John Sydney, 675858, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 919 – 47. Boughner would never fully recover from his service-related injuries and died on 12 February 1923.
- 112 "Norwich Celebrates," *Norwich Gazette*, 10 October 1918. Unfortunately, little Archie Nichols was run down on the street by a horse that had been startled by a firecracker. Although knocked unconscious after he was kicked by the horse and run over by the buggy, the boy recovered. In future celebrations, the *Gazette* recommended keeping Main Street clear of vehicles "for a block or two" to avoid "the repetition of so serious an accident."
- 113 The Diary of Ariel Poole, Data Concerning Bruce, NDMA, 2005.090, Range B, Shelf 5, Box P5, File World War I. The packing of boxes would continue through the fall and into 1919 when the last soldiers returned home. See, for example, "Milldale," *Norwich Gazette*, 7 November 1918.
- 114 Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire*, 105.
- 115 Soldier file, Yeoman, George Edward, 3133846, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 10635 – 54.
- 116 Soldier file, Harris, Charles Hibbert; and war Diary, 5th Battalion Canadian Engineers, 4 October 1918.
- 117 "News from Pte. H. Harris," *Norwich Gazette*, 7 November 1918. Another casualty was British-born farm labourer Pte. William Green, who enlisted with the 71st Battalion in Woodstock in early September 1915. He was shot in the right arm on 3 October 1918 while serving with the 72nd Battalion. Soldier file, Green, William, 126117, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3786 – 33.
- 118 DND, Battle Honours, "Cambrai, 1918," <http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/his/bh-bh/cambrai-1918-eng.asp>.
- 119 Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire*, 115.
- 120 Orum, William Charles, 675211, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 7491 – 55. Instead, he married Ruby McDonald after the war and moved into a home on Centre St. in Woodstock where he got a job at the County Court House and eventually became a Justice of the Peace for Oxford County. Armstrong Family, *Maple Leaf Forever*, 36.
- 121 CEF soldier file, Rowe, Arthur Barton, 71427, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 8507 – 37.
- 122 "Many Deaths --- At Home and on the Field of Battle," *Norwich Gazette*, 31 October 1918.
- 123 CEF soldier file, Bowerman, John William, 3314273, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 953 – 1.
- 124 Major Horace C. Singer, *History of the 31st Canadian Infantry Battalion C.E.F.*, ed. Darrell Knight (Calgary: Detselig Publishing, 2006).
- 125 War diary, 31st Battalion, 8-11 October 1918, LAC, RG 9-III-D-3, vol. 4937, file 431.
- 126 "Pte. Bruce Poole Killed," *Norwich Gazette*, 14 November 1918.
- 127 War diary, 18th Battalion (Western Ontario Regiment), 6-11 October 1918, LAC, RG 9-III-D-3, vol. 4951, file 479.
- 128 Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire*, 118-19.
- 129 Travers, *How the War was Won*, 172-73.

130 CEF soldier file, Parson, Clarence Elmer, 773056, LAC, RG150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 7612-28; and "Report on Operations, October 17th to October 22nd, 1918," war diary, 50th Battalion, LAC, RG9-III-D-3, vol. 4941, file 441.

131 Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire*, 115-26. Serving with 40th Squadron, Royal Air Force, 2nd Lieutenant Earl H. Mulley (who was born and raised in Norwich) was killed in action on 30 October 1918. His notice of death is in the *Norwich Gazette*, 21 November 1918. See also Commonwealth War Graves Commission, <https://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/4009497/mulley,-/>.

132 Soldier file, Shelby, Ernest Ratz, 3132383, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 8838 – 40.

133 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 471-75.

134 "Valenciennes Taken," *Norwich Gazette*, 7 November 1918.

135 Soldier file, Starr, John Percival, 675988, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 9245 – 19. For being absent from his billet for two weeks without permission, Starr had to endure three humiliating days of Field Punishment No.1 in August 1918: he would have to stand in full-length, affixed to a post or gun wheel, for up to two hours a day.

136 John Starr, excerpts from two letters printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 7 November 1918.

137 Travers, *How the War Was Won*, 172.

138 See Robert J. Sharpe, *The Last Day, the Last Hour: The Currie Libel Trial* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); and Tim Cook, *The Madman and the Butcher: The Sensational Wars of Sam Hughes and General Arthur Currie* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2010).

139 Undeterred by possible infection, 27 members of Milldale Patriotic Society met to pack boxes for boys overseas. "Milldale," *Norwich Gazette*, 7 November 1918. The *Gazette* also urged the importance of the boxes and reported despite "the serious outbreak of Spanish Influenza the response on behalf of the Christmas boxes has been highly satisfactory." "Christmas Boxes," *Norwich Gazette*, 7 November 1918.

140 "Preparing to Celebrate," *Norwich Gazette*, 7 November 1918; "Allies Still Sweeping Ahead in Flanders, Americans Smashing the Kriemhilde Line," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 16 October 1918; "Huns Unable to Check Advance of Allies: Allies Now Within a Few Miles of Ghent," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 21 October 1918; "Flu Situation is Improving," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 25 October 1918; "Turkey Accepts Allies' Terms for Armistice," "Austrian Army Asks Armistice?" and "Demonstrations Against Kaiser," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 31 October 1918; and "Austria's Broken Armies are in Full flight" and "Germany, Alone, Deserted by All, Awaits Her Fate," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 1 November 1918.

141 "Thursday's Celebration," *Norwich Gazette*, 14 November 1918.

142 "Thursday's Celebration."

143 "Abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm Officially Announced this Afternoon," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 9 November 1918; and "The Great War Over," *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 11 November 1918.

12 “Peace has once more spread its wings over our land”

Afterword

The dreadful world war has at last been ended and the Canadian boys and Canadian men and women, both at home and abroad, have done no small part in bringing the awful conflict to so happy a conclusion. We enter upon the new year with mingled feelings of regret and joy. Regret for those dear lads who lie where the poppies blow on the far-off fields of France and Flanders and rejoice that peace has once more spread its wings over our land.

“To Our Readers,” Norwich Gazette, 26 December 1918

On Monday, 11 November 1918, Ariel Poole noted in her diary that “word came war was over. Bells & whistles began to blow about four in morning. A big celebration all over.”¹ The festivities in Norwich began that evening at 7:30 p.m. when another “monster parade” of “scores of beautifully decorated cars and floats from local factories and organizations streamed down the main street, propelled forward by music from the local boys’ marching band. A mock dummy of “the Kaiser was there in a cage, bearing a placard asking that the people of Canada cease buying Victory Bonds.” Young members of the cadet corps made sure he was carefully guarded. Employees of Borden’s Condenser decorated a huge truck that was filled with overjoyed women singing “with fervor patriotic and war songs,” while the broom factory employees had a “very conspicuous and appropriate float” that boasted: “They swept the Kaiser off the Earth.”² The “big noise” came from “a special musical com-



Borden's Milk Condenser truck decorated for the armistice parade in Norwich

bination composed of a company of enthusiastic, patriotic young ladies, who with their own hands arranged a beautiful and appropriate float.” They sang, played, and waved their flags “long after others had become winded,” thus demonstrating their enthusiasm and patriotism.³ The “heavy cannonading” of the evening ended up shattering windows in several buildings, but the *Gazette* responded cheekily: “that’s nothing to what would have happened had the Germans won instead of the Allies.”⁴ The celebration proved a “gala night for Norwich, one that the younger generation will never forget.”⁵

Otterville also raised jubilant noise on Armistice Day. “At 5 o’clock in the morning the bells began to ring and the anvils were fired, whistles blowing and all sorts of noises were heard which continued nearly all morning,” the *Gazette* reported. Local Christian churches united for a joint Thanksgiving service at St. John’s Anglican Church at 1:00 that afternoon. Everyone had taken the day off work, and “the church was filled to the doors.” After the service, the community formed a procession that marched down Main Street, headed by six young men carrying a large union jack, with flags flapping and patriotic songs filling the crisp fall air. At 7:00 that evening, another group paraded through town in a “grand torch light procession” that culminated in a “splendid concert” rendered by local talent. Mrs. Weasley Fish gave a stirring rendition of “What has Britain done” by Canadian poet Rev. Frederick B. Hodgins. The messages were not lost on the audience. The British had “Kept the faith and fought the fight / For the everlasting right / Chivalrously couched her lance / In defence of Belgium, France.” She had “Given every seventh son, Met the challenge of the Hun; Placed her men on every field; Proud to die, too proud to yield.” It had been a truly world war, and Canada and the other dominions had helped unfurl the flag on every front. “Britannia” wept for “her slain” – and township residents saw themselves as part of the broader Empire – but the youth of Canada had not died in vain. They had saved civilization and won the battle between freedom and tyranny. At the end of an evening filled with national pride, those in attendance sang “God Save the King,” with full confidence of Canada’s prominent role in securing victory.⁶

Celebrations continued the next day, with many township residents journeying to Tillsonburg for yet another “monster celebration” (ostensibly designed to boost the Victory Loan Campaign). The Borden Condenser’s decorated truck again participated in the event, with the employees making “a grand showing in their uniforms and costumes.” The Victory loan results from the area that year (posted daily in the *Sentinel-Review*) were dismal, however, and none of the three townships came



In celebration of the war’s end, Otterville paraders marched from newly-built St. John’s Anglican Church to Main Street.

close to fulfilling their goal.⁷ North Norwich Council put forward a motion to try and spur its constituents into giving, proclaiming that Victory bonds were a “vital necessity for both the maintenance of our businesses and commercial prosperity at home.”⁸ William Hughes, the contact for purchasing bonds in South Norwich, vowed to keep his office open until midnight on Saturday to facilitate last minute buys. Whether it was the additional council pressure or people buoyed by continued celebrations and the spirit of victory itself, residents of both North and South Norwich townships purchased enough bonds to earn their honour flags (awarded for reaching their financial goal) which they would proudly display when the soldiers returned.

On Armistice Day, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George told the people of Canada: “You are entitled to rejoice. It is the most wonderful victory for liberty in the history of the world. Let us thank God for it.”⁹ Thanking God was a way of expressing relief that the war was over, ensuring the divine protection of those who had fallen, and of sanctifying the victory. Across the country, Canadians congregated in chapel, church, and cathedral to “express their gratitude for the divine assistance that brought the victory in a just war.”¹⁰ Offering praise and thanksgiving became common refrains in the days of celebration that followed. The Allied defeat of the Central Powers affirmed that Christianity, freedom, and justice had prevailed. At a large ecumenical prayer service in the Methodist Church on 12 November, Reverend Doolittle celebrated in his sermon that “the Allied victory followed the National Days of Prayer set by the United States, Canada and Great Britain in June, July and August.” While he acknowledged that other factors influenced the outcome, he emphasized that all of the Allied nations had collectively turned to God in prayer. Canada and its people were on the right path, and he held up temperance as an example. “Canada and Norwich have never celebrated as they have this week and yet in our town not one case of intoxication was seen,” he observed. The “merry making” in the dry township proved that “whiskey and beer are no longer necessities for a big celebration.”¹¹

The Norwich prayer service placed significant attention on Henry “Harry” Saunders, a former company sergeant major who had enlisted underage with the 33rd Battalion in February 1915. In fact, three young men from the Saunders family had volunteered for the same unit that year: his 18-year-old brother David left their family home in Hawtrey to enlist in January, and his brother Charlie (also underage) enlisted in July.¹² Harry arrived first in France that October, suffering shell shock and sustaining chest and arm wounds during the battle for Mount Sorrel in June 1916 that left him medically unfit for further service. David and Charlie also served with the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles and, a few days after Harry was forced from the field from his physical injuries, both of his brothers were reported missing. They ended up prisoners of war. Harry had returned home during the summer of 1918, was grateful to celebrate peace, and counted the days until his beloved brothers were released from the German POW camps and also could find their way home. The family’s story was meant as an inspiration. Saunders, the *Gazette* extolled, “gave new meaning to the colours of our flag - the red, white and blue. The

red for the red days of war; the white for the days of peace; and blue for the glorious days of truth which are to come.”¹³



