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Byng's and Currie's Commanders: A Still Untold Story of the Canadian Corps

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Byng's and Currie's Commanders A Still Untold Story of the Canadian Corps

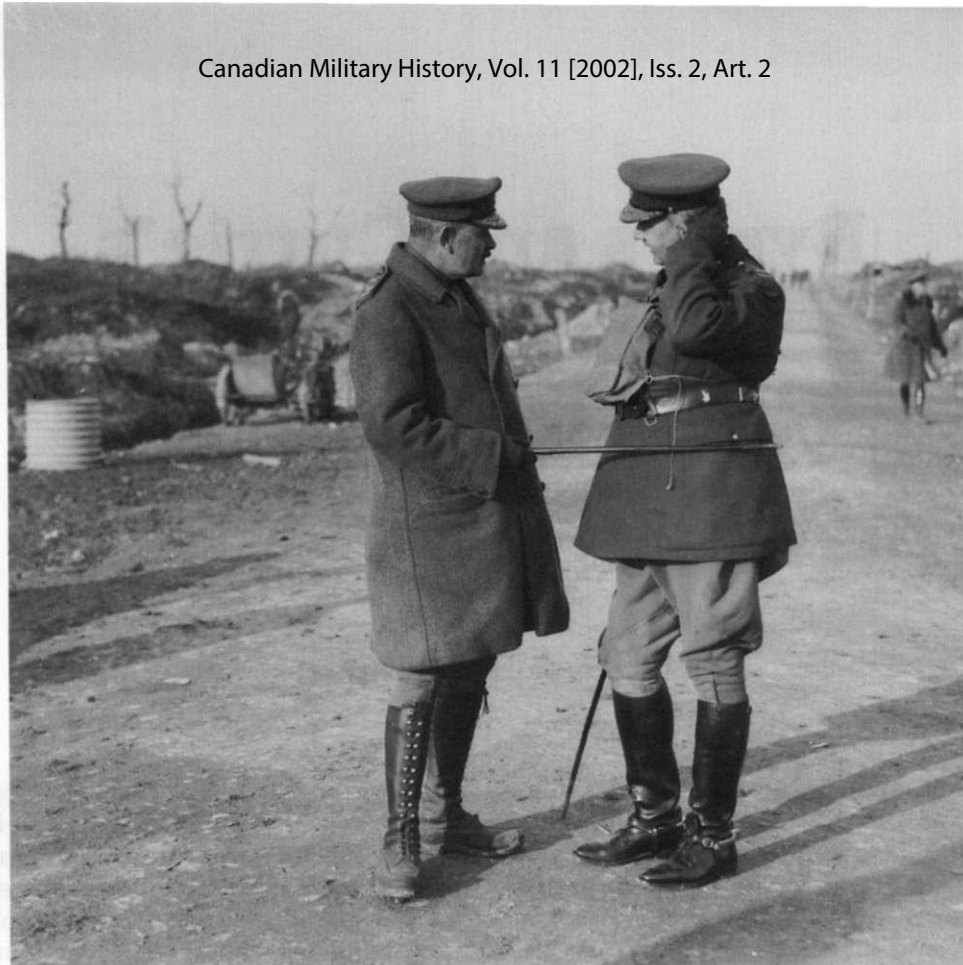
Patrick H. Brennan

In 1915, the Canadian Corps was little more than a rabble of enthusiastic amateurs. Yet by 1917-18, it had become an accomplished professional fighting force, one characterized by Denis Winter as "much the most effective unit in the BEF" and by Shane Schreiber as "the shock army of the British Empire."¹ While Canadian military historians have studied this evolution extensively few have examined the decisive element in the transformation - the development of a cadre of proficient senior combat officers. No one questions Currie's status as Canada's best fighting general, but of the supporting team he and his predecessor, General Byng, assembled we know precious little. Who, then, were the men commanding the Corps' four divisions, 12 infantry brigades and supporting machine gun and artillery units - the senior officers whose abilities as trainers and fighters were integral to the CEF's battlefield success?

From Flanders to Vimy these mainly Canadian-born, militia-trained officers learned how to command by commanding. Their apprenticeship taught them that their militia training hardly prepared them for the war in which they were now engaged, and that the militia's patronage-ridden system of promotion in a fighting army got men killed. Fighting a modern war demanded that all ranks be properly trained and equipped professionals. From hard lessons they developed the "Canadian way of war" characterized by meticulous planning, training and rehearsal, artillery-infantry co-ordination, and innovative tactics. Two factors proved essential to this

transformation, and contributed mightily to the Canadian army's growing success on the Western Front. The first was the establishment of the merit principal in promotion at the senior level, a process underway by 1916 and confirmed by Sam Hughes' removal in November, 1916. In theory at least, Hughes' firing cleared the path for Canada's "best and brightest" officers to take command of the nation's army. The second was the institutionalization and standardization of learning within the army - a policy implemented by Byng and expanded by Currie in which the battalion, brigade and divisional commanders played a central and indispensable role. Professionalization of the senior officer corps was thus a crucial step in the transformation of the CEF into a first-rate fighting force.²

Military historians have largely inferred what is known about the men who commanded the Corps' infantry divisions and brigades and specialized supporting arms. Good armies have good commanders; from Vimy Ridge onward the Canadian Corps was very good, *Ipso facto*, our commanders must have been very good. But our knowledge of these individuals extends little beyond this generalization. Jack Granatstein concluded in *The Generals*, his study of Canada's Second World War commanders, that the Hundred Days "demonstrated...Canadian generals were the peers of those in any country."³ A.M.J. Hyatt, Currie's biographer, has more cautiously asserted that while "a description of Canadian generals during the First World War is hardly a tale of great captains, one could argue that the quality of generalship among Canadians



General Sir Julien Byng talking to Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie, February 1918.

