

2006

Faith, Hope and Love: The Wartime Motivations of Lance Corporal Frederick Spratlin, MM and Bar, 3rd Battalion, CEF

Michelle Fowler

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh>



Part of the [Military History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fowler, Michelle "Faith, Hope and Love: The Wartime Motivations of Lance Corporal Frederick Spratlin, MM and Bar, 3rd Battalion, CEF." Canadian Military History 15, 1 (2006)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Faith, Hope and Love

The Wartime Motivations of Lance Corporal Frederick Spratlin, MM and Bar, 3rd Battalion, CEF

Michelle Fowler

In an attempt to understand the motivations that drive soldiers in war, historians often seek to capture the experience of an individual soldier through his letters, diaries and other personal accounts. But what of the artifacts that are left behind? The personal effects that arrive home to a family after a soldier's death, neatly labeled and wrapped in yellowed paper. These also have a story to tell. Lance Corporal Spratlin, from Toronto, was killed during the Battle of Amiens in 1918. Today his remains lie in the Toronto Cemetery in France, but following his death one of his most treasured possessions was returned to his family – a small pocket-sized Bible. The condition of the Bible alone suggests something about the man who owned it. A gift from his daughter before he left for war, the Bible is worn, the leather is soft, the pages are so curled they stick together and the words *New Testament* are faded almost beyond recognition. To this day, 90 years after it was issued, the Bible is permanently bowed, an indication of its place in a soldier's breast pocket. It is inside the back cover that we gain a clear insight into how a man endures the horrors of war. Penned in Spratlin's clear, unmistakable handwriting are references to many biblical passages, 11 of them with a corresponding facet of war beside it.

The story of the Bible begins on 22 March 1916, when little Janet Spratlin gave her daddy the small leather-bound Bible. Published by the Pocket Testament League, the Bible was issued in order to encourage those who received it "to read a full chapter a day." Exactly one week later Frederick Spratlin and his conveniently-sized

Bible left Canada aboard the *HMS Empress of Britain* as a member of the 75th Battalion, CEF.

There was nothing particularly extraordinary about this citizen soldier, except perhaps that he may have been slightly older than most, 33.5 years at the time of his enlistment. Family lore suggests that he had originally been rejected from service on account of his varicose veins; he had them removed, and re-enlisted. Papers from his successful attestation in August 1915 substantiate that fact. Originally from Port Hope, Spratlin had moved to Toronto with his wife Mary Ethel. Spratlin and his wife had two daughters aged four and six when he joined the CEF, they owned a home with a mortgage in East Toronto, and were members of Emmanuel Presbyterian Church. Spratlin was a tile setter by trade.

Frederick Spratlin spent the majority of his wartime service as a stretcher-bearer attached to the headquarters company of the 3rd Battalion, Toronto Regiment. It is difficult to ascertain why Spratlin was transferred to the stretcher-bearers, but both Spratlin's personnel records and photographic evidence suggest that, although a man with deeply held Christian beliefs, he was not morally opposed to war. Photos were sent home of Spratlin holding a rifle and upon disembarkation in England he was sent on a standard course of Physical Training and Bayonet Fighting (PT. & B.F.). Newspaper clippings and letters show us that he was a rifleman and performed sentry duty at the front for two months prior to the transfer. We will probably never know for sure if his age and strong faith played a part

in his selection for the stretcher-bearers.

