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A Cape Bretoner At War

Letters From the Front 1914-1919

Brian Douglas Tennyson

Introduction

The production of books, journal and magazine articles and films on the First World War has become a veritable industry in recent years, reflecting society's belated realization that it marked a profoundly important milestone if not turning point in the history of the modern world. Prominent among the books that began to appear as early as the 1920s and are still being published today are the memoirs, diaries and letters of men who served in the war. The Canadian contribution to that literature remains relatively thin. Indeed, this is the first known collection of letters written by a Cape Bretoner. It will, therefore, be of particular interest to readers who know that unique island and especially Sydney, because of the many references to people and places and the memories the letters evoke of life there in the early years of the twentieth century. This essay offers brief extracts from those letters, in the context of a biographical profile of their author, as an introduction to the collection, which it is hoped will one day be published in full, with explanatory notes and background information.

Percy Charles Willmot went overseas in the spring of 1915 with Nova Scotia's famed 25th Battalion and served throughout the war, returning as an invalid to Camp Hill Hospital in Halifax in August 1919. His letters tell us much about the wartime experiences of a very typical Cape Bretoner and Canadian of his time. They reveal much about the progress of the war, the daily experiences of the men, the bizarre contrast between the beauties of nature and the horrors of the trenches, and the inevitable transition from naive idealism to bitter cynicism.

Some may suggest that Willmot was not really a Cape Bretoner because he was born in

England, emigrated to Canada, and settled on the island, albeit at an early age. This fact, however, made him very typical of many Cape Bretoners, particularly those living in the Sydney area at the time of the war. Until the end of the nineteenth century, the Sydney area, like much of Maritime Canada, was essentially a rural community which earned its livelihood from farming, fishing, shipbuilding and the carrying trade. What distinguished it from other areas was the presence of vast coal deposits which had been worked since the middle of the eighteenth century but took on enormous economic and strategic significance in the second half of the nineteenth century because of the invention of steam power and its application to railways, ships, and factories. The 1890s saw the amalgamation of the various coal mines around Sydney harbour into one international corporation, followed by the formation of the Dominion Iron and Steel Company at Sydney and the Nova Scotia Steel Company at Sydney Mines. Sydney harbour at the beginning of the twentieth century had become the industrial centre of the Maritime provinces, with the result that many of the European immigrants flooding into Canada in the 15 years preceding the war settled there. In a very real sense, then, Willmot was not only a typical Canadian in being a recent immigrant from England; he was also typical of Cape Bretoners in the Sydney area because he had moved there during this very dramatic and exhilarating period when it was one of the most dynamic and rapidly growing communities in the country.

Born near Birmingham, England, on 13 April 1887, Percy was the son of Edward and Alice Willmot. How or when he arrived in Nova Scotia, or indeed Canada, remains unknown. According to family tradition, he and his brother Arthur were brought out by their grandmother, Frances Elizabeth Willmot, following the death

of their father in 1895, with a view to placing them with their Uncle Percy, who had emigrated to Montana in the 1880s, but there is no real evidence to support this story. Certainly, his grandmother and his Aunt Frances emigrated to Canada at some point, apparently after 1905, living initially in Toronto before moving to Ottawa where they were living by 1909. When Percy visited them there in October of that year he observed in his diary that it was "fifteen years since I saw my Grandma," which suggests that he emigrated in 1894 at the age of seven years.

What is known is that Percy attended school in St. Peters, Cape Breton, earning his Grade 10 diploma in August 1900.² He then worked on farms in Cape Breton and near Truro,³ before attending Truro Academy in 1903-04 in an unsuccessful attempt to earn his Grade 11 diploma.⁴ In the summer of 1904, he moved to Sydney, attracted like so many others to the rapidly growing industrial centre, and began working at Crowell's department store on 3 August. He remained there, managing the men's wear department, until he joined the army in November 1914, except for a brief period in 1909 when he returned home to England to visit his family and lived briefly in Ottawa with his grandmother and Aunt Frances.

Like other young men, Percy soon developed a circle of friends, both male and female, and enjoyed an active social life in the small but dynamic community. Together, he and some others jointly purchased a 'camp' - a property with a little cottage - in Westmount, and a motor launch, to which they gave the enigmatic name Suke, for running about Sydney harbour. In 1911 he brought his sister Dorothy, then 16 years of age, out from England to join him in Sydney. Dorothy also joined the staff of Crowell's and eventually became the store's window dresser. For whatever reasons, Percy felt closer to Dorothy - or 'Doll,' as he called her - than to his other siblings, and she became his primary correspondent during the war years.

The outbreak of war

When war broke out in August 1914, Cape Bretoners, at least in Sydney, shared in the general enthusiasm. Early on the afternoon of 1 August "hundreds crowded about the bulletin

board at the post office till midnight" as the *Sydney Daily Post* issued the latest news "hot from the wires," and Percy and Dorothy were probably among them. War fever was "sweeping over Sydney"⁵ and when the *Post* issued the bulletin on the 4th announcing Britain's declaration of war, "there was an enthusiastic outburst of cheering" from the crowd "and a number of people sang the Canadian anthem and 'O Canada' with enthusiasm."⁶

Although Halifax was the most important Atlantic coastal port and home to the nascent Royal Canadian Navy, Sydney harbour was at least as important, if not more so. North Sydney was the fourth busiest port in Canada for ocean ships, surpassed only by Quebec, Halifax and Montreal in gross tonnage. The successful completion of the transatlantic cable in 1866 and the establishment of the Western Union cable office at North Sydney in 1875 also contributed to the commercial and strategic importance of the harbour, and the completion of the national railway system at the turn of the century made North Sydney the main entry point in Canada for European mail destined for North American addresses. Finally, the several coal mines along the harbour's shores - the only coal mines on North America's Atlantic coast - were the major source of fuel in eastern Canada, both for industrial and home heating purposes and for ships of the British and French navies, and the steel plants at Sydney and Sydney Mines produced approximately one-third of the country's steel. In short, Sydney harbour was of enormous economic and strategic importance in 1914 and would inevitably experience more military activity than most other Canadian communities.⁷

