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Whiz Bangs and Whoolly Bears

Walter Estabrooks and the Great War, compiled from his diary and letters

Hal A. Skaarup

The Order of Battle for the Canadian Corps during World War One included the 32nd Field Battery of the Canadian Field Artillery (CFA), in the 8th Army Brigade. One memorable gunner who served in that unit was Sergeant Walter Ray Estabrooks. He enlisted in the spring of 1916 with the 65th Depot Battery at Woodstock, New Brunswick. Here, on the 9th of April, he was issued a uniform and service number 335805. Walter Estabrooks would go on to become part of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) and participated in what came to be known as "The Great War." This extraordinary soldier was my grandfather.

As a boy I used to listen to his stories while we worked around his two large Belgian work horses, Smokey and Trigger, on his farm in Carleton County, New Brunswick. The horses generated a lot of "pitchfork and shovel work" for a young fellow visiting the farm, but I learned to like working with the team. In between chores, or while we were splitting wood in the woodshed, my grandfather would tell me about his experiences during the Great War. One of these stories concerned his horse "Hungry Joe." This one was particularly striking, because his horse had been hit with a shell splinter while he was out running an errand as a dispatch rider. In spite of the

wound, the horse had gamely carried him safely back to the battery lines before dying. He was also caught in the open during a shelling with a horse named Chubby. They had managed to get into a part of a trench, but a shell splinter tore through Chubby's neck. Gramp got his bridle and saddle off before he fell, loaded the works on his back and cleared out.



Gramp never talked much about the bitter side of that war, although what was left unsaid about the other things that happened at that time led me to ask him more questions. He would often give an interesting answer, based on experiences that had happened to him over 50 years ago, and yet seemed clearer to him than other events much closer to the present. He could talk about those experiences at great length, although he would sum up the events in his life since then in only a few sentences. Many years later I joined the army, and began to have some interesting experiences myself, and it was then that I began to realize what it was that made Gramp's stories so interesting. It was the telling of the story with a clear and often humorous memory of people he worked with, trained with, and grew to know in a way that only people who have undergone stressful circumstances together can know each other, that made the stories interesting.

Remembering those people, their names and their stories was important to him, and so it became important to me as well.

As I grew older, I began to read more about the First World War and to develop a tremendous interest in history. I visited battlefields during Army Staff College training, and tried to get a feel for what had happened to Gramp and other men like him. I also read a copy of his war diary that had been typed up by one of his six children, my Aunt Wilhelmine. I was away at school and 18 when I began to write to my grandfather to ask him for more details about the war and the things that he wrote about in his diary. Although I'm older now, and he's long gone, the stories are still interesting, and a few of them are presented here.

* * * * *

Walter Estabrooks was 15 when he first went to drill at Camp Sussex, New Brunswick, with the old 10th Battery, using 12-pounder muzzle loaders. In his own words:

I drew my first uniform in June 1906, a week before going to camp. Dressed up in it as soon as I got home and had supper. Felt pretty big. Harnessed old Maud the bay mare in the single wagon and drove up the road to show off. Met Edna Rockwell at the Primitive Baptist Church. The uniform kind of bolstered my courage, and

I asked her to have a drive with me. I could not think of anything to say, so asked her to sing. She sang several old songs. She couldn't think of anything to say either.

Between 1906 and 1914 he trained for two weeks each year at Camp Sussex and then went to competition shoots at Petawawa. While working on the B & A railroad in the spring of 1914, however, he was knocked out with typhoid. Although he was able to go to camp 25 June to July 6th, he could not get by the medical officer until the spring of 1916. He trained in Woodstock, NB (along with six horses and one gun), where he had been a Sergeant in the militia and was an acting gunnery staff Sergeant until he landed in England.

He embarked at Halifax on the 3rd of October and crossed to Liverpool on the CPR liner *Missanabi* in convoy with two other troop ships and a destroyer. They went the Northern route near Ireland, and down the Irish Sea to Liverpool. From there they were taken to Shornecliffe camp near Folkstone, where they were billeted in tents. There, on the strait of Dover on clear days they could see across to France.

While at Shornecliffe he was picked for training on the 4.5-inch Howitzer. He described these as, "a high angle of fire gun with unfixed ammunition. They used one charge for dropping a shell over a nearby hill, two charges for a hill farther away, and three charges for longer ranges, in a flat trajectory." Compared with the eighteen pound shell, the 4.5 weighed about 24 pounds. The eighteen pound shells were fixed ammunition, as they were in a cartridge case about 20 inches long and propelled by cordite. The three charges that propelled a 4.5 were filled with cordite, NCT [nitro-cellu-toluene], and TNT [tri-nitro-toluene].