In France was very high."⁴ Why have Byng's and Currie's commanders, with rare exceptions, not been studied? Perhaps, as Arthur Lower concluded, Canadians "became intensely proud of their fighting men, though characteristically they took little interest in their generals."⁵ Unfortunately, this disinterest has also extended to Canada's military historians.⁶

Who were the combat officers of general rank who served under Byng and Currie during the period from late May 1916 through the end of the war? This study includes only those who held their appointments for an extended period - at least two months - with those whose tenures were terminated by the end of hostilities naturally excepted. Of these 48 officers, seven were British regulars, leaving 41 members of the CEF.⁷

Drawing on the personnel records of these individuals, one can draw several useful generalizations.⁸ Most - 74 percent - were Canadian-born, a notably higher proportion than was found among the ranks (generally accepted at only slightly more than 50 percent) and even among battalion commanders where the figure was 65 percent.⁹ At the time of enlistment, they were almost equally split between Central

Canada and the West: eleven lived in Ontario, nine in Quebec, seven in British Columbia, four in Manitoba, three each in Alberta and Saskatchewan, and one in Nova Scotia.¹⁰ Their average year of birth was 1873, and for those serving at war's end, when the GOC Heavy Artillery and six of the 12 infantry brigadiers were in their thirties, their average age was 42. Only three were francophones, and one of those - Brutinel - was a French national. As for religion, 62 percent were Anglicans, 21 percent Presbyterians, with Odium the lone Methodist. Only two of the anglophones - Elmsley and A.H. Macdonell - were Roman Catholic.¹¹

All of them had prewar military experience, though it had been obtained in a variety of ways: nine were Canadian regulars at the war's outbreak, two had once served in the British army and another in the French, while the remaining 27 had served in the Canadian militia. A dozen had South African War experience, and 22 of the 27 from the infantry commanded a battalion at the front.

Their prewar careers confirm that most were solidly ensconced in the middle class with careers in the military, business or the professions. Apart from the nine serving in the

regular forces (Burstall, Elmsley, Ketchen, MacBrien, the two Macdonells, Panet, Thacker and Williams), a further two listed their occupation as "soldier" (Bell and Hilliam). Professional occupations accounted for a further dozen, including seven lawyers (John Clark, Embury, Griesbach, Hill, McLaren, Ormond and Alexander Ross), four engineers (Brutinel, Garnet Hughes, McNaughton and Tremblay), and one dentist (Stewart). Only two - Draper and Dyer - listed their occupations as farmers. Most of the remainder were in business and related activities: three were merchants (Rennie, Turner and Tuxford), McCuaig was a stock broker, while Arthur Currie, Dodds, and Odium were in real estate and insurance. King was in manufacturing, as was Loomis who was also a building contractor. John Ross was a miller. There was one senior civil servant (W. Hughes, a prison inspector), one newspaper publisher (Watson), one journalist (Odium's other career), a "secretary" (Mitchell), and an "agent" (Robert Clark).

They were also a homogeneous group in another way - those who got to France generally stayed there. Tenure of command was pronounced among senior officers during the 29 month long Byng-Currie regime. At the end of May 1916, Byng inherited 22 senior commanders: four divisional commanders, 12 infantry brigadiers, three divisional artillery commanders,¹² GOCs Royal Artillery (GOCRA) and Heavy Artillery (GOCHA) and a Brigadier-General, General Staff. Of these, Mercer was promptly killed and Williams taken prisoner in the same action, necessitating Lipsett's promotion to divisional command, Loomis's switch to replace Lipsett (and Odium's promotion from battalion to replace Loomis), and Elmsley's promotion from command of a cavalry regiment to replace Williams. Turner's replacement by Burstall as OC 2nd Division necessitated Morrison's promotion to GOCRA, and Panet's promotion to replace Morrison. Only four of the remaining senior commanders Byng inherited were replaced during the ensuing twelve months, all of them, including Sam Hughes' brother and son, for reasons which to varying degrees related to performance. Of 22 officers, 15 were still there in one capacity or another when Byng left the Corps.

Of the 25 senior commanders Currie inherited in June 1917 (including Currie's own replacement as OC the 1st Division, A.C. Macdonell),¹³ Thirteen were still there at the armistice 17 months later. Of those Currie replaced, four were British or ex-British regulars who moved back to the British army and another - Bell - had been wounded.¹⁴ From the remainder of that initial cadre, Loomis replaced Lipsett as OC 3rd Division while Rennie, A.H. Macdonell, Elmsley, McLaren and Hill were replaced as Brigadiers chiefly (though in Macdonell's case, certainly not solely) because they had worn out. The removal of Ketchen and Mitchell was dictated by performance.¹⁵

Most striking is not the number of replacements but the number who continued to soldier on efficiently. Including Currie himself, seven officers served the full period, another seven served from two years to 28 months, while seven more served between 18 and 23 months. From the middle of 1916 onward, only a relative handful - maybe six - of the 42 Canadian officers seem to have been replaced for "deficient performance" without at least the extenuating circumstance of exhausting service at the front.¹⁶ Another six fell into the latter category, several of them after a long period of exemplary service.¹⁷

Byng and Currie's commanders were a self-confident group who had grown accustomed to leading and winning, important qualities in successful combat officers. A significant number had been with the army from the start at "Bloody Ypres" - seven future divisional commanders, eight infantry brigadiers, a GOCRA and GOCHA and three divisional artillery commanders.¹⁸ Some were promoted by virtue of Sam Hughes' patronage, most by virtue of merit, and not a few by virtue of both. Socio-economic profiles and tenures in command tell us some things about these men but explain little about how they performed individually, the level at which our understanding of them remains so deficient. A brief examination of the careers of four of these officers - William Griesbach, Frederick Loomis, Alex Ross and David Watson - confirms the value of more thorough studies.

William "Billy" Griesbach was born in 1878 in the prairie hamlet of Qu'Appelle in what is now Saskatchewan, the son of a North West



Brigadier-General William "Billy" Griesbach (right) with Brigadier-General H.M. Dyer.

Byng approved his promotion to command the 1st Brigade in February 1917.²⁰

Little direct information survives on how Griesbach's men viewed their commander. He seems to have been respected rather than "loved," at least in the way Macdonell was "loved" by his men. Griesbach was sharp and brusque, a strict but fair disciplinarian, and a stickler for details. Certainly he was as demanding of himself as he was of his men. Despite presenting a rather intimidating demeanor to subordinates, he went out of his way to listen to them, and he seems to have been an excellent teacher. Manifestly brave, he did not shirk from putting himself in harm's way, something his officers and men must have admired.

