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# 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade in the Second Battle of Ypres The Case of 1st and 4th Canadian Infantry Battalions, 23 April 1915

**Andrew Iarocci**

The Great War began in August 1914 as a war of movement, but after three months of maneuver battles the conflict assumed a different form on the Western Front. As flanks were closed during the “race” to the sea, opposing lines of armies began to solidify into static positions. The quick resolution that many contemporary observers had imagined would settle the war before Christmas was nowhere in sight, and with the onset of winter, there was little activity in the west. In the meantime the Germans won significant victories on the Eastern Front, but with the return of campaigning weather in the spring of 1915, their attention returned to the situation in France and Belgium. In order to divert attention away from troop movements to the east, the German command decided to launch a limited offensive to reduce the Ypres Salient in April 1915. This was not intended as a war-winning attack, but it presented a double opportunity to test new chemical weapons and keep the Allies on the defensive. While the Germans were eager to reduce the Salient, the Allies were equally determined to defend it. Ypres was one of few Belgian towns that remained unoccupied and it had become an important symbol of Allied resistance since the First Battle of Ypres in 1914. It was also a gateway to the channel ports and the British were not prepared to let these fall into German hands.

The Second Battle of Ypres is widely remembered as the debut for chlorine gas on the Western Front, but it was also the introduction to pitched battle for the officers and men of the First Canadian Contingent. From the Allied and Canadian

perspectives, Second Ypres was a difficult fight not only due to the presence of chemical agents on the battlefield, but because British, French and Canadian troops were reacting to a German initiative. Such circumstances must have made those April days especially chaotic for Canada’s largely untested soldiers. It is now recognized that the Germans lacked the local resources necessary to sustain a breakthrough at Ypres in the wake of their 22 April attack, but Allied commanders operating without the benefits of hindsight interpreted the enemy’s advance as a palpable threat to the security of the Salient. The first German gas cloud was directed against French troops who occupied the northeastern edge of the Salient. The defenders, who were not equipped with respirators, fell into disorder as choking men attempted to escape the greenish-yellow gas cloud. To the immediate right of the French, 2nd and 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigades fought desperately to prevent the Germans from encircling the Allied line. Meanwhile, a polyglot of Allied units rushed forward to close the gap left by French troops who were driven back by the initial gas attack. Many of the fresh British and Dominion formations thrown into a series of counterattacks during the following few days would suffer appalling casualties, not from the gas itself, but from conventional small-arms and artillery fire.<sup>1</sup>

During the night of 22-23 April, 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade marched out of its reserve billets to help deal with the crisis at the front. In the dawn hours of 23 April a counterattack by 1st and 4th Infantry Battalions was launched against



new German positions established along the east-west line of Mauser Ridge. The attack, designed to stabilize the front, lasted for most of the daylight hours of 23 April. Upon first examination it seems to conform to the stereotype of “unprepared” Canadians being thrown haphazardly into hopeless battle that is so often associated with the earlier war years. Standard historical interpretations of the Canadians’ participation at the Second Battle of Ypres argue that inadequate and incomplete training were chiefly responsible for high Canadian casualties and loss of ground. Military historian Desmond Morton has noted that “serious training” for the Canadians prior to Second Ypres was limited by weather, leave, sickness and a shortage of instructors.<sup>2</sup> Historian Bill Rawling, in his landmark study of trench warfare, contends that in early 1915 “the Canadians were not yet ready for the kind of war that had been thrust upon them.”<sup>3</sup> There is some truth to these statements, but they do not sum up the first few months of the war with complete

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**Left:** Lieutenant-Colonel A.P. Birchall, commanding officer of the 4th Battalion from 29 January 1915 until his death on 23 April.

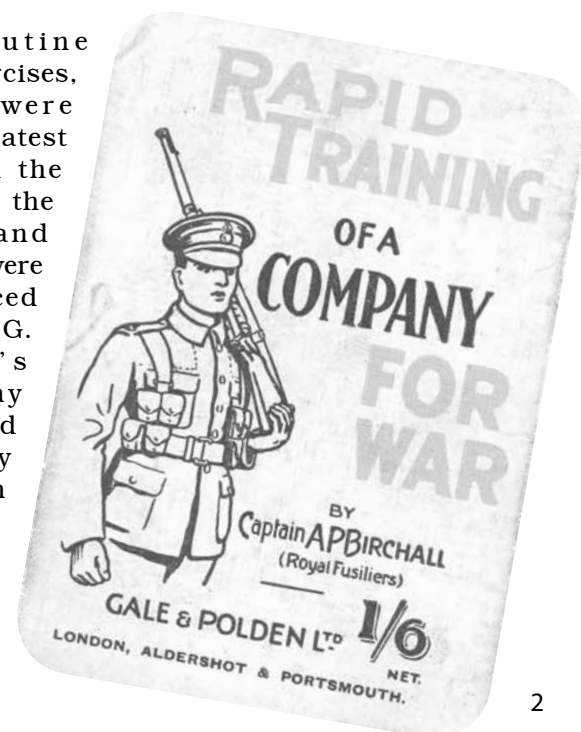
**Inset:** A cap badge of the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion (Central Ontario).