Artillery training with 18-pounders at Camp Sussex, New Brunswick, in 1912.

(Author's collection)

Canadian soldiers training on an 18-pounder, 1916.

*(Photo by J. R. Curry,
NAC PA 112412)*

They crossed to Le Havre, France from Southampton and went through Rouen to the line at Haut Avesnes. The Canadians had just come off the Somme, and as the 18-pounders needed men, he and his friends Lee Bell and Ed Duffy were attached to the Division headquarters and eventually the 32nd Battery. There they took part in holding the line on the Arras and Vimy front during the winter of 1916-1917. They gave covering fire for infantry raids involving the Canadian Mounted Rifles, Royal Canadian Regiment, and Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. He told me that a typical unlucky night would involve being on a work party to dig temporary emplacements for the trench mortar operating in no man's land, with nothing for protection but a shovel, and nothing to eat from six at night until seven in the morning. In his words, the "mud in the trenches was waist deep, and we spent most of the time dodging Whiz Bangs."

I asked him what a Whiz Bang was, and drew the response that,

the Whiz Bang was a field gun used by the Germans in the forward area as opposed to our 18 pounder. The shells were slightly under 3 feet and longer than ours. They travelled with great speed, and were fired by fast action guns, but did not have the strafing power of our 18's. Not much time to duck as one just heard Whiz. Bang! Our 18 pound shells were filled with bursting charges regulated by time fuse up to 21 seconds, and filled with about 100 steel bound bullets. The Whiz Bangs were similar except the bullets were lead shrapnel. Our HE [high explosive] shells burst on contact, and were filled with NCT. Woolly Bears were another problem for us.

Needless to say, the use of military abbreviations is not something new, and of course on reading these terms I had to draft another



letter, this time to ask about Woolly Bears. He replied that,

A Woolly Bear was used for demolition, and could be compared with our 5.9's. It burst on impact, made a big hole and left a tremendous cloud of black smoke. They were slower than a Whiz Bang and could be ducked by a man with a sixth sense."

Souvenirs and living conditions were always of interest. One day he had gone up to a place near Vimy Ridge called "the Pimple" on a foggy morning to take a look at where the French and Germans had fought so desperately the first year of the war. The skeletons were still there, and he noted that there were several V-shaped shields made of oak and steel also still in place. These had been pushed in front of the men while they were crawling forward. The Pimple was under observation and when the fog lifted he didn't stop long. He remembered carrying a beautiful pair of French officer's boots, but after shaking the foot bones out of them, he didn't seem to care for them any more. He also said that they never could seem to become attached to lice or dirty underclothes enough to regret their passing. At a place called Aubigny au Bac he was lucky enough to find a 9 mm German Luger and, in fact, eventually got it home as a souvenir. It was partially destroyed in a fire later, but has since been restored, and is now on display along with his spurs and medals in our home.



Riding Party, Bois de Boulogne, France, 30 October 1918. Walter Estabrooks is on the extreme left while in the centre is Amy Johnson, who would later become a famous aviatrix.

He was granted leave on some rare occasions, and he and other soldiers went riding with the famous aviatrix Amy Johnson on the bridle paths in the Bois de Boulogne. He left a photo of them which also makes a fine souvenir.

When asked about Vimy Ridge, the subject of “sandbag pudding” came up. It had snowed and rained for a couple of weeks after they had arrived at Vimy. Ammunition had to be packed over roads at night. Their bread rations were put into two sandbag lots slung over a saddle and tied on. The sandbag fuzz worked into the wet bread and it was all one loaf in the bag when they finally got it. Earlier, they had been given a few rations of plum and apple jam. The cook dumped the bread in a big boiler along with a couple of cans of milk and a quart pail of jam, stirred it up and gave them two ladles per ration. His friend Bert Bryan said he ate so much sand bag lint that he never had to wipe himself all the time he was at Vimy.

Rabbit stew brought out another “food” story. Australia shipped an order of frozen rabbits to the commissary as a treat for the soldiers. They were shipped frozen in crates of about two dozen. They had rounded them up in an enclosure, conked them with a club and crated them as they were. By the time they left cold storage until they reached the soldiers, they had thawed out and

one could smell the G.S. wagon half a mile away. The cooks and helpers had to wear their gas masks to clean them and soak the carcasses in salt and water for at least 24 hours. He said that “they didn’t taste too bad if you held your breath.”