Griesbach believed that if his men experienced success, they would believe in themselves, and their morale and preparation for combat became high priorities. No where was this attribute more in evidence than in his tireless preparation for the transition to semi-open and open warfare the Corps anticipated in 1918. "No man [would be allowed to get back to Canada and say that he had a good idea or suggestion upon any subject connected with the war and that he could not get it considered by a higher authority," he liked to remind his officers.²¹ Even though Griesbach wryly acknowledged that "most officers behave much better in actual warfare than they do in manoeuvres, he monitored his battalion training exercises with a critical eye. Mistakes were opportunities for learning - ruthlessly exposed but constructively discussed. He had long believed in allowing his battalion commanders some leeway in planning and executing their attacks. Open warfare, he knew, would make still greater demands on their initiative. Consequently he designed exercises to encourage initiative and adaptability at all levels of command. After two and a half years of the hardest experience, Griesbach had learned much, and his ideas on how to master the battlefield were crystallizing. Dissecting one disappointing training exercise, he reminded the two participating battalion commanders that:

The essence of success in the attack is to bring a superior number of troops in on a point where the enemy is weak and absolutely assure success

Mounted Police officer and former British army regular. The young Griesbach saw action in South Africa as a trooper with the 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles (CMR), subsequently serving in the militia in Edmonton where he pursued a successful career in law and politics. Griesbach undoubtedly used his militia involvement to make useful political and professional contacts, as did most of his peers, but he was also noted as one who took his avocation very seriously. Griesbach went overseas with the first contingent as commanding officer of the cavalry, only to be asked by his friend Sam Hughes to return to Canada and raise an infantry battalion. Griesbach agreed reluctantly, on the minister's promise that the 49th would serve in the line and not be broken up as reinforcements.¹⁹

Griesbach and his men found themselves in the Ypres salient in mid-October 1915, and the "Forty-Niners" saw their first heavy action in the crushing German attack at Mount Sorrel in June 1916. Though badly mauled, the unit helped blunt the enemy advance. The confused and bloody fighting at Kenora Trench on the Somme saw the 49th chewed up a second time, but both his brigadier, Archie "Batty Mac" Macdonell and divisional commander, Louis Lipsett, had seen enough to recommend Griesbach for a brigade command. Despite Currie's initial reluctance,

at that point. In a task of this sort swiftness and decision is [sic] necessary... Commanders must learn to appreciate situations. They must learn to deliver a real punch based upon a sound conception.²²

In an army where the abler commanders were intent on learning how to apply technological firepower to the battlefield, Griesbach was especially noteworthy. His memoranda to Macdonell and Corps during 1918 are full of recommendations on how best to organize the principal elements of the attack - field artillery, machine guns and tanks - in light of the rapidly evolving battlefield conditions that characterized the Last Hundred Days.²³

Griesbach's greatest tactical stroke came in the 1st Brigade's attack on the Vise-en-Artois Switch on the early morning of 30 August 1918, part of the preliminaries to the Drocourt-Queant attack. The plan was principally Griesbach's own design - he had laboured throughout the previous day to draw up three versions, finally settling on the more risky but promising option and then winning the approval of Macdonell and his staff. Macdonell was right to call it "bold."²⁴ In a sort of long left-hook, Griesbach's infantry pushed north behind an ingenious artillery barrage expertly thrown together by Thacker that crossed the face of the D-Q Line to the east to take the Switch in the flank. Heavy casualties were inflicted on the enemy, all for the loss of fewer than 700 of his men.

But what the official history describes as a "skillfully planned operation carried out with daring" almost came unstuck.²⁵ Many of his infantry had become disoriented by the odd axis of attack, parallel to the main enemy defensive position. Failing to face east once the Switch had been taken left the flank open to a strong enemy counterattack which, in due course, the Germans provided. Only the intervention of the 2nd Battalion's commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Lome McLaughlin, pistol drawn with purpose, rallied panicking troops at the point where the Germans almost broke through. Griesbach's decisive action to send forward his reserve battalion stabilized the situation.

Macdonell was effusive in his praise of the operation, and attributed the success to his companies' and platoons' mastery of open warfare tactics. The commanding officer of the

1st Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel Albert Sparling, maintained that "it was only from previous training and initiative on the part of all ranks that the situation was grasped and the attack pressed forward so successfully..." while Griesbach concluded that "the brigade benefited tremendously by the training in open warfare that it received... during the months of May and June last... and the attack methods there taught were practiced with success."²⁶

Griesbach became a successful commander for several reasons. Never satisfied, his observant after-battle reports started with a critique of his own plan, then proceeded to highlight specific deficiencies revealed in the Corps' capabilities. There was much that was typically "Canadian" of Griesbach. Like so many of them, he applied his talents and self-confidence earned from a successful civilian profession to the profession of war. Thrown into combat command with minimal preparation, Griesbach made his share of mistakes in 1916 but he survived them. He readily acknowledged the benefits of being mentored by a talented senior - Macdonell - under whose immediate command he served for all but six of his 37 months at the front.

Griesbach was a successful commander because he could study war and carefully incorporate what he learned. In an army that institutionalized, then universalized what it had learned, officers like Griesbach made a valuable contribution and naturally found their way to the top. Finally, Griesbach worked well on the battlefield: "Courageous, resolute,... full of daring and resourcefulness," in the words of the admiring Macdonell, possessed of a "well-balanced and analytical mind..." and "the quickest officer that I have ever had anything to do with to grasp the tactical advantages or disadvantages of a given situation...."²⁷

Rather less is known about the career of Frederick Oscar William Loomis. He was born in Sherbrooke in the Eastern Townships in 1870. By the outbreak of the war, he had established a thriving manufacturing and contracting business in Montreal, where he also served in the militia. In the fall of 1914, Loomis went overseas as commander of the 13th Battalion that he handled capably in the chaos of 2nd Ypres. Loomis was appointed temporary

commander of the 7th Brigade in March 1916, replacing A.C. Macdonell who was ill. He moved to the 11th Brigade for two months, and finally to the 2nd Brigade - an all-Western Canadian unit - in early July as Lipsett's replacement. There, with the exception of three months' compassionate leave to Canada in early 1918, he remained in command until early September 1918. Currie thought him one of his ablest brigadiers, commenting once that "brigadiers like him do not grow on gooseberry bushes [and] I would not lose him for the world...."²⁸

During his tenure with the 2nd, Loomis was involved in several bitter engagements. His troops spearheaded the last Canadian attack at Passchendaele, on 10 November 1917 where the survivors had to hold on to their captured positions against a ferocious German counter-bombardment. An Australian noted grimly of their situation: "If the Canadians can hold on, they are wonderful troops."²⁹ Hold on they did, surely a compliment to their tenacity, but also to their commander's abilities to train and lead them.