**Below:** Birchall’s training manual, *Rapid Training of a Company for War*. This is the third edition, printed in March 1915.

accuracy. A careful examination of the evidence suggests that, notwithstanding the unfavourable circumstances referred to by Morton, the officers and men of the 1st Canadian Contingent learned a great deal about warfare during the months they spent training in England and France between October 1914 and March 1915.

Upon arriving in England in late October 1914 a standard training syllabus was prepared for Canadians to follow.<sup>4</sup> This training was supplemented in France when Canadian companies and battalions were paired off with more experienced British units during rotations through quiet sectors of the front. Special attention was devoted to the preparation of defensive positions in the dark, the crossing of wire obstacles, cooperation of all arms in the attack, and resupply in the field.<sup>5</sup> Prior to leaving England for France, 1st Brigade participated in several days of brigade-level maneuvers that involved scenarios not dissimilar to the real-life situation that 1st and 4th Battalions would find themselves in on 23 April.<sup>6</sup> Overall, the training undertaken by the Canadians prior to their first major battle was quite sophisticated and not simply a matter of squad drill and bayonet practice.

Beyond routine drill and exercises, Canadians were privy to the latest lessons from the front through the pamphlets and manuals that were being produced by Captain S.G. Partridge’s British Army Printing and Stationary Depot in ever greater numbers.<sup>7</sup>



Visiting British officers also arrived in the Canadian camp to give lectures and answer questions about the situation in France and Belgium.<sup>8</sup> Some of these officers stayed on permanently with the Canadians. One of them was Captain A.P. Birchall, a veteran officer with 14 years in the British Army's 7th Royal Fusiliers.<sup>9</sup> Birchall was subsequently promoted and assigned to command 4th Canadian Battalion as of 29 January 1915.<sup>10</sup> He was not only an experienced officer, but also the author of *Rapid Training of Company for War*, an instructional manual reprinted three times during 1915.<sup>11</sup>

There is no question that the counterattack of 23 April was extremely costly for 1st and 4th Battalions; 1st Battalion suffered more than 400 casualties and 4th Battalion lost approximately 500 men.<sup>12</sup> Although neither unit was able to capture its terrain objective on 23 April, the counterattack was successful in the sense that it helped to prevent the Germans from advancing on Ypres and cutting off the Salient. Contrary to the standard interpretation, there is little evidence to suggest that insufficient training caused high numbers of casualties or unduly influenced the outcome of the counterattack. Contemporary sources clearly show that 1st and 4th Canadian battalions displayed a great deal of skill in their first major battle. A careful examination of message logs, after action reports, and eyewitness accounts recorded at the time indicates that the two battalions remained in communication with each other, and with higher level formations (brigade and division), throughout the day. During their ordeal on the battlefield, both battalions continued to function under extreme fire according to their training and, despite many officer casualties, including the 4th Battalion's commander, the troops did not fall into disarray or quit the field in disorder. Both units held their positions as best they could until relieved late on the 23rd. Officers at brigade and division headquarters attempted to secure as much support as possible from neighbouring infantry and artillery units.

When the Germans launched their first gas clouds on 22 April, Brigadier M.S. Mercer's 1st

Canadian Brigade was in reserve at Vlamertinghe, about five miles to the west of Ypres. During the night of 22-23 April, Generals H.C.O. Plumer, (5th British Corps) and E.A.H. Alderson (Canadian Division) decided that 1st Canadian Brigade, specifically 1st and 4th Canadian Battalions, would participate in an Allied counterattack against the newly-established German line along Mauser Ridge, which ran roughly west to east on the northern edge of the shrinking Salient. Both battalions were warned for action during the evening of 22 April. As a result of the initial German attack, French troops suffering the effects of chlorine gas were falling back on Vlamertinghe itself, along the very roads upon which 1st and 4th Battalions would march in order to reach their starting lines for the counterattack.<sup>13</sup> The battalions moved out of reserve after midnight and crossed over the Yser Canal on the Brielen Bridge sometime between 0315 and 0410 hours.<sup>14</sup> Good route march discipline probably saved the Canadians from becoming hopelessly entangled with retreating French soldiers and various other bodies of troops heading one way or another. Shortly after crossing the canal the commanding officers of 1st and 4th Battalions

NAC PA 7380



Lieutenant-Colonel F.W. Hill, commanding officer of the 1st Canadian Infantry Battalion in April 1915. He is shown here later in the war as a Brigadier-General in command of 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade.





**Above:** The scene of the initial German gas attack. This photograph was probably taken shortly after the war.

**Right:** This photo, taken by the author in 2001, looks northeastwards across the battlefield from the Ypres-Pilckem Road. Mauser Ridge is visible along the horizon, although the upward slope of the land is barely discernable. An extension of the A19 highway towards Ostend will soon bisect this area, which has otherwise changed very little since the Great War.



were briefed by Brigadier Mercer.<sup>15</sup>

Lieutenant-Colonel A.P. Birchall (4th Battalion) and Lieutenant-Colonel F.W. Hill (1st Battalion) were notified at 0443 hours on the morning of 23 April that two French battalions on their left flank would be launching a counterattack toward Pilckem at 0500 hours. On the Canadian front 4th Battalion would lead the assault with 1st Battalion in support. A single battery of 1st Canadian Field Artillery (CFA) Brigade was to fire in support of the Canadian battalions from a position west of the Yser canal.<sup>16</sup> The Canadians' objective was the German line atop Mauser Ridge, 1,500 yards from the Canadian starting line. The intervening space was largely open ground, with a single line of hedges and willow trees bisecting the area about halfway between the Canadian and