When asked about runners and dispatch riders, he indicated that,

each of the three battalions that formed the brigade had to supply a man to be attached to Brigade HQ, to be a runner, dispatch rider, go-fetcher. HQ was usually situated out of the line of observation from the front line. We carried orders to Battery Ammunition columns, and met motor cycle dispatch riders at the nearest place they could come. The motor cyclist HQ had three heavy cog drive cycles to be used when necessary. If the trip was not over a couple of miles, I would rather walk than drag a bicycle over rough country to reach a road going the way you needed to go. I could read maps and get to places, so I was unlucky enough to get several of the long distance trips.

New men had a lot to learn when they arrived at the front. While he was on a carrying party to his observation post one night with some experienced men, they heard a loud “pop” up front. Everyone stopped but him, and he bumped into the man ahead of him. Each of them was carrying several sheets of corrugated tin sheeting

on their backs. Crash, Bang! Everyone flopped to the ground as a flare lit the sky. Someone whispered, "What fool didn't know enough to stop when he heard a flare pistol?" A machine gun sprayed them for about a minute. No one answered but an important lesson was learned.

About officers, he commented on one particular incident:

I was accompanying a new officer that I had met in England from the gun position to OP. One of those long range shells passed over us about a mile in the air. I paid no attention, but he dove for the ditch. By the time the sound got to us it was bursting near our ammo dump about four miles in the rear. He looked funny as he got up from the ditch, but that's when I realized that officers had to grow up the same as men in the ranks.

There were lots of story tellers in the lines, and his friend Bert Bryan's stories were some of the best, depending on who the tale was about. This brought us around to stories about Passchendaele. "Passchendaele was just one glorious mud hole. We were there 42 days. Kept 24 men on the guns and lost 42 in the time, an average of one a day." He used the word shocked for one man, which he described as "to be shell shocked, one is just in a daze until it wears off, if it ever does."

Caught in the open during a heavy shelling, he and a friend name Vic, who had been hit, climbed into an old German tank. It sounded interesting to me, but he commented that,

when Vic Dennis and I ducked into that German tank we didn't take much notice. There were two dead Germans in it and they were ripe. We kept our head out a hole in the side of it until it was safe to go on. I carried Vic out to the hospital that afternoon. He died the next day from loss of blood.

While talking about wounds and injuries, he discussed an incident that occurred while man-handling a gun during a move out of the Passchendaele salient:

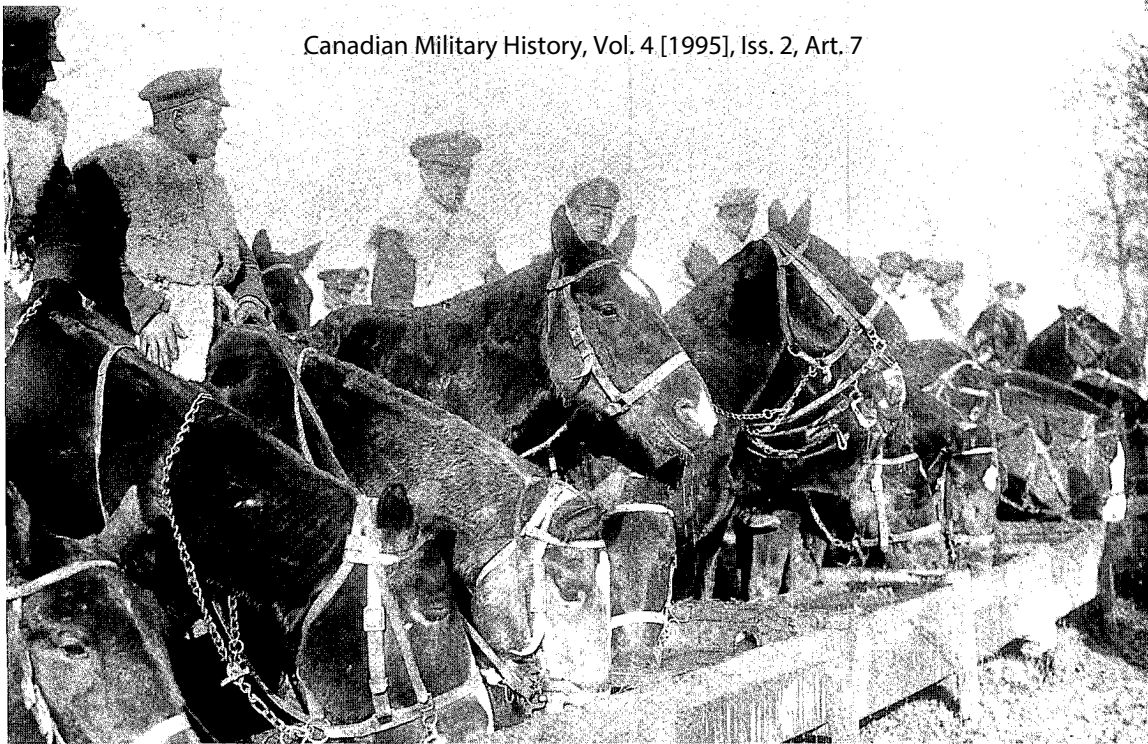
I was the man at the trail. I had the beam over my shoulder, hands on the grip side of trail with the spade between my legs, and several other men on the drag ropes. We felt the Woolly Bear coming. Everyone flopped in the mud, but I couldn't get out from under the trail quick enough, so tried to get most of me under the steel hat. I tried to get down a little and turned my head towards it. A piece of something gouged my right shoulder, tore my greatcoat down the back and ruined it. Ernie Bennett cleaned the wound out with iodine and applied the first field dressing.

