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Canada

**The “Mad Fourth”:
The 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion at War, 1914-1916**

by
Andrew Iarocci
BA, University of Western Ontario, 1998

THESIS
Submitted to the Department of
History in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Arts degree

Wilfrid Laurier University

2001

(c) Andrew Iarocci, 2001

Table of Contents

Preface	i
Acknowledgments	v
Reference Map: The Western Front from the Somme River Valley to the Ypres Salient	vii
Reference Map: The Ypres Salient	viii
List of Figures	ix
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: The Imperial Infantry Battalion in the First World War and the Mobilization of the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion	6
Chapter 2: 1915 and the Birth of the “Mad Fourth”	21
Chapter 3: 1916	45
Conclusion	82
Bibliography	89

Preface

This thesis offers an analysis of the experience of the men who served in the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion from the outbreak of war in 1914 to the final weeks of the Somme offensive in October 1916. The research is based on the best available archival sources and is informed by the most important secondary literature dealing with operations on the Western Front. Canadian historians have generally avoided the study of the Great War at the battalion level, preferring to write about generalship or operations at the Corps level.¹ This has left the task of writing about combat to those concerned with personal memoirs and anecdotal accounts of life at the sharp end.

This case study of the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion presents evidence which challenges many of the conventional arguments employed by military historians describing the war from the top down. Some of the most common themes outlined in the existing literature are applied to the Canadian Corps in Bill Rawling's book *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps: 1914-1918*.² The basic thrust of Rawling's argument is that the Canadian military experience from 1914 through 1918 represents a sort of upwardly sloping learning curve whereby progress was the inevitable consequence of experience. Rawling's work is also typical in its criticisms of the recruitment of the 1st Canadian Division and his suggestion that the Canadians were inadequately trained when they entered combat in 1915. The Ross Rifle question, which also figures largely in the literature on the Canadian Army, is emphasized by Rawling, though as we will see, there is little comment on the weapon in the records of the 4th Battalion.

¹J.L. McWilliams and R.J. Steel's *The Suicide Battalion* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1978), examines the experience of the 46th Canadian Infantry Battalion, but few other studies of the sort have been completed during the past two decades.

²Bill Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps, 1914-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

The themes of "change" and "progress" are recurrent ones in the historiography of the First World War. Pierre Berton's *Vimy* is a classic example of a work that espouses an optimistic progress paradigm. But the terms *change* and *progress* are not synonymous. If "changes" in the way of waging war represented a continual process, such changes did not always equal progress. "Progress" refers specifically to developments that are conducive to more successful operations. Drawing on the fighting record of the 4th Battalion, this paper will argue that even for the first two years of battle, the unit's experience cannot be adequately represented by a simple learning curve. In its first and perhaps most tragic action, the battalion performed admirably. And yet, errors would be committed during later engagements, at points in time when we might assume that the battalion should have "learned" from past experience.

The thesis also addresses the age old question of the role of leadership in war, arguing that the battalion experienced a variety of leadership styles. While there seems little doubt that the quality of leadership impacted upon morale, it appears to have been just one variable, and rarely the most important one, in determining success in combat. Indeed the argument of the thesis may be summarized by stating that the evidence demonstrates that the experience of war in the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion was dependent on so many variables that the easy generalizations employed by historians who describe the "big picture" rarely provide insight into the complex and ever changing experience of an infantry battalion. This study calls into question many of these generalizations and points the way to future research on this and other battalions; future research which will allow a more accurate picture of the reality of war to be drawn.

There is another, perhaps somewhat nostalgic reason for embarking on this study of the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion, but some digression is required in order to provide an explanation. I first became aware of the 4th Battalion, quite accidentally, early in 2000, after coming across some of the battalion's war diary issues in the reading room of the Canadian Military Heritage Museum in Brantford, Ontario. The diaries had been recently donated to the

museum by the 56th Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery, a Canadian Forces reserve unit that is currently headquartered in the Brantford Armouries. Some 79 years earlier, on 23 March 1921, the colours of the 4th Battalion were deposited in these very same armouries under the care of the 38th Regiment, Dufferin Rifles.³ This now defunct militia regiment was to be the official successor of the 4th Battalion, as it had provided many of the initial recruits when the battalion was mobilized in August 1914.⁴ In the meantime, the former paymaster of the battalion, Captain W.L. Gibson, had been endeavouring to write a history of his unit. In 1924 Gibson published *Records of the Fourth Canadian Infantry Battalion in the Great War, 1914-1918*, but this book was simply a nominal roll of all battalion members, along with a list of award citations.⁵ Gibson realized that if he was to write an actual historical narrative of the 4th Battalion's war, he must have a copy of the unit's war diaries.

In April 1924 Gibson, who then resided in Buffalo, New York, sent a letter to Colonel A.F. Duguid, the Director of the Canadian Military Historical Section. In the letter Gibson requested a copy of the 4th Battalion war diaries,⁶ but he was to be disappointed by Duguid, who replied that official war diaries could only be issued to an official regimental historian via the commanding officer of the regiment. In this instance, the regiment would have to be the Dufferin Rifles.⁷ Thus over the next several months, a flurry of letters was exchanged among

³NAC, RG 24, volume 1904, file DHS 5-7-4.

⁴Throughout the war, some 20 percent of the men who passed through the battalion were from Brantford. H.Q. Overseas Military Forces to Ministry of Overseas Military Forces of Canada, 21 March 1919, NAC, RG 9, volume 3002, file U-3-33.

⁵W.L. Gibson, *Records of the Fourth Canadian Infantry Battalion in the Great War, 1914-1918* (Toronto: Maclean Publishing, 1924).

⁶Gibson to Duguid, 29 April 1924, NAC, RG 24, volume 1904, file DHS 5-7-4.

⁷Duguid to CO, Dufferin Rifles, 2 May 1924, NAC, RG 24, volume 1904, file DHS 5-7-4.

Duguid, Gibson, Colonels M.A. Colquhoun and F.H. Newman of the Dufferin Rifles, and other surviving officers of the 4th Battalion. On 15 October 1924, a copy of the 4th Battalion war diaries was dispatched in two registered packages to the Number 2 Military District Commanding Officer in Toronto for transmission to the Dufferin Armouries in Brantford.⁸ Although Gibson finally won the designation of “official historian” for the 4th Battalion, it is unclear if he ever actually laid hands on the war diaries themselves. A May 1932 letter from the Militia Service to Wm. Dawson Subscription Service in Toronto confirms that no history of the 4th Battalion had yet been published.⁹ It is possible that Gibson lost interest in the project, or did not feel inclined to travel from Buffalo to Brantford in order to consult the war diaries. In any event, no history of the 4th Battalion was ever published. Thus, in some sense this study is the legacy of a project that was first conceived 75 years ago, but never completed, and possibly never started. Ironically, if Gibson had not requested the diaries in the first place, they would not likely have found their way to the Brantford Armouries in 1924, and in turn, would not have been deposited in the reading room of the Canadian Military Heritage Museum in 2000.

Both time constraints and the evident transformation of the Canadian Army in 1917 determined the scope of this thesis. The author proposes to complete the study of the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion by examining its record at Vimy Ridge, Lens, Passchendaele, and the battles of 1918, but this will require a manuscript of book length.

⁸Duguid to District Officer Commanding, Toronto, 15 October 1924, NAC, RG 24, volume 1904, file DHS 5-7-4.

⁹Militia Service to Manager, Book Department, Wm. Dawson Subscription Service, 10 May 1932, RG 24, volume 1904, file DHS 5-7-4.

Acknowledgments

I must take an opportunity to thank the large group of people who helped me along the way with this project. I am unable to express enough gratitude toward my parents, Marsha and Anthony, who listened to me discuss the battalion so often, and supported my academic endeavours to the utmost; they also took the time to proofread drafts of this paper. My special friend Kelli Fraser also listened to me recount my latest discoveries as we walked together down Laurier Avenue after each research day I spent at the National Archives in Ottawa. If I was ever discouraged, she always reminded me that the project was “almost finished.”

I have been blessed with many capable and inspiring teachers throughout my university years, as an undergraduate at the University of Western Ontario, and as a graduate student at Wilfrid Laurier. Professor A.M.J. Hyatt, formerly of Western, first inspired my interest in the Canadian Corps and the Great War, and supported my application to the Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour in the spring of 1998. After arriving at Laurier in the winter of 2000, I was fortunate to cross paths with Professors David Monod, Cynthia Comacchio and Richard Fuke, among others, each of whom helped me find my way through the Master of Arts program. The months I have spent working with Mike Bechthold at the Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies have been highly enjoyable and rewarding. Mike and I have become good friends, and he has been kind to enough to offer help at every turn.

Professor Terry Copp’s influence on this project precedes his role as my advisor. I first encountered Professor Copp when I participated in the Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour in 1998. Since then I have had the privilege of accompanying Professor Copp and his wife Linda on two additional European battlefield tours. As we examined the terrain over which Canadian soldiers fought in France and Belgium, I began to appreciate the true complexity of military operations at the lower levels of command; some of the hardest decisions were made by battalion, company or platoon commanders. Professor Copp has been a challenging teacher,

an excellent mentor and a good friend. I could not ask for anything more.

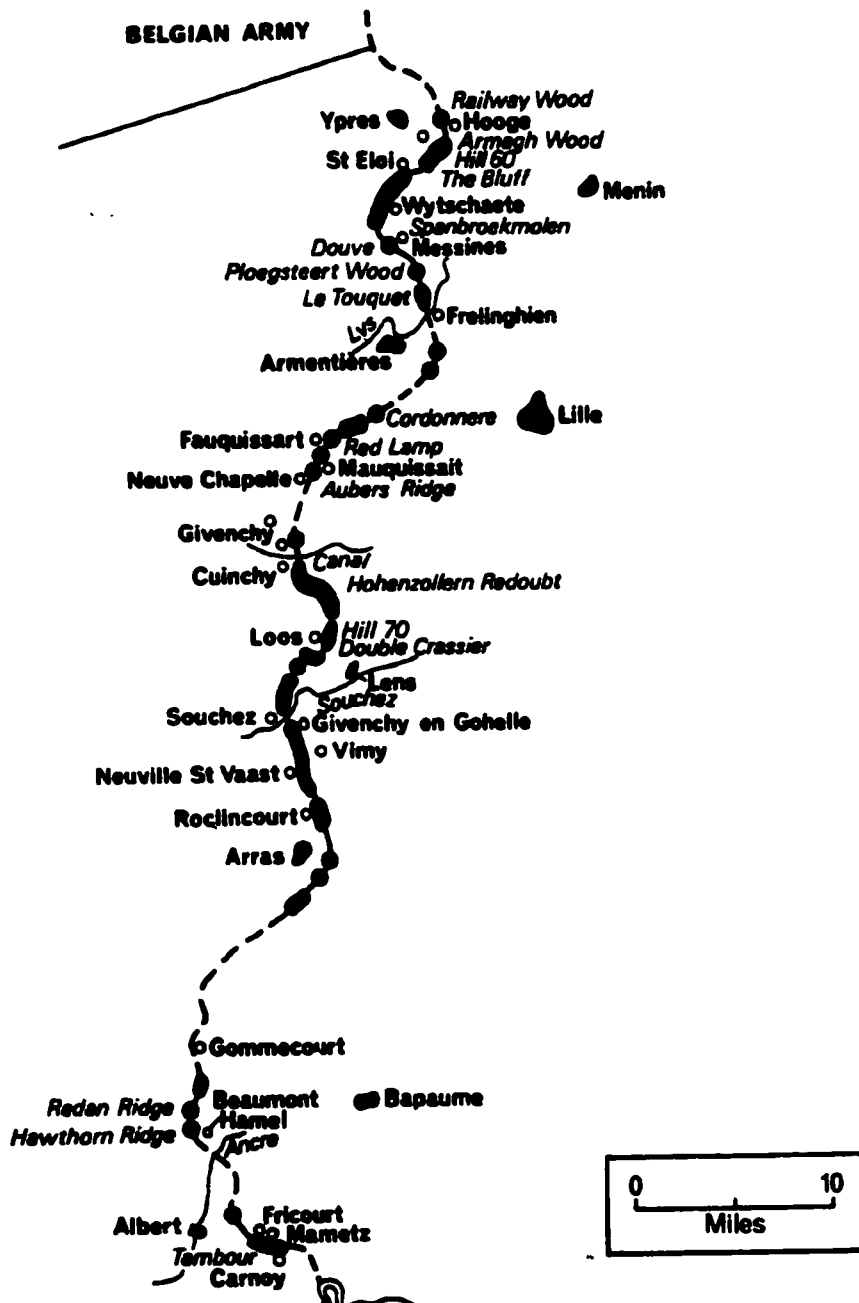
Lieutenant-Colonel Doug Thompson, the curator of the Canadian Military Heritage Museum in Brantford, first brought the museum's collection of W.L. Gibson's long lost 4th Battalion war diaries to my attention. If he had not, this project would not have been. I would like to thank all of the museum members and volunteers who reflected on the project with me; such local resources as the Canadian Military Heritage Museum have been critical to the research process. At the National Archives of Canada, Tim Cook generously took time from his schedule to meet with me and discuss the project. Tim is an expert on the Great War, and his knowledge of the rich primary resources available at the National Archives saved hours of extra searching on my part. Without such capable archivists as Tim, the pieces of our country's historical puzzle would be scattered and forgotten.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to all of the officers and men who served in the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion. They have passed on from this world by now, but I hope their legacy will be secured with the completion of this project. These men put their lives on hold and travelled to a distant shore to repel an aggressive invader. One in five of them never came home, and three in five were physically scarred by their ordeals on the Western Front. We can never know how many suffered from permanent emotional injuries. Yet these men soldiered on. When the war ended they returned home to a grateful nation and unassumingly took up their normal lives once again. On the battlefield and at home, these sturdy individuals helped to build the magnificent country in which we are so fortunate to live.

Andrew Iarocci

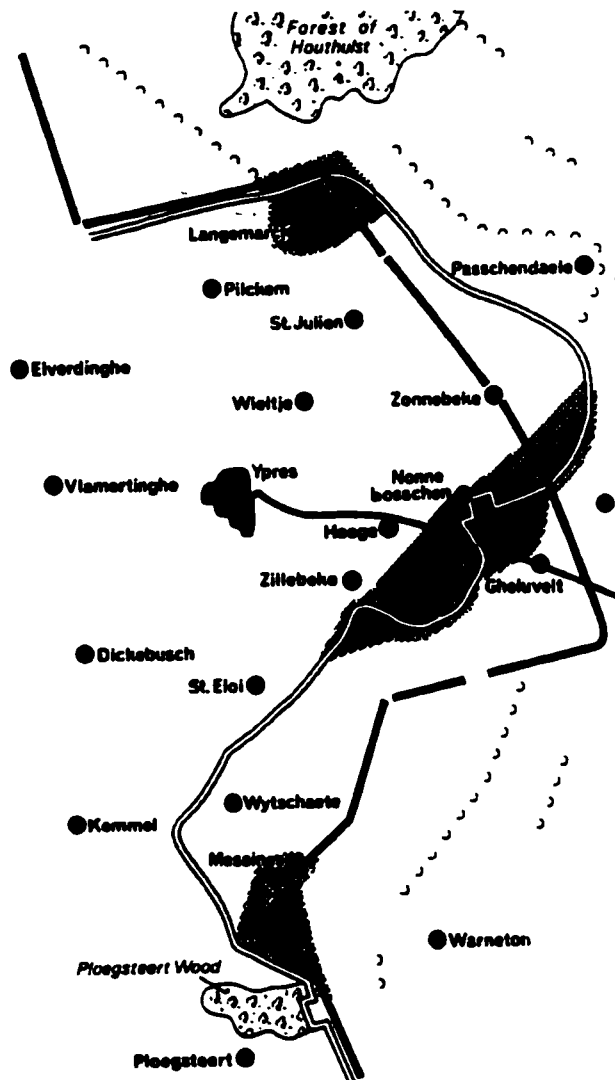
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The Western Front from the Somme River Valley to the Ypres Salient



This map shows the sector of the Western Front in which the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion was engaged during 1915-1916. The Somme River is just visible at the bottom edge of the map, to the east of Carnoy. (From Martin Gilbert, *The Routledge Atlas of the First World War*, p. 51.)

The Ypres Salient: 1914-1915



The curved white line on this map shows the Ypres Salient as it was formed during the fighting of October-November 1914 (the black lines show its initial shape). The 4th Battalion would arrive in the salient during the following spring. (Scale: the distance from Elverdinghe to Vlamertinghe is about two miles, Gilbert, p. 20)

Figures

Figure 1: Organizational chart for a First World War infantry battalion	7
Figure 2: Shoulder sleeve insignia of 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade	9
Figure 3: Mauser Ridge as it appears today	25
Figure 4: The attacks of 23 April 1915	26
Figure 5: The grave of Private George Harrison	29
Figure 6: <i>Charge of the 4th Canadian Battalion at Ypres</i>	30
Figure 7: Lieutenant-Colonel A.P. Birchall	35
Figure 8: Ploegsteert Wood Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery	41
Figure 9: Lieutenant-Colonel W. Rae	48
Figure 10: Observatory Ridge and Mount Sorrel	53
Figure 11: Mount Sorrel trench raid sketch	58
Figure 12: The grave of Private T.O. Saidler	63
Figure 13: The Somme front	65
Figure 14: The Quadrilateral near Courcelette	69

Introduction
The “Mad Fourth”: The 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion
in the Great War, 1914-1916

The First World War in Europe was an undertaking of incredible proportions. An impressive array of large armies took to the field. In the aggregate, these armies were composed of many corps, divisions and brigades. Brigades, in turn, were composed of battalions, and each British or Commonwealth battalion consisted of nearly 1,000 men at full strength. The battalion was the fundamental building block of any field force; it was also the smallest unit in the military hierarchy to have a unique designation, be it a name or a number. The infantry battalion was also a foot soldier's immediate family while he was in the service. In the Canadian Corps, for instance, virtually every battalion was composed of four companies, designated by the first four letters of the alphabet. And while individual companies may have assumed their own character and identities, they were not really unique, for every battalion had its “A”, “B”, “C” and “D” companies. But there was only one 1st Battalion, 2nd Battalion, 10th Battalion, 29th Battalion and so forth.

This study is concerned with one such unit among many: the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion (Central Ontario), which went overseas as part of the First Canadian Division in autumn 1914 and fought through to the last battles of 1918. Lieutenant J.H. Pedley, MC, served with "C" Company of the 4th Battalion during 1917-1918. In his wartime memoir, Lieutenant Pedley noted that a battalion of infantry is like “a chameleon, ceaselessly changing its colour to suit the changing complexions of its commanding officers.”¹ Pedley might have taken this apt simile one step further; an infantry battalion *is* a chameleon, but it changes colours for a variety of reasons. The casualty rates of the First World War meant that replacements were constantly dispatched to make up for losses. The arrival of new men might precipitate slight changes of

¹James H. Pedley, *Only This: A War Retrospect, 1917-1918* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 1999), p. 18.

character in the battalion just as a new commanding officer could. Moreover, each new experience of war added to the complicated personality of the unit.

Unlike the Second World War, which, in the popular mind, had some sort of a beginning, middle, and end, Canadians generally remember the First World War (or "Great War") as a largely static confrontation over a shell-scarred moonscape, a confrontation without nuance or variation. Perhaps with the exception of Vimy Ridge, a battle that is often cited as one of the most important nation-building events in Canadian history, the Great War is generally imagined as an undifferentiated series of massed trench assaults. Not enough attention has been paid to the manner in which Canadian soldiers fought the war, how they were organized, or how the specifics of ground combat changed throughout the conflict. Using a case study approach, this paper will examine a small portion of Canada's war effort under a microscope. The case subject is the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion, and the battalion's war experience will show that even in trench warfare, the battlefield situation was frequently in a state of flux, as were the units of men who fought over the battlefields. Of course, some aspects of the war persisted as it raged from month to month, and year to year. Bad weather and high casualty rates are two common examples. But to gain a more complete understanding of operations on the Western Front, it is necessary to study them at the most basic level. The infantry battalion provides the ideal subject for a case study approach.

As W.L. Gibson probably discovered back in the 1920s, the study of even a relatively small unit such as an infantry battalion is fraught with difficulties. A total of 5,563 officers and men passed through the 4th Battalion between 1914 and 1919. Although no more than about 800 were on strength in the battalion at any given moment, this is still quite a significant group of individuals to consider, individuals who came from a variety of backgrounds. We must wonder if the analysis of a few battles can fairly portray the reality of life in the battalion. As Lieutenant Pedley thoughtfully noted in his memoir, the unwritten experiences of the ordinary soldiers

represented the true history of the battalion. Each man's story died with him in action, or was lost as he returned to some unassuming civilian occupation.² Some men put pen to paper and wrote letters to friends and family, but most of these documents are now long lost in the attics and drawers of the nation. Fortunately, there are several rich varieties of primary evidence to consider in such a study as this one. Of greatest significance are the battalion's official war diaries, as discussed above. During the First World War, virtually all battalions of the British and Commonwealth forces were required to keep daily war diaries. According to the contemporary British *Field Service Regulations* manual, the impetus for keeping such detailed records was twofold:

- i. To furnish an accurate record of the operations from which the history of the war can subsequently be prepared.
- ii. To collect information for future reference with a view to effecting improvements in the organization, education, training, equipment and administration of the army for war.³

Because the first point explicitly refers to the use of war diaries as historical evidence, we must concede that the battalion officers charged with record keeping may have chosen to omit "sensitive" material. As is often the case, the historian must deal with imperfect or incomplete evidence. Notwithstanding these potential deficiencies, it is also true that the battalion war diary represents one of the best tools with which to reconstruct the unit's operational experiences. Whereas eyewitness accounts and personal diaries may offer highly insightful, yet fragmentary images of wartime situations, the official war diary presents the most complete picture of what was going on within the entire battalion.