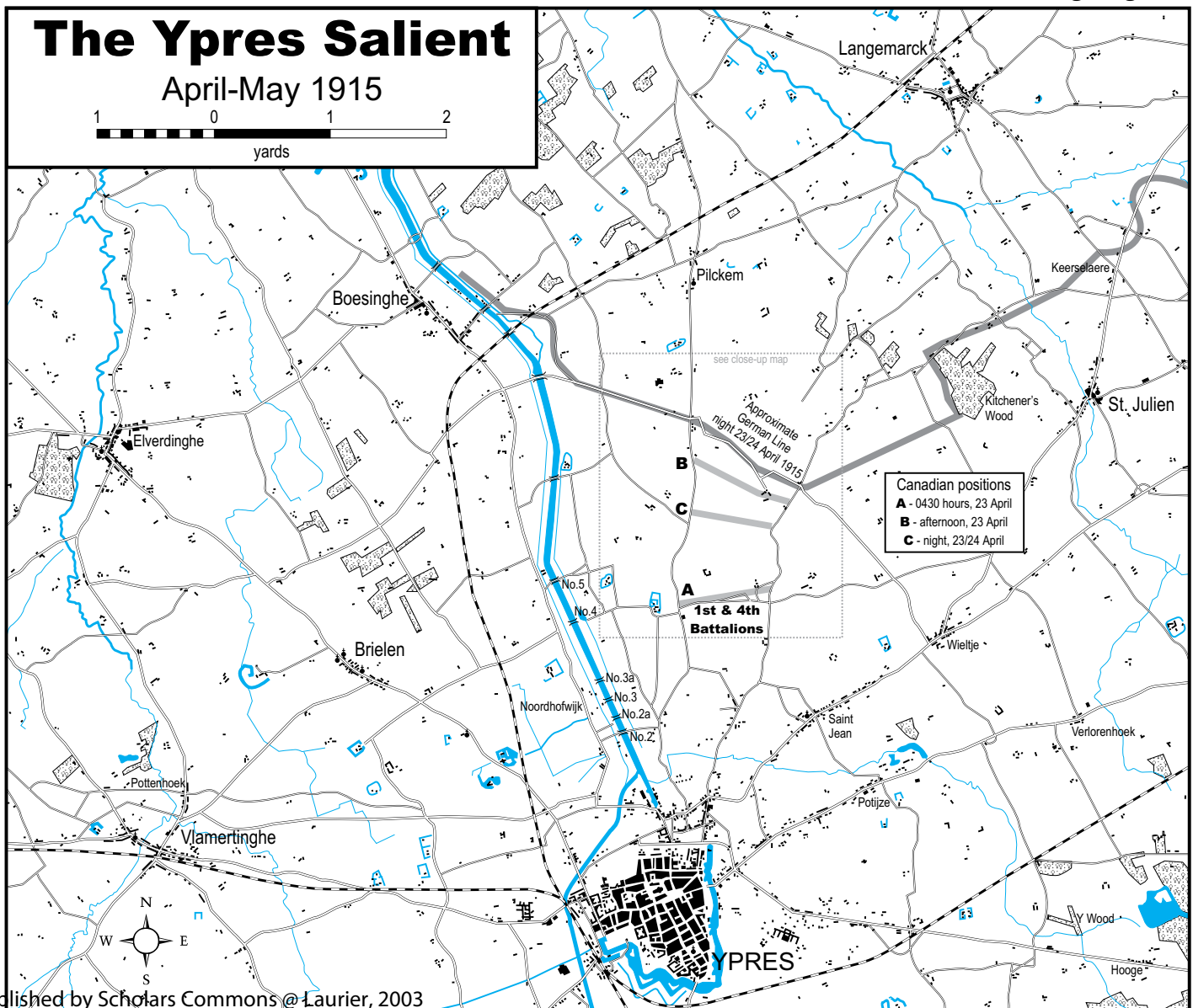
German positions.<sup>17</sup> The field sloped upward very gradually to the top of the ridge line upon which the Germans were dug in.

As of 0500 hours neither the French nor the Canadian battalions had yet to move. The reason for the French delay is unknown, but 4th Battalion's axis of advance was temporarily blocked by the Middlesex Regiment. At 0550 hours Mercer's 1st Brigade reported to Alderson's headquarters that 4th Battalion would be passing through the Middlesex Regiment in order to join the French in the attack, which had still not begun. Believing that the French were prepared to attack on his left, Birchall launched his assault sometime between 0550 and 0630 hours.<sup>18</sup> 1st CFA was kept abreast of the battalions' progress through messages from 1st Brigade since it was unlikely that the gunners would have been able

to clearly observe the attack from their positions on the opposite side of the Yser.<sup>19</sup> No mention is made in the sources of forward observation officers being with the infantry battalions. Instead, it appears that supporting fire was requested by the battalion commanders through their brigade headquarters, which in turn were in contact with the CFA.