Walter 'Bronc' Pollard

Other soldiers returned with less fanfare. Amidst the noise, gathered crowds, and general ballyhoo of mid-November 1918, Pte. Walter “Bronc” Pollard arrived quietly and unnoticed. Pollard had left his wife Etta May in Norwich with their three young children – Luella May age 5, Merritt age 3, and infant son Walter Fredrick – to join the 168th Battalion in February 1916. Serving with the 1st Battalion Heavy Artillery meant that the labourer exchanged construction work and hefting boxes for lifting heavy shells. He did not enjoy the shift, finding “shelling very disagreeable” and told his medical case worker that “he used to go wild” from the pain it caused him. After the fighting at Hill 70, he was forced out of action not from bullet or shrapnel

wounds but from myocarditis: an inflammation of his heart caused by his immune system attacking itself. Invalided back to Canada in mid-October 1918, Pte. Pollard was expected to rest and wait in the military hospital in Guelph. When peace was declared, he could stand the separation from his family no longer. He had done his part. For two long years he had been away. Feeling that Canada did not require his ongoing service, he simply left the hospital – defying regulations and going AWOL – and came home.¹⁴ Unaware of his illegal departure, the *Gazette* heralded his return. Pollard, however, refused to give any interviews amidst the celebrations. “Like all returned men, Walter Pollard has little to say as to the part he played and the scenes he witnessed,” the newspaper reported. His sole comment was that it had been “like an awful nightmare which he would fain forget.” Pollard subsequently shared a short paragraph that he had written at Lens which encapsulated the experience that he wished to share with his neighbours:

I am here somewhere in France in my dugout. In the far distance I hear the roar and rumble of cannon. Shells are bursting, the night is dark. Clouds hang heavy overhead and ever and anon I hear the hum of Fritz’s aeroplanes, travelling above me and soon the burst of bombs vent the air. Star shells light up the night as they cut through the deep darkness and burst. I hear the tramp of horses and the rattle of traffic on the heavy roads. It’s three o’clock in the morning and I must turn out to guard.¹⁵

In the weeks that followed, Canadians back home learned of how the soldiers overseas had received the news that the war had ended. Pte. Fred Furlong had gotten his long-expressed wish and finally made it to France in March 1918.¹⁶ He joined the 4th Battalion Canadian Machine Gun Corps (CMGC) in the field on 1 October, joining the push to Valenciennes. His company was pulled out of the line on 10 November, and his battalion headquarters received the news at 8:00 the next morning that hostilities would cease at 11:00. There was no celebration, and the companies spent the day cleaning their guns and equipment in anticipation of a promised inspection by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales the next day (which never came).¹⁷ Writing home the next month, Furlong noted that he “still

hadn't celebrated the finish of the war yet" with an expressive "ha!ha!" added to the complaint. "I guess they sure had some time in Toronto" – unlike Belgium, where he found himself. "Out here you would never know the difference," Fred be-moaned. "We had just come out of the line for rest & the next morning they lined us up & told us the war was over. We didn't even cheer." He had heard of great celebrations in Blighty, where recuperating soldiers were likely one step closer to returning home than the soldiers on the European continent. Foremost in Fred's mind – and filling his correspondence and that of his mates – was one central question: "Do you hear any rumours about when the troops are coming home?"¹⁸

Veteran soldier Pte. Stanley Vanderburgh, having rejoined the 28th Battalion just before the armistice, found himself in the "most advanced position on the front" when the highly anticipated news came. In late December, he sought to give his mother a full picture of how the hour of peace had approached – or as close as he was able given the censors. "Two hours before the armistice our battalion passed through Mons," he wrote, and took the village of Havre seven kilometres beyond it before dashing to the Canal du Centre. "A very sad thing occurred there," Vanderburgh recounted. "At two minutes to the hour [11:00] one of the boys gave his life in obedience to the order to clean up a crew of machine gunners." Twenty-year-old Nova Scotian Pte. George Lawrence Price had led a patrol to the far side of the canal and was fatally shot when he attacked the enemy with his Lewis machine gun.¹⁹ Given the ongoing push, Vanderburgh was filled with anxiety for his friends right to the end, and there was no jubilation or dancing when the war ceased. Instead, there was an all too familiar sense of loss. "We have all been through a lot and there were times when I said good-bye to all I hold dear, but it is over now," he wrote with relief. Later, Stanley would encounter the joy of war's end in Havre-Saint Pierre. As he walked through the street separated from his battalion, a man took him by the arm and directed him to his house. "He first showed me a comfortable bed and insisted that I go to sleep if only for a couple of hours," Vanderburgh described. "I explained I had to go find the battalion, which had gone another way." The man's family filled Stanley "with good things and [the stranger] changed into his best clothes and walked 1½ miles to the battalion to get permission for me to go and live with them." This was not permitted, to the man's great disappointment, and Stanley explained this through an interpreter. Nevertheless, the man "danced all along the street and kept bringing up people to shake hands with me," Stanley wrote. "When I told him my name he became greatly excited and said there was a town official of the same name and we were going to visit him that night." The party broke up before that happened, but the experience was something Vanderburgh would never forget. The fighting finally had come to end. He told his mother to expect him home in six months, "a beautiful time of year to arrive."²⁰

For the soldiers overseas who had "done their bit," the desire to return home to friends and family was a common thread in letters from this point onward. Instead of demobilizing and returning home immediately, however, Canadian troops would share in the Allied Army of Occupation. Prime Minister Borden saw this as another way to raise Canada's profile within the British Empire, while General

Currie anticipated that soldiers would get into trouble if they were left idle before they could be brought home. Soldiering was a disciplined occupation, with officers holding the ranks in check to ensure that the Canadians upheld the positive reputation that they had earned on the battlefield. In late November, soldiers loaded with the full weight of their packs, rifle, blanket, ammunition, and steel helmets marched for up to eight hours each day, covering up to 30 kilometres of the Belgian countryside. Blistered feet and drizzling rain dampened spirits, but the cheering crowds that greeted the Canadians in each town compensated for the boredom and exhaustion. Unsurprisingly, the mood of the local populace changed after the Canadians crossed into Germany in early December. All told, about half of the Canadian Corps made the 28-day trek to take up garrison duties around Cologne and Bonn. "This occupation of hostile territory was a first for the Dominion, as never before had Canada's civilian soldiers been asked to garrison the home terrain of a European enemy," historian Chris Hyland explained. It was a tense time, with Germany teetering on the brink of social, political and economic chaos, and the negotiations for a peace treaty still to come in Paris.²¹

"All the way from Valenciennes through Belgium we were welcomed by the people who had made arches and hung out flags made of anything they could get," Sgt. John Paulding wrote his cousin Ethel on 22 December. "On crossing the German border all this ceased but the people have welcomed us kindly and in some cases [have been] very friendly." The Canadians had now settled in barracks where they would remain until they demobilized, but they were allowed to visit the large German towns of Bonn and Cologne to the north and south. Paulding enjoyed the visits but, with the war over, he confessed that "I shall be glad when we leave and know I am on my way to Canada."²² Similarly, Pte. Furlong and his compatriots carried



The Canadians cross the Rhine into Germany, December 1918

out their “March to the Rhine,”²³ moving from town to town where they met French “civies” and billeted in “nice towns with nice people.” The reception was uplifting. “These people have been under the Germans for four years & talk about being glad to see us. Wow. They fairly eat one up,” he wrote his mother. “I have drank more coffee & cocoa on this trip than I ever did.”²⁴ Closer to the German border, where villages were small and scattered, it was more difficult to billet large groups of men. The soldiers were warned that the people were “a little hostile,” but Fred remarked that “we can bark, growl & show our teeth with the best of them.”²⁵

After such a long time away from home, post-armistice service seemed a burden rather than an honour. “Gee Mother but this life is getting on my nerves,” a frustrated Furlong wrote on 18 December. “Now that the war is over I want to get back to Canada right off the bat, but what I want & what I get are two very different things. We are having it real easy only parading in the morning & then I am not satisfied. The only thing that will make me happy is a little piece of paper saying ‘Your [sic] Fired.’”²⁶ Instead, he would face “the quietest Xmas that I have ever put in,” away from home “in a small town of Belgium & there is absolutely nothing doing. If it hadn’t of been for our Xmas dinner, which was different than usual, I would never know that it was Xmas.” His thoughts were not in Europe but on the prospects of getting home. “I heard some rumor in regards to demobilization yesterday & if they are true it will be sometime in May before I arrive in Canada,” he lamented. “They are going to take a division a month starting with the 1st Div. in February & as I am in the 4th Div. we will be the last to get back. It is not a very square way of doing it as there are lots of fellows in the 1st, 2nd, & 3rd Div. who just came over this year, but I guess that it is the quickest way of getting them all back.” He anticipated that his unit would head into Germany for occupation duty “for a month or two,” which failed to buoy his enthusiasm. “However,” the young soldier conceded, “I may consider myself pretty lucky that I am alive & able to go back at all.”²⁷



Paperwork in hand, Canadian soldiers await medical inspection as part of the demobilization process

Another wave of influenza hit in the winter of 1918-19, further complicating the demobilization process and dictating that some soldiers who had survived the war would not make it home in peacetime. Pte. Harry Lapier, part of the contingent of farmers' sons conscripted in May 1918, had found himself with the 4th Reserve Battalion training in England when the war ended. He too awaited demobilization and enjoyed Christmas Day festivities with his fellow soldiers. The next day, however, the young private felt ill. His condition worsened over the next two days, and on Saturday evening he began experiencing pain in his left side, which was aggravated whenever he breathed deeply. On Sunday, 29 December, the medical officer in camp told him to go to No. 12 Canadian General Hospital in Bramshott, where Harry complained of a headache and the pains in his left chest & back. His temperature spiked to 106°F that night, the doctor detected mucus in his left lung, and the patient's face turned an "ashy grey colour." His condition deteriorated further on New Year's Eve, leaving him comatose, with laboured breathing marked by a distinct "rattle." The doctor made an intercostal incision on his left side to drain the pus in his lung, but his temperature again spiked to 106°F. Harry did not recover and died at 7:50 p.m. on 1 January 1919.²⁸

Two of Harry's friends, fellow farmers Pte. Delloyd Lewis Brough and Pte. Fred Fewster, communicated the news and circumstances of the young soldier's death to his parents Paul and Prudence in Springford. "You have no doubt received the extremely sad message before this," they wrote. "It sure was an awful shock to all of us in this part of the camp." His mates had assumed all would be fine and "went on leave, thinking that Harry was not serious at all." When they returned and learned of his death, they could not believe it. Several of his mates attended his funeral on 7 January at Bramshott cemetery, "a quiet place at the rear of a small church about a mile from Bramshott camp. The graves are all fixed up neatly with a nice wooden cross bearing the name and number company and date on it." One of his closest friends reassured Harry's parents that they intended to return to the cemetery "in two or three weeks and see that Harry's grave is fixed up nice"²⁹ – a measure of consolation for a family grieving a son who had died suddenly so far from home.³⁰ In the end, the Spanish influenza pandemic resulted in a staggering 50 to 100 million deaths worldwide – somewhere between 2.5% and 5% of the *global* population – and claimed more lives in a few months than did the battles of the entire First World War.³¹ In Canada alone, 50,000 deaths are attributed to the pandemic out of a population of only eight million.³²

These losses put the war in context. While nightmarish in its form and mass casualties, most Canadians did not question the broader, noble purpose for which so many men had fought and died. "Faced with loss on an unprecedented scale during the First World War," historian Jonathan Vance observed, Canadians removed the sting from death on the battlefield by affirming "that their loved ones had died to defend western civilization and Christianity and to found a new nation from the ashes of war."³³ Chaplain Capt. John Hilary Barnett, who preached to the members and adherents of the Norwich and Bookton Presbyterian congregations from France, penned a reflection soon after the armistice that looked optimistically

at the future. “When I wrote to you, a year ago from France, the Empire, (indeed the whole world) lay shrouded under the great shadow of the world war,” he wrote:

Since that time we have passed through very dark and trying days, days which tried the nerve and endurance of our best and bravest. Today we are able to look upon a world in quietness, over which the Dove of peace is about to fold its wings. It is difficult though, as yet to grasp fully the thought that now men can rest in peace and quietness, undisturbed by the roar of the guns or the hail of death from the sky.



