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## Snapshots from the South African War: The F.C. Cantrill Photograph Collection at the Canadian War Museum

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*Inscription: "Cpl. Cornfoot." Trooper J. Cornfoot, regimental #1847, was a former member of the North-West Mounted Police. In recruitment for the Constabulary preference was shown for South African veterans, members of the mounted branches, the permanent force, and members of the NWMP. This photo provides a good view of a mounted constable wearing riding breeches, boots and (in this case) leather gaiters, and the bandolier that was typical of mounted units. An English-style, probably universal-pattern, saddle, and .303 Mark 1 Lee-Enfield rifle are also visible.*

# Snapshots from the South African War

## The F.C. Cantrill Photograph Collection at the Canadian War Museum

Brendan McCoy

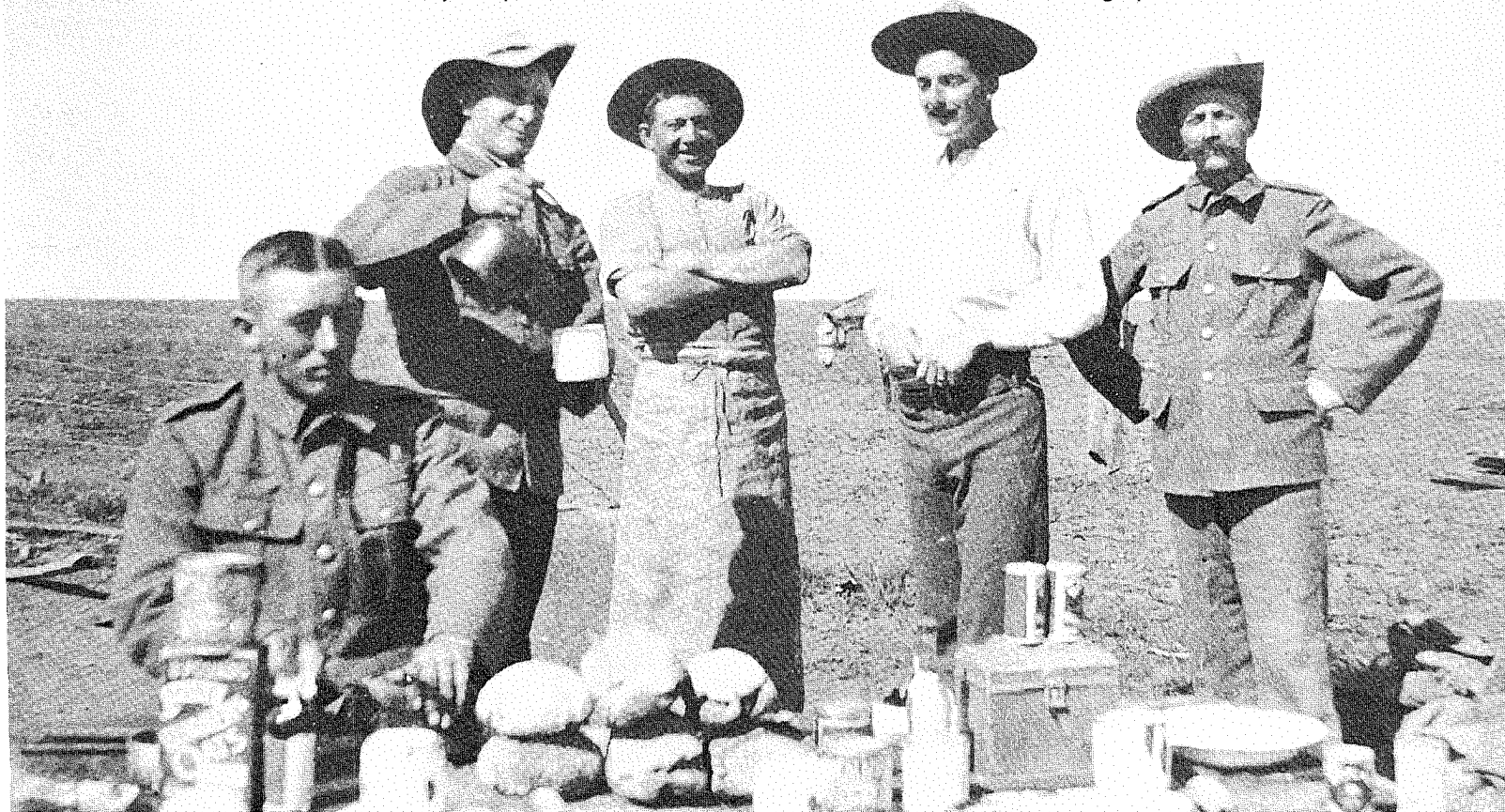
The Canadian War Museum's (CWM's) Photographic Archives contains over 600 photograph collections or fonds. These include over 17,000 individual photographs, some with their original negatives, and more than 250 photo albums. This collection has been acquired from private sources, with the photographs for the most part representing the personal documentation of Canada's military history by the participants. These have been brought together as part of the CWM's mandate to collect, preserve and make available for research and exhibition the artifacts of the Canadian military experience. The collection of Frederick Charles Cantrill who served in the South African Constabulary from 1901 to 1903 is one of these.<sup>1</sup> Larger than some, much smaller than others, this collection is typical of the personal photography undertaken by soldiers throughout the century. It is discussed here both as part of the CWM's ongoing commemoration of Canadian participation in the South African War, and as an illustration of the interesting informal nature of many of the CWM's photographic holdings. The article will examine Cantrill's own story, the developments in photography that made his collection possible and, in the captions, assess what the photographs add to our understanding of Canadians in the South African War.