At 0700 hours Lieutenant-Colonel Hill reported to brigade that 4th Battalion was not in touch with the French battalions that were supposed to be advancing on the Canadian left. The Canadians' right flank was in better shape, as a company-sized force from the Middlesex Regiment was also advancing.<sup>20</sup> Within approximately 30 minutes Birchall's troops had managed to cover roughly half of the distance toward the German trenches on top of the Mauser Ridge and Hill felt confident enough to report to brigade that "all goes well so far."<sup>21</sup> This early optimism may have resulted

because the Germans held their fire until the Canadians were within 600 yards of them; shortly after Hill's message was received, Birchall reported that progress was slow and that the enemy rifle fire was heavy.<sup>22</sup> Hill then indicated to brigade that Birchall requested reinforcements and, accordingly, 1st Battalion was ordered to advance to support 4th Battalion.<sup>23</sup> By the time that Hill's message was received, brigade had already signaled division that 4th Battalion was stalled and had not established contact with the French.<sup>24</sup> At 0820 hours brigade requested "urgent" artillery support for 4th Battalion, which had clearly been pinned down by then.<sup>25</sup> In the absence of a French advance, division ordered brigade to dig in next to the British on its right and extend its line all the way to the canal line on the left, an additional distance of nearly one mile. The two Canadian battalions were expected to fill the French vacuum between the Pilckem road and the Yser.<sup>26</sup> But as a result of heavy fighting



since daybreak, Birchall and Hill's troops were not strong enough to extend themselves leftwards all the way to the canal line. Thus, Birchall dispatched the following message, received by brigade at 1050 hours:

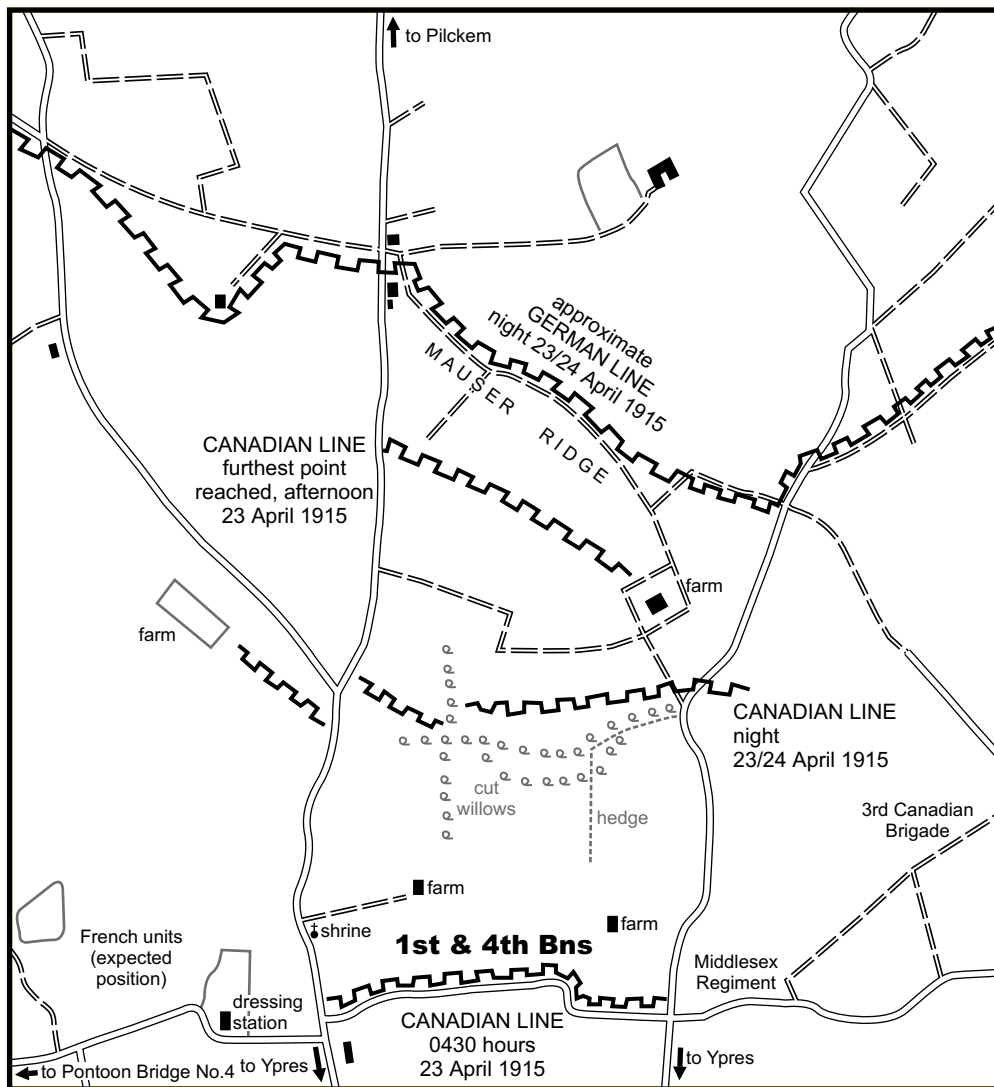
Your message instructing us to stop advance and dig in received. Whole line is now digging in. Line extends from YPRES-PILKEM Road to I think about 600 yds. East of road. Casualties are heavy. MIDDLESEX are on our right and I do not know exactly how far they extend. We reached a point about 450x from German Trenches As all my companies are up in line and I cannot well move them to a flank in daylight I cannot extend our road (line?) towards Canal unless absolutely necessary. I am trying to find out situation between road and canal. Have sent a message to O.C. 1st Bn. giving your message and requesting him to extend his line to the left of the road.<sup>27</sup>