People in the area were well aware of this, of course, with the result that martial enthusiasm was exceptionally strong there, and when units of the Royal Canadian Regiment arrived on 31 July, even before the declaration of war, between two and three thousand people thronged the Intercolonial Railway station in Sydney to welcome them.⁸ By 3 August there were approximately one hundred troops in the Sydney - Louisbourg area and during the night of 3/4 August a naval brigade of 43 personnel from the Halifax dockyard with two 12-pounder field guns and two machine guns also entrained for Cape Breton.⁹ The local militia, the 94th Regiment,



Dorothy Willmot
Percy's sister



Private Percy Charles Willmot
August 1914

Argyll Highlanders, was mobilized on the morning of 5 August and by the 10th had 707 men stationed on Sydney harbour, and at Louisbourg and Canso.¹⁰ Meanwhile, artillery was brought in to guard North Sydney and Canso as well.¹⁰

Clearly, then, the outbreak of war had a very dramatic impact on Sydney and its neighbouring communities, which must have stimulated war fever with a very real sense of the potential nearness and immediacy of the war not shared by most Canadian communities. This war fever was reflected not only in nervousness about coastal defence and the arrival of significant numbers of troops and artillery but also in enthusiasm to enlist for overseas service. When Lieutenant-Colonel Harvey McLeod offered the services of Sydney's 17th Field Battery on the day war was declared, the Militia Department immediately wired its acceptance and the 17th proved to be the only combatant militia unit in Nova Scotia accepted for overseas service in the first contingent. Reflecting the spirit of the times, the *Sydney Daily Post* predicted that the number of volunteers would be more than required but assured its readers that "all possible influences

are being used to insure a fair representation from Cape Breton, as it is reported from upper [sic] Canada that volunteers are offering in great numbers."¹¹

In the days leading up to their departure, a number of enthusiastic patriotic events took place. On Sunday, 23 August, "something in the nature of a great demonstration" took place in Sydney, "arising out of the enormous crowds of people who congregated for the purpose of watching the movements of the military in various parts of the city, but more especially in connection with the church parades." The Roman Catholic troops attended mass at Sacred Heart church on George Street in the morning and the Protestants attended St. George's, the old Anglican garrison church on Charlotte Street, in the afternoon. Following the afternoon service, the troops paraded through downtown Sydney, led by the city band, an event which, as the *Post* observed, had not been seen in Sydney since 1854, when a regiment of British soldiers stationed in Sydney paraded through the town prior to leaving for the Crimean War. There was, it added, "a tremendous concourse of people at every point" - Percy and Dorothy among them,

no doubt - to witness this event and "on every hand the highest praise was accorded for the fine soldierlike and well-disciplined appearance of the men."¹²

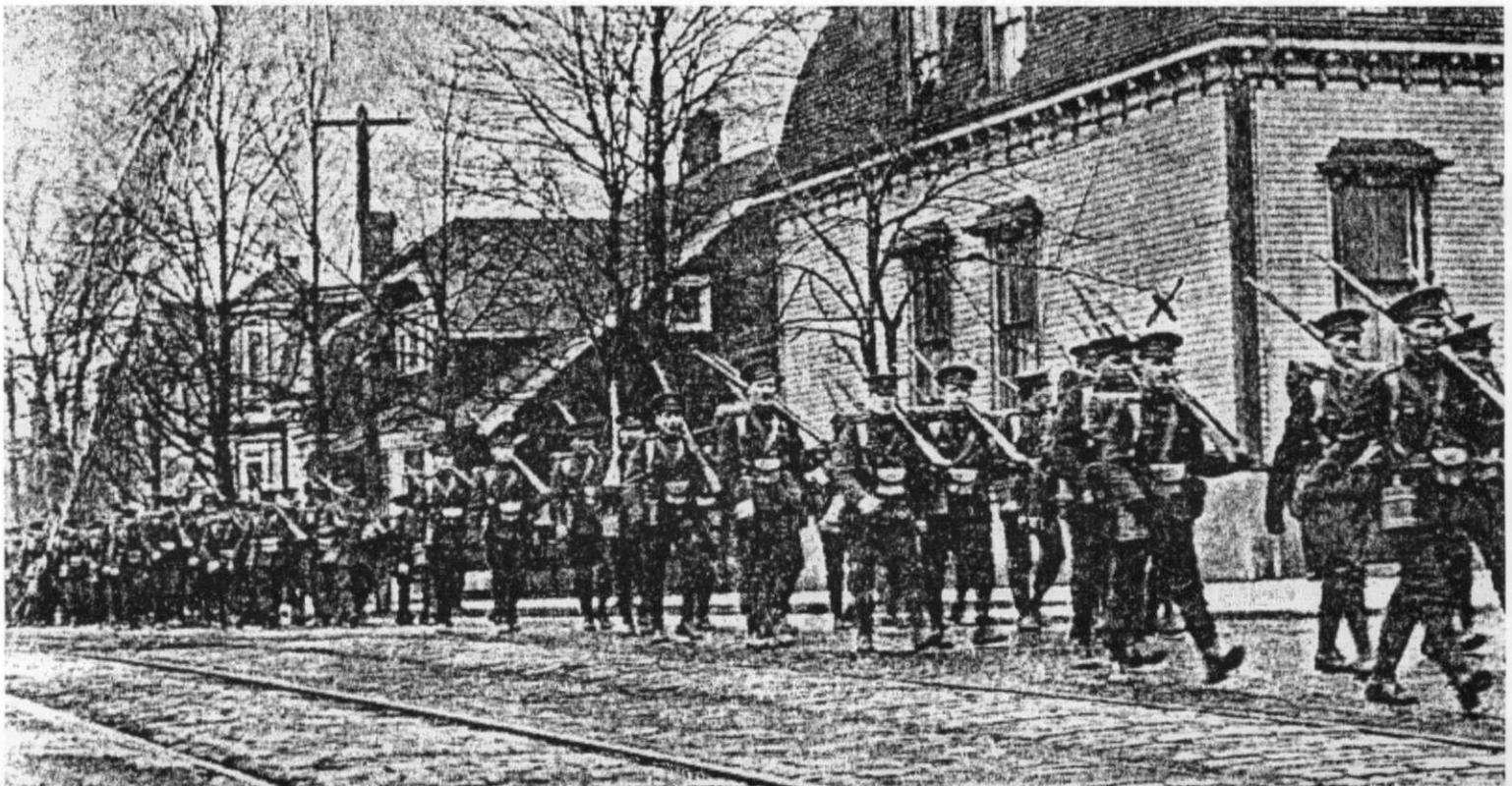
On the 28th, crowds began to gather at Victoria Park and along Charlotte Street by noon, although the train taking the troops to Valcartier did not leave until evening. Ferries carried some 2,000 people across the harbour from North Sydney and Sydney Mines and a special half-hour electric tram service from Glace Bay brought thousands more. By 3:00 pm, when the city's shops closed for the occasion, some 10,000 people lined the streets. "Everywhere here yesterday, from housetop to button hole, the Union Jack was in evidence. Big flags, little flags, silk flags, cotton flags, all were there. Even the French tricolour was in evidence," reported the *Post*. The town bands of Sydney, Sydney Mines, and the 94th Regiment provided appropriate music. The commanding officers and the mayors of Sydney and the surrounding towns made patriotic speeches before the departing regiment proceeded to the railway station on Intercolonial Street, where the troop train was gaily decorated with bunting. There, band selections such as "Auld Lang Syne," "Our Old Canadian Home," "O Canada," and "God Be With You Till We Meet Again" were played and the enormous crowd cheered them off.¹³