Rev. John Hilary Barnett, c.1928

Like other people of faith, he thanked God for backing the Allied cause. They had fought the good fight, and he sought divine justice in its aftermath. “A just peace is all we may ask for but a just peace will also be a hard peace,” the minister emphasized, “for stern reckoning must be made with those who so lightly plunged the world in war and wrought such harm.”³⁴

The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 brought a “hard peace” and it also signalled another step in Canada’s maturation as an autonomous world actor within the British Empire. The Allies agreed to Germany’s request for an Armistice in November 1918, and two months later some of the most powerful people in the world gathered at the Palais de Versailles in Paris to devise the peace terms that would be imposed on Germany and to debate the future of the world more generally. Over the next six months, “the peacemakers did their work in an atmosphere of fear: first that they would never be able to put European civilization back together again but also that there was worse still to come,” historian Margaret MacMillan explained. “An image, used often during the Peace Conference, was that of being on the edge of a volcano which was about to blow up.”³⁵ For Canada, the conference was not only important in terms of stemming the revolutionary tides of Bolshevism, socialism, and anarchism in Europe (and perhaps even in Canada), but also in confirming Canada’s new status on the world stage. In light of Canada’s wartime contributions, Prime Minister Borden secured the right to send two Canadian delegates to sit as part of the British Empire delegation. The dominion representatives had little influence in shaping the peace treaty itself, but Canada did pen an independent signature – albeit under that of the British Empire. Thus, although Canada remained subordinate to Britain (both legally and in the eyes of most countries globally), the Paris Peace Conference and Treaty of Versailles enhanced Canada’s prestige and emerging international personality, including a seat in the newly-formed League of Nations that was designed to maintain peace by arbitrating international disputes. The “hard peace” came in the terms handed to Germany on 28 June 1919, which broke up and redistributed the German Empire and demanded substantial reparation payments from Germany for starting the war.³⁶ (Germans resented these terms, which later provided fodder for Adolf Hitler who would systematically undo the treaty in the 1930s.)

Such politics were far removed from the realities of life for the soldiers eagerly awaiting demobilization. The Canadian commitment to the occupation of Germany officially ended on 26 January 1919, and even General Currie acknowledged that the Canadian soldiers were "very anxious to get home."³⁷ Demobilizing an army of this size would take time and organization, however, and transportation resources were limited. In early February, Cpl. John Paulding was "in a village about the size of Norwich in Belgium" where he patiently waited for his service to come to an end. "The people are very kind and if you will only be friendly they can't do enough for you," he recounted. Rather than planning to head back to England with his unit, he applied to work in a demobilization centre in France. "I hope to be married to a French girl near Bethune," he notified his cousin Harold Poldon, "and as the government will not transport any of the soldier's family's [*sic*] from France or Belgium" until after general demobilization he doubted that he would get back to England before July or August.³⁸ Pte. Fred Furlong was also in Belgium. "Everything going fine & dandy but very quiet," he wrote home.³⁹ His unit did not go to Germany after all, but was preparing "to march through Brussels, Paris & London. Kind of a show division. It won't be too bad," he conceded, "but I would just as soon march through Toronto. However, orders are always changing & I am living in hopes of this one doing likewise." Like Paulding, he enjoyed Belgium. "The village we are in is very small, but the goodness of the people we are billeted with make up for everything that the village lacks," he wrote. "We always have soup for dinner & before going to bed & believe me you have to hand it to the French & Belgian people for making soup."⁴⁰

Interactions with European civilians in a peacetime context were a welcome change from combat, but the soldiers still longed for home. The transition from military service to life back in Canada would not be easy. Harold Innis explained that:

Whether we will it or not, Army life has left an indelible impress on the lives of all those who have come in contact with it. The discipline, which considers every individual as a mere unit of a great organization, has had its effects good and evil. At all times, under every condition of weather, under every inconvenience, whether it be due to hostile activity or to red tape, the fact is always forced upon the soldier that he must obey orders. The result is more or less an indifference to what happens, on the part of the average rear rank private. His only worries are his rations or his mail. This cramping of individuality and the enforced idleness that usually accompanies it, have eradicated many of the characteristics that marked the ordinary civilian. It has introduced and created a lassitude, an indifference to surroundings that is not in his best interests. The man, who has been over the top taking chances with life and death, has become carelessly indifferent to the mere happenings of every day life. The man, who has endured the hardships of active service where danger is not so prevalent has drifted into much the same lackadaisical attitude towards life. ... This attitude that has been caused by various influences is responsible for the desire of nearly every average returned soldier to have at least a good time on his return.⁴¹



Opening of the Khaki College, YMCA, London, England, February 1919

In the months ahead, the Canadians overseas took their first steps towards “rehabilitation” into postwar civilian life. Like many soldiers, Fred Furlong attended “Khaki College,”⁴² in his case taking French and German language classes every day. “Perhaps by the time I hit Canada, I will be a master of languages, but I have my doubts,” he admitted. “However, I am learning enough to carry on a little conversation. Where I lack in French I make up with motions.”⁴³ He returned to England in March and soon found himself on a winning baseball team. “Well Mother they kept coaxing me until I decided to stop here awhile to play ball,” he wrote home. “So can’t say just when I am liable to hit Canada, although I don’t think that it will be very long.” His team had won the area title and would play in London in the semi-finals for the British championship the following week. “We are having a good time of it & don’t do anything but play ball,” he wrote, exemplifying the value of baseball in the post-armistice period as a way of keeping soldiers occupied and in check. “Baseball’s ability to recall Canada, home and peace comforted men while its expressions gave them a vocabulary to express and suppress their experiences at the front,” historian Andrew Horral observed.⁴⁴ For Furlong, baseball, memories of home, and expectations for the future were intertwined. “I am at the old ball game again,” one letter described. “Pitched a seven inning game yesterday & won 12-3, not too bad eh! Feel a lit-



For Canadian soldiers like Fred Furlong, baseball offered entertainment and generated memories of home

tle stiff over it, but that will soon work out.” The victory was satisfying, but Fred’s thoughts immediately drifted to his real desire. “Hope to be able to play a game in a place called Otterville, Ontario on the 1st July,” he anticipated. “Is there a place in Canada by that name? It’s been so long since I last saw it, that I quite forget.”⁴⁵

Transitioning to Peace on the Home Front

Otterville had not forgotten Fred Furlong or the other boys overseas. After the parties and parades were over, the townships prepared for the sober realities of transitioning to peacetime and the return of the service men and women. As historian Jonathan Vance eloquently argues in his landmark book *Death So Noble*, Canadian families and the state gave meaning to the deaths of 60,000 Canadians by constructing a myth of purposeful sacrifice at the end of the war. Rather than seeing the war as a meaningless slaughter, the lives lost represented the purposeful sacrifice of a nation that had produced an elite fighting force that had won Canada respect and international recognition on the battlefields of Europe. The war was the crucible upon which a modern, Canadian nation had been forged. The war profoundly changed the country, from Canada’s international status through to everyday routines of family life in the rural townships of Oxford County.

Although the fighting had ended, death notices continued to trickle home from Europe. These losses, coupled with influenza deaths at home, meant that the Armistice did not bring an end to grief.⁴⁶ The combined funeral of Arthur Rowe (a long-serving veteran killed in action in October) and Wilfred Edmonds (a recent volunteer who succumbed to influenza in a military hospital in Lancaster the following month) was a case in point. Both of their names appeared on the Norwich Trinity Church’s honour roll, which was “tastefully decorated” with seven blue leaves for soldiers who gave their lives and forty-seven white leaves representing the soldiers who had survived. The banner was carried into the service by two veterans “and placed on an easel in full view of the congregation.” The chapel and sanctuary were draped with white and purple flags that “symbolised both the joy of peace and the sombre hue of mourning.”⁴⁷ During the service, the community recognized *in absentia* Arthur’s brother Major Hugh Rowe, and post-humously Fred Croxford, both of whom had won medals for gallantry. They also paid their respects to the absent Isabel Rowe, the widowed mother of Arthur, Hugh, and Frank who had moved to Folkstone, England during the war to be closer to her three sons fighting in France. She remained in England working with the Maple Leaf Club in Folkstone and visiting soldiers in hospital.⁴⁸

The soldiers overseas had played their part, and so had the female volunteers like Mrs. Rowe. When the Norwich Women’s Patriotic League (WPL) met in late January 1919, their figures indicated that 43% of the 538,283 Canadians who enlisted came from Ontario – and about one in nine made the supreme sacrifice. 4200 Canadian soldiers remained in French and British hospitals, with many others having already returned to Canada. “We are more interested in the 168th and 71st than any other regiments, because some of them were especially our kin,” the patriotic society admitted. By their count, 101 men from the 168th had died overseas, and



Canadian parcels in England await forwarding to the troops

another 208 had been wounded. Another forty Oxford soldiers who enlisted with the 71st had “laid down their lives for the noblest cause in the history of humanity.” They had done their part. So had the Norwich WPL, whose work – by their own stocktaking – “compares admirably with any other part of the province, according to prorate in numbers and wealth.” From September 1914 to September 1918 it had raised \$10,645 and sent \$3,000 to the Red Cross Society. It had furnished nearly 100 boxes of hospital supplies, 200 quilts, and 3000 pairs of socks to men overseas, as well as “more than 300 boxes of good things for the soldiers to eat.” Local politicians paid tribute to the league for its “faithful” and “untiring devotion to this noble work,” acknowledging that “these good ladies have worked hard and long without remuneration to provide comfort and good cheer for the men in the field of battle.”⁴⁹

In the patriotic leagues throughout the townships, women had played an essential role in the war effort, their contributions recognized as their communities made the transition to peace. In April 1919, the Great War Veterans Association celebrated the work of the Norwich WPL in a letter to its president, Miss J.H. Carroll:

The members of the G.W.V.A. of Norwich are pleased to have this opportunity of expressing through you, to the ladies of Norwich, their admirations of the gallant part you have played during the great struggle of the past four years. Your unflinching loyalty to duty during the long months of the war was an inspiration to us, who were carrying on away across the seas. It was a source of deep satisfaction to feel that while we were holding the lines over there you were holding the home lines.

Your motherly interest in the boys over there has driven away the gloom many a time when we were bowed down, worn out, homesick and longing for the old familiar friends and faces. Your untiring efforts to supply those comforts so essential to a soldier, we wish to say, is deeply appreciated and as long as we live we shall always remember with joy your tokens of kindness in an

untiring devotion to our cause. Without the assistance of the heroic mothers, sisters and sweet-hearts, this war could not have been won.

We wish you to feel a share in this great salvation from tyranny and to show that we feel a deep and sincere gratitude for your gallant conduct, we wish you to receive this token for what we all must claim was, Distinguished Service.⁵⁰

They sent along a bouquet of flowers – a modest token of appreciation, but recognition nonetheless.