We then moved to Vimy town and dug in just off the road. The far end of the road was about four feet high. We built or dug a bivouac about 6 1/2 feet deep around it with steel rails and ties from a shot up railroad. An otter slide was set up at one side with a wet blanket to keep out gas. Fritz was shelling the road that night at about two minute intervals. We were standing by playing penny ante on a blanket on the floor of the dugout by candle light. I said to George Haddock, "play my hand when the next one lands. I'll have time to go top side to take a leak and be back before the next one lands." He said "don't be a fool, use that old shell case behind you." I said, "the smell of that would kill the devil." I went up the slide and had just unbuttoned and turned on the tap

Spent cartridge casings following the battle of Vimy Ridge, May 1917.

(NAC PA 1349)





Canadian artillery horses being watered, November 1916.

(NAC PA 865)

when a big one struck the far side of the road. A chunk of mud about the size of a pail hit me right in the belly and knocked the wind out of me. I slid butt first into the dugout and flopped out on my back. Haddock says, "the dizzy bastard must be alive, he's still pissing." I didn't have enough wind left to argue the point.

He described Vimy Ridge as,

having an easy slope from the Lorches valley on our side, fairly steep on the eastern side, looked like an ordinary piece of farming country at first look. The German front lines and ours were on a slight valley on the western side. Our guns ploughed the whole western side and top over to the village of Vimy on the eastern side.

As a soldier in the present Canadian Army, it does not take long to appreciate that no matter which side you are on, the weather and terrain tend to be the same, only the enemy is different. Present times, politics and attitudes are affected by those who came before us in many strange ways. There are always two sides to a story, but because my grandfather Frederick Skaarup died before I knew him, I did not hear the stories from "the other side." He was living in the German-occupied area of southern Denmark when the war came, having been conscripted into the German army in 1912. He was therefore in the war from day one in 1914, and also fought in France. I was curious as to whether or not my two grandparents had fought in the same area, or perhaps been in the position where they might have been firing on

each other. Because of our family tradition in the field of music, Gramp was able to tell this incredible story about how he knew they had been the same place at the same time:

I met your grandfather Skaarup about 1937 or 1938. They bought the farm next to ours, and in the summers I changed words with them quite often while threshing etc. There were no combines then. We often listened to him playing the trumpet on the veranda in the evenings. We discussed the war many times. One time in particular on 05 February 1918, I had charge of a team getting some lumber salvaged in an old blown up school. We heard a German Band playing the boys going out on relief in Lens just across no man's land from Levin where we were. We checked the dates and your grandfather said that he may have been playing in that band.

I have seen troops coming out of the line tired and dirty after a big push, make their first halt for a little rest. Sometimes a band would be waiting for them. Marching when not weary and with a good band will give some folks a tremendous thrill. But can you imagine a depleted unit coming out of the line from a hard position, tired, dirty, muddy and lousy, stumbling along just after dark, a few minutes halt just out of maximum gun range. "Fall in, quick march." Imagine that a band has been waiting for them, and what it would feel like as it begins playing "The British Grenadiers." The men would hunch their equipment up higher on their backs and their shoulders would straighten up. They would all have fallen in line four abreast without an order. No need for left-right. The muddy boots would seem to lighten

up, and darned if the feet don't seem to get the beat of the music. They are old hands, and would soon disappear in the night. Your grandfather told me about playing the men out on the other side of the line in the same way.