Percy goes overseas

Three days after the first contingent, comprising more than 30,000 volunteers, sailed from Quebec City for England in October 1914, the government announced the mobilization of a second contingent of 20,000 men. Lieutenant-Colonel G.A. Lecain was authorized to raise men for the 25th Battalion, the first to be organized and raised entirely in Nova Scotia. Headquarters was established at the Halifax armouries and recruiting offices were opened in Sydney, Amherst, New Glasgow, Truro and Yarmouth.¹⁴

Like so many other young men of the time, Percy was undoubtedly caught up in all of the patriotic fervor and excitement and, having close family and emotional ties to England, he must have decided fairly soon that he must enlist to defend all those values which he held dear and were generally thought to be represented by the empire. Like him, some two-thirds of the men who had volunteered for the first contingent were British immigrants.¹⁵ One presumes that he held back from volunteering in August only because of a concern for leaving Dorothy alone in Sydney. However, he was one of the first to enlist in the 25th, doing so on 8 November 1914. A day later he left for Halifax, "there to become a soldier of the empire of which *we two* as Englishmen are so proud," in Dorothy's words.¹⁶

The 25th Battalion marching in Halifax, December 1914. Percy is identified with the "x" over his head. Note his moustache, which he grew after enlisting but soon removed.



Thus began the great adventure of his life, which consumed the next five years and ended with his death. It also began a remarkable correspondence, describing his experiences in Halifax, overseas in England and at the front, then back in England when he was convalescing from his wounds, and finally back in Halifax, where he was sent for long-term convalescence and rehabilitation, ending only with his final visit home in December 1919, where he died on 27 December. This paper will present brief extracts from Percy's remarkable letters, ending with the one written from hospital in England on 22 October 1918, in which he described the circumstances of his being wounded in the Battle of Cambrai, which ended the war for Percy.

In his first letter, written from Sydney on the day of his enlistment, Percy gave Dorothy instructions on what to do with his things if he died overseas but, more importantly, urged her to "get all the love out of life you can" and not to "go through life loveless & alone as I have done." He concluded by assuring her "that I have - always - dearly loved you."¹⁷ Next day he was off to Halifax to join the battalion and begin training. On Sunday, 13 December, he reported that he felt "quite elated" at his ability to "hold my own 'physically' with the best of them here...I am getting harder and stronger every day. I am certainly going to benefit greatly by this physical Military training besides getting clear of some mental cobwebs." He must have made a good impression because he was soon promoted to lance corporal and placed in charge of the battalion's orderly room. He was also given the opportunity to transfer to the Medical Corps and seriously considered it "but while I should like the work all-right, it would mean I should be away from the firing-line and *that* is what I enlisted for."¹⁸

On 23 March he reported that "rumours are flying that we are to get away this week." He hoped that this was true because "the boys are becoming very discontented and impatient." Two weeks later he expected "that we shall leave very soon and I indeed hope so."¹⁹ The 25th Battalion did not in fact sail for England until 20 May, when it was accompanied by the 22nd Battalion, which had arrived in Halifax from Quebec a few days earlier. Upon arrival at Devonport nine days later, they proceeded to East Sandling Camp on the western outskirts of Shorncliffe, which had

recently replaced Salisbury Plain as the training base for Canadian troops in England. With the arrival of the second contingent, Canadian forces in England were reorganized into two divisions. The 25th Battalion was one of four that formed the Fifth Brigade in the new Second Division.