Township churches also joined in the chorus of gratitude for women's work during the war. In the Norwich Methodist Church, Reeve Henry Park moved the following resolution of appreciation, which was seconded by ex-Reeve Charles Carroll:

We, the members of this Church and Congregation in Christian fellowship with all the other churches and the goodwill of all our citizens, desire to express to the officers, members and all other helpers in association with our Patriotic work, our most sincere regard and appreciation for their faithful work during the past four years and more. These good ladies have worked hard and long without remuneration to provide comfort and good cheer for the men in the field of battle. Again and again have our men and men from other lands testified that but for boxes of food and comforts by the Patriotic Societies at home they, by German cruelty, would have starved to death. Sad to say in spite of all that has been done, many have died for want of food or become physical wrecks. Our hearts are full of gratitude that words cannot express for your untiring devotion to this noble work. The Giver of all good will not forget you through the coming years for your work of faith and labour of love.⁵¹

In the townships, women volunteered at home while their loved ones fought overseas. Their involvement in organizations had not only offered a welcome distraction from traditional domestic roles; women had proven their organizational abilities during the war and could no longer be dismissed as incapable of assuming public responsibilities. When two women were chosen to serve on the Norwich Public Library Board in January 1919, it marked the first time that women had cracked the gender barrier on a municipal board.⁵²



Women employed at the Norwich Broom and Brush factory, 1919

During the war, women's new roles in patriotic societies, in farming, and as voters were undertaken in addition to traditional domestic duties. The question

remained whether conceptions of women's responsibilities in Canadian society really had changed – and if so, whether these changes would persist when the men returned. Wartime duties had been accepted out of necessity. The soldiers not only needed support overseas, but their jobs needed to be filled back home. This gave women new opportunities to participate in non-traditional tasks, leading to newfound confidence and independence. What would this mean for Canada now that the war was over? “The state would undoubtedly gain through the individuality of its women, but it would lose if it forgot that woman's greatest influence is in the home,” Innis contended at the time. “On the other hand, on the return of the men with families the necessity for women to support the household will no longer exist. Many will welcome a return to the old conditions of life and the more who do welcome this return, the easier will be the solution of the problem of unemployment.”⁵³

“Just as good a man as when he left Canada”⁵⁴: The Returned Soldiers

The problems of the returned soldier that are the problems of Canada in perspective are at hand and in abundance. A people, virile and possessed of energy, characteristic of the products of the climate; resources surpassed by no country; capital, as to which the financial situation of Canada need cause no fear; and above all the possibility of organization, such that these factors may be so utilized as to promote the best interest of the nation; these are the cornerstones of national progress. Work is the first and only road to prosperity, national and enduring. The evils of army life, so far as they have influenced the returned soldier, must be combated as well as the evils of civilian life to which the soldiers return, the remedies are similar and their effectiveness in either case depends largely on the influences of the home, the school, the press and the church, or an education in general.... At the present moment the task of the Canadian people is that of cleaning house, preparatory to the return of her citizen army.⁵⁵

With these conclusions, Harold Innis summarized the findings of his M.A. thesis on “The Returned Soldier.” In his view, addressing the challenges posed by the return of so many men inevitably reshaped by their experiences overseas would require a concerted Canadian effort. Governments and the private sector would have to work together to ensure employment, and wives and children would have to reintegrate men into family life. “The furnace of war has melted men into a brotherhood in which the frills of humanity have disappeared,” Innis eloquently observed, and the churches would have to reinvigorate a sense of morality and purpose into their lives. “The wholesomeness of Canadian life” depended upon the soldiers' successful reintegration. “In the name of those who have fallen in the defense of the liberties of



Harold Innis in the 1920s

the country and in obligation to those who have returned from that struggle,” Innis wrote, “the Canadian people have before them the task of presenting to the world, a nation morally and materially great, a monument worthy of the men living and dead who have made this possible.”⁵⁶

The transition would begin with positive homecomings. “Tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp, the boys are marching but this time thanks to Him who rules on High and the indomitable will of the boys the march is homeward bound,” the *Gazette* celebrated.⁵⁷ In late 1918, Chaplain Captain John Hilary Barnett (like the other township residents still overseas) explained that “our thought over here at present is demobilization and ‘Home Sweet Home,’ and when our lads do return we feel assured they will receive a welcome, which will make up to them in a measure for that through which they have passed. Let it be ours to demobilize all things that are wrong and mobilize those things which are true and beautiful.”⁵⁸ The process would not be easy. Bringing the Canadian military home from Europe entailed the largest movement of people in Canadian history up to that time, and military officers and civilian planners worked with aid agencies to try and make it as efficient as possible. For soldiers who had been overseas for years and now waited months before boarding a ship for home, frustrations mounted when the proposed “first over, first back” policy (which would have seen those who served in Europe the longest heading home first) was replaced by the return of entire units (including soldiers in training camps with no front line service). For others, however, the new system seemed more appropriate. “The men hoped and believed that they would have an opportunity of returning to their bases as members of the fighting units with which they have so long been associated,” the *Gazette* reported. Rather than returning as “a mob of farmers or bankers or clerks, which our country wants to get rid of as quickly as possible,” many soldiers envisaged marching as units into their “home town with our regimental flag waving and the band playing.”⁵⁹ Because the 71st and 168th had been broken up and the soldiers dispersed into other units, however, the demobilization process meant that men from the townships did not return as a large group.⁶⁰ Instead, they trickled home as individuals and in small groups between late 1918 and the late summer of 1919, when the final Canadian forces left England.

The townships’ war weariness at the end of 1918 elicited a sharp rebuke from the *Gazette* just after Christmas. “What’s wrong?” the newspaper asked when local crowds failed to show up at the train stations to welcome returning soldiers around that time:

Every citizen should be overwhelmed with a feeling of shame because of the disgracefully cool reception given some of the returned lads from overseas. We’ve heard time and time again gathering after gathering in church and hall sing: ‘God save our splendid men, Send them safe home again, They are so dear to us – God save our men.’

With tears in our eyes we have sung this song. But now that it is all over and the dear lads are really coming home, back to the old town they have dreamed about for months past, we give them such a reception as would make them

wish they too lie beneath the poppies with their comrades in these far off war cursed lands. The war itself was an unutterable tragedy but the lack of appreciation of the great serves rendered by our own lads and the utter indifference manifested is the saddest tragedy of all. Say or think what you will our boys are being sadly disappointed. This must not be, morning, noon or night let Norwich, young and old, turn out and welcome the lads back.⁶¹

Township residents did their best to make up for their oversights. Pte. Norman Birtch returned home “unheralded, unsung, and unwelcomed in any way” and quietly made his way to his home on Washington Ave. in Norwich “where his mother and sister had for months in hope and fear awaited his return.” The next morning, when “news of his arrival quickly spread through the village,” a special reception committee paraded to the Birtch home, where the Anglican Church rector welcomed the returned hero. “Pte. Birtch replied feelingly and thanked one and all for their hearty welcome,” the newspaper reported. “The reception wound up with the singing of the National Anthem and three cheers for Pte. Birtch.”⁶²

However much the soldiers appreciated the welcome home, they often wanted to forget the war or to simply move on. They would carry the horrors of the trenches with them for the rest of their lives, as well as a sense of loss for friends and mates who had been claimed by the Western Front. Perhaps no one could really understand what they had endured. Loved ones had read their letters and stories of battles in newspapers, but only those who had seen first-hand the carnage of trench warfare could really understand what it was actually like. For many returned soldiers, war stories were something to be recounted only with those who had been there. Veterans’ organizations like the Great War Veterans’ Association (which became the Royal Canadian Legion in 1925) provided them with an outlet to maintain relationships, with local branches in Norwich, Otterville, Woodstock, Delhi, and Tillsonburg. Tommy Atkins’s “Veteran’s Column” in the *Norwich Gazette*, which appeared soon after the end of the war, offered short

updates on returned soldiers, their ongoing medical treatments, and tongue-in-cheek commentary. In one column, Atkins wrote of the postal service catching up with returned veteran Archie Farrell, delivering parcels he was meant to receive overseas. “The rumour is that he ate it in the garden, in the mud, blindfolded and enjoyed its contents dreaming of beautiful Flanders.”⁶³ While many veterans appreciated the light hearted repartee, others may have found it too irreverent. A close friend of Harold Innis explained that, unlike other veterans who looked back upon the war “with an amused tolerance and nostalgia,” Harold “never spoke of it except briefly and with loathing.” It was horrific, and his thoughts did not dwell



Archie Farrell

on his own wounding but “of young men being destroyed, who might have been so valuably useful.”⁶⁴

For returned soldiers, a sense of usefulness came from returning to work on the farm, getting a new job in town or in the city, or resuming a previous career. The

transition was not always easy, and returned soldiers across the country found themselves frustrated when they realized that men who had remained home had received promotions and pay raises while discharged soldiers returned to their old jobs and, in light of wartime inflation, with less real pay. Others expressed dismay when they discovered that their “temporary” wartime replacements had taken their jobs permanently. For example, Ernest Vigar, who had enlisted with the 168th in 1916 and had been wounded in the field serving with the PPCLI in the summer of 1918, wrote to the Ontario Soldiers’ Aid Commission in May 1919 complaining that his clerical job at the post office remained in the hands of the woman



Ernest Vigar

who had replaced him. Before he had enlisted, the postmaster had promised that “his job would be held good for him when he returned from Overseas.” The federal post department responded that the Norwich post office employed and paid its own staff, and they could hire and fire as they pleased. Vigar never got his job back and ended up becoming a mechanic.⁶⁵ In other cases, when employers were rumoured to deny jobs to returning soldiers, veterans lashed out in newspapers and other public forums. James Milne, the owner of Borden’s Milk Condenser, had to defend himself against rumours of anti-veteran sentiments in the *Gazette*, emphasizing that he prided himself on “establishing returned men in a comfortable meeting place” and that his hiring practices gave “returned men the preference in every case.” Nine of his company’s employees were ex-soldiers, six of whom had been overseas. “These men have received good wages, fair treatment, and have been used in every way the same as others employed,” Milne insisted. “Some of them have taken advantage of being returned soldiers and have not reciprocated the courteous treatment accorded them, leaving when they felt like it and returning when they were ready. These men were never reprimanded or spoken to in any way and their jobs were in every case held for them” – even though their behaviour had caused the company “considerable inconvenience.” The Norwich Branch of the Great War Veterans’ Association accepted his explanation and the controversy was settled.⁶⁶ For many veterans, however, the struggle to find employment after the war was a bitter pill to swallow after putting their lives on the line for Canada and the Empire.

The transition to peace presented new challenges for veterans who had sustained permanent injuries. The first step in a soldier’s transition was to recover from one’s wounds. The postwar ordeals of conscript Hibbert Harris are a case in point. Harris had arrived in France on 29 September 1918 and had sustained shrapnel wounds to both legs and his left foot six days later at Cambrai. He was grateful to be alive, but the healing process was daunting. He moved between three Canadian general hospitals in England over the next six months, where medical personnel excised his wounds and sensory nerve. His left side healed without complication but a wound on his right leg did not. “All the muscles, skin, and nerves have been carried away,” one report noted. An x-ray later showed that shrapnel had fractured his fibula and large pieces (as well as some shrapnel dust) remained in the wound. The ulcers in

his leg proved “persistently unhealthy” and required continuous care. As his condition began to improve in late spring 1919, he was invalidated back to Canada where his hospitalization continued in London. Suffering from swelling and inflammation of his right foot each day and intense pain each night, Harris could only walk at a very slow pace owing to limited movement in his foot. A bone graft and skin transplant seemed to help, and that October he was able to go on weekend leave back to his parents’ house at the corner of Church and Front Streets in Norwich. He looked forward to resuming work as a harness maker. In January 1920, however, the graft became septic and failed, so surgeries continued. The injury had cut his tendon, leaving his foot at an angle, but he could “stand well in spite of the non-union of the Fibula close to the ankle.” Walking remained painful, however, and his final medical report indicated that he could likely resume his former trade – “with limitations.” Harris recovered sufficiently to secure his military release in June 1920, and for the rest of his life was entitled to wear a brass metal stripe on his military uniform indicating that he had been injured in battle. Under that uniform, he would bear large scars that continuously reminded him of his involuntary service for the remaining fifty-five years of his life.⁶⁷

Returned soldiers with physical disabilities or scars of war offered visible reminders to township residents of the dangerous realities endured by those who had served overseas. For some, it was a physical disfigurement, such as Walter Howell who lost his nose to shrapnel and Bert “Bob” Barham who lost a portion of his right ear.⁶⁸ For others, it was a limp or restricted mobility that could affect postwar livelihoods, as was the case with Thomas Carroll Abraham who had a crippled leg owing to shrapnel (which a medical board determined would reduce his capacity to earn a living by 20%).⁶⁹ Those who had lost a limb – such as Clarence McKee and Charlie Orum, who each had a leg amputated below the knee, and Harry Barnett who had an arm removed owing to severe shrapnel damage⁷⁰ – had to adjust to the realities of how their postwar bodies worked and looked and, in some cases, were unable to resume their prewar occupation. John Boughner not only lost his left foot, he also suffered a serious chest wound and had been gassed. He never fully recovered, dying in 1923 from his service-related injuries.⁷¹ Others came back with respiratory problems, often associated with exposure to poison gas (such as Roy Marr who suffered from chronic bronchitis), or hearing loss (such as Leon “Dick” Sales of East Oxford⁷²) that affected them for the rest of their lives.