open left flank he reported that only 100 men from his company were available as reserves, an entirely inadequate number to fill the gap left by the French. Hill wisely dug in his reserve troops toward the rear on a higher piece of ground from which he could cover some of the gap and protect the exposed Canadian left flank.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, Birchall ordered his men to dig in where they were. A letter written by Captain Colquhoun, of "B" Company, 4th Battalion, indicates that the order was received by the forward troops, noting that "we advanced to within 400 yards of the Germans, when I received orders to go no further until I received reinforcements. I had only about half of my company left then."<sup>29</sup> Casualties tapered off once the troops were dug in opposite the Germans.

When Lieutenant-Colonel Hill learned of the

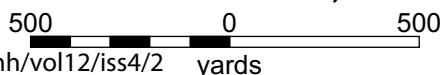
The problem of the open flank was apparently solved just after 1100 hours when brigade

informed the Canadian battalions that the French "now have five battalions between you and the canal..."<sup>30</sup> However, it seems that the French were well to the rear of Canadian firing line, since Birchall was still having difficulty linking up them.<sup>31</sup> As a consequence, General Alderson attempted to contact the French headquarters requesting that they advance to join up with the Canadian left flank.<sup>32</sup> It is unknown how the French responded to this message, but by 1215 hours Birchall had finally established contact with them and learned that despite earlier reports of five French battalions being available, only 50 men were present to fill the gap between the Pilkem Road and the Yser.<sup>33</sup> Then, for reasons that are unclear, the French headquarters informed 1st Canadian Division that the Germans were "apparently running short of ammunition."<sup>34</sup>



Map drawn by Mike Bechthold ©2003. Based on sketch maps contained in 1st Battalion War Diary, April 1915

## Canadian Counterattack, 23 April 1915







*Charge of the 4th Canadian Battalion at Ypres - Lieutenant-Colonel Birchall killed while leading his men as illustrated in The Times History of the War.*

It was agreed that the Canadians and French would resume their attack at the soonest possible opportunity, although it is difficult to explain why Canadian or French commanders believed that the Germans were low on ammunition. If the German fire died down, it was probably because the Canadians had dug in and were presenting fewer targets than they had during the initial advance. In any case, the attack did not resume immediately, as the Canadians waited for a cue from the French which did not materialize before 1500 hours.<sup>35</sup>

The detailed message record ends at this point, but the battalion war diaries and eyewitness accounts of 4th Battalion soldiers indicate that the Canadians did resume their attack during the afternoon. An after-action report from 1st Battalion states that at 1545 hours, Colonel A.D. Geddes' Buffs (East Kent Regiment) arrived and joined the Canadian survivors in a fresh assault. The Anglo-Canadian force was accompanied by a French attack of undetermined strength on the left. The 4th Battalion war diary reports that prior to the second attack, Lieutenant-Colonel Birchall took command of "C" Company after its commander had been wounded. The second attack succeeded in capturing a further 200 yards before being halted by withering fire. At some point during this final attempt to reach the enemy trench Lieutenant-Colonel Birchall was killed,<sup>36</sup> but the additional ground was held until later in the evening when the Canadians were relieved

and withdrawn.<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, an account from the London *Times* corroborates this narrative, although in highly compressed and stylized form:

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

4th Canadian Battalion at one moment came under a particularly withering fire. For a moment--not more--it wavered. Its most gallant commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Birchall, carrying, after an old fashion, a light cane, coolly and cheerfully rallied his men, and at the very moment when his example had infected them, fell dead at the head of his battalion.<sup>38</sup>

The first paragraph of the *Times* report refers to the initial phase of the attack, before the battalion "wavered" and dug in at a range of 400 yards from the crest of the ridge. The second paragraph describes the resumed Anglo-Canadian-French attack in which Birchall lost his life while leading "C" Company.

Some of the 4th Battalion survivors insisted that the objective was reached within two hours of launching the original dawn attack. These accounts present some difficulty, since it is abundantly clear from official sources that the objective was never reached. In all likelihood the troops were not referring to the final objective,



but rather, to German outpost lines which were quickly overwhelmed under the weight of the initial assault. Consider the following account from Private A.W. Wakeling, of "B" Company, 4th Battalion:

At 5 a.m. we were told to take a trench about 1,500 yards away. We had been lying down behind a hedge, and we no sooner showed ourselves than a terrible fire was opened up, machine gun, rifle and shrapnel. It came from all directions on our front and both flanks; our boys went over in dozens...It took us just one hour to take the trench the French had lost. Only 250 of us were left and five officers. We lost about 700 men and 20 officers that morning...In my platoon 55 started and only 11 of us reached the trench.<sup>39</sup>