While the South African or "Boer" War of 1899-1902 began as a classic 19th Century imperial conflict, it can also be seen as the first



modern war of the 20th Century. Many of its elements became all too familiar in the decades to come: the terrible power of modern rifles, trench warfare, a guerrilla army fighting a global power, concentration camps, sensational media reporting, a debate at home on the morality or relevance of the cause. South Africa marked a new stage of Canada's participation in foreign wars, volunteer citizen soldiers fought outside Canada for the first time in formed units of the Canadian Militia. There was also one other modern element: soldiers could record their experiences with a marvelous 19th Century invention then exploding in popularity, the camera.

In photography the Boer War was a truly modern war. Foreshadowing the experience of the First World War, the new film and camera technology was compact, cheap and easy to use and for the first time allowed ordinary combatants to record their experiences. Starting with the invention of the camera in the 1840s, wars had been recorded largely by professionals using cumbersome equipment. The role of the professional would continue and expand, but technical developments in the last quarter of the 19th Century allowed amateurs to create their own records. James Peter's remarkable photographs of the Northwest campaign are an excellent example of the first wave of amateur military photography, which used dry-plate glass negatives.<sup>2</sup> The scenes captured by Peters, and others like him, using large cumbersome



*No inscription. This evocative scene of a meal in the field, shows a variety of dress, with a clear view of the table with food and plates. Food includes what appears to be loaves of bread and a box of Quaker Oats, while the trooper standing at left is pouring a cup of tea or coffee.*

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equipment, were the first photographs of war taken by the participants. What remained to make photography more widely available was a small, cheap and easy to use camera.

George Eastman had invented the first Kodak roll-film camera, the Kodak Number 1, or the "Box Brownie," in 1888. The "model T" of cameras was portable, weighed just 2 pounds 3 ounces, and cost \$25, which included processing. The Kodak Number 1 had a fixed focus, fixed stop, one speed, and contained enough celluloid roll film to take 100 small photographs, which had a distinctive round shape.<sup>3</sup> Roll film was cheap and easy to use, and with the first Kodak cameras photographers did not even need to load the film. Eastman did all the processing. The camera, with film inside, was mailed back to the Eastman Kodak Company where the film was removed and processed. Then the camera was reloaded and sent back to the owner. As George Eastman's famous slogan put it: "You press the button, we do the rest." By 1891 an important innovation had been introduced whereby the roll

of film could be mailed or delivered to a studio for developing without the camera.<sup>4</sup> By 1900 George Eastman was selling 100,000 Kodak Box Brownie cameras a year, while large numbers of other cheap copies were also on the market.<sup>5</sup> Originally a hobby only for the rich, who had the time, scientific education, and financial resources to afford it, by the turn of the century, thanks to Eastman Kodak, photography was well within the grasp of the lower middle and working classes.<sup>6</sup>

Eastman introduced the Folding Pocket Kodak No.1 in 1898, just before the war in South Africa began. Very simple to operate, this camera incorporated two significant developments. First, it could be folded flat, which considerably reduced its size, an important consideration for a soldier.<sup>7</sup> As the Eaton's catalogue for spring and summer 1900 put it, the camera "folds up so compactly that it can easily be carried in [sic] ordinary pocket."<sup>8</sup> The second development was that the photographer could load the camera with film in daylight conditions, without need of a darkroom. There was no need for the almost



comedic care Northwest campaign photographer James Peters used to change film at night under a blanket by touch, with the sad result of losing or damaging many of his valuable glass plates.<sup>9</sup>