Percy described conditions at the camp as "fairly comfortable," the huts being "roomy, well aired, with good lighting - and kept strictly clean." Training was not initially rigorous either, consisting of route marches "usually to some shady spot where some of us read & play cards. We have a good time..."²⁰ The "sweet" English countryside was, he said, "exceedingly peaceful. Truly [*sic*] this is an awful war."²¹ He was, however, thinking of returning to the ranks because if he did not do so "I shall very probably never get within 15 miles of the firing line and of course that won't suit me."²² Training soon became more rigorous but even after a long hard day engaged in a mock battle, Percy described the night march back to camp as "one of the wonderful experiences of my soldier life. The sky was almost clear overhead but the earth was shrouded in mist and made one realize what Tennyson meant by 'muffled moonlight.'"²³

On 30 August Percy was promoted to the rank of staff sergeant, still responsible for the orderly room. Three days later, on an overcast 2 September, King George V, accompanied by Lord Kitchener, the Minister for War, inspected the division, a sure sign that it would soon be leaving for France. Indeed, the Second Division crossed the English Channel in stages two weeks later, the 25th Battalion crossing on the night of the 15 September. Next day it travelled by train from Boulogne to St. Omer, the headquarters of the British Expeditionary Force.²⁴ On 20 September it began the march from St. Omer to the front lines.²⁵ Percy's account of this march was typically upbeat. Because he was in charge of one of the trucks carrying the battalion's baggage, he and his men went ahead to prepare for its arrival. Arriving at the billeting point about 10 o'clock, they got the baggage piled beside the road:

laid out our blankets on the hard road & ...slept like logs... We got up at 6:30 - made our wishes known to the French folk who were very kind indeed - gave us hot water & other things for tea. The old village Priest in his long black Soutan [*sic*]...treated us with apples & other fruit

& scoured the village for a wheel for us with which to do some scouring on our own account. After lunch a few of us went down a narrow lane where there were thousands of blackberries - I got several cans for tea.²⁶

On Tuesday, 21 September 1915, the 25th Battalion went into the trenches to relieve British forces on the Ypres Salient, becoming the first Nova Scotia battalion to face the German army.²⁷ It arrived just in time to participate in the Battle of Loos, which began on 25 September and raged to 4 November. The British lost more than 60,000 men, among them eight generals, while the French lost nearly 200,000 men and the Germans about 150,000.²⁸ For this horrendous expenditure, nothing of significance was achieved. In his next letter, Percy reported the death of Leonard Lewis of Sydney.²⁹ "I am sure no benefit would follow to go into the details of his death and the last sad grave-side services. It is my duty to write tonight to his parents and I shrink from the task...I am sure I don't know what to write them but I must do my best. It is hard for me to forget even for an instant the sudden fate that cut him off in the very flower of youth - he was barely 20." As for the battle, then still in progress, "our front is comparatively quiet to date but the thundering of heavy artillery night & day bids sleep farewell, and betokens ill for the Kaiser. Actual shelling is not very annoying. One soon becomes used to it. All day long the shells sing over our heads sometimes dropping a short distance away but people don't mind them much."³⁰ Two weeks later he admitted that he had been "a little nervous" during the previous week because "shrapnel and stray bullets were not a few around our HQ's and down on the front line there was Hell let loose." But morale was high and:

death is regarded in a familiar aspect. Brave deeds are done as a matter of routine and our fellows have come out of a very severe week - as cheery and as sure of victory as ever. There is a day of reckoning coming for our friends a few

short yds against us. When it comes our boys will *not* be found wanting.³¹

He returned to this theme a few weeks later, when he observed that "life is cheap - what matters is where one ends it, provided that in parting with it a good account may be given. Surely it is worth dying in so great a cause."³²



Lieutenant Percy Willmot, Spring 1918

This patriotic attitude must be qualified, however, by his comment, on learning that his brother Art had received a mild wound, that "many chaps welcome wounds such as he has received, for the strain of standing up to one's knees in mud & water - for days together - without sleep, while bullets and bursting shells are boon companions - a bullet in the leg or arm means a rest for a time or eternity."³³

By Christmas, the Second Division had experienced "three months of the monotony of the steady round of trench tours, fatigues, rest periods with training, and the miseries of waterlogged trenches and bitter winds." If this was not bad enough, there was the realization that there was no apparent end in sight. Like the men of the First Division in 1914, those of the Second in 1915 inevitably found their first Christmas Day "most depressing," not only because the war was clearly dragging on but because "the leaden atmosphere and lowering skies" of winter in northern France and Belgium were so different from the "blue cloudless skies, and crisp sparkling snow of home." Christmas Day passed quietly, however. The German artillery was silent and in at least one instance the infantry of both sides walked about in the open behind their forward trenches, without a shot being exchanged. But there was none of the large-scale fraternization that had characterized the unofficial Christmas truce between British and German troops in 1914.³⁴ For Percy, the Christmas of 1915 was a day of hard work. Because the 25th Battalion came out of the trenches on Christmas Eve, he "had to work late getting an Orderly-Room fixed - I turned out at 6 AM Christmas Day and worked till noon

without even a break for breakfast. After lunch I pegged away until 11:30 at night." Nonetheless, he was able to report that he was "in excellent health and in fairly good humour with myself and the world at large, which is worth something at Christmas time."³⁵

Back home, the enthusiastic response to the formation of the 85th Battalion (Nova Scotia Highlanders) in the autumn had led to a proposal to form a Nova Scotia Highland Brigade, one of whose four battalions, the 185th, would be raised in Cape Breton. This was the origin of the Cape Breton Highlanders. Lieutenant-Colonel Frank Day of the 85th Battalion was given command of the 185th and recruiting began in February 1916.³⁶ The majority of the officers selected were Cape Bretoners, some drawn from the 85th but most from the 94th Regiment, the Cape Breton militia unit. Broughton, eighteen miles from Sydney, was designated the mobilization centre and it was there that the battalion assembled during the first week of April 1916.³⁷

Willmot thought "the idea of an All-Cape-Breton Regiment one of the finest and most inspiring ever" and hoped to be given a commission in it through the influence of F.A. Crowell, his former employer in Sydney, because "my experience would be invaluable in the forming and training of a new regiment, familiar as I am with the faults and short-comings in the make-up of our own 25th."³⁸ Inevitably, however, the raising and organizing of the 185th Battalion involved a good deal of political interference and manoeuvring in the community and Percy did not get the appointment.