Some soldiers returned home bearing other forms of invisible wounds: what today are considered post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) or operational stress injuries (OSI). English-born Pte. Charles Biddis, who worked at the Schell Farm in East Oxford at the start of the war, had enlisted in August 1916 at the age of 48 by falsely claiming to be ten years younger. While serving with the 1st Canadian Forces Infantry Works Battalion in France, he received shrapnel wounds to his right side in early October 1917. After he recovered from his physical wounds, he was diagnosed with myalgia and a “nervous debility” from trench life. He returned to hospital for treatment in July 1918, where he contracted influenza the next month. Doctors noted his general weakness and nervousness. He was easily star-

tled by unexpected noise and it took him nearly a day to fully calm down from each episode. Easily fatigued, any exertion such as fast walking or running a few yards caused him dyspnoea and palpitations. "The man shows well defined nervousness and reacts markedly to sudden noises or unexpected stimuli as taps or touching body," a report designating Biddis as medically unfit described in December 1918. "He shows the effect of his service and age, upon his nervous system but no organic sickness can be demonstrated."⁷³ When he returned home, the Soldiers' Aid Commission concurred that "war service was hard on him" and that his injuries left him unable to continue working as a farm labourer. Biddis decided to move to Woodstock with his sister and received vocational training to get into the shoe repair business.⁷⁴

The federal government established special provisions to loan money to returned soldiers who wanted to purchase or improve their own farms. If a veteran met the requirements for physical health, moral character, assets, and capability, the soldier settlement scheme would provide loans up to \$7500 for land, stock, and equipment (repayable at 5% interest) or \$5000 for land already owned by an applicant. John William Ernest Cole, who had joined the 168th in early 1916 and fought in France with the 3rd Machine Gun Company, was 29 years old when he was discharged as medically unfit in June 1918. In addition to sustaining a shrapnel wound during the battle of Lens, he suffered from nephritis (inflammation of the kidneys) and high blood pressure during the war, which left him with headaches and leg pains.⁷⁵ Invalidated back to Canada, he rejoined his wife Alice in Norwich and purchased a farm on Lot 17, Concession 4, RR 2, Norwich, with Soldier Settlement Board support. They immediately started a family, and by January 1922 had three children under the age of five. At this point, he applied for extra support. Members of his family had fallen sick on three occasions, John suffered from appendicitis, and his son swallowed a penny and had to have it removed by operation (for which they still owed the doctor \$50). Family finances were severely strained, yet he also helped support his brother Harry. Crop yields had been poor, and he struggled to meet the large payments needed to start a farming operation.⁷⁶ The files are silent about Cole's ultimate fate, but he did not have an easy transition to civilian life.

For other war veterans, the return home to Oxford County meant starting a new life with a war bride. English-born infantryman Edgar Wallace, who had worked on the Co-hoe and Croxford farms prior to enlistment in 1916, avoided serious injury serving with the 2nd Battalion in France. While on furlough in late 1918, he met Therese in England and married her on 1 March 1919. She promptly immigrated to Canada and lived in Burgessville until her husband joined her that August.⁷⁷ In



John Edgar Wallace and his English war bride Therese were married in March 1919

another case, English-born Quaker Harold Parker arrived in Canada in 1914 only to enlist with the 168th in January 1915. During a prolonged stint in England, he met Eve and the two were granted permission to marry on 27 October 1917. Tense times followed as Sgt. Parker left his bride to fight through the bloody battles of the Hundred Days, but he emerged physically unscathed. Eve and their newborn daughter Ruth sailed to Canada in early 1919 to live with the Carroll family in Norwich until Sgt. Parker returned home that May, when the young family took up residence on Centre Street.⁷⁸ Sgt. Edgar Beeney of Holbrook met his bride Maria in Pas de Calais, France, and they married in January 1916 after Beeney returned from a nine-day leave. In the fall of 1918 Maria and her newborn son Edgar immigrated to Holbrook and awaited Beeney's demobilization. After he returned in April 1919, he worked as farm labour in North Oxford.⁷⁹ Londoner Arthur Back, who had immigrated to the Otterville area to work as farm labour in 1913, enlisted with the 168th three years later. While in England, he married Daisy, a woman from his home borough, before heading to the front with the 18th Battalion. He would serve nearly two years in France, but he managed to see his wife on two 14-day leaves to England before she immigrated to Otterville in early 1919 with her sister Lillian. Arthur arrived in August, and by 1921 he had purchased his own farm.⁸⁰ These wartime unions obviously brought new people to the townships, and they encouraged the returned soldiers and their new families to set roots in the communities and reach for a better future.

A fuller study of the veterans of Oxford County awaits its historian. The Through Veterans Eyes project,⁸¹ currently under development, will offer future researchers access to First World War pension files that will shed insight into the livelihoods and health of the returned soldiers who settled in the townships after the war. "The separate fates of half a million veterans defy generalization," historian Desmond Morton observed. "Some were 'Old Originals' from 1914; others were conscripts with a few months' service. Half the members of the CEF never got beyond England."⁸² Their postwar journeys would be as varied as their prewar background and wartime experiences. In the broadest of terms, many Canadian soldier settlers failed to make it as farmers owing to the major agricultural recession in the early 1920s and then the Great Depression in the 1930s. Furthermore, many veterans who



"The Norwich Soldiers Club Senior O.H.A. entry" in 1920. Left to right - back row: Percy Newton, Anson Arn, Frank Pritchard (manager), Harold Sweazey, and Ken Marshall. Front row: Ernest Vigar, Fred Newton, and Harvey Searles.

received vocational training after the war found there was little market for their skills and ended up underemployed. The administration of veterans' pensions, high veterans' unemployment rates, and disability benefits all proved frustrating.⁸³ The townships of Oxford County, however, still boasted some of the most productive agriculture land in the country, and many of the soldiers from the area returned to well-established farms that could provide for them and their families. During the war they had dreamt of returning, and once resettled they could resume their "normal" lives. But could anyone return to "normal" who had experienced the horrors of the Western Front and left friends behind in the cemeteries of France and Belgium? They would harbour private grief, finding camaraderie in conversations with other veterans who had been there. They would also participate in acts of public remembrance that allowed the residents of the townships who had not been overseas to commemorate the sacrifices and ensure that the "war to end all wars" was not forgotten.

Public Commemoration and Memorialization

The world is entering upon a great period of reconstruction in which Norwich should participate. Shall this opportunity of bettering our village be allowed to slip past? The Memorial question, the returned soldier question, and the reconstruction question are surely big enough problems to arouse an interest. Let everyone make it a personal responsibility and help out in some way.

- Norwich Board of Trade, November 1918⁸⁴

Almost as soon as the war ended, local organizations initiated discussions about how they should memorialize the war in the townships. Noting that other Ontario towns had applied for captured German artillery "trophies" to adorn civic spaces in memory of the war, the *Norwich Gazette* proclaimed "we want a gun."⁸⁵ There were not enough to go around, however, and its bid did not succeed. Other suggestions included dedicating a local high school in memory of the fallen, or building a memorial hospital, or erecting a prominent monument in the town cemetery, or a fountain or monument on the library lawn near the main crossroads. The Board of Trade urged collective action, expecting that "every public spirited man in Norwich" should participate in the deliberations on how best to commemorate the war. "Passively waiting for something to turn up never got us anywhere," it cajoled.⁸⁶

Because the Imperial War Graves Commission insisted that the bodies of Canadian soldiers who died overseas remain in European cemeteries near the old battlefields, the families and friends of the fallen did not have easy access to graves. Instead, local memorials served as sites of mourning and common remembrance for an entire community.⁸⁷ Almost immediately after the war, East Oxford dedicated a simple stone monument to "Our Heroes," which stood directly south of the township hall, bearing the names of ten local men who died in wartime service.⁸⁸ In early September 1919, another relatively simple stone monument was erected in the New Durham cemetery (which sits in North Norwich Township) listing the names of six local boys who had died in the war.⁸⁹ The town of Norwich had yet



Chauncey Poole travelled to his son Bruce's grave at Niagara Cemetary, Iwuy Nord, France

to decide upon a permanent memorial, and instead hosted a Great War Veterans' Association event at the local cemetery to honour "her fallen heroes ... who today rest beneath the little white crosses bearing their names and regimental numbers in the far away fields of France and Flanders." Local residents placed 27 white crosses "in the home cemetery to represent the 27 that lay far across the seas." The service, led by former army chaplain Rev. Dr. John Hilary Barnett, featured the Norwich band and a parade of veterans who each laid a wreath of flowers at the foot of one of the crosses. The final message was to the fallen:

Sweet be your rest; the task is done.

The tramp of armies, boom of gun.

The furious cry of Savage Hun, Are silent now.

The Victor's won in Flander's fields.⁹⁰

After the ceremony, discussions ensued about what form Norwich's memorial should take and where it should be located. Rev. Dr. Barnett, the retired captain who had returned to his congregation in Norwich, was the unanimous choice to chair the meeting. While Barnett and secretary George Lees wanted "a fitting memorial in the cemetery placed in a prominent and commanding position on the east side," Rev. Dr. Ross made the case for "a park in a convenient place in the village." With no obvious consensus, Reeve Henry Park agreed to chair a committee to explore options and arrive at a decision. "If the scheme now materializes," the *Gazette* noted, "Norwich in the course of a few months will have what she should have had many years ago."⁹¹ It would take longer than that. When Trinity Church unveiled its handsome honour roll – an oak shield with seven leaves inscribed with the names of congregation members who had been killed in service – in late October, the newspaper grew increasingly impatient. "We owe it to the lads who have paid the price to put some mark in this village by which the succeeding generations shall be reminded of the self sacrifice of the men during this war," it insisted. "Don't drop it."⁹²

On Victoria Day in 1921, Norwich finally unveiled its memorial in front of the local high school. It is a striking but sobering monument, with a large marble statue of a weeping lady – "the Spirit of Canada" – mourning her dead. The statue itself was sculpted in France, with delays in securing ocean transport preventing the memorial from being completed in 1920 as originally planned. "Perhaps it is just as



The Norwich cenotaph in its original location in front of Hadley High School, 1921

well,” the *Norwich Gazette* affirmed, because the initial intent was to place it in front of the local library “but now everybody feels that the High School Park is a more suitable location.” The base of the monument (fashioned by a Woodstock carver) was made of hewn granite, with a tablet of polished granite bearing the names of the fallen and the short tribute: “Erected by the village of Norwich and township of North Norwich, to commemorate the service and sacrifice of their citizen soldiers in the World War. 1914 – ‘Lest We Forget’ – 1918.” There was no gloating of victory, no stone soldier standing at attention with rifle at his side ready to “do his bit.” Instead, the sculpture evokes a sense of mourning and of loss. “The whole idea is allegorical,” the *Norwich Gazette* explained on 26 May 1921. “It is a personification of the Spirit of Canada, bowed in grief and sorrow and weeping for her lost sons. This intends to perpetuate the memory of the disastrous results of the Great World War.”⁹³

Today the Oxford County website suggests that the statue represents the local “Quaker response of pacifism and the futility of war,”⁹⁴ but this is a revisionist interpretation that would not have been shared by Norwich or township residents at the time. The community had not espoused a message of pacifism during the war. It had “done its bit.” The memorial spoke to grieving hearts, but mourning and acknowledgment of loss did not mean pointlessness or futility. Far from it. The names on the memorial recognized men who had bravely answered the call of King and country and made the supreme sacrifice for freedom and democracy. The unveiling ceremony on 24 May 1921 laid clear these themes. The 22nd Regimental band from Woodstock led a march of veterans from