The price of the Kodak camera was well within the resources of a working man. A third-class trooper in the South African Constabulary, for example, received \$1.21 per day.<sup>10</sup> In the T. Eaton Company catalogues for 1898 to 1900 a Folding Pocket Kodak No.1 camera, loaded with film, was listed at \$9.50. Film was 45 cents for a roll of 12 exposures.<sup>11</sup> It may have been the widely available Folding Pocket Kodak No.1 that Frederick Cantrill used. The print size of 3" by 2" is consistent with the size of prints produced by the Folding Pocket Kodak No.1.<sup>12</sup>

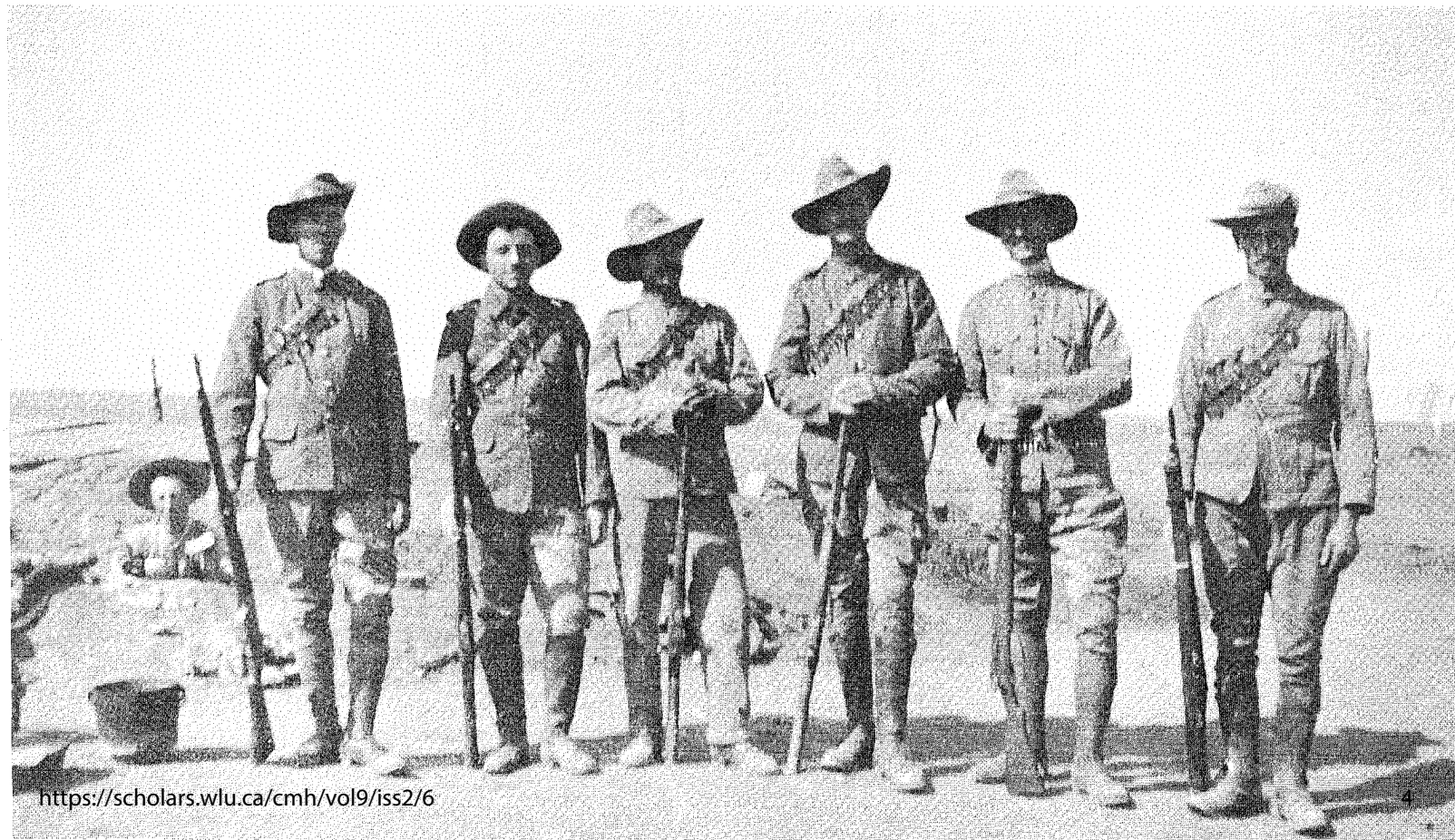
The photographer, Frederick Charles Cantrill, was born on 5 April 1871 in Derby, Derbyshire, England. He immigrated to Canada as a teenager in 1888, and spent some time in Manitoba and in the north.<sup>13</sup> In April 1901, single and working as a carpenter in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, Cantrill enlisted in one of the

units being recruited in Canada for service in the South African War, the South African Constabulary.<sup>14</sup>