In the first place, Wakeling has overestimated the casualties suffered by his battalion. In 4th Battalion there were 18 officer casualties, while 487 other ranks were killed, wounded, or listed as missing.<sup>40</sup> It is also likely that German fire did not reach a crescendo until the Canadians advanced to a closer range, probably within 1,000 yards of the objective. This would explain why Hill observed an initially smooth advance. Finally, the trench to which Wakeling refers was not the main objective, but more probably, a forward outpost that the Germans quickly evacuated under the

weight of the Canadian attack.<sup>41</sup> Wakeling further explains that,

The worst was yet to come during the day. We had no artillery behind us and we had to hold the trench at all costs. The artillery started shelling us right away to drive us out...Towards evening our artillery came into action and reinforcements from the British Army..."<sup>42</sup>

In fact, one battery of Canadian artillery was in action throughout the day, but the men in the ranks hardly would have noticed this modest level of fire support in the midst of the punishing volume of German artillery that was landing on top of them. The friendly artillery to which Wakeling refers as "coming into action" was probably British or French. His last assertion regarding reinforcements is correct and refers to those arriving to support the second phase of the attack.

Under the circumstances, there is little that the officers and men of 1st and 4th Battalions could have done differently from a tactical standpoint to make the counterattack against Mauser Ridge more successful. According to A.F. Duguid's account in the official history, the initial advance was "carried out in the most perfect order," as the respective companies "leap-

In this 1917 photo a Canadian soldier examines the grave marker of sapper from 1st Field Company, Canadian Engineers who was killed at Second Ypres.



NAC PA 4499

frogged" toward their objectives during the early morning hours of 23 April.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, battalion machine gunners attempted to lay down suppressive fire with their Colt guns while the rifle platoons moved forward.<sup>44</sup> The battalion's initial advance conformed to guidelines indicated in *Rapid Training of a Company for War*, which outlined the techniques of fire and movement as "the need for covering fire, (a) of one company or platoon covering with its fire the advance of its neighbours," and "(b) of special detachments of infantry posted, if possible, on a flank."<sup>45</sup> Birchall, author of the training manual, made sure that his troops were familiar with these techniques. Eyewitness accounts confirm the "leap-frogging" described by Duguid; according to Private Albert Adams of "B" Company, he and his fellows would advance about 25 yards at a time, taking cover intermittently.

Anyone who visits the battlefield today can easily observe that the Germans enjoyed full advantages of terrain. The ground is very flat and, in early 1915, would not yet have been shelled into the interminable quagmire so often associated with the Ypres Salient during the later war years. As Private Frank Betts noted shortly after participating in the action, the battlefield was "as level as a billiard table."<sup>46</sup> A sketch map of the field drawn by someone from 1st Battalion shows that willow trees bisected the battlefield, and soldiers' letters speak of hiding behind hedges prior to advancing, but this vegetation offered little cover once the assault troops passed the middle of the battlefield.<sup>47</sup> From that point northward the ground rises almost imperceptibly up to the crest of Mauser Ridge. The difference in elevation is only really noticeable as one descends along the Pilckem road, but clearly the Germans were able to look down upon the vulnerable attackers and fire at will from their well-constructed "loop-holed" positions.<sup>48</sup>

It is tempting to criticize Birchall for launching the attack without having contacted the French on his left flank and without a preparatory bombardment. Yet Birchall had orders to attack and the message logs show that the Canadian force was expected to cooperate fully with its Anglo-French counterparts. As far as Birchall knew, the British and French forces on his flanks were also going to participate as planned. In the face of uncertainty about French intentions

Birchall could only delay for so long, as precious minutes of darkness were running out with the approach of dawn on the morning of 23 April. As the sky grew lighter Birchall faced a conundrum experienced by countless other battalion commanders throughout the First World War: go, wait, or stay put? With time running short, clear orders from above, and the understanding that the Salient was in grave danger, it is not difficult to understand Birchall's decision to advance. Nor was this a case of the stereotypical hide-bound commander thoughtlessly ordering his troops forward to meet certain death. Birchall led the attack personally, and then assumed responsibility for "C" Company when its commander was incapacitated. In a letter home Frank Betts wrote:

I suppose you saw in the papers about the 4th (Battalion). Our Col. Birchall was killed. He sure was a brave man. He went up the field just as if there was not a war on, and the bullets, shrapnel, Johnsons and war shells were as thick as hail...<sup>49</sup>

Like so many of his soldiers, Birchall's decision cost him his life, but it is difficult to conceive a better course of action he might have taken under the circumstances of 0530 hours, 23 April 1915.