On 27 March 1916 the British army launched a major offensive at St. Eloi in the Ypres salient and a week later, on the night of 3/4 April, the Canadian Corps went into the line. The Battle of St. Eloi has been described as "beyond a doubt the most trying experience which the [25th] Battalion had to that time or has since been called upon to endure" because there were only mine craters rather than front line trenches, and the German artillery fire in the Ypres salient was the heaviest of the war.³⁹ Losses were enormous, and apparently unnecessarily so, with the result that changes were made at the command level. Nasmith claims that the Battle of St. Eloi "will live as one of the greatest feats of endurance and stubborn

tenacity in the history of Canadian arms, being only rivalled perhaps by the battle of Passchendaele."⁴⁰ Percy commented only that there had been "considerable action on our front" and "the news is not pleasant." After suggesting that "there is little that I might add that would be of any interest," he added:

Luck is with me - some 250 German shells fell in our near vicinity a couple of days ago - big fellows too but no one hit. One huge fellow - 9 inches in diameter - drove deep into the ground about 15 feet from a hut where I was stationed. It did not explode. If it had - well - *You* see the luck is with me.

Huge trees were uprooted and thrown high in the air - and the splintered shrapnel fell in showers all round. Yes we are in a pretty Hot Climate for a time.⁴¹

Heavy fighting and shelling continued in the St. Eloi area through June and Percy reported that "there is quite a little doing on our front, as you will see from the casualty lists."⁴² This was the buildup to the Somme offensive, which was launched on 1 July 1916. It was on this day that the 1st Newfoundland Regiment was virtually annihilated when attacking the German trenches south of Beaumont Hamel. The Somme offensive lasted until 15 September, at a cost of nearly 200,000 British, 70,000 French and 200,000 German casualties.⁴³

The Somme offensive included the Battle of Courcellette, which has been described as being "to the Second division what Ypres was to the First division."⁴⁴ The plan of attack at Courcellette was for the Fourth (Ontario) Brigade to attack on the morning of 15 July to clear the ground, after which the Fifth Brigade would carry the assault into the town on the 16th. The initial assault went well and the second attack was launched in broad daylight, an event which the army commander described as being "without parallel in the present campaign."⁴⁵ After a brief bayonet attack, the 22nd and 25th Battalions advanced straight through the town while the 26th Battalion began to mop up.⁴⁶ Because many German troops remained in cellars and dug-outs, the clearing of Courcellette became a two-day operation. Meanwhile, the 22nd and 25th Battalions came under repeated counterattack. "If hell is as bad as what I have seen at Courcellette," Lieutenant-Colonel T.L. Tremblay, commanding the 22nd, wrote in his diary, "I would not wish my worst enemy to go there."⁴⁷

Between 15 and 18 September, the 22nd suffered 207 casualties, the 25th 222, and the 26th Battalion 224.⁴⁸

Percy wrote on 30 September that he was "feeling very fit but *awfully* strained & busy. It is one continual Hell. Just now the worst bombardment of the whole battle is proceeding. No words can describe it." He added, sadly, that "there are a few - very few - left of the boys who enlisted with me in the old 25th" but "we have them on the run now."⁴⁹ Two weeks later he told Dorothy that, "while I was little more than a spectator, [I] feel lucky to have escaped without a scratch...The marvel of it all is that there are any left to tell the tale."⁵⁰ By now, the war was taking its toll on him. "I feel," he said, "that I am fast becoming a hardened and calloused old Soldier. The loss of dear friends is a matter of every day occurrence and awakens little deep feeling." A month later he admitted that it was becoming hard to write letters because "there is not much inspiration to be obtained from vistas of desolation and ruin."⁵¹ Meanwhile, both the trenches and no-man's-land were "in a dreadful state with decaying bodies and all sorts of decomposing matter."⁵² As for the lice, "I have been more fortunately placed than most men, but still find it well nigh impossible. Frequent changes of underwear are not always possible and I despair of ever feeling *clean* again."⁵³

December offered some respite with an opportunity to travel to Paris with the paymaster on official business. "The work *might* have occupied only a day but I managed to 'dawdle' it to six and they gave me a day to see the sights. It was one of the most beautiful cities I have ever seen and needless to say I enjoyed the trip immensely."⁵⁴ He "stayed at the finest hotel - and lived like a prince, all my expenses being paid by Johnny Canuck. Did I have a nice time - well, *rather*...Just think of it - a real bed with nice white sheets. Did we get up at 6 A.M. next morning - *not much*." He attended movies, the opera and the Folies Berglères, and visited the cathedrals and shops.⁵⁵ That was followed by leave, which he spent at home with his family in Birmingham.

As spring approached, preparations were being made to launch the Battle of Arras, the key to which was Vimy Ridge. The Third British Army occupied the Arras region but the attack on Vimy Ridge was assigned to the Canadian

Corps. The bombardment began in the third week of March and continued by day and night until the assault took place on the morning of Easter Monday, 9 April 1916. The 25th Battalion took part in this legendary battle, the significance of which is well known to most Canadians. It is interesting to discover that Percy, who was there, recognized its importance at the time. He did not actually participate in the assault, "though I used all my endeavours to be there," but he walked the battlefield the next day. Vimy Ridge, he told Dorothy, "will go down in history as the magnificent achievement of the Canadian Corps."