The highlight of Loomis's war came in early September 1918, when a reluctant Major-General Lipsett was transferred to the British army.³⁰ Earlier in the year, Currie had identified

five of his brigadiers suitable for divisional command.³¹ As a successful fighting officer almost continuously since the spring of 1915, Loomis was Currie's choice to command the 2nd Division. It was a singular honour. A "Canadianization" policy meant that Canadian officers could only be promoted within the four-division Corps. The highest command most Canadian infantry officers could hope for was a brigade. The rapid collapse of the German army allowed Loomis to exercise his command in only one major engagement, but the thrust across the Canal du Nord in late September involved some very heavy fighting by his division. His war ended in Mons, where he can be seen, but is rarely identified, among the senior Canadian officers taking part in the ceremonies marking the liberation of the town on 11 November 1918.

In 1914, Alexander Ross was practising law in Regina. The Scottish immigrant was then 34 years old. Ross did not enlist in the first contingent on the advice of his militia commander, J.F.L. Embury, who hoped his unit would be sent overseas intact. When Ottawa authorized a second contingent, Embury was appointed commanding officer of the Saskatchewan contribution, the 28th Battalion, and Ross joined as a company commander. By the time he reached France in the fall of 1915,



Brigadier F.O.W. Loomis (middle row, centre) with his HQ staff, 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade, April 1918:

Front row, l. to r.- Major R.H. Winslow. Captains H.D. Ives, R.J. Paget.

Centre row - Lieutenants S.C. Graham, Major J.P. Mackenzie, Loomis, Captains E.H.L. Johnston, E.L. Brown.

Rear row - Lieutenant H.W. Dawson, Captain Grant and Lieutenant M. de Bishop.

NAC PA 2636



▼NAC PA 3524 ▲NAC PA 4144

Above: General Sir Arthur Currie taking the salute in the Grand Place in Mons during the march past. General Loomis is the 5th figure to the right of Currie, in front of the other officers. Major-General E.W.B. Morrison, commander of Canadian Corps artillery is to the left of Loomis and Brigadier G.J. Farnar, DA&QMG is to the right. 11 November 1918.

Right: Brigadier-General Alexander Ross.

he had been promoted second-in-command with the rank of Major. The 28th underwent its "baptism of fire" at St. Eloi in the spring of 1916, a chaotic battle which Ross later remembered as "discouraging." Many officers were replaced after St. Eloi, though not enough to satisfy Ross. On the Somme, the 28th was involved in very heavy and costly fighting. Early on, Embury, who was already suffering from "the strain of duties," was wounded and had to be replaced. Byng tabbed Ross to take over.

It proved quite an apprenticeship, but, like Griesbach, Ross survived. He felt the Canadians were finally beginning to learn some valuable lessons which would save infantrymen's lives, starting with "proper artillery support..., attacking on a wider front with fewer men in the front [line] and more in support and, of course, [all with] the general knowledge of what they were to do, and... preparation down to the very last detail...."³² Byng organized meetings of divisional, brigade and battalion commanders and other officers where the hard-earned lessons of the Somme and new tactical ideas were frankly discussed. As Ross vividly remembered 47 years later, "He [Byng] revolutionized a lot of our organization and made it much more sensible...



[and] he gave me new ideas, things that appealed to my common sense."³³ Byng also was willing to listen to Canadian officers who, with their basically civilian mindsets, were more open to learning and had less to forget.

Ross was an able pragmatist, representing the Canadian militia officer at his best. He joked that he ran his battalion like he ran his law office in Regina, but few could argue with the results. Vital in an army that almost always attacked, Ross clearly had a knack for maintaining esprit de corps among his veterans while rapidly integrating inexperienced reinforcements. He was keen on promotion from the ranks as well, preferring that men "who had learned in the field" train and lead. In battle, Ross proved his coolness under fire, and he reveled in the independence he enjoyed as a battalion commander. "The higher echelons had to tell you what their plan was but you had to carry it out and the less they interfered the better..." he later emphasized. "It was left to you largely as to how you were going to do it."³⁴

Ross was on the list of 12 officers Currie was considering for promotion to brigadier in 1918.³⁵ His opportunity came during the Drocourt-Queant attack when Bell was wounded and the Corps commander picked him to take

over the 6th Brigade, a post he held until the armistice. Ross's service as a brigadier was brief, but it points out that a pool of talented officers was available when the men were required - eight were promoted to brigade commands in 1918. It also vindicates the struggles of Byng, Currie and others to ensure merit ruled promotion and to establish the organized doctrine of preparation and attack in the CEF that ensured such command transitions would be relatively seamless.