Perhaps the second point raised with regard to war diaries in *Field Service Regulations* is

²Pedley, p. 34.

³*Field Service Regulations, Part II: Organization and Administration*, London: War Office, 1909/1914, pp. 174-175.

more encouraging to the historian. It seems reasonable to assume that senior battalion officers would take care to include as much information as possible in the interest of the greater war effort. Of course, this would necessitate reporting both positive and negative events. We will see that the diaries do in fact reflect on success and failure, although the officers who composed the diaries tend to have used optimistic language under most circumstances. Having taken the potentially limiting factors of the war diaries into consideration, it is also noteworthy that the documents were generated on a daily basis, and as a consequence of their classified status, were not subject to any sort of official censorship. The fact that events were recorded within hours of the time that they transpired would have been conducive to a higher level of accuracy.⁴

Another extremely useful primary source has already been mentioned above: Captain W.L. Gibson's *Records of the Fourth Canadian Infantry Battalion in the Great War, 1914-1918*, published in 1924. *Records of the Fourth Canadian Infantry Battalion* is a concentrated source for battalion "demographics." It consists primarily of tables listing every officer and man who served with the unit, including their service numbers, ranks, original dates of enlistment, casualty information, and address on demobilization. A complete set of gallantry award citations is also attached, along with photographs of key battalion personalities. While most of this information still physically exists at various locations in the National Archives of Canada, it was very thoughtful for Gibson to have compiled it into a single volume so soon after the war.

I have discovered a wide assortment of other primary sources deposited separately from the war diaries in the National Archives of Canada, as well as the Canadian Military Heritage Museum in Brantford. These include correspondence between the 4th Battalion and its parent brigade, daily orders logs, personnel files, nominal roles, training reports, battalion weapons files

⁴*Field Service Regulations* state that a war diary is a "confidential document" and "should be entered up daily and initialed by the officer detailed to keep it. It must always be carefully safeguarded." See pp. 174-175. In most instances, the diaries are initialed by a senior battalion officer, or the battalion commander himself.

and other miscellaneous documents. First World War British and Canadian military manuals represent a final category of useful primary sources. Titles range from *The Pattern 1908 Web Infantry Equipment* to *Company Drill*. Yet these seemingly arcane publications elucidate the inner workings of the British and Commonwealth forces during the Great War, and have proven a useful supplement to the other sources cited in this study.

Chapter One: The Imperial Infantry Battalion in the First World War and the Mobilization of the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion

Specialized terminology is a constant feature of military organization. To complicate matters further, the meaning of particular terms is subject to change from one context to the next. The definition of an infantry battalion is a function of time and place. A First World War Canadian infantry battalion consisted of approximately 1,000 individuals, about 30 of whom were commissioned officers. Each battalion was commanded by a lieutenant-colonel, and was composed of four companies. Each company was commanded by a captain, and was made up of four platoons. Each platoon was commanded by a lieutenant, and consisted of four sections. Sections were commanded by non-commissioned officers, and would consist of approximately 12 soldiers.⁵ The companies in a battalion were designated by the first four letters of the alphabet. The platoons were designated by arabic numerals, from one through 16. Thus, the second platoon in the second company would be known as number six platoon, "B" company. This organization was more or less constant throughout all Canadian infantry battalions. The organizational hierarchy beyond the battalion level included brigades, divisions, and ultimately, the Canadian Corps. Each brigade had four battalions, while each division had three brigades.

In the Canadian Corps of the First World War, an infantry battalion was an individually numbered body of troops, although some battalions were referred to by their previous regimental titles. However, the 4th Infantry Battalion was a composite of so many pre-war Canadian militia regiments that any single regimental identification would not have been appropriate. By 1918, there were more than 60 line infantry battalions in the Canadian Corps, numbered roughly from one through 102. Each battalion, in turn, was grouped with reserve units which would supply reinforcements as required. But when the 4th Battalion arrived overseas in October 1914, the

⁵Refer to Captain C.C. Esson, *Company Drill Illustrated* (London: Harrison and Sons), pp. 4-5, for more complete details of sub-unit organization.

Canadian Corps was still a thing of the future; the First Canadian Contingent that arrived in France in the autumn of 1914 consisted of a single division.

ORGANIZATION

- A BATTALION** has 4 COMPANIES.
A COMPANY consists of 4 PLATOONS, numbered 1 to 16, throughout the Battalion.
A PLATOON consists of 4 SECTIONS, numbered 1 to 16, throughout each Company.

COMMANDERS.

- A COMPANY** is commanded by a Major or Mounted Captain with a Captain on foot as second in command.
A PLATOON is commanded by a Subaltern, with a Platoon Serjeant as second in command. When a Subaltern is not available his place will be taken by the Platoon Serjeant, who will *not*, however, be replaced by a Section Commander.
A SECTION is commanded by a Non-commissioned Officer and is the normal fire unit. The post is a definite appointment, and transfers should be as infrequent as possible.

WAR COMPLEMENTS. (Approximate.)

	Officers.	Other Ranks.
A BATTALION {		
4 Companies	24	884
Machine Gun Section	1	17
Headquarters	5	76
Total	30	977
A COMPANY	6	221
A PLATOON	1	68
A SECTION	—	16

Figure 1: This contemporary chart outlines the organization of an infantry battalion. (From *Company Drill Illustrated*, p.2.)

The organizational definition of a First World War infantry battalion helps to conceptualize the unit's structure and hierarchical position, but before proceeding further, the function of a battalion should be considered within the context of the First World War on the Western Front. British War Office manuals of the period clearly explain the offensive role of an infantry battalion. The battalion's object was quite simple: "to get to close quarters with the enemy as quickly as possible."⁶ Generally speaking, two companies of a battalion would go into

⁶Captain C.C. Esson, *Battalion Drill Illustrated* (London: Harrison and Sons), p. 26.

an attack side by side. It was noted at the time that each company in the attack should have clearly delineated segments of the battalion's overall objective allotted to it. Such allotments were intended to prevent companies from becoming disorganized and intermingled with each other, or neighbouring companies of adjacent formations. The battlefield experiences of the 4th Battalion will illustrate that such precise organization was not always possible in practical situations. Arbitrary boundary lines were often difficult to recognize or maintain in the midst of an engagement, although various attempts would be made to keep troops in their correct zones at different points throughout the war.

The assaulting companies of a battalion would, in theory, open fire on the enemy when "effective ranges" were reached, with the intent of "beating down the fire of the defenders." As the enemy was brought under fire, reinforcements could be fed into the assaulting companies, while the attackers moved forward "through a series of bounds from place to place, the movement gathering renewed force at each pause" until the enemy could be assaulted "with the bayonet."⁷ In practice, this mode of assault was subject to considerable change on the battlefields of France and Flanders, although the objective remained more or less the same throughout the first two years of the war: close with the enemy and capture his positions.

The battalion of a Canadian soldier could be readily identified by the coloured patches he wore on the upper sleeves of his tunic. For example, all battalions in the First Canadian Division were represented by a red rectangle, approximately two by three inches. A smaller shape sewn above the rectangle denoted a man's battalion and brigade. Each battalion in the First Infantry Brigade was represented by green shapes. In turn, a man's battalion was indicated by the shape of the badge worn above the triangle. The first battalion in a brigade was identified by a circle, the second by a semi-circle, the third by a triangle, and the fourth by a square. According to this system, the men of the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion wore a red rectangle below a green

⁷Esson, *Battalion Drill Illustrated*, p. 26.

square, as shown in the chart below (figure 2).

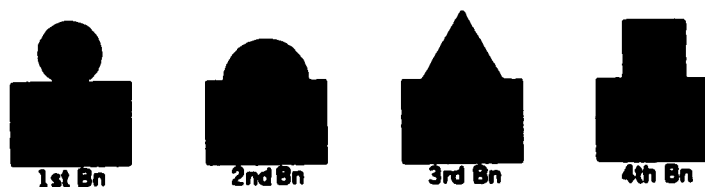


Figure 2: This battalion sleeve insignia of 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade. Seen in colour, the rectangles would be red, and the smaller shapes would be green. Based on a chart in Nicholson, *The Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919*.

* * *

Canadian Minister of Militia Sir Sam Hughes' modifications to the First Canadian Contingent's mobilization plan during August and September 1914 generated a considerable degree of discussion and criticism, both at the time and in the historiography that has developed since the end of the war. In his official historical treatment of Canadian mobilization, Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson noted:

The Minister of Militia had other ideas about mobilization-what he later described as "really a call to arms, like the fiery cross passing through the Highlands of Scotland or the mountains of Ireland in former days."⁸

More recent sources such as the National Archives of Canada website "Canada and the First World War," emphasize the importance of Hughes' "successful" and "unsuccessful measures."⁹ Contrary to earlier interpretations, the National Archives website categorizes Hughes' training program and organizational efforts as successes. The ultimate impact of the minister's battalion reorganization is beyond the scope of this study, but either in spite of, or as a consequence of Sam Hughes' influence, the First Canadian Contingent set sail for France late in September 1914, barely two months after the first recruits had arrived at Valcartier, Quebec.

⁸Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919* (Ottawa, 1962), p. 18.

⁹www.archives.ca/05/0518/05180104_e.html

The 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion (Central Ontario) was assembled at Valcartier in September 1914, in accordance with Privy Council Order 2067.¹⁰ It was one of the four battalions that would eventually compose the First Brigade of the First Canadian Infantry Division. Many of the first officers and men to fill out the ranks of the battalion came from no fewer than a dozen pre-war Canadian Militia regiments. These consisted of the 12th York Rangers (Toronto HQ), the 13th Royal Regiment (Hamilton), the 19th Lincoln Regiment (St. Catharines), the 20th Halton Rifles (Milton), the 25th Brant Dragoons (Brantford), the 35th Simcoe Forresters (Barrie), the 36th Peel Regiment (Brampton), the 37th Haldimand Rifles (Cayuga), the 38th Dufferin Rifles (Brantford), the 39th Norfolk Rifles (Simcoe), the 44th Welland Regiment (Niagara), the 41st Brockville Rifles (Brockville), and the 97th Alongquin Rifles (Sudbury).¹¹ Although the battalion would ultimately end up in the 1st Infantry Brigade, there were at least two provisional brigade arrangements before the final battalion assignments were determined.¹² It appears that during the period 22 through 27 August, the 4th Battalion had been designated as the 7th Provisional Battalion, composed of the 10th, 12th, 13th, 19th, 34th, 35th, 36th, and 44th Militia Regiments.¹³

The initial overall strength of the battalion was 69 officers and 1542 other ranks.¹⁴ This total number of 1611 men exceeded that specified in Canadian Militia orders by almost 600

¹⁰Privy Council Order 2067, 6 August 1914: "Military force for overseas service to aid in the defense and maintenance of the empire to be raised and equipped." Privy Council Register, 1914, NAC, Volume 2810.

¹¹ In fact, only a single officer came from each of the latter two regiments.

¹²Nicholson, p. 22. The battalion composition of the original provisional brigades is available for review at NAC, RG 9, volume 4474.

¹³Custody Records, 4th Canadian Battalion, Regimental Orders, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 3, file 20.

¹⁴Historical Record: 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion, RG 9, volume 4690, folder 47, file 10. Also refer to the *Dominion of Canada Militia List, 1917*, pp. 147-154.

men.¹⁵ As of 22 September 1914, total strength was listed at 56 officers, 1159 other ranks (1215 total personnel), and 63 horses.¹⁶ However, the recorded embarkation strength for the battalion (23 September) was only 1126.¹⁷ It is uncertain precisely what became of the 89 men who did not board the *Tyrolia* for England. The net reduction of approximately 400 personnel that occurred between August and September also begs some elaboration. Militia Orders stated that all recruits for the First Canadian Contingent should fall between the ages of 18 and 45 years, should be at least 63 inches in height, and should have a chest size of at least 33.5 inches. Physical fitness was also emphasized as a requirement. Unmarried men received first preference; married men with or without families were less desirable, but still accepted.¹⁸ At least some of those who did not fulfill the above requirements must have been released during the month of September. The Daily Orders log for the period 22 August through 2 November 1914 lists the names of men who were struck off strength, but the reasons for their removal were rarely recorded, with a few exceptions. Private M. Halkin, of the 36th Regiment, was ejected from the battalion on 4 September for being "inefficient." Privates Victor Annis, Willes Annis, J. Robinson, and C. Fox were discharged because relatives would not sanction overseas service.¹⁹ Others simply transferred to different formations. On 17 September, five men were reassigned to transport units, four to the Royal Canadian Dragoons, two to the Canadian Field Artillery, and

¹⁵Militia orders authorized infantry battalion strength at one lieutenant-colonel, one major, 11 captains, 18 lieutenants, and 993 other ranks, for a total of 1024 personnel. See "Mobilization of the First Contingent," NAC, RG 9, volume 4774.

¹⁶"Valcartier Camp Field State, 22 September 1914," NAC, RG 9, volume 4774.

¹⁷Historical Record: 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion, NAC, RG 9, volume 4690, folder 47, file 10.

¹⁸Militia Orders, Headquarters, Ottawa, 17 August 1914, NAC, RG 9, volume 4774, p. 3.

¹⁹Custody Records, 4th Canadian Battalion, Regimental Orders, 4 September 1914, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 3, file 20. Interestingly, Victor Annis would rejoin the battalion on 7 September 1917, and survive the war with two wounds. See Gibson, p. 35.

one to Lord Strathcona's Horse.²⁰

Without scanning each one of the personnel files for the 5,563 individuals who passed through the battalion throughout the Great War, it is difficult to construct an accurate social portrait of the first group of 4th Battalion officers and men who set sail from Gaspé on the S.S. *Tyrolia* in September 1914.²¹ However, a general sense of the battalion's varied composition can be gained from incidental sources, in addition to personnel files themselves. For instance, the 4th Battalion casualty list reported by the Brantford *Expositor* for 10 May 1915 includes 44 names: 13 of these individuals were born in England, four in Scotland, one in Ireland, 25 in Canada, and one in the United States. Of those who were Canadian born, places of birth ranged from central Ontario to Saskatchewan and Manitoba.²² Thus, even at this early stage of the war, not every man in the battalion necessarily hailed from the geographical areas where the battalion's original feeder regiments were located. Battalion personnel files show that the regional composition of the unit grew increasingly varied as casualties were replaced and additional personnel transferred into the 4th from other units.²³

* * *

The broader Canadian historiography of the First World War has tended to emphasize the country's *ad hoc* approach toward military training during the first months of the war. In his 1919 history, Colonel George Nasmith noted:

²⁰Custody Records, 4th Canadian Battalion, Regimental Orders, 17 September 1914, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 3, file 20.

²¹According to a survey conducted by the battalion chaplain, approximately 56 percent of the men belonged to the Church of England, 16 percent identified themselves as Presbyterian, 13 percent as Methodists, nine percent as Roman Catholic, and six percent as "others." Historical Record: 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion, NAC, RG 9, volume 4690, folder 47, file 10.

²²*Expositor*, 10 May 1915.

²³Personnel Documents, 4th Cdn Bn, CMHM, Brantford, Box 1, 008-1-B.

It was generally thought that if a man could shoot and had a few weeks' training, he was ready to take his place in the front line. It was not realized that an army composed of such badly trained men would be little better than a mob...²⁴

Along the same lines, official army historian Colonel A.F. Duguid has suggested that Minister of Militia Sir Sam Hughes' assessment of early Canadian military training was overly optimistic.²⁵ In *Marching to Armageddon: Canadians and the Great War, 1914-1919*, historians J.L. Granatstein and Desmond Morton suggest that "by her own modest standards," Canada was better prepared for war in 1914 than ever before or since.²⁶ However, Granatstein and Morton adopt a tone similar to Nasmith's or Duguid's when discussing the semi-chaotic weeks that the First Canadian Contingent spent training at Camp Valcartier, and subsequently, on the rainy Salisbury Plain, during late 1914 and early 1915.²⁷

It seems certain that much of the time spent by the 4th Battalion (and probably the entire First Contingent) at Valcartier was taken up by organizational and administrative tasks, some more important than others. Thousands of men needed to be clothed, equipped, and armed before any training could proceed. In the case of the 4th Battalion, the War Diary pages reveal little information with regard to daily training during August and September. However, the Daily Orders log for the same period reveals that a clutter of sometimes insignificant details preoccupied the battalion during its first weeks of existence. These petty concerns range from explicit instructions regarding the officers' mess (*Officers will not enter the Mess at dinner hour until the Officer Commanding has entered, and dinner will be formal...*) to complaints that the men had been painting graffiti on their tents flaps (*It has been noticed that men have been*

²⁴Colonel George C. Nasmith, C.E.F., *Canada's Sons and Great Britain in the World War* (Toronto: John C. Winston, 1919), p. 105.

²⁵Colonel A.F. Duguid, *History of the Canadian Forces, 1914-1919, Volume I, August 1914 to September 1915* (Ottawa: J.O. Patenaude, 1938), pp. 89-90.

²⁶See Desmond Morton and Jack Granatstein, *Marching to Armageddon: Canadians and the Great War, 1914-1919* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1989), p. 7.

²⁷Morton and Granatstein, pp. 10-11.

*marking their tents by drawing pictures, etc...).*²⁸

As a consequence of administrative preoccupations, very little training occurred while the battalion was in Canada, perhaps with the exception of musketry practice.²⁹ The emphasis on marksmanship comes as no surprise when one considers that musketry was a central feature of British tactical doctrine in 1914.³⁰ While classes on other subjects were conducted periodically, it seems that they may have been sporadically attended. For instance, attendance was voluntary for a 30-minute signaling class held for officers and non-commissioned officers, although it was “expected that a large number will take advantage of the opportunity to learn something of this very important branch...”³¹ But if the case of the 4th Battalion reinforces the historiographical interpretations of Nasmith, Duguid, Granatstein, and Morton, we will see below that it also demonstrates to some degree that once the unit was organized, equipped, and shipped overseas, the training curriculum became more suited to the present battlefield conditions on the Western Front as they were understood at the time.

* * *

The battalion disembarked at Davenport Harbour, near Lavington, England on 23 October 1914, in the midst of very wet weather and a somewhat confused logistical scenario.³² Little serious training had been carried out on board the ship during the battalion’s trans-Atlantic

²⁸Custody Records, 4th Canadian Battalion, Regimental Orders, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 3, file 20.

²⁹Historical Record: 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion, NAC, RG 9, volume 4690, folder 47, file 10.

³⁰Refer to *Infantry Training, 1914*, General Staff, the War Office, 1914. This manual is dominated by rifle theory and drill. Without doubt, the British soldier’s proficient handling of the Lee Enfield rifle served him well during the initial engagements of 1914.

³¹Custody Records, 4th Canadian Battalion, Regimental Orders, 7 September 1914, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 3, file 20.

³²War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 24 September - 31 December 1914, Appendix: 27 September 1914, NAC, T-10707. For instance, battalion officers immediately discovered that they were short 35 tents. War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 24 October 1914, NAC, T-10707.

voyage, with the exception of signalling courses for officers. However, rainy and muddy conditions in England did not prevent a more comprehensive training program from commencing almost at once. For the week ending 14 November, the following 36-hour curriculum was organized:

Physical Training: 6 hours
Musketry: 9 hours
Squad Drill: 6 hours
Extended Order Drill: 9 hours
Route Marching: 2 hours
Night Work: 4 hours³³

Additionally, during the first month in England the battalion was issued general infantry training directives from Brigadier-General H.S. Dawkins (General Staff), Southern Command. Even at this early stage in the war, the importance of fire and movement in the advance was noted. A training bulletin dated 12 August stated:

Special attention is to be paid to "fire and movement." Units should always endeavour to move forward under mutual fire support to within assaulting distance of the enemy. Rapid short bursts of fire are to be favourably considered.³⁴

The bulletin also noted that "extra attention is to be given to scouting and the training and employment of machine guns."³⁵ By mid-November the following activities began to appear with more frequency in the 4th Battalion's training schedule: route marches, the company and battalion in attack, the battalion in advance guard, instruction on manning outposts, entrenching lessons, and bayonet fighting exercises.³⁶ Thus, it appears that the battalion commander was

³³Custody Records, 4th Canadian Battalion, Regimental Orders, 6 November 1914, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 3, file 20.

³⁴Southern Command Training Bulletin, 12 August 1914, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 4, file 10.

³⁵Southern Command Training Bulletin, 12 August 1914, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 4, file 10.

³⁶War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 16 November-12 December 1914, NAC, T-10707

attempting to train his unit in accordance with directives from higher echelons. Likewise, the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade ensured that training instructions were followed as described in the 1914 edition of *Infantry Training*. For instance, a brigade order dated 7 December 1914 urged battalion commanders to delegate all company training to company commanders, as directed in *Infantry Training*.³⁷

Further organizational alterations occurred alongside the training curriculum during the battalion's time on Salisbury Plain. Prior to departing Canada, the battalion had been reorganized according to the eight company system. On 26 October, just a few days after having arrived in England, the battalion was reorganized once again, into four companies. Approximately ten days later, the battalion was reformed back into eight companies. Finally, during the month of January, the battalion was permanently reorganized back into four companies. Such erratic organizational behaviour may be construed as evidence of a poorly coordinated approach. At the same time, it may also indicate healthy and thoughtful experimentation on the part of officers who were hoping to field their units under the most favourable circumstances possible.³⁸ Additional evidence pertaining to the 4th Battalion supports the latter conclusion. For instance, in a memorandum sent to 1st Canadian Brigade dated 31 December 1914, Major Buell (acting battalion commander) expressed some dissatisfaction with the official establishment (the numbers of officers and men available for given tasks) for infantry battalions.³⁹ Buell's concerns appear to be insignificant in retrospect, but his attention to detail indicates a willingness to field a well organized battalion.

³⁷"Company Training, from 1st Infantry Brigade major to 4th Battalion, 7 December 1914," NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 4, file 10. *Infantry Training* stated that "all commanders, from platoon upwards, are responsible for the training of their commands." See section 2, paragraphs 1 and 2.