While on duty in the dugouts they took turns on watch, two hours on and two off for 48 hours. The dugouts had been an old chalk quarry mine, and were infested with big grey rats. "You had to cover your face when trying to sleep," he said.

Through March 1918 trench mortar warfare increased. The Germans shot up flares that kept the line lit up for several minutes.

We were standing by most of the time so BHQ had the battalion send up a man from each gun crew to help dig emplacements for the mortar boys. I was on several trips in no man's land with nothing for protection but our shovels. By the time you heard a pop from a flare pistol you had about three seconds to duck or be perfectly still until the flare burst over head. We had rations at the gun at 6 PM, and nothing more until returning to our guns just before daylight. Boy oh boy did a hard tack look and taste good.

To make a night raid for information meant cutting our own wire or digging under, a sweet job in the night, crawling or running between flares to a listening distance. Enemy patrols played the same way. If two patrols contacted, the outfit that got one man to take back as a prisoner was very lucky. Everything was hand to hand and quiet. Most often both patrols would get back to their own lines and report enemy

patrols on the alert. It took the monotony out of living on a quiet front.

I wondered how the guns were kept cool after all the rounds they fired, and about the size of the shell holes they made. He said that,

we had canvas pails and poured water from shell holes down the muzzle of the gun after elevating the gun, it was easier that way. Shell holes were all sizes, some made to order from three feet across to any size about as deep as half the width.

He also worked as a limber gunner, and described his duties,

The limber gunner services the gun. He takes charge of loading kits and equipment, so the limber is excused other fatigues. When his battery was loaded at the train station, they were loaded up on flat and box cars, flats for the guns and box cars for the horses, six horses in a car.

When he had trained in England in October and November, it had rained every night. Sir Sam Hughes had his outfit in tents on Caesar's Plains. He tried to get his men placed in barracks, and had some big brass down to review his outfit. They hovered over his men and congratulated him on having such a robust Canadian regiment that could stand it to be in tents. They could not however, get barracks for them. The men had been standing at attention in front of the individual tents. The big brass ordered stand at ease. Sam called them to attention again. He roared out:

Canadian artillerymen loading their limbers from a dump by the roadside, May 1918. Note the soldier on the right by the wheel preparing to catch the shell which has just been tossed to him.

(NAC PA 2587)



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Walter Estabrooks (right) and his brother Oscar about 1917-18. (Author's collection)

"From now on, only two parades, church parade and pay parade." He turned quickly and fell on his ass in the mud. In any event, from then on there was only one parade, pay parade.

Walter Estabrooks was at Thelus corner when General Currie unveiled the artillery monument. Later he was sent through Mons on 11 November 1918, and passed General Currie and a platoon of Lancers lined up for the triumphant entry into the city. The flags were flying and the people were shouting "vive les Canadiens." A provost captain halted them with the information that the route was being cleared for General Currie and his staff's triumphant entry into the square, and for them to detour "toute de goddam suite."

There were five of us on the long track going through to Nerring to arrange billets for the Eighth Brigade. The military police headed us off at the square, and shunted us through another part of the city. Before we had progressed very far, everyone had a girl on horseback with him. I followed my good resolution until we passed the hospital. A busty looking woman came running down the steps. I gipped the sorrel to the side wall, pulled my foot from the stirrup. "Ascendez Mademoiselle." "Mon Monsieur, j' allez a l' apothecarie. Viens tout de suit." I slipped to the back of the old universal saddle and she came up sideways. I promptly took her in my arms. I was enjoying a hug that smelled like chloroform, until she slipped off and went into the drug store saying "merci pour le souvenir." She had snipped every button but the top two off my overcoat while I was enjoying myself.

King George and several members from the Labour Party walked over the ridge from La Targett in steel hats and civilian clothes.

I was on orderly duty, passed through them going down and when they were coming back every one of them had some kind of a souvenir, an old rifle barrel, empty shell case etc. I also heard Sir Robert Borden at Lincuiser on Canadian Sports Day. It would take too long to tell it here.

Walter Ray Estabrooks survived and got back to Halifax in 1919 on May 24th, 28 years old. Incredibly, he lived to be 94 years old and still had a clear and vivid memory of the events of the Great War that he had personally experienced. The indelible impression that the Woolly Bears and Whiz Bangs left on him were passed on to me while we were working with the horses called Smokey and Trigger. I've not forgotten. I hope my children will read them as you have, and stop to think about the incredible times their great grandfathers experienced, and more importantly, to pass the stories on without having to experience them first hand.

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