I have been over the field of Courcellette, I have seen the ruins of Ypres and shell torn fields of Belgium, but never have I seen such destruction as found here. Where the 'heavies' scored - deep cavities 10, 20 & 30 feet deep and 20 to 30 feet across are found all over the area - an extent exceeding three miles in depth. The impregnable wire of the Siegfried line was simply annihilated and the ground is churned in a fearful condition.⁵⁶

Two days later he continued recording his thoughts on this pivotal battle:

During 18 mos. of warfare I have become more or less deadened to feeling & emotion but I could not prevent the tears from rolling down my cheeks, and the choking in my throat for the cheery lads who were marching away, many of them never to return. At 5:28 A.M. on the morning of the ninth our lads were at their appointed places. At 5:30 thousands of guns of all calibres belched forth a fire such as was never before seen in all the war. Nothing human could stand it. As the guns spoke, over the bags they went - men of CB, sons of NS & NB - FC's [French Canadians] & westerners - all Canucks. Within 14 minutes the first trench was captured, & within an hour & 15 minutes, the whole ridge, 4000 prisoners & many guns were in our possession. So far it was the most decisive, the most spectacular and the most important victory on this front since the Marne and Canada may well be proud of the achievement.⁵⁷

The French now began their attack on the Aisne, along the southern part of the Hindenburg line, and by the end of May the Battle of Arras had come to an end. The British had taken 20,000 prisoners, 257 guns, 227 trench mortars and 470 machine guns, and the Germans had lost a key position in Vimy Ridge, about seven miles of the Hindenburg line, and the important position of Bullecourt. German casualties totalled 350,000.⁵⁸



Percy Willmot,
England,
late 1918.

The offensive known as the Third Battle of Ypres began at the end of July. The 25th Battalion participated in the attacks on Hill 70 and Lens. The last stage of the Third Battle of Ypres, commonly known by Canadians as the Battle of Passchendaele, "was probably the muddiest and most difficult operation ever carried out." On 9 October the Canadian Corps moved forward under dripping skies and in the north and won all their objectives by noon. In the centre, British territorials and Australians moved forward towards Passchendaele, also taking their objectives.⁵⁹

The misery of our fighting men now almost surpassed endurance. The country was one great bog and the shell holes kept brim full by the ceaseless downpour were a constant source of danger to the unwary. Wounded men frequently were drowned in the mud and water. Men loaded with packs falling into shell holes were unable to crawl out without assistance and, if none was forthcoming, perished. Men's feet sank deep into the treacherous clay and progress could be made only by the most heroic efforts.⁶⁰

On 6 November the Canadian Corps captured Passchendaele and by the 10th they held all the

high ground northeast of the town, placing it well within their lines. Nasmith considered the Battle of Passchendaele to be "the most terrible and tragic battle that the Canadian Corps was to experience."⁶¹ Its casualties totalled 14,867 men killed, wounded and missing.⁶²

Meanwhile, Percy had returned to England for officer training and was stationed at Bramshott camp in Hampshire. He was happy to be in England, two years in the trenches having dampened his enthusiasm for combat. "I shall not probably be back in France until April. Anyway here's hoping!... I wish the damned thing was over."⁶³ He completed his training at the end of January and was promoted to lieutenant, "the victim of every saluting Tommy' within the circuit of vision."⁶⁴ Happily, he was now enrolled in a musketry course which he hoped might last two months. Thus, he missed Germany's last great offensive in the spring of 1918, during which the 25th Battalion established its reputation as the most successful 'Raiding Battalion.'⁶⁵ Percy completed his musketry course at Aldershot in early April but, for whatever reasons, remained in England,

enjoying visits with his family and visiting London and other places, until being sent back to France in June. He remained at a camp behind the lines until finally rejoining his unit on 13 August, just in time for the final offensive.

The end of the war was now in sight because of the failure of the German spring offensive, and the Allied offensive was launched on 18 July. The Canadian Corps participated in what came to be known as the Battle of Amiens in August, then moved up to Arras for the Battle of Cambrai, the final assault on the Hindenburg Line that ended the war. The Canadians, including the 25th Battalion, entered Cambrai on 9 October, having advanced 23 miles and engaged and defeated 31 German divisions since 26 August. They had taken 18,585 prisoners, 371 guns, and 1,923 machine guns at a cost of 1,544 officers and 29,262 other ranks killed, wounded and missing.⁶⁶ One of the wounded officers was Percy Willmot.

He seems not to have written to Dorothy between August and October, but he did fight in the Battle of Cambrai and on 3 October reported that the ground was "simply covered with hundreds of blue-gray uniformed bodies. Some of our units suffered pretty heavily but it was slaughter for the Huns." He had a close escape from an artillery barrage a few nights earlier:

I had got well down in a Funk hole and was trying to get a few moments sleep, and I was 'some' sleepy having been 'standing to' and awaiting moving orders for three days and nights. 'Whiz-bang' a big shell landed on the rails not more than six feet from my head. While I was marvelling to find myself unscathed, in the dim light, I saw the deadly gas-cloud, emitted by the exploded shell. In an instant, I had yelled the

alarm and had several sniffs of the blasted stuff before I finally got my mask on. Fortunately, I don't feel the slightest after-effects.⁶⁷

Six days later, on 9 October - the day the Canadians took Cambrai - Percy was wounded in the left leg and thigh by shrapnel from an artillery barrage - apparently from our own guns - while leading his men across the canal at Tilloy, on the outskirts of Cambrai:

On arriving about two hundred yds from the canal we got caught in our own barrage which was firing short. After waiting a short while, I pushed on with my platoon to the bridge head, and found as expected that the bridge had been blown up. Word was sent back and in a short time the Engineers came up and constructed a temporary foot bridge. My Sergt and I were first across and after getting the men in a defensive position, I started out to reconnoitre. I had not gone far, when I saw a number of Huns and these did not give me a chance to fire for they immediately put up their hands - there were seven of them. Meantime we were being shelled considerably and it was shortly after this, about 7 A.M. that a shell landed within a few yards and gave me this lovely 'blighty' - I had four stalwart Huns carry me to the dressing station.⁶⁸

This was the end of his war. He was taken to hospital in England for treatment and, because his wounds were not terribly serious, he enjoyed being out of the fighting and visiting with his family. The war ended on the morning of 11 November 1918, and rumours that the 25th Battalion would form part of the Allied force occupying Germany interested him not at all. "I am sick of it, and as long as I am in this game I shall do no more than I have to. No more 'volunteering' from this child," he told Dorothy in February 1919.⁶⁹



John Leigh Hospital, Altrincham, England, where Percy was sent for recuperation after being wounded in October 1918.