³⁸Historical Record: 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion, NAC, RG 9, volume 4690, folder 47, file 10.

³⁹Buell to 1st Brigade, 31 December 1914, NAC, RG 9, volume 417, file E-47-1. In the memorandum Buell argued for the addition of one corporal to the 1st Line Transport Detail, and for the promotion of the battalion medical officer's orderlies to more senior non-commissioned ranks.

The equipment of the First Canadian Contingent has been much maligned in the historiography, probably with some justification. The Ross Rifle is well known in this regard, but Duguid also notes that Canadian-pattern service dress and boots issued at Valcartier proved less than adequate under the wet conditions of the Salisbury Plain.⁴⁰ While some of the Canadian battalions had been outfitted with cotton webbing equipment before leaving Canada, the 4th Battalion had marched out of Valcartier equipped with the infamous Oliver pattern equipment. This pattern had been designed by Deputy Surgeon-General William S. Oliver before the turn of the century, and consisted of an overly complex assemblage of leather components.⁴¹ Conversely, the revolutionary British 1908 pattern webbing was constructed entirely of cotton canvas, and was designed in such a way that the entire assembly could be put on or taken off as one piece.⁴² Thus, General E.A.H. Alderson, the first commander of the Canadian Contingent, insisted that units equipped with the Oliver pattern should be issued the 1908 pattern.⁴³ The men of the 4th Battalion received their new kit just a few days prior to crossing the channel to France.⁴⁴ It would prove far more practical than the Oliver pattern under battlefield conditions. The Ross rifles with which the First Canadian Contingent had been originally equipped were retained in the meantime.⁴⁵

* * *

On 11 February 1915, the 4th Battalion arrived at St. Nazaire on board the S.S. *Atlantian*.

⁴⁰Duguid, p. 145.

⁴¹Jack L. Summers, *Tangled Web: Canadian Infantry Accoutrements, 1855-1985* (Bloomfield ON: Museum Restoration Service, 1992), pp. 39-42.

⁴²See *The Pattern 1908 Web Infantry Equipment*, (London: War Office, 1913) for details of this gear.

⁴³Duguid, p. 146.

⁴⁴The Oliver equipment would survive in two updated forms, the 1915 and 1916 patterns, which would be issued to subsequent Canadian battalions.

⁴⁵Historical Record: 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion, NAC, RG 9, volume 4690, folder 47, file 10.

After a train ride to Strazeele, the battalion marched to Outtersteene, where it was billeted for the moment. During the trip from St. Nazaire to Strazeele, the battalion incurred its first casualty on the continent when Private Frederick Norris fell from the train and was killed.⁴⁶ By 17 February, 1st Canadian Brigade moved to Erquingham and Armentieres; the 4th Battalion was billeted at the former location and temporarily attached to the 19th Brigade for instructional purposes. Officers and non-commissioned members of the 4th Battalion received instruction from the Cameronians and Middlesex Regiment. Nine officers and 10 non-commissioned officers were taken on trench tours with the Cameronians and the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. Members of the Welsh Fusiliers and the Middlesex Regiment would serve as instructors on 19 February. On the evening of that day two platoons each of "A" and "C" Companies entered the lines with the Cameronians and the Argyles as substitutes for the respective platoons in the British regiments. However, a cadre of British officers and non-commissioned officers remained to guide the Canadian platoons. The remaining platoons of the 4th Battalion each took their turn during 20 February.⁴⁷

This practical means of instruction was interrupted on 21 February by an minor outbreak of scarlet fever that primarily affected "D" Company. The battalion was subsequently billeted at Hazebrouck where training was taken up under rear-echelon conditions.⁴⁸ Exercises included rapid fire practice, fire control and discipline, close combat drill, trench manning, outposting and relief of sentries.⁴⁹ The importance of these subjects would become quickly apparent during the coming months of action. As these crash training courses were conducted, and Number 15 Platoon was cured of scarlet fever, battalion officers found the time to meet and discuss the

⁴⁶Historical Record: 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion, NAC, RG 9, volume 4690, folder 47, file 10.

⁴⁷War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 17-20 February 1915, NAC, T-10707.

⁴⁸War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 21 February 1915, NAC, T-10707.

⁴⁹War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 26-27 February 1915, NAC, T-10707.

“regimental method of packing men’s kit bags.”⁵⁰ (This minor obsession with the location of each piece of kit survives in the Canadian Army to the present day.) By 2130 hours on 5 March, the battalion moved into the line for the first time as a complete entity near Bac St. Maur.⁵¹

* * *

In 1921 General Sir Ian Hamilton published *The Soul and Body of an Army*. Hamilton had served in the South African War, was attached to the Japanese during the Russo-Japanese War, and had commanded the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force during the Gallipoli campaign. Having been relieved of his command after the Gallipoli debacle, Hamilton turned to writing. *The Soul and Body of an Army* critically examines Britain’s pre-war approach to army building. In it Hamilton compares the ancient Roman approach to “army making” with the recent experience of the Great War, noting that the Romans placed a heavy emphasis on training, while the British Army of 1914 seemed to rely on less tangible factors to prepare for war.⁵² Hamilton’s question can also be posed in the Canadian context. Canadian military forces in 1914 did not compare with the Roman *Exercitus* of antiquity in terms of military preparedness, but Canada did have a relatively well established militia tradition. Although the force could hardly be considered professional, some of the men who ventured overseas with the First Contingent in 1914 were veterans of the South African War and many had militia experience. Notwithstanding the limitations of pre-war military preparations, Canada managed to ship its first overseas contingent to the continent before the end of the year.

The historiography has generally contended that these men were hastily trained and as a consequence, ill-prepared for war. The first contention is undoubtedly true, although the men of the 4th Battalion and the rest of the First Contingent would enjoy a few more months to train in England and on the continent *before* entering the firing line. The question of whether or not the

⁵⁰War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 25 February 1915, NAC, T-10707.

⁵¹War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 5 March 1915, NAC, T-10707.

⁵²Sir Ian Hamilton, *The Soul and Body of an Army* (London: Edward Arnold, 1921), pp. 2-3.

officers and men of the 4th Battalion were adequately trained for war is a relative one, but under the circumstances, it is doubtful if they could have been much better prepared within the context of early 1915; it is probably safe to argue that even the most professional troops from any of the European armies were poorly prepared for the style of fighting they were about to confront. In the Canadian context, time did not permit for a more extensive program, and no one could foresee the future. In any event, as the next chapter will show, the battalion made a strong showing at Ypres, although at enormous cost. Nevertheless, the evidence demonstrates that a battalion that had only existed for six months was able to perform under the most trying circumstances during the spring of 1915. The casualties suffered during April meant that by the following month the character of the battalion would be different as changes in command occurred and replacements arrived. The battalion would see its second generation after only a few weeks of war.

Chapter Two: 1915 and the Birth of the “Mad Fourth”

In his 1967 history of Britain in the First World War, Sir Llewellyn Woodward reflects on his own experiences on the Western Front, and argues that the conflict clearly assumed its most gruesome phase about nine months into 1915.⁵³ Such a statement may be valid in the most general sense, but as the combat record of the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion during 1915 will demonstrate, casualty rates were already reaching catastrophic proportions much earlier in the year. Any veteran of the 4th Battalion who survived the fighting of 1915 might argue that Woodward had things reversed. In absolute terms, 4th Battalion probably lost more men during April and May 1915 than it would in the Somme battles of October 1916; by mid 1915, fewer than 50 percent of the men who arrived on the continent with the first draft of the 4th Battalion were left alive and unwounded. Conversely, the final six months of 1915, and the early part of 1916 represented a period of relative calm for the battalion.

* * *

As February 1915 passed over to March, the battalion spent increasingly more time in active sectors of the front. The inexperience of the battalion during its first few weeks of war is humorously evident in its official war diary entries. It seems that during March, the diary keeper recorded virtually every artillery and rifle round that impacted in the battalion area during these first weeks in the line. For example, on 8 March, it was noted that several shrapnel shells exploded over “A” Company, with the “only casualty being Pte. Williams who was very slightly injured by a piece of shrapnel scraping his nose.”⁵⁴ Likewise, on 10 March it was recorded that a large shell landed amidst “C” Company, burrowed 15 feet underground, but failed to explode.⁵⁵

⁵³Sir Llewellyn Woodward, *Great Britain and the War of 1914-1918* (London: Methuen, 1967), p. xxv. Woodward says that mass killing did not become “a dreadful routine” until “after the battle of Loos (September 1915), the failure at Gallipoli, and, above all, after the holocaust on the Somme.”

⁵⁴War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 8 March 1915, NAC, T-10707.

⁵⁵War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 10 March 1915, NAC, T-10707.

In the ensuing months such routine occurrences would be mentioned less often.⁵⁶

The battalion itinerary published by W.L. Gibson in *Records of the Fourth Canadian Battalion* mentions participation in the “fake attack” at Neuve Chapelle,⁵⁷ but there is no direct reference to this action in the battalion war diary. The entry for 10 March mentions that the battalion was “in readiness all day pursuant to order but no further orders received.”⁵⁸ The same statement is entered under 12 March, but once again, nothing seems to have occurred, as bathing parade and inspections continued.⁵⁹ It is possible that the battalion’s rotations into and out of the trenches during March may have been part of a larger deception plan, but as far as the rank and file of the battalion were concerned, the month was fairly uneventful.

If action was light during March, the fighting around Ypres during late April must have satisfied those men who yearned for a taste of action. Since the previous autumn, the town of Ypres had loaned its name to a salient which projected into the German line from Bixschoote in the north, toward Hooge in the east, and then south toward Messines. Ypres was located in the approximate centre of the salient, about halfway between Bixschoote and Messines. As long as it remained standing, the magnificent Cloth Hall tower situated on the Grote Market of Ypres was visible from virtually every other point inside the salient. It was a very compact battlefield, only about twenty kilometres wide and between five and ten kilometres deep, yet the dozens of Commonwealth and German war graves cemeteries that dot the landscape serve as constant reminders of the incredible battles that raged there between 1914 and 1918. In Ypres itself the massive Menin Gate lists the names of the Commonwealth soldiers who fell in the Salient, but have no known grave. Many soldiers of the 4th Battalion are named on this monument, including one of its commanders. Others can be found in marked graves throughout the

⁵⁶It is also possible that there were simply too many such “routine” occurrences of which to keep track.

⁵⁷Gibson, p. 18.

⁵⁸War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 10 March 1915, NAC, T-10707.

⁵⁹War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 12 March 1915, NAC, T-10707.

cemeteries maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Considerable controversy has surrounded the decision of the Allied high command to hold the salient. While the Belgians were extremely reluctant to surrender one more inch of their soil to the Germans, there were other military reasons for holding on to this brutalized, shell-torn ground. While the Germans already occupied high ground east of the salient, British forces had managed to hold on to Observatory Ridge, which extends east from Ypres towards Hooge. The British also held Mont Kemmel, a major piece of high ground located just southwest of the salient. Abandoning the salient might have jeopardized Mont Kemmel, and this was quite unacceptable, as high terrain features were scarce commodities in Flanders. Thus, the troops of Britain and its Commonwealth forces would stand and hold the salient for the rest of the war. The 4th Battalion would see its share of action in this area beginning on 23 April 1915.

On 22 April the German Army changed the nature of warfare on the Western Front by employing lethal chlorine gas on the battlefield for the first time. The Germans hoped to incite panic around the Ypres salient in order to break through and capture the battered town, which had already become a stubborn symbol of British and Allied resistance.⁶⁰ Although German reserves were unavailable to follow the attack through, Allied commanders considered it to be an extremely serious threat at the time it occurred. Without protective masks, the French colonial troops against whom the Germans had directed the gas suffered high casualties. The French line broke just to the left of the Canadian positions, opening a dangerous gap for the Germans to exploit. Disaster was seen to have been largely averted by Canadian troops who were ordered to seal off the breach and contain the enemy.⁶¹ The 4th Battalion was one of the many units committed to the counterattacks of 23 April.

A.F. Duguid's account of the counterattack on the northern flank of the Ypres salient complements the information available in the 4th Battalion war diary and other primary

⁶⁰Nicholson, pp. 58-59.

⁶¹Newspapers from the months of April and May 1915 are full of references to "Canada saving the day." See the Brantford *Expositor* from the final week of April through the first two weeks of May.

documents. The battalion had been warned for action at 2130 hours on the evening of 22 April while in reserve at Vlamertinghe, a small village on the west side of the Yser Canal, and off to the southwest of the main German thrust. In the meantime, French troops were falling back on Vlamertinghe itself.⁶² During the night of 22-23 April, British Generals H.C.O. Plumer and E.A.H. Alderson decided that the 1st and 4th Canadian Battalions would participate in a counterattack against the newly established German line along Mauser Ridge, which ran roughly from west to east on the northern flank of the salient. The basic plan for the 4th Battalion was to march eastward, out of its reserve position and into the salient, and then attack northward toward the Germans, who were entrenched approximately 1,500 yards away.⁶³ Mauser Ridge is actually a gently rising slope that is only perceptible if one stands on the 4th Battalion start line and looks north.⁶⁴ Yet on the battlefields of Flanders, even a few feet of elevation could be of great tactical significance. From their positions along the ridge, the Germans could easily observe the Canadian infantrymen as they advanced up the slope.

According to the war diary, the battalion moved out of Vlamertinghe at half past midnight and crossed the Yser Canal at 0410 hours.⁶⁵ A second document dating from May 1934 and based on interviews states that the battalion crossed the Yser at 0315 hours and that 15 minutes later the commanding officers of the 1st and 4th Battalions were briefed by Brigadier Mercer.⁶⁶ However, both the war diary and the later document agree that the attack commenced at 0525 hours on 23 April. Although the distance between Vlamertinghe and the battalion's start line is only about 15 kilometres, the roads would have been very much congested by retreating French troops and advancing British and Commonwealth troops. Thus, the night's march took

⁶²War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 22 April 1915, NAC, T-10707.

⁶³War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 23 April 1915, NAC, T-10707.

⁶⁴The difference in elevation is only a few feet, but on the flat landscape of Belgian Flanders even a few feet could be important.

⁶⁵War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 22-23 April 1915, NAC, T-10707

⁶⁶Duguid to Ralston, 26 May 1934, NAC, RG 24, volume 1904, file DHS 5-7-4.

longer than it would have under ordinary circumstances.

“B” Company was the first element of the 4th Battalion to advance on a frontage of 150 yards, with the other companies following under a fusillade of enemy artillery and small arms fire. In his official history Duguid notes that the advance was "carried out in the most perfect order, "as the respective companies "leap-frogged" toward their objectives during the early morning hours of 23 April.⁶⁷ Despite the heavy fire, the men appear to have remained in good order, and battalion machine gunners set up their weapons so they could lend support to the riflemen.⁶⁸ At a range of approximately 400 yards from the enemy, the attacking companies went to ground and entrenched themselves. The battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Birchall, took over command of “C” Company after its officer was wounded and lead a final charge. The precise time of these events is uncertain, but Birchall was killed in the charge at 1900 hours on 23 April. The battalion was relieved by the East Yorks two hours later.⁶⁹



Figure 3: Mauser Ridge as it appears today, seen from the Pilckem Road looking northeast (in the same direction that the 4th Battalion attacked on 23 April 1915). The slope is very gentle, but the lack of cover is obvious. (Photo by the author, August 2001.)

⁶⁷Duguid, p. 267.

⁶⁸Duguid, pp. 269-270.

⁶⁹War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 23 April 1915, NAC, T-10707

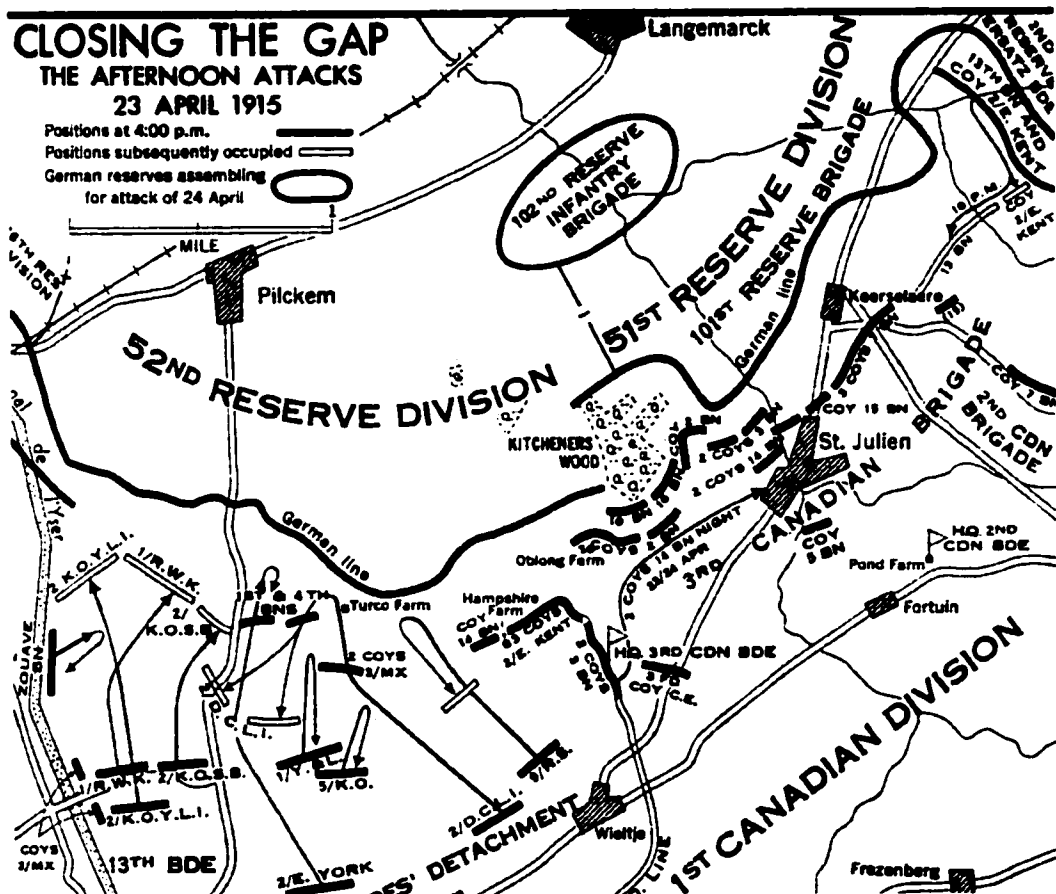


Figure 4: This map from Nicholson's *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919* (p. 68) shows the 4th Battalion attack just to the right of the north/south Pilckem Road. Ypres is just to the south, off of the map; Vlamertinghe is to the southwest.

Additional details of the assault can only be gleaned from eyewitness accounts, as the war diary provides no further details with regard to ranges of advance or the timings. With so few survivors, this lack of detail is not surprising: few officers were left to record the attack. According to Lieutenant J.K. McKinley (No. 1 Platoon, "A" Company), "it seemed that every soldier in the enemy's ranks had a machine gun, and the air was literally filled with bullets."⁷⁰ The raw intensity of the fighting on 23 April is evident in the 4th Battalion's casualty figures; the war diary lists 505 killed, wounded, or missing for 23 April, including the battalion commander,

⁷⁰Quoted in Daniel G. Dancocks, *Welcome to Flanders Fields. The First Canadian Battle of the Great War: Ypres, 1915* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988), p. 143.

the second in command, and the adjutant.⁷¹ Yet to say that the fighting was intense does not articulate very clearly what was occurring on the battlefield at the most basic level. It is not entirely clear when the greatest proportion of casualties was suffered, how far the battalion advanced prior to entrenching, how well command and control were maintained throughout the attack, or even if any enemy positions were captured on 23 April by troops of the 4th Battalion.

Private Albert Adams of "B" Company noted in a letter to his father that "hell was let loose," almost immediately as his company was ordered forward about 0630 hours.⁷² According to Adams, he and his fellows would advance about 25 yards at a time, taking cover intermittently. Adams claimed that he was able to advance to within 50 yards of an abandoned forward German trench before finally going to ground and digging in under fire. At about that time, he learned that the battalion commander had been killed.⁷³ Private Ernest Edwards presented a similar account in a letter written from hospital after the battle: "when their [German] fire eased a little we would up and run again...I was hit about 200 yards from the German defenses."⁷⁴ Edwards' story suggests that order was maintained in the advance and that it was possible for smaller groups of men to reach points relatively close to the German trenches. Perhaps the first companies were able to advance several hundred yards before the Germans released the full brunt of their defensive fire.

In a letter posted from No. 2 Canadian Stationary Hospital (La Fouquette) on 25 April, Lieutenant F.W. Miller described his experiences in the attack as commander of No. 6 Platoon ("C" Company).⁷⁵ Miller claimed that he sighted the enemy at a range of 1000 yards and that he

⁷¹Bill Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare*, p. 21. A similar number can be estimated by hand-counting the men listed by Captain W.L. Gibson as casualties on 23 April, 1915.

⁷²This timing does not agree with the start time of 0525 hours recorded in the war diary.

⁷³Quoted in F. Douglas Reville, *History of the County of Brant* (Brantford: The Hurley Printing Company, 1920), p. 455-456.

⁷⁴Reville, p. 455.

⁷⁵F.W. Miller commanded No. 6 Platoon of "C" Company, according to "Historical Record: 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion," NAC, RG 9, volume 4690, folder 47, file 10. Miller

was subsequently able to advance up to about 250 yards from the enemy line before being wounded in the scalp. If these range estimates are accurate, it can be assumed that Miller covered a total distance of 1250 yards, as the battalion start line was 1500 yards distant from the German line. Miller stated that he was wounded about 0500 hours, and that he lay in the field until 2100 hours, roughly two hours after Birchall is said to have been killed. Finally, Miller mentions that Lieutenant P. Jones (No. 5 Platoon) and Captain M.A. Colquhoun (C.O., "B" Company) were the only two officers of "B" Company to survive the attack unscathed.⁷⁶ Miller's testimony supports a fundamental conclusion regarding command and control during the attack. It seems that both of these elements existed even as the battalion was pinned down within two or three hundred yards of the enemy's main line of resistance. While it is also possible that Miller may have been one of a few men who managed to scramble to this forward point, it is unlikely that he would have done so without the surviving members of his platoon. The fact that Miller witnessed Jones and Colquhoun in action supports the same end.