The “Spirit of Canada” mourns the fallen atop Norwich’s memorial cenotaph

a rendezvous point downtown to the memorial on the high school grounds. “To the strains of martial music the columns of soldiers entered the park, and marched in true soldier fashion to the base of the monument.” The hundreds of onlookers were instructed to remove their hats out of respect for the fallen. Speeches emphasized a central theme: “Lest We Forget.” MPP Arthur T. Walker (who had been the town reeve during the war) appealed to the audience to “maintain the standards for which [the soldiers] fought and died.” Local minister Rev. O.E. Kendall acknowledged the “pangs of sorrow” felt by many in attendance: “sorrow for those whose dust lies slumbering in Flanders fields.” He reassured those who grieved that these men “counted not their lives dear unto themselves,” and also praised “those who carried on at home.” Veteran Rev. Dr. Barnett impressed upon the township residents that they “not to break faith” with those who had died, proclaiming that the soldiers had “died a glorious death; let us not mourn, but rather let us prove worthy of the men who died in Flanders fields.” Canadians were indebted to those who had fallen, not in a futile cause but in “crushing the iron heel of Germany,” Rev. Dr. Ross emphasized. “The heroic dead” had died so “that we might live,” and he appealed to the young men and women “that as the years roll by, they will remain true to all the glorious traditions of the Empire,” with the memorial serving as “an inspiration to young people, and an education in patriotism.”⁹⁵

Speakers also emphasized the importance of paying a debt of gratitude to the veterans who survived the Great War amidst honouring those who had not returned. Amongst their ranks was Norwich-born Lt.-Col. Donald M. Sutherland, who had received the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) in February 1919, the month that he sailed back to Canada.⁹⁶ Although he never fully recovered from the shrapnel and bullet wounds that he sustained to his left elbow and back,⁹⁷ he resumed his medical practice in Princeton and Woodstock. Given his instrumental role in recruiting so many of the boys from the district and his distinguished war record, Sutherland was the keynote speaker at the unveiling. “Giving a very vivid description – so vivid that to many the scenes became almost a reality as the fighting soldier talked on and on – he outlined the history of the Canadian recruits from the time they enlisted until they crossed the English Channel and landed in the strange land of France,” the *Gazette* recounted. “So great was the powerful eloquence of the speaker when he presented to the minds of the audience a picture of the boys struggling in Flanders fields, that for a brief space his hearers, themselves, experienced the horrors of warfare.” Although Sutherland had been wounded repeatedly, he did not dwell on himself, instead eulogizing the common privates and their gallantry. “In action and out of action,” he proclaimed, “the boys remained true as steel, and preserved the indomitable spirit of Britain against a tyrannical foe.” He dedicated the marble monument to their memory and, the newspaper described, “while the silent crowd stood with uncovered heads, the hero of Oxford drew the shroud from the memorial.”⁹⁸

These memorials served as obvious sites for Armistice Day (renamed Remembrance Day in 1931) services each 11 November. Although local churches held “special thanksgiving services” on that day in the first years after the war,⁹⁹ a



Mrs. Elizabeth Crabbe, the mother of Ernest, Arthur, William, and Stanley, lays a wreath at the base of the monument honouring her son Arthur Ellis's sacrifice.

memorial became the natural point of congregation to commemorate “the declaration of peace following four years and more of the most terrible war the world has ever known.” The 1928 celebration in Norwich was indicative. Local veterans, their war medals on their chests, assembled on Main Street and marched “to the dolorous sound of the

drums” to the High School Memorial Park where they formed up before “a very large gathering of the local people.” Local pastors read Bible passages, those gathered sung hymns, and speakers reaffirmed that those who gave their lives overseas had done so “for the cause of true freedom.” There were references to Lt.-Col. John McCrae’s “In Flanders Fields,” and onlookers wore poppies – the official symbol of remembrance adopted in 1921. The veterans laid wreaths on the monument “amid impressive silence,” and “the pathetic notes of the ‘Last Post’ arose on the still air. As the strain died away, the pronouncement of the benediction by Rev. A.J. Preston brought the service to a close”:

They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old;
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We shall remember them...¹⁰⁰

South Norwich citizens took much longer to decide how they would memorialize the war, eventually settling on a substantial stone cairn at the entrance to Otter Park. Set back a block from the main street of the village at the entrance of the community park that lay alongside Otter Creek, the square-based pyramidal monument built by renowned local stonemason Alfie Moore reaches 11 feet (3.35 metres) high, topped with a small bronze lion in repose symbolizing the British Empire. A large brass plaque lists the local soldiers who died, flanked on both sides by the names of their brothers-in-arms (and sister) who served. A large group of township residents gathered to unveil “South Norwich’s tribute to the sons and daughters who served overseas during the Great War” on 8 October 1932. “The multi-colored maples of the wooded parklands beyond and the smiling sun of a perfect autumn afternoon combined to make a setting than which none could have been more typically Canadian,” the *Woodstock Sentinel-Review* captured. Before the ceremonies, residents from “many parts of the district” congregated on Otterville’s main street, which was lined with automobiles (a testament to the prosperity



The large crowd gathered for the unveiling of the South Norwich Township memorial in Otterville, 1932

of the townships). The Oxford Rifles from Woodstock provided a guard of honour, the St. Thomas Legion pipe band and Norwich boys' band played music, and about three hundred war veterans from the Legion branches in Otterville, Norwich, Delhi, Tillsonburg, Ingersoll, Woodstock, Aylmer, and St. Thomas paraded proudly before a cheering audience.¹⁰¹

The South Norwich organizers asked Lt.-Col. W.T. McMullen of Woodstock (the former commanding officer of the 168th who knew many of the men listed on the plaque) to address the gathering. Although it had been fourteen years since the war ended, "the recollection of that struggle – the greatest in all history – has not been dimmed," he proclaimed. The men (he neglected to highlight Nursing Sister Matilda Oatman, whose name was also on the cairn) whose names were inscribed on it "went from among you to take their part and to join in that wonderful response of the whole British Empire in defence of humanity and of liberty." His message bore no hint of disillusionment with the war or the loss of life. "Speaking of the sentiments that filled the minds of the Allied peoples in those days of German aggression and German brute force as factors in the war's beginnings," McMullen offered:

what has been uppermost in your minds as we gathered here has been the vivid memory of those men and boys whose names are on this memorial. All of them are known to some of you and will be revered and treasured.

That is one great object this memorial will serve. You have undertaken to dedicate to their memory this beautiful and fitting memorial so that in the years to come all who pass by, the young and the old, will have ever presented to their minds the remembrance that these men went among you to do their part in a spirit of devotion and heroism. May their memory be imperishable and may their example be ever an inspiration, not only to your immediate neighborhood, but throughout this part of the country.

The audience stood in solemn silence when he read out the roll of honour, containing the names of the seventeen men from South Norwich who gave their lives during the war.¹⁰² It had been fourteen years since the war had ended, but residents could still put faces to the names of the fallen. Ceremonies like this evoked both memories and mournful thoughts of what might have been. Despite all the challenges facing Canadians at that troubled time, they would not forget the supreme sacrifices that these men had made.

The key political figure unveiling the memorial that day was Hon. Donald M. Sutherland, the retired colonel from Norwich now serving as the Minister of National Defence. He was elected to the House of Commons as the Conservative MP for Oxford North in 1925, thus securing the seat in parliament that he had sought during the war. Although defeated the following year, he re-gained his seat in 1930 and joined R.B. Bennett's Cabinet as Minister of National Defence. At the ceremony, he linked the Great War to the state of the world in 1932. Rebuilding France and Belgium was nearly complete, but getting people back "to a peace mentality" and back "into normal production" was "not concluded yet." Canada had ramped up agricultural production to meet Europe's wartime needs, but declining postwar demand brought lower prices and surplus production. The period from 1926-29 had generated mistaken assumptions that "readjustment was pretty well completed," Sutherland observed, but the Great Depression showed that "we are having to start fresh."¹⁰³

However dire the present situation facing the country, Sutherland insisted that the people of Canada had a duty to remember those who had given their lives during the war. "It is very fitting that we do this in a public way because there is a generation growing up now that knows nothing of the war first hand," he explained. The memorial would serve as a constant reminder of local men who had gone overseas, "made the supreme sacrifice," and now lay "sleeping in those cemeteries of France and Belgium under the Cross – the symbol of the Great Master." Sutherland, as a returned soldier, noted that only the veterans taking part in the ceremony actually knew what the soldiers listed on the memorial had gone through. "On occasions like this the heart of each man picks out some

particular one whom he knew well and who is still on the other side and as he stands here he is thinking of the other one," he told the audience.¹⁰⁴ We do not know which soldier Sutherland himself had in mind, but given his relationships throughout the townships it could have been any one of the seventeen fallen soldiers listed on the cenotoph.

Although this solemn occasion was held in October, it bears a strong resemblance to typical Remembrance Day services held throughout Canada. The Norwich boys' band played the music while a choir comprised of members from the various Otterville churches sung church hymns with messages that spoke to sacrifice



*Hon. Donald M. Sutherland,
Minister of National Defence,
1931*

and everlasting life. The Oxford Rifles bugle band sounded the “Last Post,” and everyone paid a moment of silence to the fallen – a replication of the ritual that soldiers had performed during funeral ceremonies on the front lines. The placing of floral wreaths offered a way for community members and organizations to participate in the celebrations. The various Legion branches laid wreaths, as did the Otterville school, the local board of trade, and the South Norwich Township Council. Then came individual families: Mr. and Mrs. A.E. Moore in memory of Homer Burtch (who died of wounds sustained during the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915); the Scidmore family in memory of Fred Chapple (killed at Sugar Trench on the Somme in September 1916); and Clara Roy and Alex Martin for Emerson Milton Martin (killed in the trenches at Fresnoy in May 1917).¹⁰⁵

The Great War was in the past, but it had shaped Canada as it then was – and what it would become. “You have laid these stones to connect the great past with the many tomorrows that are to come, so that the girls and boys [of the future] will remember the great acts of their predecessors,” South Oxford MP Thomas Merritt Cayley proclaimed at the unveiling of the Otterville memorial in 1932. He hoped that the world had learned the lessons of the Great War and would avoid repeating the “great loss of the world’s best manpower and the bankruptcy of nations.” The “jealously, competition and lack of co-operation” in the international system at that time portended possible conflict, he worried. Cayley told his audience to pray that countries had the sense to avoid the danger.¹⁰⁶ Unfortunately, the world failed to pay heed to such warnings, and the rise of authoritarianism in Europe would force Canada to participate in another world war seven years later. A new generation of young men from the townships would enlist, and the home front would again mobilize to support a total war effort. Much to the chagrin of those who had sacrificed so much in the Great War, it was not the “war to end all wars.”

A century after its conclusion, the First World War continues to leave its quiet imprint on Norwich Township. The distant fields of France and Belgium also continue to turn up their secrets. During a munitions clearing exercise in Vendin-le-Vieil, France, in 2011, workers unearthed the skeletal remains of a Canadian soldier, his general service button, damaged shoulder title, and bugle. Thirty-three-year-old Pte. Henry Edmonds “Doc” Priddle, who had been born in Norwich, Ontario, was killed in action with the 16th Canadian Infantry Battalion (The Canadian Scottish) during the assault on Hill 70 on 16 August 1917. He had been one of 11,000 fallen Canadians with no known place of burial in France whose name had been etched on the Vimy memorial. Once his remains were positively identified, he was given a proper burial at the Commonwealth War Graves



Henry “Doc” Priddle

Commission British Cemetery in Loos-en-Gohelle.¹⁰⁷ The Canadian flag draped around his body one hundred years after his death was not the flag under which he had served during the war, but it is the flag under which his descendants enjoy freedoms and liberties that he fought to preserve. It is also the flag that flies over the marble statue of the “Spirit of Canada” sitting atop the cenotaph in front of Emily Stowe Public School on the main north-south highway cutting through the town in which Priddle was born.¹⁰⁸ Today, when Doc’s young relatives in Otterville, Ethan and Lucas Bari, race to that old familiar baseball diamond in Otter Park, they run past the stone cairn with the names of other local men and the woman who served in the Great War. After the passage of a century, the names do not evoke the emotional response that they once did, but they serve as enduring reminders of the men and women who left loved ones behind to tend to familiar fields while they went off to fight on foreign soil. Lest We Forget.