The South African Constabulary (SAC), commanded by Major-General Robert Baden-Powell, has been characterized as "the unhappy warriors." A senior commander of one of the four divisions, was Canadian North-West Mounted Police and South African veteran Sam Steele. Envisioned as a mounted police force akin to the North-West Mounted Police (NWMP), the force was originally formed in October 1900, to keep law and order in the subdued Boer republics. Pretoria had fallen in June and British commanders were confident that it would only be a matter of time before the Boers surrendered. The British commander-in-chief, Lord Frederick Roberts, thought the force such a good idea that he insisted its numbers be increased to 10,000, agreeing that it would be paid for by the War Office and would remain under military command for the remainder of the war. He could not have predicted at the time that the war would last for another year and a half. Problems developed

*No inscription. The khaki uniform designed by Major-General Robert Baden-Powell, consisted of khaki shirt, necktie, riding breeches, riding boots, jacket with a roll collar, and the American-designed Stetson hat that Canadians had introduced into South Africa. Note the trench behind the six soldiers. Trenches were a common feature of the war in South Africa.*

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when the peace was finally signed in May 1902, for the War Office cut its funding and the SAC had to be reduced in size.<sup>15</sup>

Recruitment for a Canadian component of the SAC began in November 1900, and over a thousand Canadians eventually joined. Cantrill's specific motives for joining are not known. Possibly it was the lure of adventure, a break from the everyday monotony. Like him, many of the Western Canadian recruits were British born.<sup>16</sup> With the remainder of his fellow recruits Cantrill sailed from Halifax on the troopship *Montfort* on 29 March 1901.<sup>17</sup> They were formally enrolled in the South African Constabulary at Bloemfontein, Orange River Colony, on 26 April 1901.<sup>18</sup>

At Bloemfontein Cantrill and his fellow constables received their uniform, consisting of a shirt with tie, jacket, riding breeches, all of khaki, riding boots, and the American-designed Stetson hat.<sup>19</sup> The latter, with its flat brim and indented crown – the style increasingly worn by the NWMP at home – had been introduced to South Africa by the units of the Second Canadian Contingent the previous year. Cantrill was assigned to E Division, which was responsible for policing the former Orange Free State, known since its conquest by the British as the Orange River Colony. While the Canadian units or “troops” were left intact, however, they did not serve together in one division under Sam Steele. Rather, the Canadian troops were divided up among the four existing divisions. This was unpopular and contrary to promises that had been made when the men were recruited.<sup>20</sup>

After their duties commenced, the men of the Constabulary increasingly found themselves occupying an anomalous position between military unit and police force. Later, as the war wound down and after the declaration of peace, they performed the boring and thankless task of policing an unruly and hostile Boer population that regarded them as an occupying force. Few served for the full three-year period of service.

Cantrill served almost two years before purchasing his discharge, with the rank of corporal, on 12 February 1903. A letter from his commanding officer stated that he “always carried out his duties in a most satisfactory manner and is hard working and sober.”<sup>21</sup> In

leaving before his term of service was over Cantrill was typical of Canadian members of the force, as more than half of them took their discharge between the end of the war in May 1902 and March 1903. Cantrill's E Division was especially hard hit.<sup>22</sup>

Many veterans of the Constabulary were unhappy about their time in South Africa. When a group of discharged veterans from the force arrived in Montreal on 30 March 1903, they recited their grievances to a reporter for the *Montreal Daily Star*. The complaints centered on perceived discrimination by British authorities against the Canadians. Thus they claimed that there had been an effort to rid the force of Canadians, that those who would not buy their discharge were being dismissed, and that all were forced to pay their own way back to Canada. They complained that British, or even Boers, were promoted over Canadian candidates, and that Canadians were forced to buy items that were provided free to British troops. Finally they asserted that the level of discipline was harsher for Canadians than for British troops.<sup>23</sup> A reply to these grievances appeared in the Toronto paper, the *Mail and Empire*, on 1 April. A correspondent signing himself, “A Canadian Trooper,” dismissed the complaints and asserted that those who made them were responsible for their own predicament.<sup>24</sup>