It appears that Jones and Colquhoun continued to command their troops during the 16 hours that Miller lay wounded on the battlefield. In a letter to his wife, Colquhoun described his own experience in the attack:

Don't know the date. Have been at it for two days and two nights. The Germans broke through the line we were going to take over. We were ordered at 1 a.m. to stop the German advance⁷⁷ with my company. The Germans had entrenched themselves one thousand yards in front. We had to advance over open ground with no cover at all. I led the firing line, Capt. Collins, (36 Y.R.) the supports. We advanced to within 400 yards of the Germans, when I received orders to go no further until I received reinforcements. I had only about half of my company left then. We dug ourselves in the best we could, under heavy fire, and then held the line until nine o'clock that night, when we were relieved by the East Kents. Had nothing to eat all night and all day. My boys were pretty well all played out. In this action our battalion was cut to pieces. As for myself, I had a man shot down on my right and left at the same time. All I can say, it must be the prayers of you

finished the war as a Major without further injury. See Gibson, p. 24.

⁷⁶Excerpts from Miller's letter appeared in the *Brantford Expositor*, 11 May 1915, p. 5.

⁷⁷This was probably the warning order passed down from brigade on the night of the 22-23 April.

people at home that saved me, as where we went through, it was almost impossible for a man to live. Two-thirds of my company were killed or wounded. Not time yet to find out as we are still at it....Lieut Jones got buried by a Jack Johnson. It took three men to dig him out. He is all right.⁷⁸

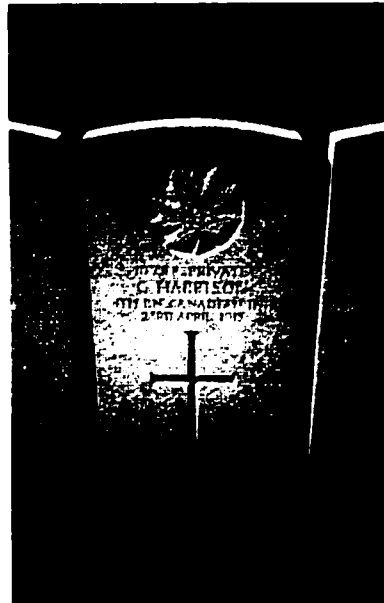


Figure 5: Private George Harrison is one of the many 4th Battalion soldiers who died on 23 April 1915. He lies in Poperinge Old Cemetery, 10 kilometres west of Ypres. (Photo by author, August 2001.)

Colquhoun's letter confirms that surviving members of "B" Company, and probably the other companies as well, were under control and in good order throughout the engagement of 23 April.

A report originally published in *The Times* described the counterattack in heroic terms typical of the period, but also provides additional information pertaining to the 4th Battalion's advance:

It is safe to say that the youngest private in the rank, as he set his teeth for the advance, knew the task in front of him, and the youngest subaltern knew that all rested upon its success. It did not seem that any human being could live in the

⁷⁸Quoted in Reville, p. 451.

shower of shot and shell which began to play upon the advancing troops.⁷⁹

The report went on to state that the

4th Canadian Battalion at one moment came under a particularly withering fire. For a moment--not more--it wavered. Its most gallant commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Birchall, carrying, after an old fashion, a light cane, coolly and cheerfully rallied his men, and at the very moment when his example had infected them, fell dead at the head of his battalion.

While this account states that the battalion may have momentarily faltered in its advance, it also implies that Birchall maintained unit cohesion until his death at 1900 hours, just two hours prior to the battalion's relief. It is entirely unclear whether or not Birchall passed the point where Miller fell wounded. This is dependant upon one's interpretation of the ranges provided in Miller's letter. It is impossible to determine whether or not Miller is referring to the most immediate enemy outposts or the stronger trenches positioned to the rear of these when he describes his own furthest point of advance. The former case is more likely, as Miller seems to be referring to the first German troops who came into view.



Figure 6: Detail from *Charge of the 4th Canadian Battalion at Ypres*, depicting the death of Lt.Col. Birchall at the head of "C" Company (artist unknown). This image first appeared in the London Times shortly after the attack. The artist has captured the heroic mood of the period, if not the literal reality of the counterattack. *The Times History of the War, Volume V* (London, 1915), p. 76.

⁷⁹Quoted in a "Supplement to the Upton St. Leonard's Parish Magazine," June 1915, p. 2, NAC, RG 9, volume 4690, folder 47, file 10.

Even the absolute number of casualties suffered on 23 April is subject to some question. As noted above, the war diary lists 505 killed, wounded, or missing. In a letter to a friend, Private A. W. Wakeling wrote that 250 men and five officers were left at the end of the day, and that 700 men and 20 officers were “lost” during the morning. Wakeling notes that the battalion commander and adjutant were killed, while the second in command was wounded. He also states that Captain Colquhoun was evacuated that night after being gassed, but Colquhoun’s record shows no wounds, so it is probable that he did not actually enter medical channels.⁸⁰ These claims are confirmable, as records show that Captain Glover, the adjutant, was killed in action on 23 April, and Major Buell, the second in command, is listed as wounded on 24 April.⁸¹ Yet a complete survey of officers listed as casualties for 23 and 24 April is a source of further conjecture. Battalion personnel records show that two officers are listed killed and six wounded for 23 April; the figures for 24 April are three killed, 12 wounded, and one missing. These numbers do not support Wakeling’s contention that only five officers were left at the end of the day on 23 April. In fact, something like 15 officers should have been left standing, unless the dates listed in casualty reports are inaccurate. For instance, it is possible that some of the men listed killed or wounded on 24 April in fact became casualties the day before, but were not confirmed or evacuated until the next day. Wakeling’s figure of 700 casualties for the first day of the attack also seems high. It is unlikely that an enlisted man would have been privy to such precise information, and Wakeling’s figure is probably an inflated estimate. It is also conceivable that some stragglers may have returned to the rear area after the initial casualty counts were made, reducing the overall estimate from 700 to something closer to 500. More reliable is Wakeling’s claim that of the 55 men who started the attack in his platoon, 11 reached the initial German trench.⁸² But whatever the exact number of killed and wounded was for officers and men, the battalion suffered at least 50 percent casualties. Those of the battalion who

⁸⁰Quoted in Reville, p. 453.

⁸¹See Gibson, pp. 21-22.

⁸²Quoted in Reville, p. 453.

remained alive and unwounded by the evening of 23 April could do little more than consolidate their new positions, and await the much-needed relief troops who arrived around 2100 hours on the same day.⁸³

There are several reasons why the counterattack failed to recapture Mauser Ridge, none of which seem to reflect upon the fighting abilities of the 4th Battalion or other battalions involved. First, the men had to contend with the after-effects of the German gas attack. The possibility of a second attack must have weighed heavily on the minds of Canadian troops, and their fears were realized when the Germans again released gas clouds on the morning of 23 April, as shown above in Private Adams' letter to his father. Of course, none of the troops were equipped with respirators at this time. Perhaps more importantly, not enough artillery support was available to press the Canadian counterattack home. And as Bill Rawling has noted, even if more adequate artillery support had been available, communications between forward infantry units and supporting artillery batteries were too primitive to be of much consequence.⁸⁴ Most of the field artillery batteries in action at Second Ypres were firing shrapnel rounds, which were less effective at suppressing and destroying an entrenched enemy than high explosive shells.⁸⁵ Finally, the Canadian troops who participated in the counterattack had very little time in which to organize themselves. The 4th Battalion was given less than 12 hours to march into the line through an extremely congested area and form up for the attack. The fact that Birchall was able to lead his men to within 300 yards of the objective (and probably much closer), in spite of massive casualties, is testimony to the skills that the Canadian troops had already acquired during their time in England, and their first couple of months in France. Less well trained and drilled troops, in the midst of their first crisis, might have broken under the weight of enemy fire and retreated in disarray. That the Canadians continued to press forward under the most dangerous

⁸³War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 23 April 1915, NAC, T-10707.

⁸⁴Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare*, p. 32.

⁸⁵Leslie Barnes, *Canada's Guns: An Illustrated History of Artillery* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1979), pp. 70-71.

circumstances also demonstrates their strong personal motivation and high degree of morale. In any event, the battalion's appalling 50 percent casualty rate (killed, wounded, or missing), was nothing out of the ordinary in 1915. The key factors limiting the success of the counterattack stemmed more from overarching battlefield conditions beyond the control of the infantrymen than from inadequate training.

Although the Canadian counterattacks of 23 April failed to take Mauser Ridge, they did play a role in foiling the enemy advance, as both Duguid and contemporary newspaper reports suggest.⁸⁶ News of the attack generated a considerable level of excitement back in Canada, and had it not been for the eventual location of the Canada's national Great War monument on Hill 145 at Vimy Ridge, the battle of Second Ypres might well have survived in public memory as Canada's greatest military glory. The event was especially notable for the 4th Battalion not only because it suffered such a high casualty rate, but because it lost its commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Birchall. The battalion was initially organized at Valcartier by Major W.S. Buell, but its first official commanding officer was Lieutenant-Colonel R.H. Labatt, whose initial period of command ran from 22 September 1914 through to 29 January 1915, at which point he took sick leave. Labatt was replaced by 38-year-old Lieutenant-Colonel A.P. Birchall. At the time Birchall was attached to the Canadian Militia, but he had served in the British Army for 14 years with the Royal Fusiliers.⁸⁷ Thus, a relatively experienced commander led the 4th Battalion into its first major action at Second Ypres, and the evidence thus far has suggested that he demonstrated capable leadership skills as an infantry officer. Contemporary observers noted the importance of the battalion commander's personal character, and a few words on Birchall's background are warranted.

Birchall was born in Gloucester, England in 1877, and joined a newly formed battalion of the Royal Fusiliers during the South African War. He was renowned as a popular and athletic officer throughout his time in the British Army. Prior to the outbreak of hostilities in 1914,

⁸⁶See Duguid, p. 410, and the *Expositor*, 24 April 1915, p. 1: "How the Canadians Saved Allied Lines from being Pierced."

⁸⁷Arthur Percival Birchall, NAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 742 - 20.

Birchall and two other British Army officers were attached to Canadian forces for the “mutual benefit” of both services.⁸⁸ While serving in Canada, he was appointed to Staff duties before falling ill and returning to England. His illness kept him out of the war from August through November, but before getting sick, Birchall published an emergency training manual: *Rapid Training of a Company for War*. This pocket manual encompassed a variety of subjects ranging from field engineering to cooperation between aircraft and infantry to “lice in war.” The author’s preface declared that the book was intended as a practical reference guide for relatively inexperienced officers, and should serve only as a supplement to War Office manuals.⁸⁹ Yet the book proved so handy that at least three editions were published, each with fresh revisions as dictated by changing battlefield circumstances. Of particular interest is Birchall’s discussion of company attacks, where he emphasized the importance of supporting artillery fire (shrapnel), fire and movement (company-to-company, platoon-to-platoon, or otherwise), and the need for short and properly timed “rushes” (10 to 30 yards).⁹⁰ Thus, even prior to the war, and during its first few months, the problems of moving infantrymen towards an objective under fire were already understood, and potential solutions were being addressed.

⁸⁸Quoted in a “Supplement to the Upton St. Leonard’s Parish Magazine,” June 1915, p. 3, NAC, RG 9, volume 4690, folder 47, file 10.

⁸⁹Captain A.P. Birchall, *Rapid Training of a Company for War*, Third Edition (London: Gale & Polden, 1915).

⁹⁰Birchall, *Rapid Training of a Company for War*, 44-47



LT. COLONEL ARTHUR PIRIVAL BIRCHALL
Mentioned in Despatches - Commanding Officer 2nd Coy 21st Bn
Killed in action 23.4.15

Figure 7: Lieutenant-Colonel A.P. Birchall,
(from Gibson, p. 65).

Birchall took over command of the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion on 29 January 1915, shortly before it sailed across the channel to France.⁹¹ His four month tenure as commanding officer of the battalion was short, but it did transpire during the unit's critical formative continental training period. It is impossible to measure the effect of Birchall's personal experience on the level of military competence attained by the battalion as of April 1915, but the fact that he literally "wrote the book" on how to train amateur soldiers must have exerted a positive impact on the battalion's performance at Neuve Chapelle and Second Ypres. In any event, it is quite certain that Birchall came to enjoy a positive rapport with his troops. The new battalion commander was quite tall at 6 feet, 4.5 inches, and was known "affectionately" by his troops as "6 foot 5."⁹² Birchall's generosity and strength of character are evident in the string of

⁹¹Gibson, p. 17.

⁹²"Supplement to the Upton St. Leonard's Parish Magazine," June 1915, p. 4.

charities he named in his last will and testament.⁹³ Such attributes are critical to effective military leadership, and fortunately for the 4th Battalion, Birchall was not the last commanding officer who would possess them. The men of the battalion fittingly memorialized their fallen commanding officer in a poem entitled *The Battle of Langemarck*. Consider the following excerpt:

Ye troubadours who sing of wars and brave
deeds handed down,
When you will sing how for the King they
strove near Ypres town-
Tell how they fought and nobly wrought like
Paladins of old;
Tell how my sons retook the guns, and won
their spurs of gold.
And you will tell how Birchall fell as calm as
on parade,
And on they bore, amid the roar, in that wild
charge they made,

The poem was written by a civilian in Canada, but was published in the June 1916 issue of the 4th Battalion's newspaper, *The Dead Horse Corner Gazette*.⁹⁴

According to Private Wakeling's letter, Lieutenant T.P. Jones was the last officer to take charge of the battalion on 23 April, in the absence of Captain Colquhoun. Despite having been wounded on 23 April, Major J. Ballantine took command of the battalion from 24 April through 27 April, at which time Captain J. Rogers assumed command. Rogers remained in command of the battalion until 14 May, when Lieutenant-Colonel Labatt resumed command after having been on sick leave. Labatt would command for less than 30 days before being evacuated sick once again on 7 June, but his short period of command happened to coincide with a second episode of serious action for the 4th Battalion.⁹⁵

⁹³The extensive list of charities includes the Archbishops of Western Canada Fund, the Children's County Holiday Fund, and the Children's Hospital of Halifax. Birchall had clearly made many friends in Canada. See RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 742 - 20.

⁹⁴*The Dead Horse Corner Gazette*, June 1916, p. 30, NAC, RG 24, volume 12382.

⁹⁵Gibson, p. 17.

* * *

The shuffling of battalion commanders occurred while the unit underwent rapid restructuring. By 29 April the battalion had returned to Vlamertinghe (where it had been originally warned for its counterattack one week earlier) and had absorbed a fresh draft of 15 officers and 523 other ranks.⁹⁶ Only a few weeks were available to integrate these new officers and men into the battalion before the unit returned to the line. Such circumstances might have been less troubling if May 1915 had been a quiet period for the Canadian Contingent; unfortunately, there was little opportunity for rest and reorganization. The period 30 April through 16 May was necessarily filled with training activities. On the evening of 2 May, the battalion completed a 16 mile march from Vlamertinghe to Bailleul, where it would spend a couple of weeks in training. During the first three days, each of the four companies performed five mile route marches, in addition to routine company, platoon, and section drills.⁹⁷ During the following week, musketry, bayonet fighting, extended order drill, and distance judging were practiced. Particular emphasis was placed on musketry practice for the new draft of troops.

The efficacy of this training program for the new soldiers is difficult to gauge. Frederick Edmonds was one of the new men taken on strength at the end of April. In his diary, Edmonds scarcely mentions any of the training conducted during his first few weeks with the battalion. This might indicate that the training was carried out in haphazard fashion and made little impact on the troops. However, the fact that Edmonds had served with the 11th Battalion since September 1914 might explain why he did not bother to mention training activities which would have seemed routine to a soldier who had already been in the army for eight months.⁹⁸

Lieutenant-Colonel Labatt assumed command on 14 May, two days before the battalion was warned to stand in readiness for rotation into the line.⁹⁹ The period 17 through 21 May was

⁹⁶War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 29 April 1915, NAC, T-10707.

⁹⁷War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 4-6 May 1915, NAV, T-10707.

⁹⁸Frederick Edmonds' diary is deposited in the University of Waterloo Archives.

⁹⁹War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 10-16 May 1915, NAV, T-10707.

spent intermittently “standing to” in support lines at St. Floris, and training in a bivouac area at Essars. Finally, on 22 May, the battalion moved into the reserve lines at Festubert as part of a relieving force for 3rd Canadian Brigade, at which time two of the 4th Battalion’s machine guns and crews were seconded to the 3rd Battalion.¹⁰⁰ During the previous three weeks, Festubert had been the epicentre of repeated costly attacks by First British Army, in conjunction with the French Tenth Army moving against Vimy Ridge to the right of the British forces.¹⁰¹ At the strategic level General Joffre was intending to win a decisive victory on the Western Front, and had managed to convince his British counterparts to support his plans. As a result, thousands of British and French troops became casualties as they attacked German positions without the benefit of adequate artillery support.¹⁰²

Although the 4th Battalion would not participate in an assault of its own at Festubert, relatively heavy casualties were sustained as a consequence of German artillery fire. On 23 May, five men were killed, and five more wounded by shellfire. The shelling persisted more or less continuously for two days. Battalion signallers were particularly busy in their efforts to keep telephone wires in working order under heavy shrapnel fire. From 23 through 26 May, each of the four companies took turns in the firing line under the command of the 3rd Battalion. Further casualties were incurred during these rotations.¹⁰³ On 27 May, the entire 4th Battalion relieved the 3rd Battalion without incident and remained in the firing line until 30 May, still under nearly constant artillery fire. Nevertheless, large working parties ventured out of their shelters at night to dig new firing and communication trenches and to keep lines of communications open. As of

¹⁰⁰War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 22 May 1915, NAC, T-10707. The battalion probably had no more than four machine guns at the time.

¹⁰¹Nicholson, pp. 93-109.

¹⁰²See Woodward, pp. 130-139, for a concise overview of the Anglo-French offensives of 1915 and their consequences.

¹⁰³War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 22-26 May 1915, NAC, T-10707.

30 May, 19 men were killed and 108 wounded, virtually all by incoming artillery.¹⁰⁴ On 31 May the British 5th Battalion, Gordons (Territorial) relieved the 4th Battalion. The Gordons' second in command had been killed the day before while reviewing the 4th Battalion's trenches.¹⁰⁵

It is interesting to compare the experiences of the 4th Battalion at Second Ypres (23 April) and Festubert (22-26 May). In the earlier engagement, the 4th Battalion consisted of a seemingly well integrated group of individuals who had enjoyed several months time in which to get familiar with one another and train together. And yet, due to circumstances largely beyond the control of the battalion, 50 percent casualties were suffered in an offensive action that lasted about 14 hours. At Festubert the composition of the battalion was much different from what it had been one month previously. Half of the men in the unit were new to the front, and had only been training with the battalion for a couple of weeks prior to entering the line. Although the battalion did not participate in an offensive action as a unit at Festubert, over 100 casualties were sustained. Once again, the level of casualties seems to have been largely beyond the control of the battalion. It is probable that casualties would have been considerably higher at Festubert if the battalion had been committed to an assault.

There is another key factor to consider. At Second Ypres, the 4th Battalion was under the command of A.P. Birchall, an experienced and charismatic officer. Thus, Birchall figures prominently in the story of that battle. Yet by the time of Festubert, Lieutenant-Colonel Labatt had returned to command the battalion. In contrast to Birchall at Second Ypres, Labatt is scarcely mentioned in conjunction with Festubert. Although Labatt was an experienced militia officer (13th Royal Regiment of Hamilton) whose service extended back to the Northwest Rebellion of 1885, he was hardly fit to command a battalion on the Western Front of 1915. The 51-year-old officer had a long history of medical problems, including a duodenal ulcer, dyspnoea, iritis, gall stones, and appendicitis. In June 1915 Labatt was diagnosed with serious heart problems, and was unable to walk more than a few paces without becoming short of breath.

¹⁰⁴Frederick Edmonds mentions 295 casualties suffered during the ten day period leading up to 1 June, but his figures are difficult to substantiate.

¹⁰⁵War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 30-31 May 1915, NAC, T-10707.

Thus, Labatt was forced to relinquish command of the 4th Battalion permanently on 7 June.¹⁰⁶ Given his medical condition, it is unlikely that Labatt played a meaningful role as commanding officer during the action at Festubert. While it is difficult to assess the impact of Labatt's presence on operations at Festubert, it is safe to argue that he should never have been allowed to resume command during a period when the battalion's morale may have been in a very delicate state.

April and May 1915 were unforgiving months for the 4th Battalion, and for the entire Allied effort on the Western Front. Although worse was to come for British forces at Loos in the autumn of 1915, the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion was able to enjoy a relatively quiet existence from June through December. For example, the battalion served eight relatively uneventful days in the line around Givenchy during June.¹⁰⁷ A typical daily war entry from this period reads as follows:

12-6-15 Fairly quiet day, good deal of sniping. Fine and sunny.
Mine south of Canal exploded at 5. P.M.¹⁰⁸

The remainder of the month was devoted to special training sessions covering such topics as the newly issued respirators and grenade tactics.¹⁰⁹ The battalion also exchanged its Ross Rifles for Lee Enfields, and some time must have been spent familiarizing the men with these new weapons.¹¹⁰ In terms of daily activities, July was similar to June, the only high points for the month being visits by Sir John French and Robert Borden. During June, Frederick Edmonds noted in his diary, "trenches pretty good & much safer than our last. Snipers not nearly so

¹⁰⁶R.H. Labatt, NAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 5270-62.