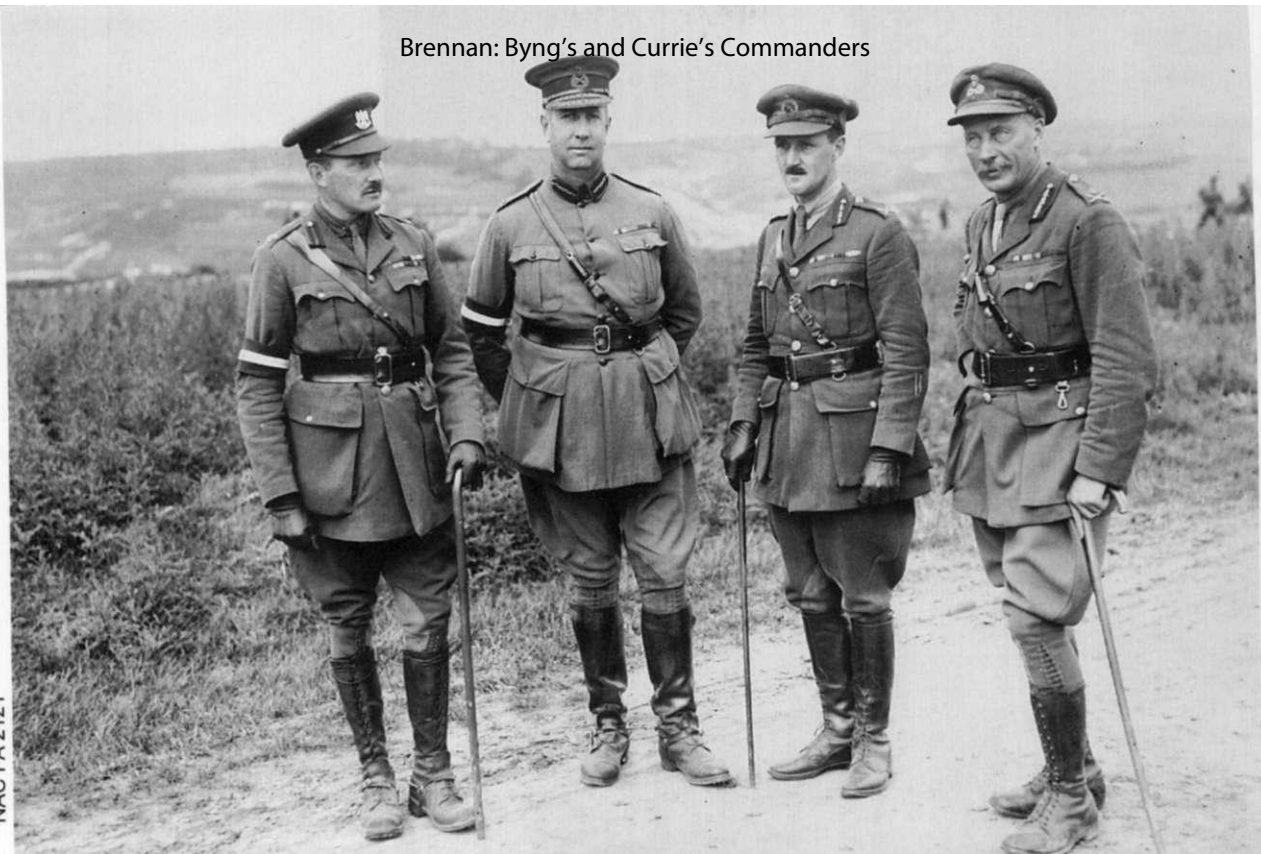
David Watson, the 4th Division's only commander, was a rather more controversial figure. Watson was a self-made man who became a wealthy Quebec City newspaper publisher with a "successful" militia career. He was also deeply involved in Conservative party politics, and much admired by Sam Hughes. On cursory examination, Watson's career seems to fit the mould of the successful militia officer who enlisted in 1914 and led a battalion (the 2nd) overseas. He fought at Second Ypres with some competence and was soon promoted to command a brigade (the 5th). In May 1916, he received the plumb job - command of the newly-formed 4th Division. Watson is most remembered as one of two wealthy officers (Odium was the other) who covered Sir Arthur Currie's bad debts and thus saved Canada's greatest military chief from public embarrassment and possible dismissal in 1917.³⁶ However, upon closer examination, Watson's military career was somewhat more disputed.

Even by the generous standard of senior militia officers in the CEF, the dashing, charming Watson was a hopeless self-promoter. In the aftermath of the St. Eloi debacle in February 1916, one of his battalion commanders, Lieutenant-Colonel J.A. Gunn, was intent on resigning and demanded to air his grievances about Watson with the Army commander. Fearing he would lose his chance of commanding of the new 4th Division - a post he had openly campaigned for - if the criticisms got out, he offered the disgruntled Gunn one of the brigades in his new division. Although Gunn flatly rejected Watson's offer, he agreed not to forward his letter of resignation up the chain of command. After the war, Gunn regretted that he had not pressed the matter "as Watson later, through bad

Major-General David Watson, commander of 4th Canadian Division.



NAC PA 2115



Officers watch a practice attack, October 1917. Left to right: Prince Arthur of Connaught, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie, Brigadier Victor Odium and Major-General David Watson.