Notes

- 1 The Diary of Ariel Poole, Data Concerning Bruce, Norwich and District Museum and Archives (NDMA), 2005.090, Range B, Shelf 5, Box P5, File World War I. Farm life also went on: “Pa ploughed for Ross,” she noted. For her cousins Chauncey and Francis and the rest of the Poole family, however, the end of the war had come a month too late. On 7 November, the family received word that Pte. Bruce Poole had been killed in action on 11 October.
- 2 “Norwich Rejoices,” *Norwich Gazette*, 14 November 1918.
- 3 “Town Talk,” *Norwich Gazette*, 21 November 1918.
- 4 “Town Talk,” *Norwich Gazette*, 14 November 1918.
- 5 “Norwich Rejoices.”
- 6 “Otterville,” *Norwich Gazette*, 14 November 1918; and Rev. Frederick B. Hodgins, “What has Britain Done?” *New York Herald*, 24 August 1918.
- 7 “Oxford’s Victory Loan Drive,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 14 November 1918.
- 8 “Buy Bonds—Says N. Norwich Council,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 7 November 1918.
- 9 “Norwich Rejoices.”
- 10 Jonathan Vance, “Remembering Armageddon,” in *Canada and the First World War: Essays in Honour of Robert Craig Brown*, ed. David MacKenzie (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 414.
- 11 “Praise Services,” *Norwich Gazette*, 14 November 1918.
- 12 Soldier files: Saunders, Harry, 127105, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 8632 – 10; and Saunders, David, 400859, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 8657-6.
- 13 “Praise Services.”
- 14 Soldier file, Pollard, Walter William, 580479, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 7887 – 28.
- 15 “Pte. Walter Pollard Home,” *Norwich Gazette*, 14 November 1918.
- 16 Fred Furlong to his Mother, 1 March 1918, authors’ collection.
- 17 War diary, 4th Canadian Machine Gun Battalion, November 1918, LAC, RG9-III-D-3, vol. 4986, file 624.

- 18 Fred Furlong letter, 22 December 1918, authors' collection.
- 19 28th (Northwest) Battalion Headquarters, "The Last Hours," <http://www.nwbattalion.com/last.html>.
- 20 "Stanley Vanderburg Writes from Belgium," *Norwich Gazette*, 26 December 1918.
- 21 Chris Hyland, "The Canadian Corps' Long March Logistics, Discipline, and the Occupation of the Rhineland," *Canadian Military History* 21, no. 2 (2015): 5-20.
- 22 John Paulding to Cousin Ethel, 22 December 1918, NDMA. On his trips to Bonn and Cologne, see John [Paulding] to Harold Poldon, 8 February 1919, NDMA. By this point, Paulding noted that when the Canadian left their barracks the German people "were courteous [but] there was a nature feeling of enmity and that spoiled things for me." He confessed that, if it were not "for the folks at home I'd have willingly done three months for A.W.O.L."
- 23 War diary, 4th Battalion Canadian Machine Gun Corps, November-December 1918.
- 24 Fred Furlong to his Mother, 26 October 1918, authors' collection.
- 25 Fred Furlong to his Mother, 18 December 1918, authors' collection.
- 26 Fred Furlong to his Mother, 30 November 1918, authors' collection.
- 27 Fred Furlong to his Mother, 31 December 1918, authors' collection.
- 28 Soldier file, medical history sheet and medical case sheets, Lapier, Harry Lee, 3136680, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 5390 - 62.
- 29 Lloyd Brough and Fred Fewster to Mr Lapier and Roy, 6 January 1919 and 9 January 1919, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 12 February 1919.
- 30 "Pte. Harry Lapier," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 6 February 1919. "War News," *Tillsonburg Observer*, 20 January 1919, erroneously reported that Lapier had died at his home near Springford, but later corrected the story.
- 31 N. P. Johnson and J. Mueller, "Updating the Accounts: Global Mortality of the 1918-1920 'Spanish' Influenza Pandemic," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 76 (2002): 105-115.
- 32 Mark Humphries, *The Last Plague: Spanish Influenza and the Politics of Health and War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013). In December 1918, Sgt. John Paulding was sorry to learn that the flu epidemic had been so bad back home. "We have had quite a few cases here," he reported, and three of his comrades had died of it on the march. Paulding himself had contracted it and had fallen "pretty sick" in the late fall. John Paulding to Cousin Ethel, 22 December 1918, NDMA.
- 33 Vance, "Remembering Armageddon," 413.
- 34 Capt. J.H. Barnett to Members and Adherents of the Norwich and Bookton Presbyterian Congregations, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 2 January 1919.
- 35 Margaret MacMillan, "Lessons from History? The Paris Peace Conference of 1919," O.D. Skelton lecture, <http://www.international.gc.ca/odskelton/macmillan.aspx?lang=eng>.
- 36 "The blowing of the whistle at the Condenser first announced the good news of peace to this place on Saturday ere long the other whistles and bells of the village had taken up the strain and were busy telling the joyful news all around," the *Norwich Gazette* reported on 3 July 1919. A united thanksgiving service was held in the Methodist Church the following Monday.
- 37 Quoted in Hyland, "Canadian Corps' Long March," 18.
- 38 John [Paulding] to Harold Poldon, 8 February 1919, NDMA.
- 39 Fred Furlong to his Mother, 31 December 1918, authors' collection.
- 40 Fred Furlong to his Mother, 21 March 1919, authors' collection.
- 41 Innis, "The Returned Soldier," in *Harold Innis Reflects: Memoir and WWI Writings/Correspondence*, eds. W.J. Buxton et al (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 166.

- 42 Khaki University was a Canadian military extension-education program involving the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the Chaplains' Corps, and several universities including McMaster. The program made available higher education facilities, namely instructors, books, and courses of study, to reserve and convalescing troops. John Watson, *Marginal Man: The Dark Vision of Harold Innis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 80.
- 43 Furlong to his Mother, 31 December 1918.
- 44 Andrew Horrall, "'Keep-A-Fighting! Play the Game!' Baseball and the Canadian Forces during the First World War," *Canadian Military History* 10, no.2 (2001).
- 45 Furlong to his Mother, 21 March 1919.
- 46 See, for example, "Pte. Bruce Poole Killed," *Norwich Gazette*, 14 November 1918; and "An Impressive Service," *Norwich Gazette*, 28 November 1918.
- 47 "Memorial Service," *Norwich Gazette*, 5 December 1918.
- 48 "Mrs Rowe Doing Good Work," *Norwich Gazette*, 17 January 1918; and "Mrs Rowe Writes from England," *Norwich Gazette*, 2 May 1918. Only Pte. Frank Rowe, who had been discharged in June 1918 because of a gunshot wound to his foot, was present at his brother's memorial.
- 49 "The Patriotic League Honored," *Norwich Gazette*, 30 January 1919.
- 50 GWVA to J.H. Carroll, 15 April 1919, McVittie Collection, NDMA, Range A, Shelf 1, Box W2.
- 51 Resolution of Appreciation, McVittie Collection, NDMA, Range A, Shelf 1, Box W2.
- 52 "Town Talk," *Norwich Gazette*, 30 January 1919.
- 53 Innis, "The Returned Soldier," in *Harold Innis Reflects*, 178.
- 54 "Pte. Archie Farrell Home," *Norwich Gazette*, 19 December 1918.
- 55 Innis, "The Returned Soldier," in *Harold Innis Reflects*, 181.
- 56 Innis, "The Returned Soldier," in *Harold Innis Reflects*, 170-71, 181. Desmond Morton summarized that "for tens of thousands the armistice had restored a prize they might otherwise have lost—their lives. Now, as with all prizes, the problem arose of how to use it. Men came home with wounds to minds and bodies and some with drug and alcohol addictions, to say nothing of the minor problems of swearing, gambling, and athlete's foot. They found broken marriages, children who had forgotten them, and families who had already heard more than enough about the war." Desmond Morton, "The Canadian Veterans' Heritage from the Great War," in *The Veterans Charter and Post-World War II Canada*, eds. Peter Neary and J.L. Granatstein (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), 24.
- 57 "Soldier's Memorial," *Norwich Gazette*, 27 March 1919.
- 58 Capt. J.H. Barnett to Members and Adherents of the Norwich and Bookton Presbyterian Congregations, printed in *Norwich Gazette*, 2 January 1919.
- 59 "Town Talk," *Norwich Gazette*, 5 December 1918.
- 60 Canadian War Museum, "Repatriation and Demobilization," <https://www.warmuseum.ca/firstworldwar/history/after-the-war/veterans/repatriation-and-demobilization/>.
- 61 "What's Wrong?" *Norwich Gazette*, 26 December 1918.
- 62 "Pte Norman Birch Returns," *Norwich Gazette*, 12 December 1918.
- 63 "Veteran's Column," *Norwich Gazette*, 12 February 1919.
- 64 George Ferguson quoted in Watson, *Marginal Man*, 79.
- 65 L.E. Lowman, Secretary, Ontario Soldiers' Aid Commission, Woodstock Branch to the Post Office Department, E.W. Vigar, 5 May 1919; and Superintendent, Post Office Department to L.E. Lowman, Secretary, Ontario Soldiers' Aid Commission, Woodstock

Chapter 12

Branch, 6 May 1919, Oxford County Archives (OCA), RG 2, Box 7/8, Series 11, Oxford Patriotic Association, Subseries E Case Files U-Y, Vigar, Ernest.

66 Jas G. Milne, letter to the editor, *Norwich Gazette*, 15 April 1919; and Alf E. Ingle, "Communication," *Norwich Gazette*, 24 April 1919.

67 Soldier file, Harris, Charles Hibbert, 3132769, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 4083 – 41. On Harris, see also *Norwich Gazette*, 24 October 1918, 7 November 1918, and 21 November 1918.

68 Soldier files: Howell, Walter, 6055, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 4555 - 58; and Barham, Robert Lavern, 797584, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 428 - 45.

69 Soldier file, Abraham, Thomas Carroll, 127355, LAC, RG 150, Volume 19 – 8.

70 Soldier files: Barnett, Harry, 797523, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 452 – 24; McKee, Clarence, 127381, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 6945 - 32; and Orun, William Charles, 675211, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 7491 - 55.

71 Soldier file, Boughner, John Sydney, 675858, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 919 – 47.

72 Armstrong Family, *The Maple Leaf Forever: A Short History from 1800 to Present of the Military Involvement of Old East Oxford Township* (Oxford Centre: self-published, 2011), 38.

73 Soldier file, Biddis, Charles, 675987, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 718-32.

74 Soldiers' Aid Commission, 30 December 1918, OCA, RG 2, Box 6/8, Series 12, Oxford Patriotic Association, Subseries E – Case Files. In another case, Sapper Edgar Cohoe, who was wounded by shrapnel during the Hundred Days campaign, was diagnosed with psychological issues during his recovery. He had received a B.A. from McMaster University in 1908, but had returned to the farm and his parents reported that he had suffered from "D.P" - dementia praecox or "pretentious madness," a disused psychiatric diagnosis that referred to a chronic, deteriorating psychotic disorder characterized by rapid cognitive disintegration, usually beginning in the late teens or early adulthood. "Patient restless and unreasonable," a medical report noted in early 1919. Cohoe refused to "discuss himself at all" and, according to his doctor, "knows he is a mental case." The soldier alleged "ill usage in France" and intimated that he was "connected with some World-wide problem but will not talk about it." By February 1919, he had become "suspicious of his comrades," alleging "that they were trying to force him to marry against his wish[es.]" While in hospital, he admitted that he had been hearing voices for five years, refused to stay in his own bed, spoke irrationally, and he showed no interest in work – or much else. His condition had been "aggravated by active service conditions," the doctors confirmed, and he was discharged to custodial care under the Department of Soldiers' Civil Re-establishment in May 1919. "Medical History of an Invalid," in Soldier file, Cohoe, Edgar Francis, 19 May 1919, LAC RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 1842 – 2.

75 Soldier file, Cole, John William Ernest, 675616, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 1852 – 28.

76 John William Ernest Cole, The Soldier Settlement Board, OCA, RG 2, Box 6/8, Series 12, Oxford Patriotic Association, Subseries E – Case Files.