¹⁰⁷Gibson, p. 18.

¹⁰⁸War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 12 June 1915, NAC, T-10707.

¹⁰⁹War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 1-7 June 1915, NAC, T-10707.

¹¹⁰Gibson, p. 18. The transition should not have been too difficult, as the general principles of marksmanship and weapons handling would have been more or less similar for the two types of rifle.

plentiful...”¹¹¹ The official battalion war diary concurs with Edmonds’ appraisal of the situation throughout the remainder of 1915. For instance, while the battalion was stationed at Ploegsteert (“Plugstreet”) from 22 through 29 July, the words “All quiet” are all that appear in the war diary for each day.¹¹² A man was occasionally killed during these weeks, perhaps by a stray shell or a sniper’s bullet. The graves of these few unfortunate soldiers can still be found in small cemeteries deep in Ploegsteert Wood. But with the exception of periodic bombardments or enemy gas attacks, the second half of 1915 was a relatively quiet time for the 4th Battalion.



Figure 8: Ploegsteert Wood Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery. This remote cemetery contains the graves of four 4th Battalion soldiers killed between June and October 1915. (Photo by the author, August 2001.)

* * *

In the popular consciousness, the First World War is imagined in general and undifferentiated terms. “Trench warfare” conjures images of daily assaults across no-man’s-land in the face of machine gun fire and barbed wire. Such statistics as the figure of 60,000 British casualties suffered on the first day of the Somme offensive are often cited as evidence of the daily horrors. To some extent these images are completely realistic. 1 July 1916 was a very costly day for many British battalions, as well as a single Commonwealth battalion, the

¹¹¹Edmonds Diary, 10 June 1915, University of Waterloo Archives.

¹¹²War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 14, 20, 22-29 June 1915, NAC, T-10707.

Newfoundland Regiment, just as 23 April 1915 was a costly day for the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion. But notwithstanding such tragedies, the experience of the 4th Battalion also demonstrates that one day or week might be completely different from the preceding one. While a soldier could lose his life to a stray shell or bullet at any moment, not every hour in the trenches was devoted to hostile activities, nor was every day of the month spent in the firing lines.¹¹³ As Tony Ashworth argues in *Trench Warfare, 1914-1918: The Live and Let Live System*, casualty levels varied considerably as a function of time and geographical location.¹¹⁴ Thus, while the 4th Battalion was engaged at Ypres and Festubert during April and May 1915, casualty rates were astounding. But during the remainder of the year the battalion suffered relatively few casualties on a daily basis. Intense combat appears to have been the exception rather than the rule.

April and May 1915 were frighteningly costly months for the 4th Battalion: at least two generations of troops had passed through the unit within its first two months of frontline action. At higher levels, Allied commanders were aware that hard lessons had been learned during the year. A secret memo sent from 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade to the 4th Battalion (and presumably, the other three battalions in the brigade) on 29 October entitled "Notes on Recent Operations" reviews some of the highlights. Some of the information included in the memo must have seemed all too familiar to the battalion officers who were privy to it. Under section one, "Formations for the attack," one passage stands out:

There should be three waves in the attack...The advance of the first wave should be in five or six lines. It may be taken for granted that in attacking the front system of the enemy's trenches the first three lines will be wiped out; the fourth may reach the enemy's second line; the fifth may take it.¹¹⁵

After detailing procedures for the infantry's advance, the memo notes that means of moving artillery forward "must be thought out." With regard to machine gunners and trench mortar

¹¹³The 4th Battalion averaged six to eight days per month in the firing lines during 1915.

¹¹⁴Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare, 1914-1918: The Live and Let Live System* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1980).

¹¹⁵Notes on Recent Operations, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 3, file 5, p. 1.

crews, it is stated that “every man” must know “exactly by what route they will advance, and at what points they should if possible come into action.”¹¹⁶ The attacks of 1916 would demonstrate that the “fifth line” could take the objective; holding on to the objective was to be an entirely separate challenge.

The notion of First World War infantrymen being overburdened with equipment during assaults is a frequent feature of the secondary literature,¹¹⁷ but the October 1915 memo notes under section seven, “Equipment,” that only essential items should be carried: greatcoats, ammunition and food. This point would come to be emphasized in virtually every 4th Battalion operation order for the remainder of the war. The memo deals with a variety of other issues, including road control, ammunition dumping, chemical weapons, food, wounded, forming up, bivouacing, artillery observation, communication of assault progress, smoke screens, and air photo reconnaissance.¹¹⁸ The points raised under each of these headings are inherently interesting, but most importantly, the memo shows that battalion commanders were made aware of such developments months before the Somme battles of 1916. The “learning curve” had already begun to creep upward in 1915, at least on paper. The practical application of such lessons was another matter.

* * *

More than 1,000 men from the Brantford area served with the 4th Battalion throughout the First World War.¹¹⁹ Thus, many of the older generation who have grown up and lived in

¹¹⁶Notes on Recent Operations, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 3, file 5, p. 2.

¹¹⁷See Bill Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare*, rear jacket, or John Ellis, *Eye-Deep in Hell: Trench Warfare in World War I* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 33-37.

¹¹⁸Notes on Recent Operations, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 3, file 5, pp. 3-8.

¹¹⁹H.Q. Overseas Military Forces to Ministry of Overseas Military Forces of Canada, 21 March 1919, NAC, RG 9, volume 3002, file U-3-33

Brantford since the 1930s are well aware that their fathers, uncles, or neighbours served in the “Mad Fourth.” I first encountered this sobriquet while speaking with Brantfordians who had some familial connection with the battalion. In his 1920 history of Brant County, F. Douglas Reville noted that the 4th Battalion won its nickname just as Birchall was killed in action at Second Ypres:

As [Birchall] turned he fell dead at the head of his battalion. With a hoarse cry the battalion rushed forward to avenge him, and thus earned their title “The Mad Fourth.”¹²⁰

The nickname scarcely appears in official primary documents, but there is evidence that it was regularly used by troops of the 4th Battalion throughout the war. In his memoir *Only This* Lieutenant J.H. Pedley confirms that the title came into use during Birchall’s period of command, and “stuck right to the end,” even being chalked on the railroad cars that carried the surviving members of the battalion back to Toronto in 1919. At the same time, Pedley admits that the “madness of the Fourth appears to have been an intermittent fever” engendered by some of its commanding officers and discouraged by others.¹²¹ The following chapter will show how the character of the battalion developed and changed as the war progressed.

¹²⁰Reville, p. 450.

¹²¹Pedley, p. 18.

Chapter Three: 1916

In the popular history of the First World War, 1916 has been perceived as the metaphorical “point of no return” in the sense that familiar aspects of civilized warfare had disappeared from the Western Front. Verdun and the Somme are two battles of 1916 that are closely associated with incomprehensible levels of death and destruction. In the former case, French and German forces spent the better part of the year grappling with each other in a battle of attrition that resulted in close to one million casualties. And certainly the Somme offensive is most often cited by historians and other commentators as one of the greatest failures of British generalship.¹²² The experience of the 4th Battalion during 1916 is a microcosmic representation of the greater struggle. The battalion had proven itself a worthy formation during the battles of spring 1915, but new and unforeseen trials and tribulations would present themselves in the new year. If the record of the 4th Battalion during 1915 suggests that Canadian troops were somewhat better prepared for war than is generally believed, there were still many obstacles to overcome. Deficiencies in communications, command, and control are only a few examples of problems which plagued operations for the 4th Battalion, and probably most of the other units on the Western Front.

* * *

The first quarter of 1916 did not represent any great departure from what the men of the 4th Battalion had grown accustomed to during the final months of 1915. Much of January and February was spent in corps reserve, and during these weeks out of the front

¹²²Modrus Eksteins' *The Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1989) is an example of work that is highly critical of General Haig's command during the Somme offensive, yet Eksteins does not demonstrate a very clear understanding of the circumstances under which officers and soldiers were operating at the time; refer to pp. 165-166.

line, a fairly comprehensive training schedule was observed. The various topics of instruction had not changed appreciably from those of the previous year. Physical training, bayonet fighting, rapid loading practice, platoon and company drills dominated the schedule.¹²³ Trench rotations during February were without any major actions, but the minor incidents which had become characteristic of trench warfare during quiet periods filled the days spent at the front. Consider the following entry for 3 February:

Weather fine and sunny. Wind from the S.W. Gas alert still on & Discontinued at 5 P.M. At night the wind veered and blew a gale from S.S.W. Enemy artillery on our immediate front threw about sixteen shrapnel shells in front of C.3. 1. Shell exploding in a dugout. He threw 10, 4.2 H.E. Shells into Wouleverghem & vicinity. Sniping and rifle fire about normal. A few rifle grenades were used by both sides. Aircraft very active on both sides.¹²⁴

The passage both supports and contradicts the popular trench warfare paradigm. Several of the most common trench stereotypes are evident in the passage: random artillery fire, sniping and aircraft are just a few examples. At the same time, there was no large scale operation in progress at the time this passage was recorded, nor does it appear that any men from the battalion were killed or wounded during this particular day. Days or weeks spent in reserve during the early part of January were consumed by training and other logistical or administrative chores, such as pay parade.¹²⁵ As with the previous year's training, physical drill, bayonet fighting, rapid loading, and route marching were staple activities on the training roster. While in rear areas the men were also able to visit the divisional baths. For instance, on 7 and 8 February, the battalion was permitted access to the bathing facilities for approximately four and one half hours per

¹²³War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 11-13 January 1916, NAC, T-10707.

¹²⁴War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 3 February 1916, NAC, T-10707.

¹²⁵War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 8 February 1916, NAC, T-10707. The troops would have required pocket money for meals and beverages served at local civilian establishments in rear echelon villages.

day.¹²⁶

Lieutenant-Colonel M.A. Colquhoun had succeeded Labatt as commanding officer of the battalion in June 1915 and also served as temporary commander of 1st Canadian Brigade from 10 through 21 February 1916.¹²⁷ Colquhoun hailed from Brantford, Ontario, and was one of the few battalion officers to come through Second Ypres physically unscathed. He was well respected in his hometown,¹²⁸ and after falling ill during the war, would serve once again as commanding officer of the Dufferin Rifles during the 1920s.¹²⁹ Colquhoun received the Distinguished Service Order in January 1916,¹³⁰ but more importantly, he was remembered as a commanding officer who attempted to perpetuate the original fighting spirit fostered by A.P. Birchall.¹³¹ There is some evidence that this atmosphere changed after Lieutenant-Colonel W. Rae replaced Colquhoun in May 1916. Unlike his predecessors, who seemed to enjoy a certain level of rapport with their subordinates, Rae was remembered as a cold and aloof individual. Although Lieutenant James Pedley did not serve with the battalion during Rae's tenure, he was able to form a vicarious impression of the man through the recollections of other officers:

With the coming of Rae, we first discern another element creeping in, which seems as difficult to mix with the rugged abandon of the early days as oil with water - the element of cold discipline. One gathers that when the prim little colonel was finally promoted to Staff he left behind him a well chastened set of madmen. He was a while steady Rae, even a brilliant Rae, but a Rae that gave out

¹²⁶War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 7-8 February 1916, NAC, T-10707.

¹²⁷War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 10 February 1916, NAC, T-10707.

¹²⁸Colquhoun figures prominently in Reville's history of Brant County. See pp. 451-452.

¹²⁹NAC, RG 24, Volume 1904, DHS file 5-7-4. It was Colquhoun who sanctioned W.L. Gibson as "official" battalion historian after the war.

¹³⁰Gibson, p. 237.

¹³¹Pedley, p. 18.

little or no heat.¹³²

Whether or not such characteristics are conducive to a more effective fighting force is a matter of debate, but it is evident that morale probably suffered during Rae's period of command.



Figure 9: Lieutenant-Colonel W. Rae. (From Gibson, p. 96.)

If Rae's leadership style as battalion commander left something to be desired, there is also evidence that the unit was suffering from a leadership crisis at more junior levels during 1916. While the battalion was located at Dranoutre during the early part of 1916, Lieutenant W.D. Sprinks was employed as brigade grenade officer and camp commandant. A letter from 1st Canadian Brigade to 1st Canadian Division notes that Sprinks showed "no mark of efficiency" in either capacity, and recommended that he be struck off strength of the 4th Battalion.¹³³ In June 1916, a Lieutenant Warburton was placed under arrest after a working party under his command was charged with unsatisfactory conduct. Although considered "not very able" as an

¹³²Pedley, p. 18.

¹³³1st Canadian Brigade to 1st Canadian Division, 9 February 1916, NAC, RG 9, Volume 4026, Folder 10, File 10.

officer, Warburton was eventually released from arrest. A second officer, Lieutenant Gates, was also involved with the working party, but was not available for questioning because he was already under arrest “for a very serious offence totally unconnected” with the working party episodes.¹³⁴

The examples of Sprinks, Warburton, and Gates may be dismissed as isolated incidents, but further evidence is indicative of serious deficiencies at the junior officer level. A 1st Brigade memo from August 1916 lists 19 officers from all four of its battalions, under the following recommendation:

The following named officers have served with units of this brigade recently and have either managed to get away or have been sent away by various means. It is highly undesirable that any of them should return to us.¹³⁵

Nine of the nineteen officers were from the 4th Battalion: Captains Wallace, Sterling, and McDiarmid, and Lieutenants White, Warburton, Jones, Tyrrell, Grant, and Gates.¹³⁶ Of these officers, seven had enlisted on 22 August 1914, and five of those seven had enlisted directly with the 4th Battalion. Thus, only two of the nine (Jones and Tyrell) were officers who had joined the battalion from later drafts of men.¹³⁷ These statistics bring into question the mode of officer training conducted during the original formation of the 4th Battalion in Canada and Britain. While the training program may have been inadequate, it is also possible that the nine individuals listed above were simply not willing to accept the great responsibility of command under field conditions. Even more importantly, we must consider what impact these junior officers had on

¹³⁴1st Canadian Brigade, 10 June 1916, NAC, RG 9, Volume 4026, Folder 10, File 10.

¹³⁵1st Canadian Brigade to Canadian Headquarters, Shorncliffe, NAC, RG 9, Volume 4026, Folder 10, File 10.

¹³⁶Four of the other 19 officers were from the 1st Battalion, one from the 2nd Battalion, and five from the 3rd Battalion.

¹³⁷See Gibson, “Nominal Roll of Officers,” pp. 19-30.

field operations during the critical months of June and July 1916. Correlation does not imply causation, but it is possible that a direct relationship existed between setbacks on the battlefield and the personalities of certain battalion officers.

* * *

The 4th Battalion had enjoyed some respite from heavy casualties as 1915 turned to 1916, but as spring turned to summer, the unit would witness further combat in the Ypres Salient. The easternmost portion of the salient was dominated by several prominent terrain features, including Hills 60, 61, and 62 ("Tor Top"), Observatory Ridge, and Mount Sorrel. Each of these features remained in Canadian hands as of June 1916. The Germans did not fail to take notice, and hoped to seize the high ground in an effort to render the Ypres Salient even less tenable than it already was. As Nicholson notes in the Canadian official history, even if such an attack failed to reduce the salient, German success might still compel the Allies to bring more troops into the region in order to prevent the line around Ypres from collapsing.¹³⁸ Throughout May, German infantrymen prepared for their attack with practice assaults on mock trenches while additional artillery formations were moved into the area. On 2 June, the assault commenced with what might have been one of the heaviest bombardments of the war; some portions of the Canadian front trenches simply ceased to exist under the weight of gunfire. By 3 June, the Germans had taken hold of Hills 61 and 62, Mount Sorrel, and several hundred yards of Observatory Ridge.¹³⁹

The 4th Battalion was heading to a billeting area near Dickebush on 2 June when the rumour arose that the Germans had launched an assault near Sanctuary Wood, a zone of broken terrain that runs into Observatory Ridge. During the night these rumours were confirmed, as the men could hear shelling from the direction of Hooge, just to the north of Sanctuary Wood. The

¹³⁸Nicholson, p. 148.

¹³⁹See Nicholson, pp. 147-149.

shelling continued throughout the day on 3 June, and throughout the next day as the battalion moved to the General Headquarters lines. The front grew quieter during 5 and 6 June, but only temporarily. The weather also turned, and by 11 June, there was a steady “drizzle” that would continue throughout the night. The next day the company commanders organized and equipped their troops for the pending counterattack.¹⁴⁰ The battalion was to move into its attack position during the night of 12-13 June, in support of the 13th and 16th Canadian Infantry Battalions.¹⁴¹ Once again the 4th Battalion was called upon to counterattack the Germans in the Salient, but this time more careful preparations were arranged. The battalion would march to its start line with “C” Company in the lead, followed by “A”, “B”, and “D” Companies, these being followed by scouts, signallers, and bombers. Each company would collect a Lewis gun crew as it passed a given point.¹⁴² The battalion was in position by midnight on 12 June.¹⁴³

The entire Canadian counterattack at Mount Sorrel consisted of five objectives. Moving from west to east, these were the new German front line (codenamed HALIFAX), the former Canadian reserve line (MONTREAL), the former Canadian support line (WINNIPEG), the former Canadian front line (VANCOUVER), and the original German front line (BERLIN).¹⁴⁴ The 4th Battalion’s objective was HALIFAX, with its axis of advance roughly following along Observatory Ridge Road. On the right hand side of the road, “A” Company was detailed to move in support of the 16th Battalion, while “C” Company would support the 13th Battalion on the left side of the road. “B” and “D” Companies would remain in the rear momentarily, along

¹⁴⁰War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 2-12 June 1916, NAC, T-10707.

¹⁴¹The 4th Battalion was attached to 3rd Canadian Brigade during the Mount Sorrel counterattack.

¹⁴²Operation Order, 4th Cdn Bn, 12 June 1916, NAC, T-10707.

¹⁴³War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 12 June 1916, NAC, T-10707.

¹⁴⁴Operation Order, 4 Cdn Bn, 12 June 1916, CODE, NAC, T-10707.

with the battalion scouts, signallers, and bombers.¹⁴⁵ At 0330 hours on the morning of 13 June, Rae ordered "A" Company forward from Valley Cottages in support of the 13th Battalion, "in response to a message" he had received from the latter. "B" Company was then ordered up to Valley Cottages to take up "A" Company's previous position. Rae waited a "few minutes" more for a message from the 16th Battalion, but when none came, he sent "C" Company forward to support it. "C" Company's initial position at Valley Cottages was taken up by "D" Company.

Although "A" Company had a slight head start on "C" Company, the latter unit passed the former, and advanced well beyond HALIFAX, which was the ultimate objective of both companies. Some men of "A" company also advanced beyond HALIFAX. Thus, both companies became "mixed up" with the 13th and 16th Battalions. The cause of this confusion seems to have been the very severe weight of artillery fire that was falling on the two companies during their advances toward HALIFAX. It appears that "A" Company fared better because its commanding officer (Captain Powell) did not become a casualty, and was able to maintain some semblance of order during the advance. The situation was quite different in the case of "C" Company, which was under the command of Lieutenant Frederick Gates. Lieutenant Gates had assumed command of the company very recently, after its previous commanding officer (Lieutenant Harris Walsh) had been wounded. Lieutenant Colonel Rae states in his operations report that Gates became "incapacitated almost immediately" after the company started to advance. Anyone reading the report might have assumed that Gates was wounded, yet there is no record of this officer suffering any physical injury or wounds during his service.¹⁴⁶ It will also be recalled that Gates had been previously cited in official correspondence as an undesirable individual who had already been charged for a "very serious" offense. Gates had not forged a

¹⁴⁵Operation Order, 4 Cdn Bn, 12 June 1916, CODE, NAC, T-10707.

¹⁴⁶Gibson, p. 21.