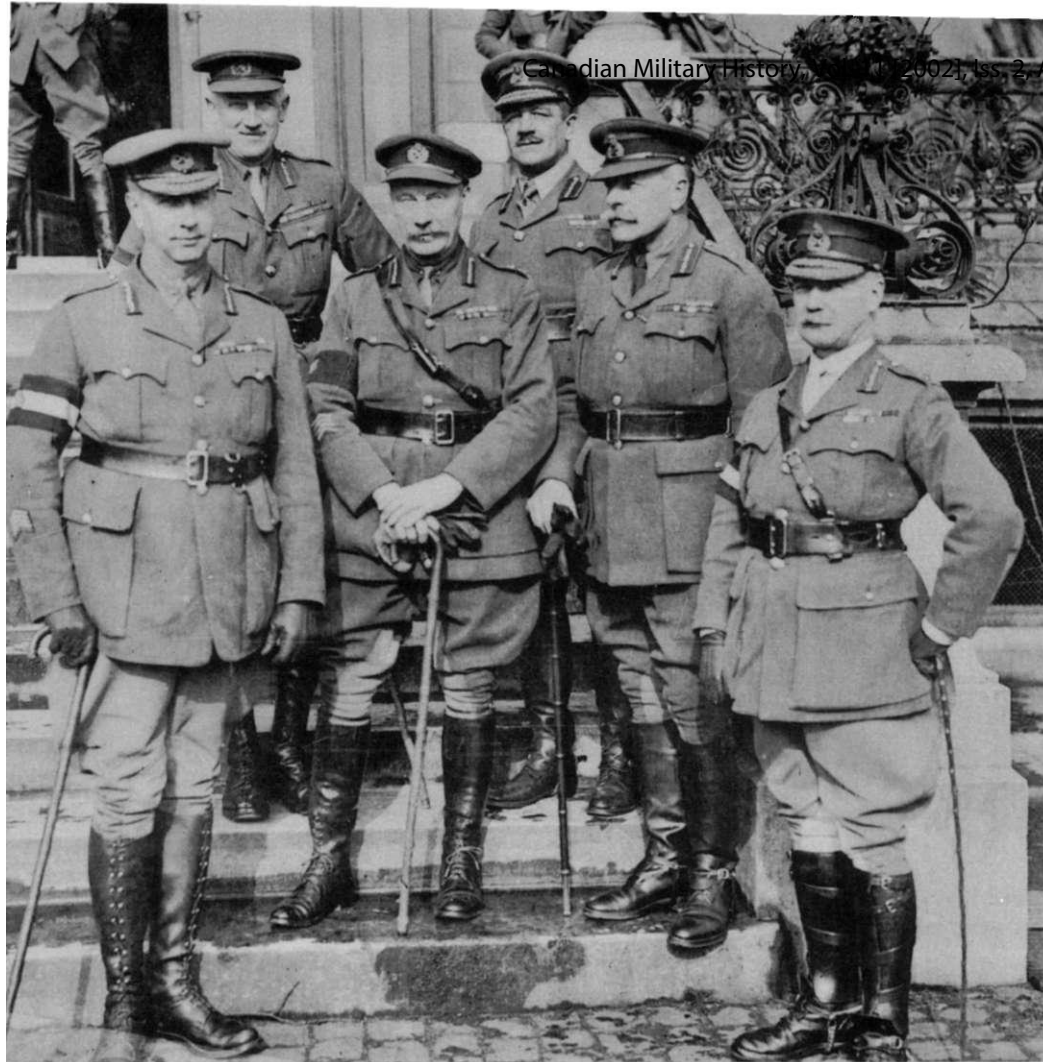
judgement and looking for kudos, cost the lives of many Canadians."³⁷

Watson's campaigning paid off as Hughes gave him the 4th Division, rather than Henry Burstall, an experienced regular. Watson then gathered as many experienced troops in England for his new unit as he could find, despite knowing none of them would see battle for months at a time when the army in France was desperately seeking reinforcements.³⁸ When the going got tough for Hughes, Watson was wise enough to distance himself. Gunn was not the only subordinate officer to take issue with Watson's competence. By the end of 1917, Lieutenant-Colonel John Warden, who had raised the 102nd Battalion and then commanded it in Watson's division, had completely fallen out with both his brigadier (Odium) and Watson. Warden resigned his command, but not before regaling Currie with his opinions of his two superiors, describing "both [as] very mercenary men and political pullers who used their commands to gain public notice and repute...."³⁹ The evidence is little more than gossip, of course, but with Watson, the evidence does seem to accumulate.

More damning was Watson's apparently excessive eagerness to fight the Hun, without a matching eagerness for the thorough planning

that increasingly prevailed among other CEF commanders. This was clear in the ill-fated 4th Division trench raid on Hill 145 a little over a month before Vimy. This operation cost 687 casualties when the gas attack failed to work, precisely what more cautious observers in the division - including several senior officers - had openly worried about. Both Watson and his very able British GSO1, Lieutenant-Colonel Edmund Ironside, displayed appalling overconfidence and particularly a lamentable - and for their troops, fatal - ignorance of gas warfare practices.⁴⁰ Although Watson's 4th Division generally performed ably thereafter, the 11th and 12th Brigades' foredoomed attack at Mont Dury on 2 September 1918 suggests that haste and sloppiness at divisional headquarters were never entirely eliminated.⁴¹ The verdict on Watson's military competence - whether he should be classed among the first or second echelon of Canada's Great War commanders - awaits further research.

Regardless of the ultimate verdict passed on Watson, by the last two years of the war the overall quality of Canadian combat generals was high and getting higher. Given that brigadiers had a better chance to control the battle as tactics became more fluid and complex, good brigadiers became more important to battlefield success as the war progressed. Moreover, the well-



NAC PA 4254

Allied commanders in Bonn, Germany following the end of the war, December 1918:
 (l. to r.) Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie, commander, Canadian Corps; unknown; Major-General David Watson, commander 4th Canadian Division; Major-General Henry Burstall, commander 2nd Canadian Division; Field Marshal Alexander Haig, British Commander-in-Chief; Major-General E.W.B. Morrison, commander of Canadian Corps artillery.

developed Canadian system of institutionalized, universalized learning would never have flourished had the senior commanders not been innovative and fully committed. The only alternative is to believe that the Corps' success depended almost entirely on Currie and a handful of brilliant British staff officers.

A study of Byng and Currie's commanders will appreciably broaden our understanding of what made the Canadian Corps an increasingly effective fighting force from 1916 onward. What did "merit" mean when it came to promotion to senior command? Did divisional and brigade commanders possess individual training and war fighting philosophies and styles? Can we rank the capabilities of these commanders or were they interchangeable cogs in the CEF machine? If, as Harris summarizes McNaughton's recollections, "Currie created an atmosphere which allowed for, in fact positively demanded, the movement of ideas from below,"⁴² who were the foremost generators of those ideas?

Military historians have provided us with a portrayal of the Canadian Corps where the military personalities of the Corps commanders, various political characters, and the private soldier have been quite thoroughly researched and their respective roles in forging the Corps' fighting ability skillfully delineated. But of those few dozen officers who served immediately below the "Great Captain," practically nothing has been written and very little is known. Even the role of the Corps' chaplains has received more study. Yet all military historians acknowledge the hierarchical command structure of the army and the vital importance of understanding how that structure operated. Furthermore, despite the "Currie-centrism" which has dominated analysis of the Corps' generalship, implicit in all accounts of the Corps during the battles of 1917-18 is the belief that it was a team effort. Surely, as with ordinary soldiers, sappers and gunners, the senior officer ranks contained more than their share of talented individuals - men who had significant responsibilities for transforming the Corps from an enthusiastic rabble into a battle-hardened and self-confident professional army.