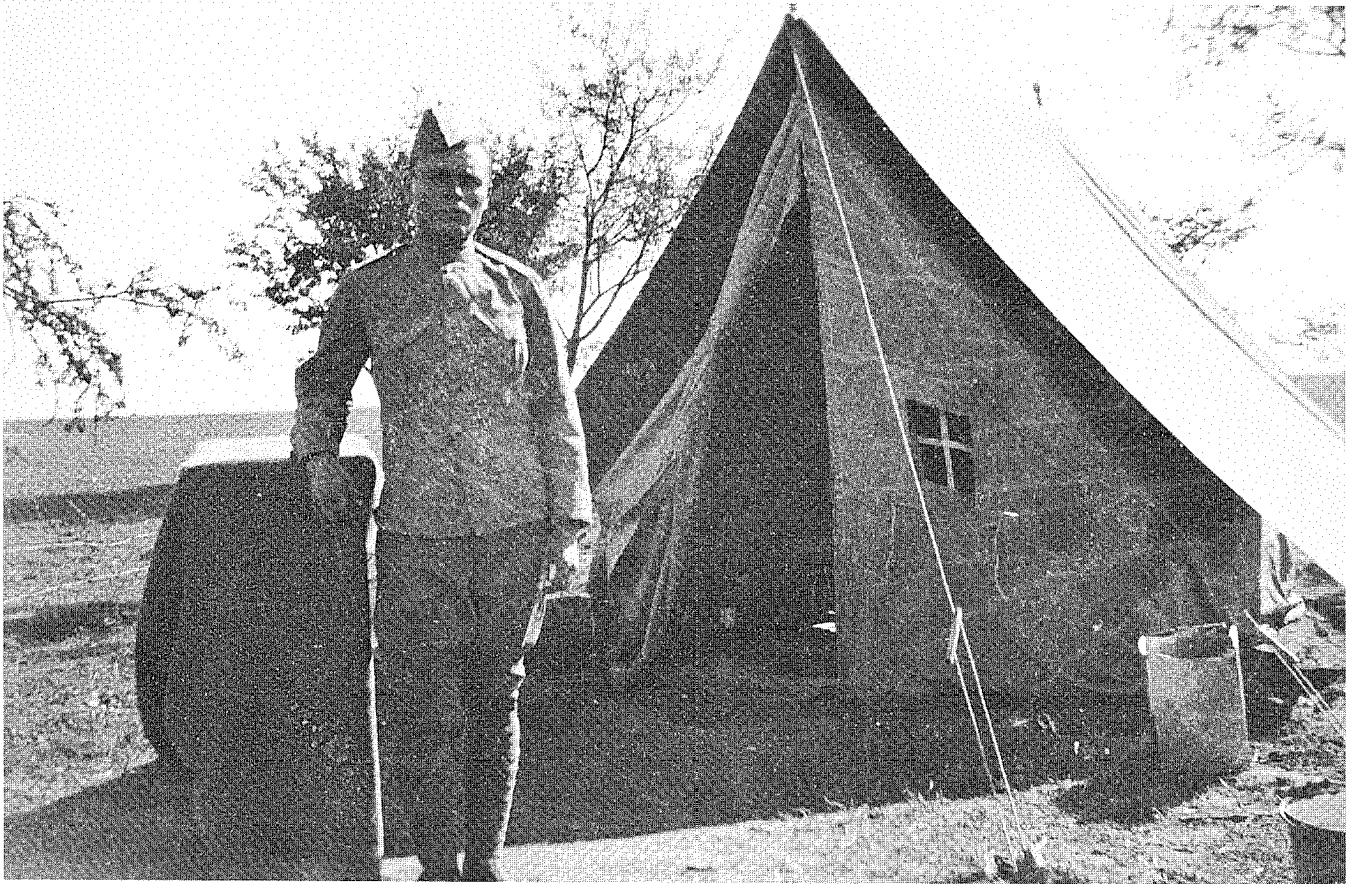
The publication of the complaints lead to questions being asked in the House of Commons of the Minister of Militia and Defence, Frederick Borden. In response to an inquiry from Borden, H.E. Burstall, a Canadian South African veteran and Captain in the Constabulary, conducted an investigation and wrote a report that refuted all of the complaints. He did, however, indicate that while they had been good at fighting a war, many of the Canadians were neither interested in, nor very good at, police work.<sup>25</sup>

The CWM has in its collection 26 photographs that Cantrill took while serving in South Africa. Together they constitute an excellent example of one amateur photographer's record of his wartime experience. The images are typical “snapshots,” a phrase that originally referred to hunters shooting quickly from the hip; but which, according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, has come to mean “a casual photograph taken quickly with a small hand-camera.” There are



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**Top:** Inscription: "Scott Mcauley of Willoughby of No. 4 in house." Boredom is a recurring problem in accounts of life in the South African Constabulary, and an entertainer would probably have been a popular man. That he could keep his violin with him is an indication that for this trooper, as for many in the Constabulary, this was no longer a mobile war.