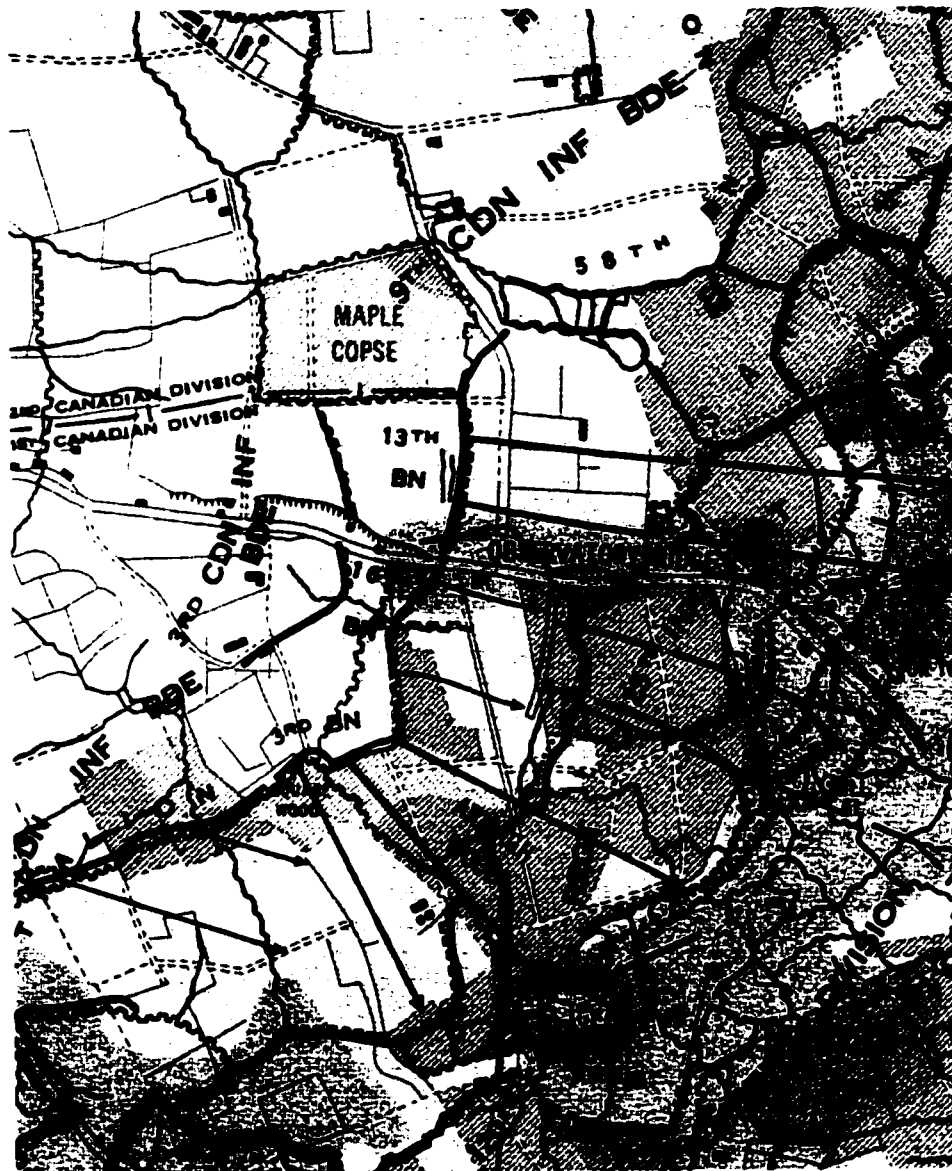


Figure 10: Two companies of the 4th Battalion advanced on either side of Observatory Ridge Road, to the rear of the 13th and 16th Battalions. Mount Sorrel is near the bottom of the map (see Nicholson).

successful military career as of June 1916, and was probably mentally unprepared to take command of the company in action. As a consequence, Gates would have easily lost his composure under highly stressful circumstances such as existed on the morning of 13 June on Observatory Ridge. Whatever the exact cause of Gates' incapacitation, "C" Company was without a leader, and this probably explains why it advanced beyond HALIFAX and

subsequently fell into a state of confusion.¹⁴⁷

It would be convenient to attribute Gates' behaviour to lack of experience, but the actions of Lieutenant Joseph Farrell demonstrate that experience is not the only factor involved in sound combat leadership. Farrell had been attached to the 4th Battalion from the 36th Battalion for only a few weeks prior to the counterattack at Mount Sorrel.¹⁴⁸ Despite his unfamiliarity with the 4th Battalion and minimal experience at the front, Farrell was able reorganize and move the majority of men from "C" Company back to their correct positions. For the remainder of 13 June, "A" and "C" Companies occupied HALIFAX TRENCH under "practically incessant shellfire."

Later on during the morning of 13 June, "B" Company was warned to be ready for a possible German counterattack from the direction of Mount Sorrel, while "D" Company and the 4th Battalion's signallers, bombers, and other ancillary personnel were functioning as carriers of small arms ammunition and grenades for the 13th and 16th Battalions. Throughout the day it was impossible for 4th Battalion headquarters to maintain telephone communications with either the 13th or the 16th Battalion, and contact with the forward companies of the 4th Battalion by telephone was probably almost as difficult to achieve. With minor exceptions, the dispositions of the 4th Battalion remained more or less unchanged throughout 13 and 14 June, when it would be relieved by the 24th Battalion. At 2300 hours on 13 June, the 4th Battalion grenade platoon moved forward to carry out an unspecified "special operation" under Lieutenant John Stagg (4th Battalion), as well as two officers from 3rd Brigade. It is unclear who issued the order for the

¹⁴⁷The facts used to reconstruct this operation are based on Lieutenant Colonel Rae's operational report to 3rd Canadian Brigade. See the appendix for the War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, June 1916, NAC, T-10707.

¹⁴⁸Since the spring of 1916, the officers and noncommissioned officers of the 4th Battalion had been involved with the training of more recently arrived Canadian units, such as the 48th and 36th Battalions. War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, March 1916, NAC, T-10707.

special operation, but both of the 3rd Brigade officers were killed by artillery fire while Lieutenant Stagg was wounded. Several of the bombers were also killed or wounded, thus forcing the surviving members of the platoon back to the trenches of "D" Company.

The operations of the 4th Battalion on Observatory Ridge from 12 through 14 June were conducted under the most unfavourable circumstances. The men had never experienced such heavy levels of shelling, and near constant rain showers did not help the situation as far as the troops were concerned. By the time that the battalion was relieved on 14 June, casualty levels were already mounting, and the survivors were extremely fatigued, as well as being soaked through to their skins. The HALIFAX trenches had been heavily damaged by the Canadians' preliminary barrage as well as German fire, and protection from incoming rounds was difficult to find. Heavy rainfall flooded parts of the trench network, and many men took their chances on higher and slightly dryer ground *outside* of the trenches.¹⁴⁹ By the time of the relief on 14 June, the battalion had lost one officer and 22 other ranks killed, and 3 officers and 122 other ranks wounded, "practically all from shellfire."¹⁵⁰

The larger Canadian effort to recapture lost ground around Mount Sorrel and surrounding high ground along Observatory Ridge was ultimately successful, but this analysis of the 4th Battalion's participation in the battle demonstrates the incredible degree of complexity involved in operations at the company and battalion levels. A broad range of factors influenced the performance of the battalion: artillery fire, weather, the leadership of junior officers, communications, and terrain. Although the 4th Battalion functioned primarily as a support unit, its casualty figures for 12 through 14 June show that significant numbers of men could be

¹⁴⁹After the relief of 14 June the men's feet were in terrible shape and required immediate attention and rest. War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 14-15 June 1916, NAC, T-10707.

¹⁵⁰Operations Report, 4th Battalion to General Officer Commanding, 3rd Canadian Brigade, War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, June 1916, NAC, T-10707.

quickly killed and wounded by indirect fire. Unlike the battalion's experiences of April and May 1915, it does not appear that the men came under heavy machine gun or other direct small arms fire at Mount Sorrel. At Second Ypres the battalion was under the command of a popular and charismatic officer (Birchall), while Lieutenant Colonel Rae was a "cold" individual who commanded operations on Observatory Ridge from his battalion headquarters. While a comparison between the fighting at Second Ypres and Mount Sorrel probably invites more questions than it answers, we can safely conclude that the differences between the two operations outweigh the similarities. Casualties were high in both instances, but were not consequences of identical factors in either operation.

* * *

If one of the factors that motivated the original German assault on Mount Sorrel and Observatory Ridge was to draw Allied troops into local offensive actions, it seems that the strategy was successful, even if the Germans were not able to hold on to all of the ground they had captured. While the Somme battles raged to the south, the 4th Battalion remained in the eastern portion of the Ypres Salient near Mount Sorrel. Less than one month after the June counterattack, elements of the battalion were committed to a bombing raid on 8-9 July with the intention of pushing the Germans away from the higher ground. The objectives of the raid were the German front line and immediate support trench, with the intention of firmly holding the German front line "at all costs." Supporting artillery fire would be provided by 1st Canadian Division.¹⁵¹

The raiding party was drawn primarily from "C" Company, and placed under the

¹⁵¹Operation Order, 4th Cdn Bn, 7 July 1916, NAC, RG 9, Volume 4026, Folder 11, File 2.

command of a Captain Scott.¹⁵² Scott's raiding force consisted of five smaller parties named A, B, C, D and E. Party A was commanded by Lieutenant Graecen, and consisted of a battalion bombing squad, a blocking party, two noncommissioned officers and 16 other ranks. Graecen's blocking party consisted of a single sapper (engineer) and three soldiers who carried the blocking hurdles.¹⁵³ The other four parties were of similar composition, with the exception of Party D, which lacked a blocking party. Rae's operation order is somewhat difficult to follow, but his intention was for some of the bombers in each party to press into the forward German trenches up to particular points. At these key points, the respective blocking parties would drop their hurdles, and then retire a short distance to establish barricades. The hurdles were to be within sight and grenade throwing distance of the barricades, from which the bombers would cover the hurdles and prevent the entry of German reinforcements into the captured trenches. Meanwhile, the remaining elements of each party would consolidate the captured trenches, killing or taking prisoner any Germans who had been cut off.¹⁵⁴ Carrying parties were detailed from "B" Company men to carry pioneer tools to jumping off points for the raid. Presumably this measure was intended to spare the raiders from engaging in extra work prior to their engagement. Lewis and Colt machine guns were detailed to cover the blocking points.¹⁵⁵

Although the raid was limited to company size, a special artillery preparation was arranged. 15 minutes prior to the assault the forward German trenches would be hit with

¹⁵²Three officers with the surname Scott served with the battalion; it is unclear whom of the three commanded the raiding party.

¹⁵³The hurdles were prefabricated portable barriers that could be quickly installed in order to block of a section of trench.

¹⁵⁴Operation Order, 4th Cdn Bn, 7 July 1916, NAC, RG 9, Volume 4026, Folder 11, File 2.

¹⁵⁵Operation Order, 4th Cdn Bn, 7 July 1916, "Machine Guns," NAC, RG 9, Volume 4026, Folder 11, File 2.

shrapnel rounds while larger calibre rounds were dropped on other selected targets around Mount Sorrel. A 30 minute barrage would cover the assault as it was launched, and after a further 30 minutes, a second 15 minute barrage would be fired. Theoretically, the barrage could be turned on or off at any time at the request of the forward infantry, assuming that some means of communication existed between the troops and the gun lines. Four provisions were made for signaling purposes: two riflemen in three from parties A, B, C and E would carry flares with instructions for use based on a colour code, a signaling officer would be detailed to facilitate communication between advanced battalion headquarters and the captured trenches, lamps would be used for visual signaling from the front line to the rear, and red asteroid rockets would be used as S.O.S. signals should the raid encounter severe difficulties. Penetrating the enemy's barbed wire entanglements was a potential source of trouble, and as a consequence wire cutters would be "distributed to riflemen and bombers as far as numbers permit."¹⁵⁶

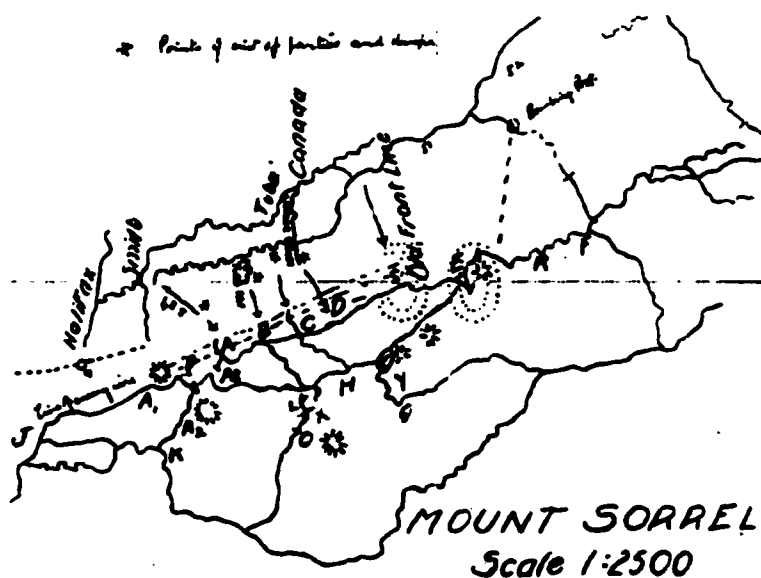


Figure 11: This is the original sketch map included with Lieutenant-Colonel Rae's operational report. The positions of the five raiding parties (A, B, C, D & E) are clearly shown. Note also the location of Canada Trench. (NAC, RG 9, volume 4026, folder 11, file 2.)

¹⁵⁶Operation Order, 4th Cdn Bn, 7 July 1916, "Equipment," NAC, RG 9, Volume 4026, Folder 11, File 2.

Despite the detailed planning that is evident in Rae's operation order, "C" Company's trench raid at Mount Sorrel failed. Captain Scott's raiding parties were in position to launch at 2345 hours on the evening of 8 July. Rae arrived in the front trenches prior to the raiders, and at about 2330 hours, he received reports from reconnaissance patrols indicating that the German wire entanglements were still largely intact. Although the shrapnel bombardment that was about to fall on the forward German trenches could exert no meaningful effect on the condition of the German wire, Rae decided not to cancel the raid.¹⁵⁷ In his report to 1st Canadian Brigade, Rae stated that an attempt had to be made "to carry out the attack at any rate, as it was then too late to make any change in the plans."¹⁵⁸ Scott's force advanced on schedule at midnight.

At 2420 hours Rae received his first indication that all was not well. D party was held up on the German wire. About 10 minutes later, Rae learned that the attack was stalled all along the frontage of the raid, and urgent requests were received for additional supplies of grenades. By 0100 hours it became obvious to Rae that the parties were unable to cut through the breast high coils of German wire without exposing themselves to deadly small arms fire. There were several rows of barbed wire in front of the German trenches, and none of the men succeeded in penetrating beyond the first or second lines of entanglements. To complicate matters further, Captain Scott was killed almost immediately (he had been in direct command of party C, as well as the whole raiding force). Lieutenant Graecen (party A commander) was wounded, Sergeant-Major Rusk (party B commander) lost a foot, Lieutenant Ansley (party D commander) was killed, and Sergeant Eagle (party E commander) was also killed. Despite the loss or wounding of

¹⁵⁷Shrapnel rounds were useful for suppressing personnel, but were not effective against wire obstacles or other field fortifications. For additional technical information, refer to Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham, *Fire-Power: British Army Weapons and Theories of War, 1904-1945* (Boston: George Allan & Unwin, 1985), pp. 83-84.

¹⁵⁸O.C. 4th Canadian Battalion to G.O.C. 1st Canadian Brigade, 11 July 1916, NAC, RG 9, Volume 4026, Folder 11, File 2.

all party leaders, the surviving raiders appear to have retreated in good order, and most of the wounded were evacuated.¹⁵⁹ Rae ordered the raiders to retreat shortly after 0100 hours.

Frederick Edmonds had been promoted to Sergeant just prior to the Mount Sorrel trench raid. He did not participate in the action, but was present as the raiding party returned. In his notebook, Edmonds notes that there appeared to be relatively few casualties among the raiders, and that the raid failed because the German wire was uncut.¹⁶⁰ While this circumstance played a major role in foiling the bombing raid, several other factors also affected the outcome. During the afternoon of 8 July, Canadian artillery observers noted that the German trenches were being heavily manned by infantry. Some of the raiders later reported that they came under heavy rifle fire, the source of which was probably the forward German trenches. Although the shrapnel barrage continued to fall on the forward German trenches beyond the specified time limit, it appears that the German soldiers were still able to man their parapets soon enough to thwart the attackers as they attempted to cut through the wire. The fact that most of the Canadian casualties were caused by German grenades reminds us just how close together the lines were in this area. The raiders were also troubled by machine gun fire coming from nearby Hill 60.¹⁶¹ While the intact wire would have caused problems in any event, the violent German response suggests that the element of surprise was completely absent.

It is fair to criticize Rae's decision not to cancel the raid when he was fully aware that the German wire was still intact. The Canadian line was not in immediate jeopardy, and with 30 minutes to spare, Rae probably could have reached the leaders of all five parties prior to their

¹⁵⁹O.C. 4th Canadian Battalion to G.O.C. 1st Canadian Brigade, 11 July 1916, NAC, RG 9, Volume 4026, Folder 11, File 2.

¹⁶⁰Frederick Edmonds Papers, 8 July 1916. No casualty figures are available in the war diary or operational report.

¹⁶¹O.C. 4th Canadian Battalion to G.O.C. 1st Canadian Brigade, 11 July 1916, NAC, RG 9, Volume 4026, Folder 11, File 2.

moment of advance. As alluded to above, the explanation that Rae submitted to 1st Canadian Brigade for his decision to launch the attack against intact lines of German wire is rather brief, and perhaps somewhat elusive:

I preceded the attacking parties and at about 11.30 p.m. when in the MOUNT SORREL trenches, patrols which I had ordered out to reconnoitre the enemy's wire as soon as it was dark, came in and reported there were some small gaps in different places, from about CANADA STREET to 48.S., but, that from CANADA STREET to the left, the wire was then practically intact.

I decided that an attempt would have to be made to carry out the attack at any rate, as it was then too late to make any change in the plans.¹⁶²

The few gaps that were observed by the reconnaissance patrol hardly justify Rae's decision. It is possible that those gaps may have been left open by the Germans intentionally, as a means of funneling assault troops into pre-registered kill zones. In any event, these few entry points were hardly sufficient for a plan of attack which stipulated that the troops must enter the enemy trenches at particular points, and not simply where a random gap in the wire might have appeared. "Canada Street" trench ran perpendicular to the main lines, roughly at the mid point of "C" Company's attack frontage (figure 11).¹⁶³ Thus, Rae was certain that nearly half of his troops would be advancing in the face of intact wire. Rae's only remaining justification for not stopping the operation was the late timing. It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine whether or not Rae could have reached all of the assault party leaders prior to their moment of advance. If he sincerely felt that he could not have done so, then it may have been best simply to let the entire operation continue as planned, rather than have some troops advance while others remained in the Canadian trenches. Yet Rae did not express this specific concern; instead he

¹⁶²O.C. 4th Canadian Battalion to G.O.C. 1st Canadian Brigade, 11 July 1916, NAC, RG 9, Volume 4026, Folder 11, File 2.

¹⁶³Map Supplement, O.C. 4th Canadian Battalion to G.O.C. 1st Canadian Brigade, 11 July 1916, NAC, RG 9, Volume 4026, Folder 11, File 2.

simple stated that it was “too late” to change the plan.

We will never know what was going through Rae’s mind, but there is little doubt that he was under an incredible amount of stress to maintain pressure on the enemy. The high casualties suffered by the 4th Battalion during the previous month must have weighed heavily on his mind, but one would think that such concerns would make a commander more cautious. Yet there is some evidence that Rae might have been suffering from exhaustion: during his eight month tenure as battalion commander, Rae spent approximately 25 days in hospital, or on leave.¹⁶⁴ The only remaining clue regarding Rae’s motivation comes from Lieutenant James Pedley’s who indicated in his memoir that Rae was a staunch disciplinarian.¹⁶⁵ Perhaps Rae was unwilling to cancel the assault for fear of draining the battalion’s will to participate in future offensives. In any event, the failed raid of 8-9 July was probably one of the episodes that contributed to Rae’s relative unpopularity as a battalion commander.

In the final analysis, we should not allow the unfortunate outcome of the trench raid to eclipse the good intentions and sophisticated planning that preceded it. Officers and men with combat experience appreciated that conventional large scale frontal attacks executed during daylight hours were extremely costly, and often resulted in few gains . It is understandable that these individuals were searching for more effective avenues through which they could close with the enemy. At the time, platoon or company sized night raids must have seemed like attractive alternatives, since in theory, they were based on stealth and surprise.

¹⁶⁴Gibson, p. 17.

¹⁶⁵Pedley, p. 18.

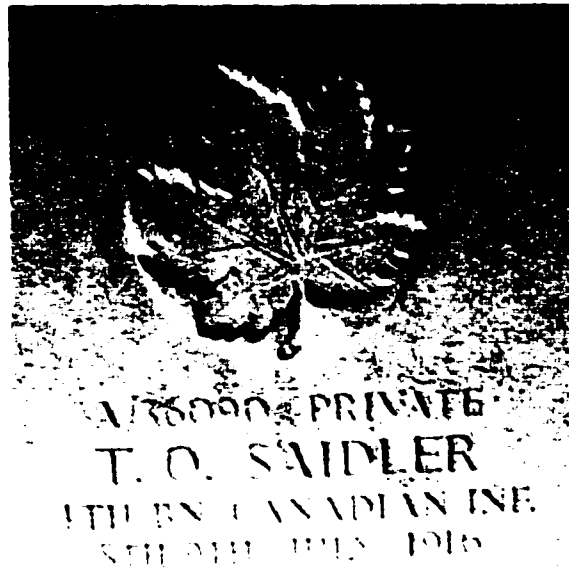


Figure 12: The date inscribed on Private T.O. Saidler's grave marker shows that he was probably killed in the trench raid on the night of 8-9 July 1916. It is unusual for the date of death to be marked in this way. Saidler lies in the Railway Dugouts (Transport Farm) Commonwealth Cemetery near Ypres. (Photo by the author, August 2001.)

* * *

While the Canadian Corps had been grappling with German Army in the Ypres Salient during the first seven months of 1916, even greater dramas were playing themselves out on other parts of the Western Front. In February the German commander Von Falkenhayn launched his attack against the French at Verdun, “the true fortress” on the eastern bank of the River Meuse. Further German attacks soon followed on the west bank of the river. It was Falkenhayn’s intention to break the back of the French Army at Verdun, but by the end of the year both the Germans and the French had bled themselves white in an epic struggle that has come to symbolize the incredible loss of life on the Western Front. The forts and villages to the north of Verdun changed hands several times throughout 1916, and even today only ruins remain where houses and farms once stood. The Germans never reached the city of Verdun itself, but many

neighbouring communities such as Fleury and Vauquois were wiped off the face of the planet by constant shelling and massive mine detonations. Most of the French forts to the north of Verdun survived the battle, but the scars of the struggle are everywhere on the battlefield: the ground resembles the surface of the moon with its acres of shell craters, while it is not uncommon to happen upon unexploded shells and grenades in a freshly ploughed farm field. Despite the nearly one million casualties suffered by both armies at Verdun, the war was far from decided in December 1916, and anything resembling a favourable resolution did not appear within the grasp of the Allies.

While the battle of Verdun raged, British and French forces launched an offensive further north, near the Somme River. The offensive had no meaningful geographical objectives, but rather, was intended to relieve some of the German pressure on the French at Verdun, and on other Allied fronts. On the 1 July, the infantry attacks commenced after a powerful artillery preparation. While the French forces on the right of the Somme River managed to achieve most of their objectives, British and Commonwealth forces on the left (or north bank) did not fare so well. At least 57,000 British troops were killed or wounded on 1 July.¹⁶⁶ The Canadian Corps was far from this action, but the Newfoundland Regiment was virtually annihilated in its attack near Beaumont Hamel.