We are unlikely to find that all our generals were the equals of a Griesbach, Ross or Loomis. Some will likely prove pedestrian or worse. But until we undertake fuller studies, our understanding of the Corps will remain incomplete, for we shall have only a fragmentary appreciation of the officers who trained the Corps' soldiers and then ordered (and sometimes led) them into battle.

Notes

1. From the title of his book. *Shock Army of the British Empire: The Canadian Corps in the Last 100 Days of the Great War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997). Denis Winter, *Haig's Command: A Reassessment* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 131.
2. The genesis of this article on the need to examine the role of Byng's and Currie's Commanders was a paper entitled "Currie's Commanders: An Untold Story of the CEF" jointly presented by Thomas Leppard and the author at the Wilfrid Laurier University Military History Colloquium, May 1998.
3. J.L. Granatstein, *The Generals: The Canadian Army's Senior Commanders in the Second World War* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1993), p. 5.
4. A.M.J. Hyatt, "Canadian Generals of the First World War and the Popular View of Military Leadership," *Social History/L'histoire sociale*, XII, 24 (Nov 1978), p.430.
5. Arthur Lower, *Colony to Nation: A History of Canada* (Toronto: Longman's, 1957).
6. The principal exception, of course, is Currie who has been the subject of three biographies, the best A.M.J. Hyatt's *General Sir Arthur Currie: A Military Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987). Currie, unlike his senior officers, also looms large in the official history, G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1964). John Swettenham's *McNaughton*, Vol. I, 1887-1939 (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1968) documents the Great War experience of the Canadian Corps' brilliant artillery officer, A.G.L. McNaughton. Stephen Harris's *Canadian Brass: The Making of a Professional Army, 1860-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988) contains very useful insights into the capabilities of various of the field commanders. Yves Tremblay's "Brutinel: A Unique Kind of Leadership," in Bernd Horn and Stephen Harris, eds., *Warrior Chiefs: Perspectives on Senior Canadian Military Leaders* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2001) explores the career of the machine gun "guru" of the Canadian Corps, and one of its most innovative thinkers. Thomas Leppard, "The Dashing Subaltern": Sir Richard Turner in Retrospect," *Canadian Military History*, Vol.6, No.2 (Autumn 1997), illuminates the career of the underachieving Turner. Bill Rawling's *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps, 1914-18* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), an outstanding study of tactical improvements, especially before 1918, barely mentions senior officers other than Currie. Brigadier-General William Griesbach's *I Remember* constitutes the only memoir published by a general officer.
7. This group includes Arthur Currie, of course, who served as officer commanding [OC] the 1st Division while Byng was Corps commander: Victor Williams, the OC 8th Brigade, who was taken prisoner in the opening stages of the Mount Sorrel battle only four days after Byng's appointment; and Malcolm Mercer, OC the 3rd Division, killed in action the same day. It does **not** include Ross Hayter who, while a British regular, was Canadian-born, nor Seely or Patterson, OCs of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade which did not fight with the Corps. The other 38 officers are: Arthur Bell, Raymond Brutinel, Henry Burstall, John Clark, Robert Clark, William Dodds, Denis Draper, Hugh Dyer, James Elmsley, John Embury, William Griesbach, Frederick Hill, Edward Hilliam, Garnet Hughes, William Hughes, Huntly Ketchen, William King, Frederick Loomis, James MacBrien, Archibald C. Macdonell, Archibald Hayes Macdonell, Eric McCuaig, Charles McLaren, Andrew McNaughton, James Mitchell, Edward Morrison, Victor Odium, Daniel Ormond, Henri Panet, Robert Rennie, John Ross, Alexander Ross, John Stewart, Herbert Thacker, Thomas Tremblay, Richard Turner, George Tuxford, and David Watson. Nicholson, Appendix A, pp.540-3
8. The author has not had access to the files of Mercer or Morrison. The remainder are found in National Archives of Canada [NAC] Record Group [RG] 150, Acc. 1992-93/166.
9. Patrick H. Brennan. "Amateur Warriors: Infantry Battalion Commanders in the Canadian Expeditionary Force," paper presented at the Society for Military History Conference, Calgary, May 2001.
10. In one case the province of residence was unclear. Given the extraordinary internal migration within Canada during the thirty years before the Great War, it gives a very erroneous impression of the regional composition of the officer ranks in the CEF to use place of birth rather than place of residence. This is a problem, for instance, in Hyatt's article. Hyatt also includes non-combatant general officers in France in his "Theatre of Operations" category.
11. Five of the 39 officers did not indicate their religion on their attestation papers.
12. The 4th Division did not receive its own artillery until June 1917.
13. OCs 5th Divisional artillery and Canadian Machine Gun Corps had been added to the Canadian Corps after Byng's appointment, and OC 4th Divisional artillery soon would be.
14. Hilliam got a brigade. Lipsett was effectively a victim of the Canadianization process late in the war. Radcliffe was replaced by Webber as Brigadier-General, General Staff and Massie, whose health had long been poor, resigned only days before the armistice to formalize McNaughton in the position of GOCHA he had long been doing.
15. On Elmsley, see Edward Kemp Papers, NAC MG 27 II D9, v. 132, file C-20, Currie to Turner, 23 May 1918. Elmsley's appalling physical state in April 1918 convinced Currie he could not be promoted to divisional command, yet after a short rest, he resurfaced later in the year as OC the Canadian Siberian Expeditionary Force. On Hill and Rennie, Richard Turner Papers, NAC MG 30 E46, v. 8, file 48, memo, undated (1918), 005539 and Currie to Turner, 005561, 17 July 1918. On Macdonell, see *ibid.*, v. 11, file 79, Burstall to Currie, undated (July 1917) and Currie to Turner, 23 July 1917.