**Above:** Inscription: "Crp Comartie of Willoughby who is cooking for the Sergeants." This is the only photo of a soldier wearing a forage cap rather than the wide-brimmed Stetson chosen by Baden-Powell, which was much more sensible in the hot sun.



inscriptions on the back of seven of the photographs, most naming individuals. While these are very useful in identifying some of Cantrill's comrades, however, the photographer himself remains a mystery. We know from his Constabulary discharge certificate of February 1903 that Cantrill was then 32 years old, 5 feet 10 inches tall, with a fair complexion, blue eyes, and light brown hair.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately he did not identify himself in any of his photographs. He may have assumed that his identity would be known, or, as was more likely, he was always behind the camera. The subjects are typical of those a soldier could, and would photograph, his favourite being his fellow soldiers, at ease before their tents or on duty at their posts. The photographs capture casual and informal scenes of everyday life as Cantrill saw and experienced them, the people and places with which he had become familiar. In action, Cantrill would have been far too busy to bother taking photographs, as has usually been the case with amateur soldier photographers.

While the full story behind the photographs, such as the specific names, dates and places, probably will never be known, Cantrill's photographs add both everyday detail and casual

insight to the record of the Canadian experience of the South African War. In many ways they exemplify the point made by photographic historian Jane Carmichael when writing of the photographic record of the First World War: "The amateur's contribution was enormously important in the narrative of otherwise unrecorded areas, events, and campaigns, [in] their accumulation of the variety of individual experience of war and their genuinely casual and candid photography."<sup>27</sup>

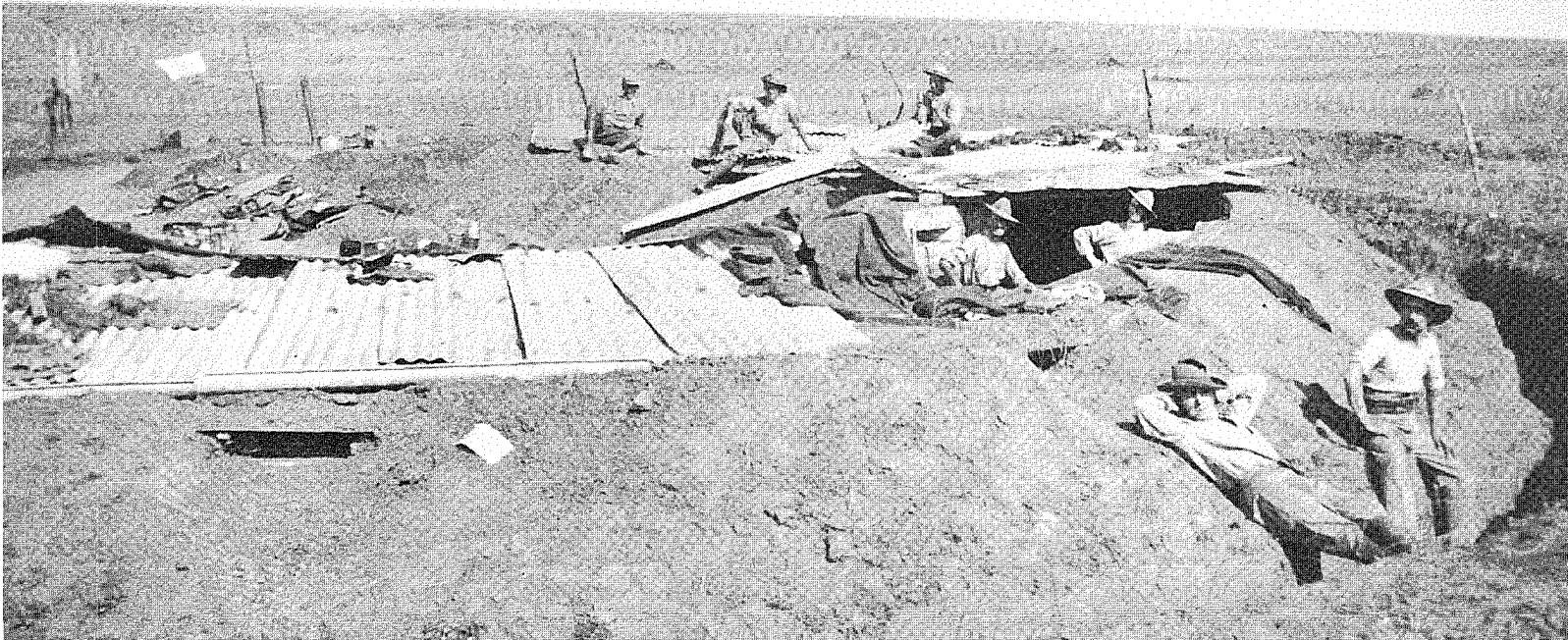
After taking his discharge, Frederick Cantrill returned home to Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, and the next year married Hannah Louise Giles. The couple had six children, of whom three died in infancy.<sup>28</sup> Despite the fact that he was 45 years old and had a family, Frederick Cantrill volunteered for service again in the First World War and went overseas as a lieutenant with the 188th Battalion in 1916. Posted to the 15th Canadian Reserve Battalion, because of his age and poor health, Cantrill was soon ruled "unfit for general service" and sent to the Canadian Forestry Corps in Scotland. By March 1918, a worn out Frederick Cantrill was sent home and discharged as "permanently unfit for service."<sup>29</sup> After the war he moved to Chilliwack, B.C. where,