At this point, Percy's story shifts from heroic to tragic, for his recovery was interrupted by a stroke, which prevented his joining the 25th Battalion when it sailed for Halifax in May. He was sent home in August, however, and entered Camp Hill Veterans' Hospital to continue rehabilitation treatment. He was well enough on occasion to enjoy a visit to Sydney and his beloved camp, and he attended a reunion of veterans of the 25th Battalion held at the Green Lantern Restaurant in Halifax on 15 September to commemorate the Battle of Courcelette. Dorothy attended with him and it must have been a happy, if poignant, occasion. His condition began to deteriorate in the autumn, however, and by November his letters make clear his discouragement with his apparent lack of progress and, indeed, his weakening strength. His last days were spent with Dorothy and his closest friends, Cass and John McKimmie, at home. He was given leave at Christmas to return to Sydney for the holidays, where he died on 27 December. His funeral, with full military honours, took place three days later, when he was interred at Hardwood Hill Cemetery.

Dorothy was, of course, grief-stricken and F.A. Crowell sent her to England, ostensibly on a buying trip for the store, in reality to visit her family. No doubt she was thinking that she might remain there. The England of 1920 was not the country she had left in 1911, however, and while she did stay for several months, she returned in January 1921 to her job at the store and her life in the community. She subsequently attended a local business college, sang in the church choir, and in 1924 married Gilbert Phillips of Glace Bay. Out of that union came a number of children, one of whom, Gladys, has spent a lifetime preserving and nurturing the memory of Percy Willmot, an uncle she never knew, but who was and remains a major presence in the life of her mother and her family.

Notes

I am indebted to Mrs. Gladys Smith, daughter of Dorothy Willmot, whose cooperation in sharing letters and photographs in her possession, as well as providing much information about the family history, has made this project possible.

1. Beaton Institute. Willmot Papers. Diary, 31 October 1909. His grandmother died unexpectedly the next day!

Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from the Willmot Papers, copies of which are housed at the Beaton Institute, University College of Cape Breton.

2. Not surprisingly, in view of the quality of his later letters, he excelled in English. His diploma is dated 10 August 1900 and is included in his diary.
3. This is inferred from the fact that his grandmother directed a letter to him in February 1905 "to St George's Channel for the chance of you getting it." Gladys Willmot Papers. Frances Willmot to Percy Willmot, 2 February 1905. Clearly, she was unaware that Percy had moved to Sydney in August 1904. When travelling from Sydney to Halifax in 1909, en route to England for a visit, he stopped at St George's Channel and milked cows, as he says in his diary, for the first time in years. He also stopped at Princeville, near Truro, where he helped his friends with the haying. It is clear from his journal that this kind of farm labour and the people at these two locations were well known to him.
4. His diary records that he spent a day there in January 1910 and "tramped around the town seeing the old places of my school days." Diary, 11 January 1910.
5. *Sydney Daily Post*, 3 August 1914.
6. *Ibid*, 5 August 1914.
7. For a valuable account of the rise and fall of the shipping industry in Sydney harbour during the nineteenth century and its relationship to the coal industry, see Rosemary Langhout, "Alternative opportunities: the development of shipping at Sydney harbour, 1842-1889," in Kenneth Donovan (ed), *Cape Breton at 200: Historical Essays in Honour of the Island's Bicentennial* (Sydney, 1985), pp.53-69. The importance of the steel plant, mines and shipping at Sydney was emphasized by Major-General Sir Louis Jackson, a British fortifications and base development expert, who visited Sydney in May 1918 and called for greatly improved defences because of the "vital importance" of the steel plants, which were "very vulnerable from the fact that there are points where the effect of one shell might stop the work for months." The 17 coal mines spread around the harbour from Low Point to MacRae Point produced 300,000 tons of coal monthly, about a third of which went to the Dominion Steel plant. Somewhat less exposed were four mines near Cranberry Head which produced between 50,000 and 60,000 tons monthly, most of which supplied the Sydney Mines steel plant. If these mines suffered serious damage, the steel works would have to shut down because they did not maintain a reserve supply of coal, and Jackson considered them highly vulnerable to attack from submarines or surface raiders. See Brian Tennyson and Roger Sarty, *Guardian of the Gulf: Sydney, Cape Breton, and the Atlantic Wars* (Toronto, 2000), 113-29.
8. *Sydney Daily Post*, 1 August 1914.
9. A. Fortescue Duguid, *Official History of the Canadian Forces 1914-1919* (Ottawa, 1938), I, pp.17-18.
10. On the mobilization of the 94th, see H.L. Livingstone *et al*, "Cape Bretoners in World World One," *Cape Breton's Magazine* 33 (June 1983), pp. 1-9, 11-15, 17-27. Stuart Hunt, Nova Scotia's military historian, described the 94th Regiment as "perhaps the most distinctively Highland Battalion in the forces of the Empire, inasmuch as the Gaelic language was the mother tongue of eighty per cent of its personnel." He added that "as a rural Battalion it is recognized as having sent more officers and men Overseas than any other similar Unit