- Burstall talked about his efficiency as a commander while Currie added the "severe strain of war." McLaren, whose performance Currie respected, had suffered a complete breakdown. Arthur Currie Papers, NAC MG 30 E100, v. 2, General Correspondence, 1915-18, S-Z file, memo, 16 December 1917.
16. Among these would presumably be Garnet Hughes and his uncle, Turner, Ketchen, Mitchell and Embury. Mitchell blotted his copy book when he went back to Canada to deal with his private business interests. In Embury's case, see Turner Papers, v. 11, file 79, Lash to Turner, 14 November 1917. He served in early 1918 as a temporary replacement.
 17. Among these would certainly be included Hill, Elmsley, Rennie, McLaren, Dyer and A. H. Macdonell.
 18. "Officers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force," in Thomas Russell, ed., *The Great War in Europe* (New York: JR Peper, 1915), pp. 17-24.
 19. Griesbach Papers, NAC MG 30 E15, v. 1, file 10, biographical memo, 5 September 1924. *Ibid.*, file 5, diary, 22 December 1914 and 1 and 3 September 1915 and file 1, Griesbach to Hughes, 21 July 1915.
 20. *Ibid.*, file 5, diary, 10 and 26 February 1917. *Ibid.*, 3 November and 4 December 1916. Lipsett was stationed in Western Canada as militia advisor in the immediate prewar years where he would undoubtedly have known Griesbach. Macdonell had been Griesbach's military mentor since 1906. Archibald Macdonell Papers, NAC MG 30 E20, v. 2, Griesbach to Macdonell, 11 February 1917. The source of Currie's initial opposition is unknown, though Griesbach's ongoing political (and personal) association with Hughes might well have played a role. Griesbach ran successfully as a Conservative-Unionist candidate in the 1917 "conscription" election.
 21. NAC RG 9 III C 3, v. 4113, folder 45, file 6, Griesbach to battalion commanders, 20 May 1918.
 22. *Ibid.*, folder 44, file 2, Griesbach to battalion commanders, 17 June 1918. *Ibid.*, folder 45, file 6, 20 and 30 May 1918.
 23. See for example *ibid.*, v. 4028, folder 17, file 20, "Lessons Learned from the Attacks Carried Out by the 4th Battalion, 8-9 Aug 1918."
 24. Griesbach Papers, v. 5, file 34B, Macdonell to Griesbach, 31 August 1918.
 25. Nicholson, p.433.
 26. NAC RG 9 III C 3, v. 4015, folder 30, file 5, Griesbach, "Report on Fighting," 12 September 1918. *Ibid.*, v. 4016, folder 31, file 5, Sparling to Griesbach, "Report on Recent Operations," 9 September 1918. *Ibid.*, v. 4028, folder 17, file 20, Macdonell memo "Lessons Learned from Recent Fighting," 12 September 1918.
 27. Griesbach Papers, v. 1, file 7, Confidential Report on Officers - William A Griesbach, 19 January 1919.
 28. Turner Papers, v. 8, file 51, 005782, Currie to Turner, 5 December 1917.
 29. Nicholson, n. 133, p.326.
 30. As to Lipsett's attitude, see Currie Papers, v. 43, Personal Diaries, 1914-19, 10 September 1918. The last two British-born British regulars to command combat formations in the Canadian Corps were both replaced in 1918, the other being an even more angry J.E.B. Seely of the Canadian cavalry brigade in May. Elmsley, who had served in the 3rd Division but was no longer with the Corps, and not known as man to harbour grudges. revealed the Britisher's departure wasn't entirely unwelcome: "As a friend and good fellow everyone liked him - and he was no doubt an exceptionally capable officer. Those who served under him, I know had an exceptionally hard time and I am glad for the sake of the fellows of the 3rd Div. that he is going. What old Mac, Hilly, Ross Hayter and myself suffered you never knew. At one point we were all on the verge of quitting and proposing to appeal direct to you - However, we stuck it out, and I am glad now that no one else will be required to do so..." Currie Papers, v. 1, General Correspondence, 1915-18, A-F file, Elmsley to Currie, 17 September 1918.
 31. They were Rennie, Elmsley, MacBrien, Odium and Loomis, Hugh Urquhart Papers, MG 4027, acc. 393/7 [McGill University Archives), vol. 3, C-U Correspondence, Currie Letters from the War file, memo 2 Apr 1918. In the spring and fall of 1918, there was a major renewal of brigade commands to replace worn out men - including Elmsley. Hill, Dyer and Rennie.
 32. NAC RG 41 B III 1, CBC, *In Flanders Fields* transcripts, Alexander Ross interview, 18 March 1963.
 33. *Ibid.*
 34. *Ibid.*
 35. Urquhart Papers, vol.3, C-U Correspondence, Currie Letters from the War file, memo 2 April 1918.
 36. Hyatt, *Currie*, 74. Victor Odium was the other.
 37. Gunn to Duguid, 3 Oct 1938, as quoted in Douglas Campbell, "Cronies, Comrades and Professional Culture: Exploring Internal Relations in the Canadian Corps during the First World War," paper presented at the Society for Military History Conference, Calgary, 2001. Campbell's PhD dissertation on the 2nd Canadian Division will no doubt add considerably to our understanding of that unit's senior officers.
 38. Harris, pp. 113 and 117-8.
 39. J.W. Warden Papers, NAC MG 30 E 192, Diary, 2 January 1918. Warden was certainly a capable fighting man. He promptly signed on with the British "Dunsterforce" which fought in the Caucasus in 1918-19, then served as a military advisor to the White forces of Admiral Kolchak in Siberia, finally returning to Vancouver in 1920.
 40. Tim Cook, "'A Proper Slaughter': The March 1917 Gas Raid at Vimy Ridge," *Canadian Military History*, Vol.8, No.2 (Spring 1999), pp.14-21.
 41. NAC RG 9 III C 1, v. 3946, folder 64, file 4, Brutinel memo to Walker, 10 September 1918 and III C 3, v. 4230, folder 22, file 3, MacBrien "Report on Scarpe Operation...2nd September 1918," 14 September 1918; and III D 2 [NAC], v. 4796, folder 81, 11th Bde "Narrative of Operations...September 2nd and September 5th, 1918, 8 October 1918.
 42. Harris, p. 124.

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