The search for blame inevitably turns next to commanders at brigade, division and beyond, for ordering a "suicidal" frontal attack and for failing to properly liaise with flanking units. The former criticism has been levelled against British and French commanders many times during the last 80 years, but once again, the reader is challenged to come up with an alternative course of action under the circumstances. With most of Belgium already occupied, Ypres was an important political symbol for the Allies, particularly since the British Expeditionary Force had made its stand there back in the autumn of 1914. Strategically, Ypres was a gateway to the channel ports that needed to be defended in order to protect British supply routes. Allied leaders elected to stand their ground and senior commanders were compelled to function within these parameters. As the German attack gained ground under a cloud of chlorine gas, hints of panic appeared in the Allied ranks. It was deemed necessary to counterattack, throw the enemy off balance, and gain time to reinforce. Senior officers did their best to re-shape plans in this fluid situation. Thus, there was no



**Top:** The Poperinge Old Cemetery, located a few kilometers west of Ypres, is the resting place of some of the Canadians killed at the Second Battle of Ypres. **Inset left:** 26-year-old Private I.H. Murray of Moncton, NB died sometime between 23 and 30 April 1915. He is buried in Essex Farm Cemetery, only a few metres from Dr. John McCrae's dressing station on the west side of the Yser Canal. **Inset centre:** Private G. Harrison was a 35-year-old veteran of the South African War who was killed on 23 April 1915. He is buried in Poperinge Old Cemetery. **Inset right:** Lieutenant H.B. McGuire, of Orangeville, ON, died of wounds on 24 April 1915 and is buried in Poperinge Old Cemetery.

demand from above that Birchall carry through the initial assault at all costs once it had gone to ground before reaching its objective. When Canadian Divisional headquarters learned of the high losses that Birchall's force was suffering, it ordered 1st Brigade to dig in and await further reinforcement. After receiving these orders from brigade, Birchall and Hill acted accordingly.

The issue of liaison is more problematic. With Canadian, British and French units operating side by side in a relatively contained space, the coordination of effort posed a special challenge. Cooperation between Canadian and British formations was facilitated to some degree by the fact that Alderson's Canadians were part of the British chain of command. While the experiences of 2nd and 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigades in

the Second Battle of Ypres show that relations between Canadians and their British cousins were not always completely harmonious, it appears that 1st and 4th Battalions operated well in conjunction with the various British regiments behind them and to their right, including the Middlesex and the Buffs.

The situation on the Canadians' left was far less secure. Not only was the flank left open to attack by the Germans, but the absence of any French activity between the Pilckem Road the Yser Canal allowed the Germans to concentrate their fire against the Canadian battalions. The message logs repeatedly state that contact existed with "French headquarters," but there is nothing more specific to indicate which unit or echelon of command these headquarters belonged to. Throughout most of his final few hours Birchall was out of touch with what forces existed on his left flank and the accuracy of information on French strengths and dispositions coming from Mercer's and Alderson's headquarters is questionable at best. If liaison between front line units had been more securely established before dawn, it is possible that the attack might have succeeded in reaching the German line. But the Canadians had been marching all night to reach their lines and time was short. Language barriers exacerbated tenuous liaison, and there was simply not time for Birchall to personally confirm what his superiors told him to be true. Such action on his part may have delayed the counterattack until nightfall, which would have given the Germans more than 12 additional hours to bring supplies forward and strengthen their new defences on top of the ridge.

Costly experiences such as those of 1st and 4th Battalions at Second Ypres have too often been interpreted as evidence that the "unprepared" Canadian Expeditionary Force had much to learn before it would become the elite Dominion shock force of 1917-1918. Yet this analysis of operations on 23 April 1915 suggests that factors such as time, terrain, liaison, the introduction of chemical weapons, perceptions of enemy intentions, strategic considerations, and emergency circumstances conspired against Canadian soldiers in their first serious encounter with the enemy. Conversely, the training that Birchall and Hill's men had received in England and France probably saved them from falling into chaos and being completely destroyed in

the open. The soldiers of 1st Brigade were well-trained by 1915 standards, and it is doubtful that any other two battalions could have achieved more than the 1st and 4th Canadians. Lessons were absorbed at Second Ypres, but there was no secret formula that could save battalions from suffering high casualties or painlessly overcome the myriad challenges posed by Western Front battlefield environments between 1914 and 1918. The Second Battle of Ypres was an unforgiving introduction to combat for the men of 1st and 4th Canadian Infantry Battalions. The battles of 1916, 1917 and 1918 were not going to get any easier.

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### Notes

1. Canadian formations avoided direct exposure to the gas clouds on 22-23 April, but their turn would come on 24 April when elements of 2nd and 3rd Brigades were targeted by a second gas attack near St. Julien.
2. Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House, 1993), p.28.
3. Bill Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps, 1914-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), p.35.
4. Infantry training syllabus, 1914, NAC, RG 9, vol 4044, folder 4, file 10. This document was not precisely dated, but matches the 13-week syllabus established in November 1914 and described by A.F. Duguid in *Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War, 1914-1919, General Series Volume I: August 1914-September 1915* (Ottawa: J.O. Patenaude, 1938), *Forces*, pp.130-131.
5. WD, 1st Cdn Bn, December 1914, NAC, RG 9, vol 4912, T-10704.
6. WD, 1st Cdn Bde, "Brigade Training/Brigade in attack of position," appendix I, January 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4866, T-10665.
7. On Partridge's work see Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack, 1916-18* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp.186-191.
8. For example see WD, 1st Cdn Bde, 15 December 1914, 7 and 15 January 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4866, T-10665.
9. Obituary, Arthur Percival Birchall, *Upton St. Leonard's Parish Magazine*, June 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4690, folder 47, file 10.
10. W.L. Gibson, *Records of the Fourth Canadian Infantry Battalion in the Great War, 1914-1918* (Toronto: Maclean Publishing, 1924), p.17.
11. A.P. Birchall, *Rapid Training of a Company for War* (London: Gale & Polden, 1915). Birchall commanded the battalion for less than three months, but his tenure coincided with the unit's formative training period. It is uncertain to what degree his expertise in the techniques of infantry training would have uniquely impacted the 4th Battalion during the weeks leading up to Second Ypres.