¹⁶⁶Nicholson, pp. 160-161.

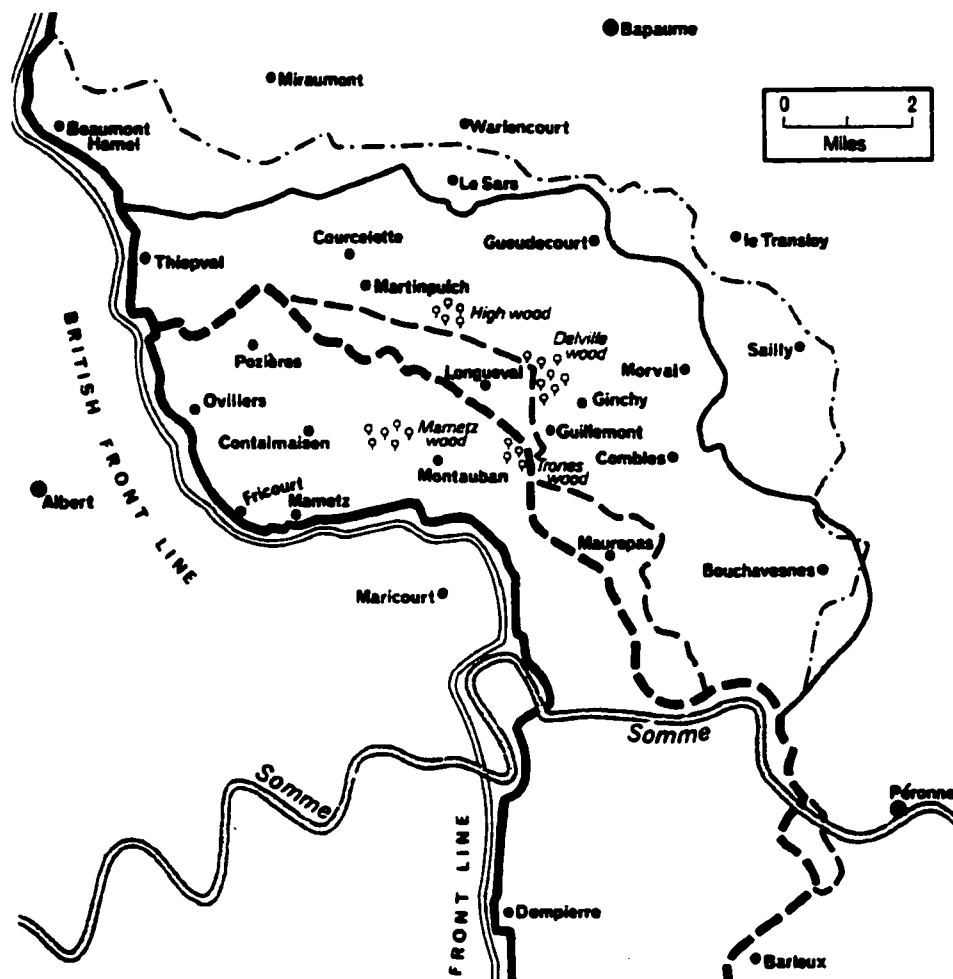


Figure 13: Overall view of the Somme front. The white line and the solid black line represent the Allied and German positions prior to 1 July. The heavy dashed line shows the German front line by the end of July; the next three lines going from west to east show the German line on 1 September, 1 October and 1 November respectively. The 4th Battalion operated north of Courcellette (just west of Le Sars; figure 14). (From Gilbert, p. 56.)

The Canadian Corps began moving into France during August, and by the end of the month had reached the Somme battlefields. The men of the 4th Battalion found themselves in support trenches near La Boiselle,¹⁶⁷ roughly halfway between Albert and Pozieres, on 31 August after spending the better part of the previous six weeks training, being inspected, and moving from village to village on foot or by train. As Nicholson explains, Haig planned to have 1st Canadian Division hold the front roughly between Pozieres and Mouquet Farm while the other

¹⁶⁷War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 1 September 1916, NAC, T-10707.

Canadian divisions prepared for offensive action.¹⁶⁸ The Germans did not cooperate, and the 4th Battalion found itself repelling two attacks later in the month. On the morning of 19 September, the battalion was in the line “in front of” Courcelette when it received orders to attack at 1900 hours that evening. The preliminary bombardment commenced at 1400 hours, but the attack was cancelled shortly thereafter for reasons not specified in the battalion war diary. But at 1930, the Germans launched their own assault on the 4th Battalion’s trenches, and managed to secure a foothold after overrunning a Lewis gun position. “B” Company was immediately brought out of reserve to repel what appears to have been a small scale raid, but by the time it reached the forward area, the Germans had evacuated their position and retreated to their original lines. Heavy artillery fire continued throughout the evening on both sides of the line.¹⁶⁹

At 0430 hours the next morning, the Germans launched yet another attack. This one was less successful than their first attempt the evening before because the 4th Battalion had remained on alert throughout the night. The battalion was ordered to launch its own assault on the afternoon of 20 September, but the order was promptly canceled; brigade had presumably taken into consideration the exhausted state of the troops after repelling two assaults within the previous 24 hours. The 1st Canadian Battalion relieved the 4th Battalion at 2200 hours on the same day, although two platoons from “C” Company remained in position near Courcelette until about 1700 hours on 21 September. The battalion’s casualties since 19 September were estimated to be eight officers and 150 other ranks. It is not clear whether the bulk of these casualties were caused by artillery fire, or direct German action during the two attacks, but the former case appears more likely. A 1st Canadian Division reconnaissance report compiled on the morning of 20 September noted that much of the country to the rear of the Sugar Refinery near

¹⁶⁸Nicholson, pp. 166-167.

¹⁶⁹War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 19 July 1916, NAC, T-10707.

Courcelette was under enemy observation from the Courcelette-Thiepval ridge line to the north and northwest.¹⁷⁰ 4th Battalion headquarters were set up in the Sugar factory itself, and most of the battalion frontage north of the refinery would also have been within view of German artillery observers. As a consequence, it is reasonable to assume that accurate artillery fire probably caused the majority of 4th Battalion casualties. Thus, it was extremely critical for the Canadians to move forward onto the Courcelette-Thiepval ridge as quickly as possible. This tactical scenario set the stage for the Canadian actions during October.

* * *

The 4th Battalion's attack near Courcelette and Le Sars on 8 October 1916 ideally illustrates factors that influenced the outcomes of company and battalion-sized operations. The secondary literature dealing with Canadian operations on the Western Front emphasizes the importance of careful planning and identifies Vimy Ridge as a major turning point in the war in the sense that its meticulous planning was a point of departure from the first half of the conflict.¹⁷¹ A careful examination of battalion operations on the Somme shows that detailed operational planning was not a new phenomenon in 1917, but the experience of the 4th Battalion at Courcelette-Le Sars on 8 October suggests that sophisticated operational planning did not necessarily guarantee success. There were a number of other operational and logistical factors that could easily doom a well-planned assault to failure.

The objective of the 4th Battalion attack on 8 October was straightforward: the men were to advance uphill on a 350 yard front and capture the first and second German lines (Below Trench), roughly in between their intersections with the Dyke road and Regina Trench. The

¹⁷⁰Reconnaissance Report, 1st Canadian Division, 20 September 1916, NAC, RG 9, Volume 4026, Folder 11, File 3.

¹⁷¹For example, see Tim Cook, "A Proper Slaughter: The March 1917 Gas Raid at Vimy," in *Canadian Military History*, Spring 1999, pp. 7-23.

attack would go in immediately to the northwest of Le Sars, and to the more distant northeast of Courcelette. The 69th British Brigade would advance to the right of the 4th Battalion, while the 3rd Canadian Battalion would advance on the left. The 4th Battalion's advance would be staged in two waves, approximately 50 to 75 yards apart. The first wave, consisting of "A" and "B" Companies, would capture the first German line, while the second wave, consisting of "C" and "D" Companies, would pass through to capture the second line. Each of the companies would itself advance in two waves of two platoons each, again, with a distance of approximately 50 to 75 yards in between. Because the attack would be launched under the cover of darkness,¹⁷² Lieutenant-Colonel Rae emphasized the importance of maintaining touch with elements of 3rd Battalion and 69th Brigade on either flank.¹⁷³ A single company of the Second Battalion was held in immediate reserve.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷²Although night operations tended to exacerbate navigational difficulties, the protection afforded by darkness was a key advantage for the attacking force.

¹⁷³Operation Order, 4th Cdn Bn, 7 October 1916, "Intention, Objective, Flanks, Formations," NAC, T-10707.

¹⁷⁴Operation Order, 4th Cdn Bn, 7 October 1916, "Assembly," NAC, T-10707.

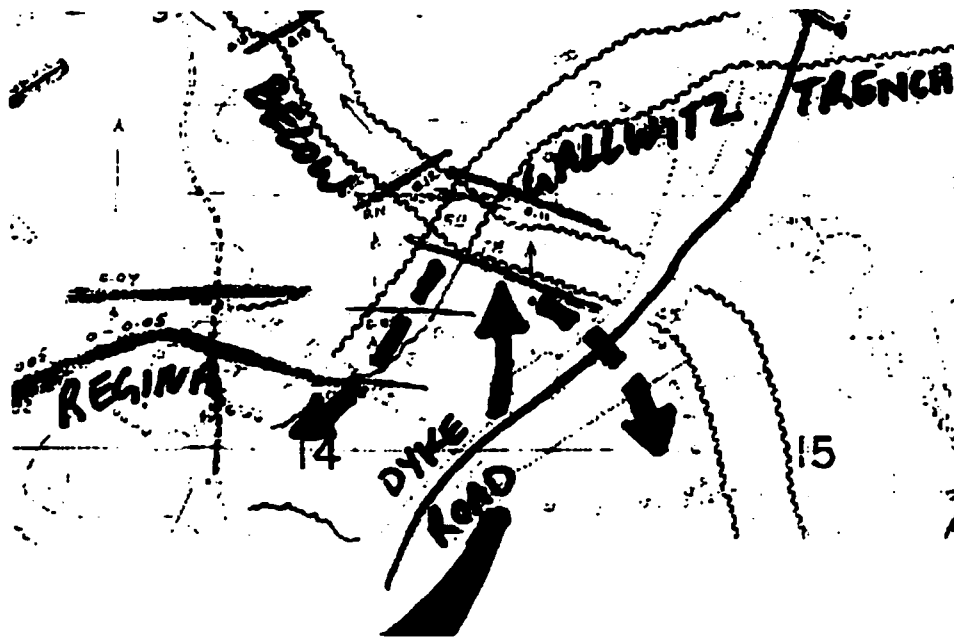


Figure 14: This original overprint shows the objective of the 8 October operation. The names of the main trench lines and the battalion's axes of advance and retreat have been highlighted by the author in black marker for clarification: the solid black arrow shows approximately the northward advance toward the diamond-shaped Quadrilateral (the intersection of Below and Gallwitz Trenches). The battalion reached the first Below Trench, but could not capture the second line. Meanwhile, German counterattacks from the north end of Below Trench and from Gallwitz Trench ultimately drove a wedge into the battalion's position at the Quadrilateral. The broken arrows show the two directions of withdrawal. Part of the battalion went left, down Regina Trench, while the other turned right, following Below Trench to the south. Courcelette is just off the bottom of the map, while Le Sars is off the right edge, to the east. (NAC, RG 9, volume 4011, folder 17, file 4.)

If and when the objectives were captured, the operation order specified that officers and noncommissioned officers would organize the survivors into new sections and platoons, while the Lewis gunners and ammunition carriers would push forward as much as 100 yards in front of the new positions. All captured German weapons, ammunition, and tools would be gathered up and distributed for re-use as required. Spare grenades and ammunition were also to be collected from dead and wounded Canadians, and passed on to the grenadiers and Lewis gun crews.¹⁷⁵ Wounded were to be cared for and evacuated only by stretcher bearers. Likewise, German prisoners of war were to be evacuated only in sizeable parties, and under the supervision of an

¹⁷⁵Operation Order, 4th Cdn Bn, 7 October 1916, "Equipment," NAC, T-10707.

officer.¹⁷⁶ These duties were not to be used as excuses for able-bodied riflemen or grenadiers to move back to the rear during the critical period of consolidation at the objectives; every man would be needed.

Four squads of grenadiers, plus additional pioneer troops, were detailed to establish blocking parties. The parties would position themselves on the forward flanks, with the intention of linking up with 3rd Battalion and 69th Brigade on either side. If these friendly units could not be reached, the blocking parties could serve as immediate flank protection forces.¹⁷⁷ Lewis gun crews from the first two companies would position themselves in positions from which they could cover the grenadiers' blocking positions. The Lewis gunners of "A" and "B" Companies were to advance in the rear line of the rear platoons in extended order, so that the gun crews would appear as ordinary skirmishers from a distance. Remaining Lewis guns from all four companies would be at the disposal of the respective company commanders and deployed as the situation dictated.¹⁷⁸ In contrast with the Lewis guns, the Colt machine guns would remain in the support trench, from which they could provide suppressive fire over the heads of the assault companies. They would also be available to cover an emergency withdrawal, or to help thwart any German efforts to counterattack.¹⁷⁹ Thus, the offensive employment of machine guns as sources of indirect fire was not a new experiment pioneered in the Vimy operation six months later.

A variety of measures were taken to facilitate communications. The capture of the first line was to be indicated by the release of red Very lights, while the capture of the second line

¹⁷⁶Operation Order, 4th Cdn Bn, 7 October 1916, "Wounded, Prisoners," NAC, T-10707.

¹⁷⁷Operation Order, 4th Cdn Bn, 7 October 1916, "Battalion Grenadiers, Working Parties," NAC, T-10707.

¹⁷⁸Operation Order, 4th Cdn Bn, 7 October 1916, "Lewis Gun," NAC, T-10707.

¹⁷⁹Operation Order, 4th Cdn Bn, 7 October 1916, "Colt Guns," NAC, T-10707.

would be announced with the release of green Very lights.¹⁸⁰ Each company would be issued three Very pistols with 60 flares, two sets of S.O.S. rockets, plus nine ground flares for aircraft signalling. Every section was to be informed with regard to who was carrying what, in case a pistol or flare was immediately required by someone who was not the original carrier.¹⁸¹

Additionally, the battalion scout officer and selected scout troops would follow in the wake of "C" and "D" Companies. The scouts' mission was to report directly to battalion headquarters on the state of the captured positions. Scouts not detailed for this role by the scout officer would remain at battalion headquarters, from which they might be dispatched as required.¹⁸² Battalion headquarters would be connected to brigade by telephone line or runners.¹⁸³

Ordinary riflemen would carry 170 rounds of small arms ammunition,¹⁸⁴ four grenades, three sandbags, two days' rations, iron rations, one full waterbottle, and one waterproof cape. Greatcoats and large packs would not be carried into the attack. Grenadiers would carry more grenades and fewer rounds of small arms ammunition than the riflemen. One in two soldiers, excepting grenadiers, would carry a full-size trench shovel slung across his back. One man per section would carry an additional sack of 12 grenades.¹⁸⁵ Thus, the men were fully loaded for the attack, but not excessively so. Experience showed that a delicate balance had to be maintained between staying power, and the exhaustion that resulted when soldiers were overburdened with excessive loads of gear and ammunition.

¹⁸⁰Operation Order, 4th Cdn Bn, 7 October 1916, "Signals," NAC, T-10707.

¹⁸¹Operation Order, 4th Cdn Bn, 7 October 1916, "Equipment," NAC, T-10707.

¹⁸²Operation Order, 4th Cdn Bn, 7 October 1916, "Scouts," NAC, T-10707.

¹⁸³Operation Order, 4th Cdn Bn, 7 October 1916, "Communications," NAC, T-10707.

¹⁸⁴Lee Enfield rifle ammunition was also compatible with the Lewis gun.

¹⁸⁵Operation Order, 4th Cdn Bn, 7 October 1916, "Equipment," NAC, T-10707.

After a hot meal, and the final issuing of equipment, the troops moved into their assembly trenches on time for the designated zero hour of 0450 hours. The leading companies jumped off under cover of artillery fire, but the operational plan began to falter almost at once. The first source of complication was the Dyke Road, which ran from the Canadian trenches to the German trenches, but not in a perpendicular fashion (figure 14). Thus, as the advance platoons used this diagonal road as a baseline from which to maintain their direction in the darkness, the entire battalion began to veer to the extreme left, into the axis of the 3rd Battalion. This navigational error was exacerbated by the fact that the ground sloped upward less steeply on the left of the battalion's assigned frontage; the platoons naturally tended toward the more level areas. Finally, the German wire remained intact on the right end of the advance. This forced the right hand platoons to re-orient themselves toward the left. The net effect was that the battalion ended up displacing itself 350 yards to the left; it had completely missed the portion of the enemy trenches assigned to it in the operations order.¹⁸⁶

After capturing the first objective, battalion officers realized their mistake. A bombing party of unspecified size was quickly dispatched 300 yards to the right, in an effort to make contact with elements of 69th Brigade. The grenadiers succeeded in doing so, and also managed to capture 100 prisoners during their foray along the first Below Trench. Having achieved this contact, the officers conferred about how to approach the second objective. They could easily observe that the wire between the two lines was completely intact, which would render a frontal assault suicidal. They considered circumventing this wire obstacle to the northwest, but decided that covering the extra distance would consume the remaining hand grenade supply, leaving little firepower with which to consolidate the second objective. The question of whether or not to continue quickly became moot, as German grenadiers began to launch localized counterattacks

¹⁸⁶Lieutenant-Colonel Rae to G.O.C., 1st Canadian Brigade, 17 October 1916, NAC, T-10707.

during the morning. The matter of holding the first objective suddenly assumed a more immediate urgency.¹⁸⁷

By 1345 hours on 8 October, intense German artillery fire began to pound the 4th Battalion's new positions in the former German trenches. The Germans were subsequently able to deploy strong grenadier parties down the Gallwitz and Below Trenches. Gallwitz Trench ran perpendicular to Below trench, and because the Germans were counterattacking in strength directly from their second lines, they experienced little difficulty circumventing the wire that ran between the second and first lines of Below (figure 14). The Canadian blocking parties resisted these incursions as long as possible, but were soon forced back by the counterattacks. As the Canadian position was overrun, some elements of the 4th Battalion retreated with the 3rd Battalion off to the southwest, down Regina Trench. Other elements of the 4th Battalion retired down Below trench to the southeast, in the opposite direction from which the Germans had just counterattacked. Both portions of the 4th Battalion attempted to rally and regain the German line. The men on the left side of the German wedge attacked with bayonets, but were driven back. The men on the right also launched several counterattacks of their own, but by dusk their grenade supply had run out, and they had no choice but to retire to the lines of 23rd British Division. The survivors of the 4th Battalion were gathered into the original assembly trenches from which the attack had been launched. They remained there until their relief on the night of 9 October.¹⁸⁸

Three days after the abortive attack, 1st Canadian Division convened a Board of Enquiry at Bouzincourt to investigate the conduct of the 3rd and 4th Battalions. It is worth reproducing

¹⁸⁷Lieutenant-Colonel Rae to G.O.C., 1st Canadian Brigade, 17 October 1916, NAC, T-10707.

¹⁸⁸Lieutenant-Colonel Rae to G.O.C., 1st Canadian Brigade, 17 October 1916, NAC, T-10707.

the 22 questions posed by the court:

1. What was the strength by which the 3rd and 4th Battalions attacked?
2. How many officers went forward with each Assaulting Battalion?
3. What was the probable number of casualties in each Battalion before the objective was reached?
4. How many officers reached the objective?
5. What as the extent of the Objective seized and the dispositions of each Battalion in that objective?
6. What as the extent of the resistance?
7. Were many Germans captured in the German Trench?
8. How many (Canadian) men surrendered?
9. Was connection established with the troops on each flank? If so, when?
10. What preparations were made after reaching the Objective for its retention?
11. When did the enemy counter-attack? In what strength?
From where and with what results?
12. Were his counter-attacks preceded by Artillery preparation?
13. Were S.O.S. Signals used by us and was our Artillery reply satisfactory?
14. What were the reasons for the retirement of each battalion?
15. Was the order given to retire? If so by whom?
16. Were any steps taken to stop the retirement?
17. Did any of our men surrender? If so how many and where?
18. How many men of each unit got back to our original Line?
19. To what extent did the units suffer during retirement?
20. How many bombs was each man ordered to carry? In your opinion was this order obeyed?
21. What was the system of replenishing the Bomb supply?
22. In your opinion was the retirement justifiable?¹⁸⁹

The answers to some of these questions have already been discussed above, based on an examination of Rae's operation order and after-action report, but by reviewing the court reports, we can shed additional light on the events of 8 October. The most basic piece of new information available in the court reports is the initial strength of the 4th Battalion: 18 officers and about 580 other ranks. As noted above, the battalion incurred few casualties prior to reaching the first objective, and after having veered off course, was able to restore touch with the British forces on the right flank by 1000 hours; contact with 3rd Battalion was never lost.

¹⁸⁹1st Canadian Division to Brigadier-General Tuxford, 3rd Canadian Brigade, 10 October 1916, NAC, RG 9, volume 4011, folder 17, file 4.