77 Soldier file, Wallace, Edgar John, 189780, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 10033 - 24; 1911 Census; and 1921 Census.

78 Soldier file, Parker, Harold Mark, 112112, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 7588 – 26; and 1911 Census; 1921 Census.

- 79 Soldier file, Beeney, Edgar, 6427, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 587 – 23; 1911 Census; and 1921 Census.
- 80 Soldier file, Back, Arthur, 675713, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 328 - 69; 1911 Census; and 1921 Census.
- 81 “Through Veterans Eyes: Canada’s First World War Veterans,” <http://www.throughvet-eranseyes.ca/>.
- 82 Desmond Morton, *When Your Number’s Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House, 1993), 270.
- 83 For the most thorough study of Canadian veterans, see Desmond Morton and Glenn Wright, *Winning the Second Battle: Canadian Veterans and the Return to Civilian Life, 1915-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).
- 84 “That Memorial,” *Norwich Gazette*, 28 November 1918.
- 85 “We Want a Gun,” *Norwich Gazette*, 28 November 1918.
- 86 “That Memorial.”
- 87 Vance, “Remembering Armaggedon”; Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997); and Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- 88 Armstrong Family, *Maple Leaf Forever*, 6. The names on the memorial are: Pte. Jas. A. Langton, Pte. Geo. E. Yeoman, Pte. Chas. I. Cooper, Pte. Albert H. Bond, Sergt. M. Douglas Schell, Lieut. R.D. Millyard, Pte. Aubrey Holdsworth, Pte. Harry Sanders, Pte. Robt. Lobban, and Pte. Fred E. Pounds. The names of local men killed during the Second World War were later inscribed on the reverse of the monument. When the township hall was demolished by a tornado in 1979, the monument was moved to the Pioneer Cemetery in Oxford Centre, where it still stands.
- 89 “Unveiling of Soldier’s Monument,” *Norwich Gazette*, 11 September 1919. The names on the New Durham memorial are: Lieut. E.E. Metcalf - 31st Inf; Pte. G. Hammond - 125th Batt; Pte. J.H. George - 87th Batt; Pte. A. Staddon - 71st Bttn; Pte. A. Henderson - 79th Batt; Pte W.B. Yates.
- 90 “Norwich Honors her Fallen Heroes,” *Norwich Gazette*, 18 September 1919. The men honored were: F. Bleakley, A. Rowe, C. Cates, E. Scanlon, H. Coles, H. Money, B. Poole, A. Crabbe, S. Shellington, J. Stewart, E. Kelly, H. Sackrider, A. Strode, R. Buck, A. Messecar, R. Newton, H. Priddle, C. Beattie, J. Johnston, B. Edwards, W. Lossing, H. Pearson, T. Croxford, R. Cattell, A. Staddon, H. Barnes, and M. McGregor. They also decorated the grave of Roy M. Arn, “the only home boy buried in Khaki” in the local cemetery.
- 91 “Met to Discuss Memorial,” *Norwich Gazette*, 18 September 1919.
- 92 “What about that memorial?” and “Town Talk,” *Norwich Gazette*, 30 October 1919.
- 93 “Victoria Day in Norwich,” *Norwich Gazette*, 26 May 1921. The Norwich memorial contains the following names. Front: Maj. T.D. Sneath, M.C.; Lieut. J.F. Dickson; Lieut. P. Johnson; Lieut. A. Rowe; Corp. H. Coles; L.Corp. A. Strode; Sgt. C.W. Beattie. Back: Pte. R. Cattel; Pte. Jno. Stewart; Pte. E. Kelly; Pte. H. Priddle; Pte. R. Newton; Pte. W.A. Hughes; Pte. Fred Croxford; Pte. A.E. Crabbe; Pte. P.L. Hainer; Pte. H.J. Sackrider; Pte. A. Messecar; Pte. Fred. Bleakley; Pte. H. Barnes; Pte. B. Edwards; Pte. E. Scanlon; Pte. H. Sackrider; Pte. G.E. Dennis; Pte. R. Buck; Pte. H. Pearson; Pte. G. McGregor; Pte. C. Beattie; Pte. S. Shellington; Pte. B. Poole; Pte. J. McNaughton; Pte. W. Lossing; Pte. H. Money; Pte. J.L. Harris; Pte. W.B. Edmonds.
- 94 Quoted in <http://www.norwichgazette.com/2017/09/12/notes-on-norwichs-weeping-lady-cenotaph>.
- 95 “Victoria Day in Norwich.”

96 “Woodstock Gives Lt-Col Sutherland a Rousing Welcome,” *Norwich Gazette*, 27 February 1919; “How Col. Sutherland won His Decoration” and “Norwich Welcomes Donald Sutherland,” *Norwich Gazette*, 6 March 1919.

97 Soldier field, Sutherland, Donald Matheson, LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 9432 – 27.

98 “Victoria Day in Norwich.”

99 “Armistice Day,” *Norwich Gazette*, 11 November 1920.

100 “Veterans Decorate Monument,” *Norwich Gazette*, 15 November 1928.

101 “South Norwich War Memorial is Dedicated,” *Daily Sentinel-Review*, 11 October 1932. The plaque on the South Norwich Township cenotaph in Otterville lists the following names. *DIED*: L. Baker; J. Bowerman; H. Burch; W. Cade; F.J. Chapple; B. Dove; A. Duffield; L. Hansel; H. Lapier; F. Malcolm; M.F. Martin; J. Mitchell; M. McElhone; W. Oatman; J. Searles; S. Starkiss; G. Swance. *SERVED*: C. Armstrong; G.F.H. Armstrong; H. Atkinson; A. Bach; T.P. Beekin; W.R. Beecraft; H.C. Bourne; F. Broad; H. Brown; S. Brown; W. Brown; C. Buffham; J. Burch; E. Butts; J.H. Church; L.R. Churchill; C.H. Davis; J. Davis; A.E. Dean; S. DeGroat; W. Depeel; J.L. Downey; E.N. Draper; C.T. Fish; N.S. Fletcher; J. Fournier; L. Fournier; F. Furlong; J. Furlong; R. Garret; L.H. Gerrard; S. Gibbons; W. Gilks; E. Glover; R. Glover; W. Glover; L. Haines; H. Hallie; G. Hansel; R. Harp; T. Harp; W. Harp; P. Heckford; O. Hicks; G. Hilliker; W. Howe; A. Hooker; C.H. Innis; H.A. Innis; H. Jones; W. Jury; G. Lundy; J. Mansfield; J. Marr; R. Martin; C. Merriott; W.F. Mitchell; W.J. Myrick; G. McElhone; C. McKee; A. Newell; A.M. Oatman; R. Oatman; E. Ottewell; W. Ottewell; W. Owens; E.D. Palmer; G. Parks; H. Parks; H. Parson; E. Paterson; R. Paterson; W. Paterson; V. Quinton; J. Rock; B. Sands; C. Saunders; D. Saunders; H. Saunders; R. Searles; J. Sims; C. Singer; M. Smith; W. Smith; W. Stevenson; C.E. Swance; R.F. Swance; A. Wagner; G. Warner; J. Welsey; J. West; J. Williams; G. Winn; A. Wolcott; H. Wooley; Nursing Sister Matilda Oatman.

102 “South Norwich War Memorial is Dedicated.”

103 “South Norwich War Memorial is Dedicated.”

104 “South Norwich War Memorial is Dedicated.”

105 “South Norwich War Memorial is Dedicated.” Causes of death were determined using the LAC Circumstances of Death Registers, First World War, available at <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/mass-digitized-archives/circumstances-death-registers/Pages/circumstances-death-registers.aspx>.

106 “South Norwich War Memorial is Dedicated.”

107 CBC News, “Absolutely Moving’: St.Thomas Man Sees his Relative Buried 101 Years after He Fell in the First World War,” <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/hanley-private-henry-edmonds-priddle-1.4802393>; and NDMA *Newsletter* (Spring 2018 and Summer 2018).

108 The names of soldiers killed during the Second World War were added onto the sides of the memorial when it was moved to its current site in front of Norwich District High School (now Emily Stowe Public School) in 1952.

Further Reading and Research

We have provided detailed footnotes throughout the book which direct readers to the primary and secondary sources that we drew upon in crafting our narrative. Rather than producing a conventional bibliography, this section is intended to direct readers towards selected further readings and online tools on general subjects that we cover in this book.

For a more complete list of sources on Canada and the First World War, see O.A. Cooke, *The Canadian Military Experience 1867-1995: A Bibliography* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 1997) and Brian Tennyson, *The Canadian Experience of the Great War: A Guide to Memoirs* (Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2013). We have not included articles, but readers interested in specific battles are encouraged to examine back issues of the journal *Canadian Military History* at <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/>.

Archival and Library Collections

Annandale National Historic Site, Tillsonburg, Ontario

From January-March 2017, the museum hosted “From Soldier to Civilian: Oxford’s Own Goes to War,” a travelling exhibit from the Woodstock Museum that is part of the Oxford Remembers: Oxford’s Own project. Accompanying the displays was a collection of transcribed newspaper clippings from the *Tillsonburg Observer* during the First World War which covered the men from Norfolk, Oxford, and surrounding areas who volunteered and fought overseas, as well as Jerry Turner’s valuable lists of “The Casualties of World War One in Tillsonburg & Immediate Area.”

Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, Ontario

Circumstances of Death Registry – includes registers containing information on the circumstances of death of service personnel, with particulars about the initial grave site.

<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/mass-digitized-archives/circumstances-death-registers/pages/circumstances-death-registers.aspx>

Personnel Records of the First World War – a searchable database providing access to digitized versions of Canadian personnel records, including the files of Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) members (soldiers, nurses and chaplains) that consist of documents dealing with enlistment, training, medical and dental history, hospitalization, discipline, pay, medal entitlements, and discharge or notification of death.

<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/personnel-records/Pages/search.aspx>

Sources Relating to Units of the Canadian Expeditionary Force – this finding aid brings together references to records and files scattered throughout several fonds, which relate to almost every unit in the CEF, and include daily orders, private papers, and diaries.

<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/Pages/units-canadian-expeditionary-force.aspx>

Veterans Death Cards: First World War – cards created by the Department of Veterans Affairs when it was notified of the death of a First World War veteran.

<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/mass-digitized-archives/veterans-death-cards-ww1/Pages/veterans-death-cards.aspx>

War Diaries of the First World War – a searchable database providing access to digitized versions of the daily logs maintained by CEF units describing their “actions in the field” throughout the war.

<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/Pages/war-diaries.aspx>

Norwich District Museum and Archives, Norwich, Ontario

The Norwich District Museum and Archives holds an extensive collection of photographs and textual material from the First World War era. Microfilm reels of the *Norwich Gazette* provide an important entry point into the history of Norwich Township. The archives also contain letter collections from several local soldiers who served overseas (Aubrey Holdsworth, Harold Poldon, John Paulding, Fred Croxford, Joseph Leslie Dickson, and Bruce Poole), correspondence and diaries from some of the family members they left behind on the home front, and the memoir of William Barker Crabbe. The photographic collection provides an excellent window into Norwich Township's rich history, including the war years.

Oxford County Archives, Woodstock, Ontario

In the Oxford County Archives, Record Group 2, Series 11 and 12, contains the correspondence and administrative files of the Oxford County Patriotic Association, which provide information on the fundraising for and administration of the Patriotic Fund, as well as on the work of the Oxford Returned Soldiers' Association, the Oxford branch of the Soldiers' Aid Commission, and the Great War Veterans' Association. The archive also holds the fonds of Donald Sutherland, Oxford South's long serving Member of Parliament. In particular, Series 2, Political, Subseries G – Military, contains correspondence, reports, and speeches from First World War era.

Woodstock Public Library, Woodstock, Ontario

The Woodstock Public Library's Local History section contains an exten-

sive collection of records on Oxford County dating back to the early 1800s, including newspaper indexes and microfilm reels of the *Woodstock Daily Sentinel-Review* and the *Norwich Gazette*. In addition to providing ready access to local history books, the collection also contains bound volumes of newspaper clippings on local histories and various unpublished manuscripts, such as Ross Butler's "The Story of Norwich."

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