*Inscription: "Nigger with water cart." The inscription perhaps reflects the hostile and derisive attitude of Constabulary members towards black South Africans, as has been documented by Carman Miller in his study, Painting the Map Red, pp. 388-389. The photo provides a fine view of a mundane, if vitally important, piece of equipment in South Africa, the water cart.*

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**Top:** No inscription. The constabulary was largely employed in small posts spread between the military blockhouses, which the British built in large numbers to help subdue the countryside. This is a good view of a rather uninspiring post, with the flat and featureless land around it. The prospect of spending long periods in such unappealing places goes a long way to explaining the poor morale in the constabulary.

**Above left:** Inscription: "A Dutch Woman and her daughter." The Boer women and girls appear rather uncomfortable, perhaps especially the woman in the center, who seems posed, but is not looking at the camera. Notice the two rifles leaning against the wall at right, which indicate that the photographer was not alone. While the soldiers were comfortable enough to put their rifles down, the weapons still may represent an implied threat as the Boer population viewed the Constabulary, at least in their early years, as an occupying army.

**Above right:** Inscription: "Tpa. Edmunds that was shot right through the body in the same fight that W. Glass was wounded in." While disease caused far more deaths in the Constabulary than battle, the force was involved in a number of smaller skirmishes, and 12 Canadians were killed in combat.



*No inscription. An obviously staged photo providing a good view of a blockhouse and its defenders. Corrugated iron was common as a building materiel in South Africa, as it was to be later in the First World War.*

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in 1929, he died after a brief illness at the age of 58.<sup>30</sup> He left a wife and three daughters, one of whom would serve in the Second World War as a member of the RCAF Women's Division.<sup>31</sup>

Although Frederick Charles Cantrill received the Queen's Medal for service in South Africa he was never decorated for heroism.<sup>32</sup> Nor does his name appear in any historical accounts. Like the grandfather mentioned by Mike Bechthold in the autumn issue of this magazine, "he was an everyman."<sup>33</sup> Frederick Cantrill volunteered for service in South Africa and, like so many Canadians who served overseas after him, did his job, came home, and got on with life. His snapshots were passed along to his children who, in turn, gave them to the Chilliwack Museum.

From there they came to the Canadian War Museum, where they will be preserved, used by researchers, and continue to form part of the collective memory of the nation's military experience.

### Notes

1. The F.C. Cantrill Collection is CWM Accession Number 19950042.
2. Owen Cook and Peter Robertson, "James Peters, Military Photography and the Northwest Campaign, 1885," *Canadian Military History*, Vol.9, No.1, pp.23-29.
3. Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1982), p.129 and Gus Macdonald, *Camera, Victorian Eyewitness; a*