- in Eastern Canada. All its original members, excepting those over age or physically unfit, were transferred to CEF units." M. Stuart Hunt, ed., *Nova Scotia's Part in the Great War* (Halifax, 1920), 263.
11. Sydney *Daily Post*, 8 August 1914. The 17th Field Battery's 141 officers and men, four guns and 123 horses left Sydney for training at Valcartier, Quebec, on 28 August and when the 30,000 men of the first contingent sailed from Quebec City in October, the first instalment of the half million men Canada would send overseas during the war, the men of the 17th were among them. Enthusiasm for the war, at least initially, is reflected in the fact that, according to the *Post*, enlistments in Cape Breton to August 1916 totalled approximately 5,000. Cape Breton supplied half the recruits for the 25th, 40th and 85th Battalions and fully recruited the 185th Battalion. *Sydney Daily Post*, 9 August 1916.
 12. *Ibid.*, 24 August 1914.
 13. Sydney *Daily Post*, 29 August 1914.
 14. G.C. McElhenny, "The 25th Battalion," in M. Stuart Hunt, ed., *Nova Scotia's Part in the Great War* (Halifax, 1920), p.71.
 15. Desmond Morton and J.L. Granatstein, *Marching to Armageddon: Canadians and the Great War 1914-1919* (Toronto, 1989), p.10.
 16. Percy to Dorothy, 8 November. Handwritten notation by Dorothy, 9 November 1914.
 17. Percy to Dorothy, 8 November 1914. This letter was not actually mailed but handed to Ella Stewart, a family friend, in Halifax for safe-keeping, to be given to Dorothy if he was killed overseas. Upon his return to Halifax, Ella returned it to him and, perhaps fearing the worst, he then sent it to Dorothy on 29 August 1919.
 18. Percy to Dorothy, 7 January 1915.
 19. Percy to Dorothy, 8 April 1915.
 20. Percy to Dorothy, 7 June 1915.
 21. Percy to Dorothy, 10 June 1915.
 22. Percy to Dorothy, 27 June 1915.
 23. Percy to Dorothy, 25 August 1915.
 24. McElhenny, *op cit*, 74.
 25. *Ibid.*
 26. Percy to Dorothy, 18 September 1915.
 27. McElhenny, *op cit*.
 28. G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919* (Ottawa, 1962), p.121.
 29. Private Leonard Lewis was killed in action on Wednesday, 27 September 1915 at the age of 20 years. He was buried on the next day, according to Percy's diary. He was the son of Orlando and Alexandra Lewis of 42 Ferry Street, Sydney, and worked for the Dominion Iron & Steel Company prior to enlistment. His brothers Hedley and Roland also served in the 25th Battalion. Percy knew all three of them well.
 30. Percy to Dorothy, 2 October 1915.
 31. Percy to Dorothy, 14 October 1915.
 32. Percy to Dorothy, 8 January 1916.
 33. Percy to Dorothy, 7 November 1915. The heavy rains and mud of Flanders are well known. As one historian has described it, "the Flanders rain was like no other rain that had ever fallen on earth. There was no escape from it. The trenches, which were nothing more than sandbagged breastworks, simply dissolved. The earth within the sandbags liquefied and oozed out. Everything collapsed. Every indentation of the ground filled with water, and, to make things worse, the enemy, being on higher ground, delighted in draining his trenches across No Man's Land into those occupied by the Canadians."
 - W.W. Murray, *The History of the 2nd Canadian Battalion in the Great War* (Ottawa, 1947), p.75, quoted in Nicholson, *op cit*, p. 125. The troops had no means of shielding themselves against the cold and wet. "They stood for days in thigh-deep water and trench shelters caved in, leaving no protection from the teeming skies. Conditions were little better in billets, where roofs leaked and it was all but impossible to coax more than a noxious smoke from the damp coke and charcoal that came up with the rations." Inevitably, there were many cases of influenza and other respiratory ailments, as well as 'trench feet,' a condition like frostbite caused by the continued cold wetness which could lead to gangrene. Nicholson, *op cit*, pp.125-127.
 34. George G. Nasmith, *Canada's Sons in the World War* (Toronto, 1919), I, p.260.
 35. Percy to Dorothy, 26 December 1915.
 36. Colonel Frank Parker Day, junior major with the 85th Battalion, was appointed lieutenant colonel of the 185th. A former Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University who went on to teach at Carnegie Institute of Technology, he had served in England with King Edward's Light Horse and with the 28th New Brunswick Dragoons.
 37. Angus L. Macdonald, "The 185th Battalion (Cape Breton Highlanders)," in Hunt, *op cit*, pp. 122-123.
 38. Percy to Dorothy, 9 February 1916.
 39. McElhenny, *op cit*, p.75.
 40. Nasmith, *op cit*, I, p.262.
 41. Percy to Dorothy, 20 April 1916
 42. Percy to Dorothy, 19 June 1916
 43. Nicholson, *op cit*, p. 163.
 44. Nasmith, *op cit*, I, p.300.
 45. Quoted in Nicholson, *op cit*, p. 170.
 46. Nicholson, *op cit*, p. 170.
 47. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 171.
 48. Nicholson, *op cit*, p. 171.
 49. Percy to Dorothy, 30 September 1916.
 50. Percy to Dorothy, 10 October 1916.
 51. Percy to Dorothy, 4 November 1916.
 52. Percy to Dorothy, 25 May 1916.
 53. Percy to Dorothy, 6 March 1917.
 54. Percy to Dorothy, 12 December 1916.
 55. Percy to Dorothy, 18 December 1916.
 56. Percy to Dorothy, 14 April 1917.
 57. Percy to Dorothy, 16 April 1917.
 58. Nasmith, *op cit*, II, p. 16.
 59. *Ibid*, p. 24.
 60. *Ibid*, p.25.
 61. *Ibid*, p.29.
 62. *Ibid*, p. 30.
 63. Percy to Dorothy, 1 November 1917.
 64. Percy to Dorothy, 28 January 1918.
 65. McElhenny, *op cit*, p.85.
 66. Nasmith, *op cit*, pp. 154-5.
 67. Percy to Dorothy, 3 October 1918.
 68. Percy to Dorothy, 22 October 1918.
 69. Percy to Dorothy, 18 February 1919.

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