12. 1st Canadian Battalion Narrative of Operations 23rd to 30th April, 1915," appendix I, WD, 1st Cdn Bn, April 1915 and WD, 4th Cdn Bn, 23 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4912, T-10704.
13. WD, 4th Cdn Bn, 22 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4915, T-10707.
14. WD, 4th Cdn Bn, 22-23 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4915, T-10707. The 12-hour clock was still used in 1915, but this article uses the 24-hour clock throughout to avoid confusion.
15. Duguid to Ralston, 26 May 1934, NAC, RG 24, volume 1904, file DHS 5-7-4.
16. 1st Cdn Bde to 1st Cdn Div, 0550 hours, 23 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, NAC, vol 4866, T-10665.
17. WD, 1st Cdn Bn, "Sketch Shewing ATTACK of APRIL 23rd 1915 made jointly by 1st CANADIAN BATTALION (Lieut-Col HILL) and 4th CANADIAN BATTALION (Lieut-Col) Birchall)," 23 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4912, T-10704.
18. An eyewitness account from Private Albert Adams of "B" Company gives a start time of 0630 hours. Adams' letter is reprinted in F Douglas Reville, *History of the County of Brant* (Brantford: The Hurley Printing Company, 1920), pp.455-456.
19. 1st Cdn Bde to 1st C.F.A. Bde, 0620 hours, 23 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4866, T-10665.
20. WD, 1st Cdn Bn, Appendix B, "Detailed Narration of Operations, 23 April 1915," NAC, RG 9, vol 4912, T-10704.
21. 1st Cdn Bn to 1st Cdn Bde, 0700 hours, 23 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4866, T-10665.
22. 4th Cdn Bn to 1st Cdn Bde, ??00 hours, 23 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4866, T-10665.
23. 1st Cdn Bn to 1st Cdn Bde, 0745 hours, 23 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4866, T-10665.
24. 1st Cdn Bde to 1st Cdn Div, 0720 hours, 23 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4866, T-10665.
25. 1st Cdn Bde to 1st C.F.A. Bde, 0820 hours, 23 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4866, T-10665.
26. 1st Cdn Bde to 1st Cdn Bn & 4th Cdn Bn, 0830 hours, 23 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4866, T-10665.
27. 4th Cdn Bn to 1st Cdn Bde, 1050 hours, 23 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4866, T-10665.
28. 1st Cdn Bn to 1st Cdn Bde, 1030 hours, 23 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4866, T-10665.
29. Reprinted in Reville, 451.
30. 1st Cdn Bde to 1st Cdn Bn & 4th Cdn Bn, 1107 hours, 23 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4866, T-10665..
31. 1st Cdn Bde to 1st Cdn Div, 1125 hours, 23 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4866, T-10665.
32. 1st Cdn Div to French HQ, 1135 hours, 23 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4866, T-10665.
33. 4th Cdn Bn to 1st Cdn Bde, 1215 hours, 23 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4866, T-10665.
34. 1st Cdn Div to 1st Cdn Bde, 1235 and 1320 hours, 23 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4866, T-10665.
35. It is possible that the French were waiting for additional troops to bolster the 50 soldiers already present.
36. The 4th Battalion war diary lists Birchall's time of death as 1900 hours on 23 April. If he actually was killed that late in the day, it is possible that the struggle to reach the German trench lasted several hours and may have included some hand-to-hand fighting before the attackers withdrew to a point 200 yards from the enemy. WD, 4th Cdn Bn, 23 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4915, T-10707.
37. WD, 1st Cdn Bn, April 1915, Appendix 1, "Narrative of Operations, 23-30 April," NAC, RG 9, vol 4912, T-10704.
38. Quoted in a "Supplement to the Upton St. Leonard's Parish Magazine," June 1915, 2, NAC, RG 9, volume 4690, folder 47, file 10.
39. Reprinted in Reville, pp.452-453.
40. WD, 4th Cdn Bn, 23 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4915, T-10707.
41. WD, 1st Cdn Bn, April 1915, Appendix 1, "Narrative of Operations, 23-30 April," NAC, RG 9, vol 4912, T-10704.
42. Reprinted in Reville, p.453.
43. Duguid, p.267.
44. Duguid, pp.269-270.
45. Birchall, p.45.
46. Reprinted in Reville, p.457.
47. WD, 1st Cdn Bn, "Sketch Shewing ATTACK of APRIL 23rd 1915 made jointly by 1st CANADIAN BATTALION (Lieut-Col HILL) and 4th CANADIAN BATTALION (Lieut-Col) Birchall)," 23 April 1915, NAC, RG 9, vol 4912, T-10704.
48. WD, 1st Cdn Bn, Appendix B, "Detailed Narration of Operations, 23 April 1915," NAC, RG 9, vol 4912, T-10704. Survivors claimed that the Germans were firing from well-protected loop-holes. It is possible that these positions were constructed during the night of 22-23 April.
49. Reprinted in Reville, p.457.

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