Because it was impossible to reach the second Below Trench, the first objective was consolidated at once. The court report notes that the battalion was reorganized into four companies in the Below Trench line that it had just captured near the Quadrilateral (figure 14). Furthermore, new firesteps were built up against the rear walls of the German trenches, so that the men could fire over the parapets toward the Germans, and enemy supplies and weapons were collected and organized. Up to that point, four officers had been killed, and four were wounded, leaving 10 able-bodied officers to direct the consolidation.¹⁹⁰

Bombing duels were fought against the enemy throughout the morning as he launched small counterattacks within about 90 minutes of being forced out of the first Below Trench. These attacks grew stronger toward early afternoon, at which time the massive German bombardment commenced. It was reported that shells were landing as far back as the Canadian assembly trenches just to the north of Courcelette. The court report notes that both the 3rd and 4th Battalions attempted to launch S.O.S. signals, but in every case the signalers were killed before they could deploy the rockets. Rockets or no rockets, it would have been a forgone conclusion that the Canadian assault companies were in trouble. Thus, the Canadian artillery responded to the German barrage with some effect.¹⁹¹

The concerted enemy counterattacks originating from the north end of Below Trench, and from Gallwitz Trench, drove a permanent wedge into the 4th Battalion's frontage. This was achieved at the intersection of the two aforementioned trenches, a major landmark referred to as the Quadrilateral. Majors Bennett and Mowat led elements of the 4th Battalion down Regina Trench, away from the Quadrilateral, with the Germans at their heels. The two officers managed

¹⁹⁰Finding of the Court of Enquiry at Bouzincourt, preliminary draft, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 3, file 20.

¹⁹¹Finding of the Court of Enquiry at Bouzincourt, preliminary draft, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 3, file 20.

to form up a group of men in the shell holes next to Regina Trench and then delayed the enemy with rifle fire for a brief period. Mowat and Bennett then inspired a final bayonet charge that was promptly stopped by German grenades and machine gun fire. Mowat was killed in the midst of this last ditch effort to drive eastward, back toward the Quadrilateral in the face of overwhelming German strength. A preliminary draft of the court report states that an officer of the 3rd Battalion may have shot some 4th Battalion soldiers who refused to participate in Mowat and Bennett's charge, but this unconfirmed statement was struck from a later draft of the report.¹⁹² It is certainly possible that some men may have refused to quit the relative safety of their shell holes when Mowat ordered the bayonet charge.¹⁹³

No formal orders to withdraw were issued to these troops, nor could there have been any, since there was no way of reaching them from battalion headquarters. It is even possible that battalion headquarters was unaware of their location. Fortunately, the court recognized that all other options had been exhausted when the survivors finally withdrew to their own lines. Only about 100 men from the left hand side of the Quadrilateral managed to reach safety.¹⁹⁴

The bulk of the 4th Battalion troops found themselves on the right hand side of the wedge, moving down Below Trench toward the frontage of 69th Brigade. Unlike the troops on the other side of the wedge, these troops were able to resist the German attacks until about 1800 hours because fresh supplies of bombs were made available by the 23rd British Division. As long as bombs were available, the German counterattacks could be stopped, but once the supply dried up, the Canadians had no choice but to withdraw into the lines of the 23rd Division, under

¹⁹²Finding of the Court of Enquiry at Bouzincourt, later draft, 12 October 1916, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 17, file 4.

¹⁹³Finding of the Court of Enquiry at Bouzincourt, preliminary draft, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 3, file 20.

¹⁹⁴Finding of the Court of Enquiry at Bouzincourt, preliminary draft, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 3, file 20.

the orders of a British officer. About 120 men returned. Summing this number with those who retreated on the left side of the Quadrilateral indicates that about 220 troops of the original 580 survived the attack. It is unknown how many of the Canadian casualties were taken prisoner.¹⁹⁵

Lieutenant-Colonel Rae suggested three reasons for the battalion's inability to hold its position in Below Trench at the Quadrilateral. The primary factor relates to the improper direction of the initial advance, a mistake that delayed the capture of the first objective and cost extra grenades. This permitted the enemy some valuable time in which to consolidate his second line and prepare counterattacks. The second factor was of a logistical nature: too many grenades had been required to capture the first objective. By the time the first objective had been tentatively secured, the sun had risen, and attempts to move additional supplies of grenades forward failed with high casualties. It was simply impossible to move material to the points of furthest advance under enemy observation during the day. Rae was in the process of sending up supplies through British echelons in 69th Brigade, but this could not be achieved quickly enough. Finally, it was not feasible for the reserve company of 2nd Battalion to counterattack during the day for the same reasons that supplies could not be moved forward.¹⁹⁶

As the court determined, the preliminary Canadian barrage was partially effective, since it had suppressed the enemy well enough to facilitate the capture of the first German line. Unfortunately, the fact that much of the German wire remained intact beyond the first objective was not discovered until it was too late. Poor weather had prevented artillery and air observers from recognizing this problem during the previous day. Even with clear visibility, it was

¹⁹⁵Finding of the Court of Enquiry at Bouzincourt, preliminary draft, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 3, file 20.

¹⁹⁶Lieutenant-Colonel Rae to G.O.C., 1st Canadian Brigade, 17 October 1916, NAC, T-10707.

difficult for ground observers or patrols to clearly see the German wire beyond the first line.¹⁹⁷

Through the course of the investigation, the court learned that the 4th Battalion carried a total of 3,200 grenades into the Assembly trenches. This averages out to approximately five grenades per man. A further 3,000 grenades were already stored in the assembly trenches, although it is uncertain in what ratio these were divided between the 3rd and 4th Battalions. Assuming an even sharing, this would equal a further two to three grenades per soldier in the 4th Battalion, giving a total of approximately 8 grenades per man. Further stocks of grenades were available at dumping points, but is unlikely that many of these could be transported to the places where they were needed. As noted, additional bombs were supplied late in the day by 23rd British Division.¹⁹⁸ It does not seem possible that the men could have carried many more grenades without being overburdened. Furthermore, if the Germans had not enjoyed such easy access to the Canadian positions in Below Trench, via Gallwitz Trench, as well as the portion of Below Trench that they still held, it is possible that the grenade supply may have been sufficient.

Finally, the court noted that a large proportion of the attacking officers and men had never seen action, and that many new men had never thrown a modern Mills grenade. In the case of the 4th Battalion, the court report indicates that six of the 18 officers who went into the attack had never been in the front line, nor had 154 of the 580 other ranks.¹⁹⁹ The relevance of this statement is difficult to gauge. We must consider that virtually none of the 4th Battalion officers or men who participated in the counterattack at Second Ypres had any prior experience

¹⁹⁷Finding of the Court of Enquiry at Bouzincourt, later draft, 12 October 1916, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 17, file 4.

¹⁹⁸Finding of the Court of Enquiry at Bouzincourt, later draft, 12 October 1916, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 17, file 4.

¹⁹⁹Finding of the Court of Enquiry at Bouzincourt, preliminary draft, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 3, file 20.

of offensive action on the Western Front. Yet in that instance, the level of actual battle experience probably would not have had a significant impact. The number of men who were new to battle at Courcellette is less significant than the sum total of training that they had received since enlisting in the Army. This matter requires further investigation.

The court ultimately ruled that neither the 4th nor the 3rd Battalion was guilty of negligence:

This court finds that there was no general retirement in this action, but that the 3rd and 4th battalions were pushed back, fighting, after a very severe artillery bombardment, by sheer weight of numbers. Our lack of bombs, which it appears could not be got up in sufficient numbers, contributing to this effect.

(signed) G.S. Tuxford
Brigadier-General
President of the Court²⁰⁰

Although this statement reflected positively on both battalions, Brigadier Tuxford outlined some important lessons at the end of his report:

The principal lessons to be learned are -

- (1) The necessity of dependable patrolling.
- (2) That the getting of the Trench does not mean the getting of the Objective. We must not only clear the enemy out of the Trenches but we must control *all his approaches to it*. (emphasis added)
- (3) The making of the supply of bombs sufficient, as far as it is humanly possible to do.
- (4) The development of qualities of leadership and resolution in officers.
- (5) When drafts come to this country they should be already trained.²⁰¹

²⁰⁰Finding of the Court of Enquiry at Bouzincourt, preliminary draft, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 3, file 20.

²⁰¹Finding of the Court of Enquiry at Bouzincourt, later draft, 12 October 1916, NAC, RG 9, volume 4044, folder 17, file 4.

Brigadier Tuxford's list of lessons serves as a useful means of summarizing the operational dilemma as it existed for Commonwealth forces at the conclusion of Somme Offensive. The first point is made in reference to the problem of barbed wire entanglements. The court determined that routine infantry patrols should have observed the state of the enemy's wire beyond the front lines. This does not seem completely reasonable, since the secondary rows of wire would have been well beyond the reach of a patrol as long as the enemy occupied his first line. Because patrols were generally carried out at night, effective observation beyond the first line would have been practically impossible. In fact, lessons number one and two stem implicitly from the problem that the German defences were very deep. Reconnoitering the first line was of little use if there were two more lines behind it. With the Germans holding the high ground at Courcellette-Le Sars, observation from a distance was also difficult. Similarly, capturing the first line was a risky venture if the enemy maintained control of communications trenches running perpendicular to it, as in the case of Gallwitz Trench (figure 14).

Lesson number three is not really a lesson at all. Rather, it refers to a logistical dilemma of incredible proportions. While assault troops could capture a trench in a night attack, they could not easily be re-supplied during the following day. Thus, an attack was not really sustainable unless the initial blow was so strong as to smash all echelons of the enemy's line, which was unlikely, considering the depth of the German defences. Paradoxically, the further the penetration, the more difficult it would be to move supplies to front, and the wounded to the rear.

Lessons four and five are much greater in scope, and go beyond the tactical and operational focus of this study. Yet a more complete analysis of the 4th Battalion may show that incoming drafts of troops were not receiving adequate training prior to joining the battalion. The dire need for replacements by the summer of 1916 would easily account for this predicament. The question of leadership in junior officers is equally troubling, and Tuxford's reference to this issue reminds us of the apparent leadership crisis experienced by the battalion earlier in 1916.

But again, firm conclusions can only be drawn from a much more detailed study of the junior leaders who passed through the 4th Battalion.

* * *

The 4th Battalion left the Somme and headed north. It would serve four more days in the line up to the end of October, plus two weeks during November near Gouy Servins, not far to the west of a key terrain feature called Vimy Ridge. Half of December was spent in the line. From late October through Christmas, new officers and men trickled into the battalion to make up for the heavy losses at Courcellette.²⁰² There would be no more large-scale offensive actions for the battalion after 8 October, but the men were still at war. Patrols ventured into no-man's-land after dark on a regular basis to examine the enemy's wire, while snipers were busy during the day. On one November day, a battalion sniper accounted for two Germans who were foolish enough to show themselves above their parapet.²⁰³ Men from the 4th Battalion also died during this relative quiet period, as they had during the last few months of 1915. A week before Christmas the battalion moved to Le Comte for a well-deserved, but all too short period of "rest." The new year would bring a massive new operation for the Canadian Corps. In the meantime the survivors of 1916 trained and drilled and took a few hours to eat Christmas dinner in their billets.

²⁰²War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 9 October-31 December 1916, NAC, T-10707.

²⁰³War Diary, 4th Cdn Bn, 12-14 November 1916, NAC, T-10707.

Conclusion

The outbreak of a general European war in August 1914 did not come as a great surprise to many people at the time. As soldiers fired the first shots, it appeared that this war would be short, like the others that had occurred during the preceding half century. Although soldiers were already equipped with modern small arms and machine guns in 1914, their uniforms and general appearance did not differ greatly from that with which Europeans were familiar. The Germans marched in columns of field grey while the French were notable for their bright red pantaloons. Everything was as it should be. In this context, Canada mobilized its first division of troops for overseas service. The members of peacetime militia regiments headed to Valcartier, where they were organized into new battalions, and shipped overseas with great urgency. The 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion was born of this rapid mobilization. Few of these men from Brantford, Hamilton, St. Catharines, Milton, Barrie or any number of central Ontario towns and cities, could have imagined that more than half of them would be dead or seriously injured within eight months time.

Canadian military historiography is generally critical of the manner in which Canadian troops have been committed to international conflicts since 1899. While the Canadian soldiers of the first contingent did not have much time to train prior to their introduction to the Western Front in February and March 1915, the evidence suggests that they were as well prepared for war as most other soldiers of various nationalities who found themselves on the battlefield during the early stages of the war. When the 4th Battalion received its orders to counterattack Mauser Ridge during the night of 22-23 April 1915 a generally chaotic atmosphere dominated the entire Allied front. Yet the battalion marched for several kilometres from its reserve position to its start line, and launched the attack as ordered. The evidence suggests that the men advanced according to the tactical doctrine of the period. Although at least 50 percent of the men were killed or wounded during the attack, there is little more that the battalion could have done to prevent these

losses, other than to refuse the order to advance. This, of course, would have been unthinkable in 1915, although other armies would confront mutinous soldiers during the next few years. Thus, Lieutenant-Colonel Birchall attacked with his men, and he died with them. This was not the first time that a battalion was destroyed in a matter of hours during the Great War, and certainly would not be the last. When the day was finished, the survivors were certain that they had done their duty, and the folks at home supported them.

The loss of Birchall must have been a blow to battalion morale, but within two weeks, the unit was back up to strength once again. For the remainder of the 1915, the battalion would not be subjected to anything so devastating as the battle of Second Ypres, although some of its men would fall in many of the small villages and woods that have come to be so strongly associated with the Great War. A few soldiers lie in a tiny cemetery deep in Ploegsteert Wood, or "Plug Street Wood," as the British and Commonwealth troops used to call it. Many other 4th Battalion soldiers lie individually, or alongside a few of their fellows in the dozens of Commonwealth War Graves Cemeteries that dot the landscape in Belgian Flanders. It appears that few of those who were killed at Mauser Ridge have a known grave. The three years of shelling and combat that followed in Ypres Salient obliterated their physical remains. Today some of their names are inscribed on the Menin Gate, along with thousands of other Commonwealth troops who have no known resting place.

1916 was a new year, and commanders on both sides hoped for new opportunities to end the war. Early in the year the Germans launched their protracted siege against the fortress city of Verdun. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers would fall in this massive series of operations, but little was ultimately resolved by the end of the year. Meanwhile, further to the north, Haig launched his offensive on the Somme. Some territorial gains were made, but the cost was excruciatingly high. As the dramas of Verdun and the Somme began to play out, the 4th Battalion was once again in action in the Ypres Salient. As in the previous year, the Germans

had launched a devastating attack against the salient, and the 4th Battalion was one of the units ordered forward to counterattack the enemy on Observatory Ridge, just north of Mount Sorrel. The two companies of the 4th Battalion that participated in the attack reached their objectives, but the situation was extremely confused, and casualties were heavy. Regardless of the week, month or year, death and confusion were constant by-products of operations on the Western Front.

Less than one month after the 4th Battalion's counterattack at Observatory Ridge, it participated in its first truly controversial action. The night bombing raid of 8-9 July was a complete, and perhaps foreseeable failure. Thirty minutes prior to zero hour, Lieutenant-Colonel (then Major) Rae was made fully aware that the German wire remained largely uncut by preliminary artillery fire, yet he decided to let the operation proceed according to plan. There is some evidence that Rae may have been suffering from ill-health, although it possible that he simply exercised poor judgement in that particular instance. Whatever the case may have been, the raid of 8-9 July demonstrates how the best laid plan can go awry.

The 4th Battalion was introduced to the Somme front two months later, where it would fight its last battles of 1916. The attack north of Courcellette, and the subsequent fighting withdrawal to the left and right of the Quadrilateral illustrate how navigational errors, logistical problems, and inexperience might influence the outcome of an operation. By the end of the year it must have been painfully obvious to many contemporary observers that there was to be no immediate way in which to end the war. The Germans had failed to break through at Verdun, but the French Army was reduced to a skeleton of its former self by the end of the year. Meanwhile, the outcome of the Somme offensive showed that deep German defences could not easily be overcome in a single attack. The 4th Battalion could capture a forward trench, but was unable to hold it, or penetrate far enough into German lines to open a breach. The efficacy of frontal assaults on the Western Front had been brought into serious question, but few other alternatives

existed on a battlefield where there were no flanks to exploit. 1917 would bring with it some notable successes for the 4th Battalion, and the Canadian Corps as a whole, but attrition would still rule on the battlefield during 1917 and 1918.

It is difficult to formulate any sweeping generalizations based on the record of the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion from its hasty formation in 1914 through to closing of the Somme offensives in the autumn of 1916; the very complexity of the battalion's experiences almost nullifies any attempt to generalize. Although the "Mad Fourth" performed capably throughout the first half of the war, it does not appear to have been particularly special in any way. Canadian military historians have argued that the experience of the Canadian Corps in the Great War is best defined by an upwardly sloping learning curve. The evidence presented in this study neither reinforces nor refutes the "learning curve" theory. After all, relatively few soldiers who served in the battalion lived long enough to fight two major consecutive battles. In order to reach more firm conclusions, this preliminary study must be carried through to the second half of the war.

The story of the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion to the autumn of 1916 does illustrate the complexity of military operations at the battalion level on the Western Front. Only a very small number of Canadian battalion histories have been written. This is unfortunate, for the infantry battalions of the Canadian Corps were the figurative nuts and bolts of Canada's contribution to the First World War. There is little point to studies of divisions, corps, armies, and senior commanders if we pay no attention to what was happening at the lowest operational echelons in the front lines. This study serves as a foundation for future micro-level research endeavours in the field of Canadian operations in the Great War.

* * *

There has been a second impetus for this study, one that is quite divorced from gaps in the historiography and the minutiae of military operational studies. This more fundamental

purpose evolves from the early efforts of Captain Gibson, the bumbling battalion paymaster and would-be historian. Although Gibson was sometimes an object of fun for the platoon and company commanders of the 4th Battalion who fought and died on the Western Front, he appreciated the importance of recording the battalion's story. We may never know why he did not complete his battalion history, but Gibson did succeed in bringing the matter to my attention, albeit three-quarters of a century after the fact. Of the 5,563 officers and men who passed through the battalion between its formation in August 1914 and its demobilization in April 1919, 1,141 were killed and 3,432 were wounded. This translates to a casualty rate of 82.2 percent.²⁰⁴ If for no other reason, the unfortunate fate of these individuals warrants the writing of a complete battalion history. The survivors of the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion have also passed on by now. After returning home, these unassuming men took up careers in every walk of life. They resumed their roles as husbands, fathers, uncles, neighbours and ordinary citizens. It is a shame that none of these men lived to witness the publication of their battalion's history.

The legacy of the Great War has meant different things to different people during the past eight decades. In the Canadian context, the war has been a source of pride and anguish. But the memory of the conflict is subject to change, and this erratic trend reinforces the need for careful operational studies based on a solid foundation of primary evidence. I was alarmed during a recent visit to the newly renovated In Flanders Fields Museum at Ypres. The museum is housed in the walls of the magnificently reconstructed Cloth Hall, one of the great marvels of gothic architecture. This is the same Cloth Hall that was reduced to rubble by German artillery as early as December 1914. While the museum adequately conveys the horrors of the Western Front, it completely fails to explain why the war was fought. Unlike the many small "traditional" museums that dot the landscape of the old Western Front, the In Flanders Field Museum does not

²⁰⁴From a chart in Gibson: the separate casualty rates for officers and other ranks were 74.8 percent and 82.6 percent respectively.

display mannequins dressed in British, German, French, or Belgian uniforms and kit. Rather, the soldier figures on display in the Cloth Hall are monochrome sculptures whose nationalities are difficult to determine even for those visitors who might be experts on military dress. The figures share their humanity and a sense of sorrow; they are all the same.

In some sense, the exhibits accurately reflect the feelings of those who fought and died on the Western Front. But the museum is also incomplete and ahistorical, for it depicts the enemy as some sort of metaphysical disease called war. As Terry Copp has pointed out, in the unified Europe of 2001, young Belgians and Germans do not care to explore the territorial appetite of Imperial Germany. Instead, the war is explained in the same terms as a natural disaster, as if it were beyond anyone's control. The soldiers of the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion who fought the Kaiser's Army at Second Ypres or Observatory Ridge or Courcellette suffered incredibly, and mourned their friends and neighbours who had been felled by bullets, mortar bombs, and artillery shells. But these soldiers of Canada had not ventured all the way to France and Belgium to combat an invisible plague; they had come to repel German invaders who had conquered considerable portions of both nations. In the case of Belgium, almost the entire country had fallen to the Germans. This intolerable state of affairs is conveniently ignored by the In Flanders Fields Museum.

If the veterans of the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion could visit Ypres today, they might be surprised to find the Cloth Hall reconstructed to its original splendour, but they would be more shocked by the In Flanders Fields Museum. It would be equally interesting to witness their reactions to other parts of the Western Front where the Mad Fourth had seen action. North of Ypres, astride the Pilckem Road is the piece of gently sloping ground upon which the battalion launched its first attack and lost 50 percent of its officers and men. Corn grows on that field today, and were it not for the small cemeteries nearby, the casual traveller would never know what happened in that same cornfield on the morning of 23 April 1915. There is slightly more

evidence of past battles along Observatory Ridge; cemeteries, monuments, and old trenches are visible reminders of the fighting, but from a distance, the ridge looks much like any other rural area in Belgium or even central Ontario. The trenches that witnessed such brutal fighting north of Courcellette in the autumn of 1916 were long ago filled in, and the area is once again devoted to agriculture. The Regina Trench Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery is situated nearby, and so is an inconspicuous, cube-shaped Canadian monument, but otherwise one would never know that the small villages in the region once teemed with Canadians. It is doubtful that this state of affairs will change as the First World War fades more distantly into the past and the world faces new and dangerous challenges in the twenty-first century.

This operational study neither tells the entire story of the 4th Battalion's war, nor does it solve any of the major historiographical questions of the First World War. But it has attempted to achieve three vital objectives. In the first place, it will serve as reminder of the complexity involved in First World War operations at the battalion level, a fact that has been too often ignored in other studies that focus on higher echelons of command. Second, the project serves as a foundation for a more complete account of the 4th Battalion's experience from 1914 right through to its demobilization in 1919. And finally, the paper is intended to rekindle interest in Canadian exploits on the Western Front. We should not forget that many of the sleepy villages in Northern France and Flanders once overflowed with Canadian soldiers. The First World War ended more than 80 years ago, but the passage of time should not allow it to be dismissed as an irrelevant episode in Canada's distant past.

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