- History of Photography: 1826-1913* (New York: The Viking Press, 1979), p.55.
4. George Gilbert, *Collecting Photographica* (New York: Hawthorn Books Inc., 1976), p.36.
  5. Macdonald, *Camera, Victorian Eyewitness*, p.59.
  6. Don Slater, "Consuming Kodak" in *Family Snaps*, Jo Spence and Patricia Holland, eds. (Virago Press: London, 1991), p.50.
  7. Gilbert, *Collecting Photographica*, p.63 and App.C.
  8. *T. Eaton Company Catalogue*, No.44, Spring and Summer 1900.
  9. "Photographs Taken Under Fire" in *The Canadian Militia Gazette*, I (15 December, 1885). Transcript in PH 1-1527, Peters James, Photography Acquisition and Research Section, NAC as quoted in Cooke and Robertson "James Peters, Military Photography and the Northwest Campaign, 1885" in *Canadian Military History*, pp.23-29.
  10. Carman Miller, *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War, 1899-1902* (Montreal: CWM and McGill-Queen's, 1993), p.371.
  11. *T. Eaton Company Catalogue*, No.44, Spring and Summer 1900.
  12. Gilbert, *Collecting Photographica*, p.63. My research has found no other camera that produced prints of that size.
  13. *Chilliwack Progress* newspaper, obituary, 18 April, 1929, and Chilliwack Museum, ADD MSS 864 Cantrill Family fonds - Giles family history file, p.139.
  14. *Ibid.*, obituary and discharge certificate.
  15. Miller, *Painting the Map Red*, p.368. Also see Carmen Miller, "The unhappy warriors: conflict and nationality among Canadian troops during the South African War" in *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 1.
  16. *Ibid.*, p.373.
  17. *Ibid.*, p.376.
  18. Chilliwack Museum, ADD MSS 864, discharge certificate. Miller gives the date the recruits reached Bloemfontein as 29 April. *Painting the Map Red*, p.377.
  19. Miller, *Painting the Map Red*, p.377.
  20. *Ibid.*, p.378.
  21. Chilliwack Museum, ADD MSS 864, discharge certificate.
  22. Miller, *Painting the Map Red*, p.384.
  23. *Montreal Daily Star*, 30 March 1903, p.6.
  24. *Toronto Mail and Empire*, 1 April 1903.
  25. Carmen Miller, "The unhappy warriors", pp.87-92. Burstall later commanded the 2nd Canadian Division during the First World War.
  26. Chilliwack Museum, ADD MSS 864, discharge certificate.
  27. Jane Carmichael, *First World War Photographs* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p.150.
  28. Chilliwack Museum, ADD MSS 864, Cantrill Family fonds- Giles family history file, p.139.
  29. NAC RG-150, Acc 1992-93/166, box 1473-75, personal records of F.C. Cantrill, CEF, 188th Battalion.
  30. *Chilliwack Progress*, obituary, 18 April, 1929.
  31. Chilliwack Museum, ADD MSS 864, Cantrill Family fonds - Giles family history file, p.141.
  32. Chilliwack Museum, ADD MSS 864, discharge certificate.
  33. "From the Editor," *Canadian Military History*, Vol.8, No.4, pp.3-5.

Brendan McCoy holds an Honours BA in History from Carleton University and an Archive Technician Diploma from Algonquin College. He has worked under contract with the photography collection of the Canadian War Museum for the past two years.

## Battlefield Tours?

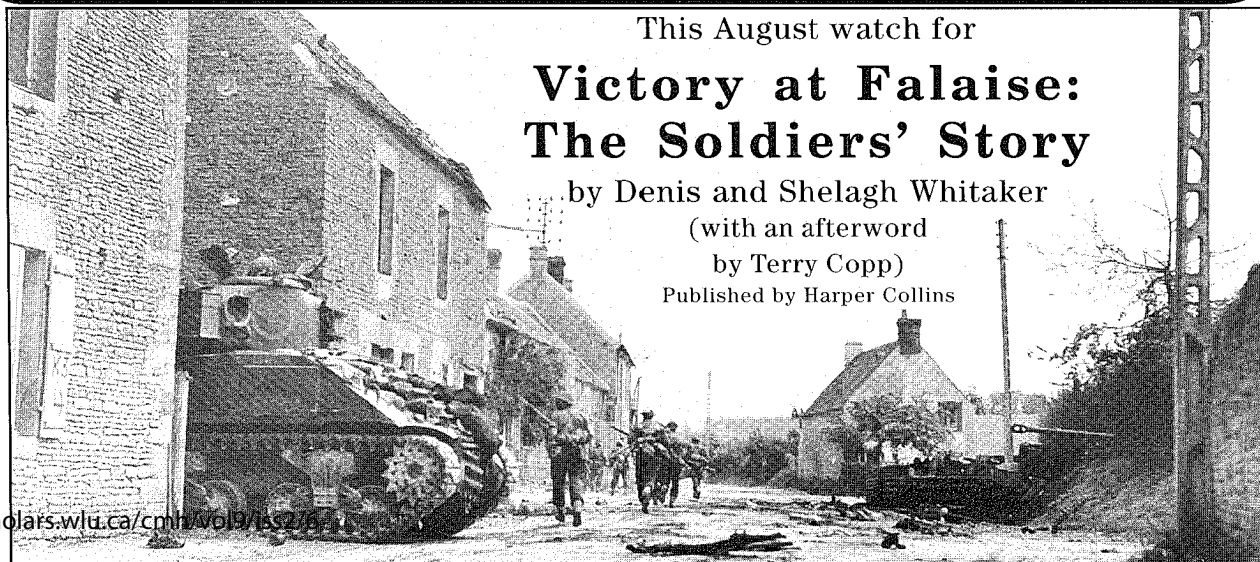
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by Denis and Shelagh Whitaker

(with an afterword

by Terry Copp)

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