We know from the comments in the back of his Bible, that Spratlin likened his decision to go to war with the 12 Apostles being sent by Jesus to spread the gospel. *Matthew 10* – outlines the selection of the Apostles, their mission, the hardships and persecution that they would endure, as well as the rewards they would receive by spreading His word.¹ Spratlin considered this chapter of Matthew to be his ‘Marching Orders.’ Other general passages reflect Spratlin’s belief in the parallels between going to war and the scripture. He annotated the passage, Ephesians 6, with the word “Soldiers” in the Bible he carried at the front. This passage, specifically verses 13-17, outlines the Christian values of truth and righteousness:

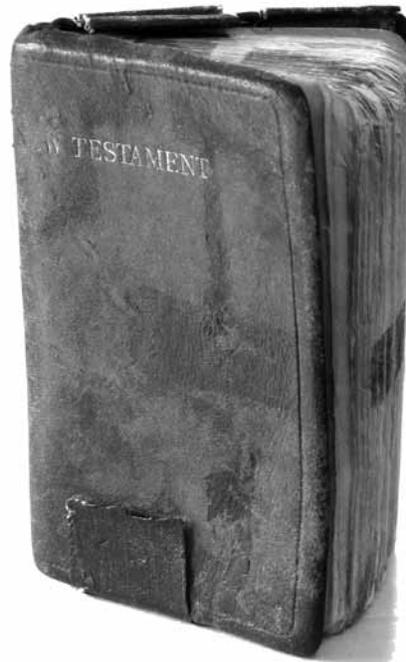
Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God...²

For Spratlin, there was a profound conviction that the Canadian soldier was a defender of Christian values.

Spratlin’s belief that his work as a soldier was in keeping with his Christian values was further emphasized when he equated the chapter *Matthew 8* with ‘Officers.’ This chapter, which outlines the conversion of a Roman centurion to Christianity, demonstrates that this career military officer, hated by Jews, had a faith that put to shame that of many of the Jewish religious leaders.³ Jesus knew what the centurion did for a living and yet was amazed by the extent of his faith. Reconciling the work of a soldier and the

Christian faith was not a problem for Spratlin.

From the time he arrived in France in May 1916 until his death in action in August 1918, Spratlin participated in many of the engagements. He was awarded the Military Medal for his action during the attack on Fresnoy, part of the Battle of Arras, on 3 May 1917. The citation indicates that he went out under heavy rifle and machine gun fire to attend to wounded men. Despite coming under steady sniper fire, he did not return to the trenches until he had determined that all the wounded in his area had been looked after.⁴ Spratlin earned the Bar to the Military Medal on 6 November 1917 during the attack on Passchendaele Ridge. It is in this citation that we get a glimpse of the impression he made amongst those in his company. The citation reads:



This man is recommended for most remarkable gallantry during the attack on PASSCHENDALE RIDGE on November 6th, when he went out from the vicinity time after time under an exceptionally heavy

barrage and a very heavy snipers fire, and dressed wounded and dragged them to shelter from whence as soon as darkness permitted he collected them and dispatched them to the Dressing Station. His work throughout the entire engagement was absolutely marvellous (sic) and has been the comment of all his company.

One of the observations in his Bible was clearly directed at his work as a stretcher-bearer. Beside the words ‘Wounded Man’, Spratlin had written *Luke 10*. This Bible passage, discusses the teams of disciples sent out by Jesus to prepare people for His later visit and to reach out to those who needed saving. It refers to Jesus’ workers “as lambs among wolves.” One verse in particular (*Luke 10:8*) suggests that this team of disciples must heal the sick, these healings would make the sick more willing to listen to the gospel. “And heal the sick there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’”⁵ Did Spratlin equate himself to be a disciple of God, whose job it was to bring the wounded to Jesus?

Lance Corporal Frederick Spratlin in France.

Lance Corporal Spratlin's well-worn Bible, with its hand-written annotations, tells us a lot about the way in which he coped with day to day life at the front. One of the few possessions mailed to his family after his death in 1918, the Bible is an intensely personal artifact that conjures up images of a man of profound faith, who sought and found comfort when confronted with the horrific experience of war on the western front. We cannot construe from one man's Bible and notes, that all Christian soldiers understood what was happening to them in the same terms, but it would suggest that amongst some believers reconciling faith and war was a part of their individual relationship with God. The private observations of one man, recorded in a tattered and faded Bible, was simply his faith, not something preached to him from a Padre or learned at church parade. It was his own perception of his surroundings and of his role in the war.

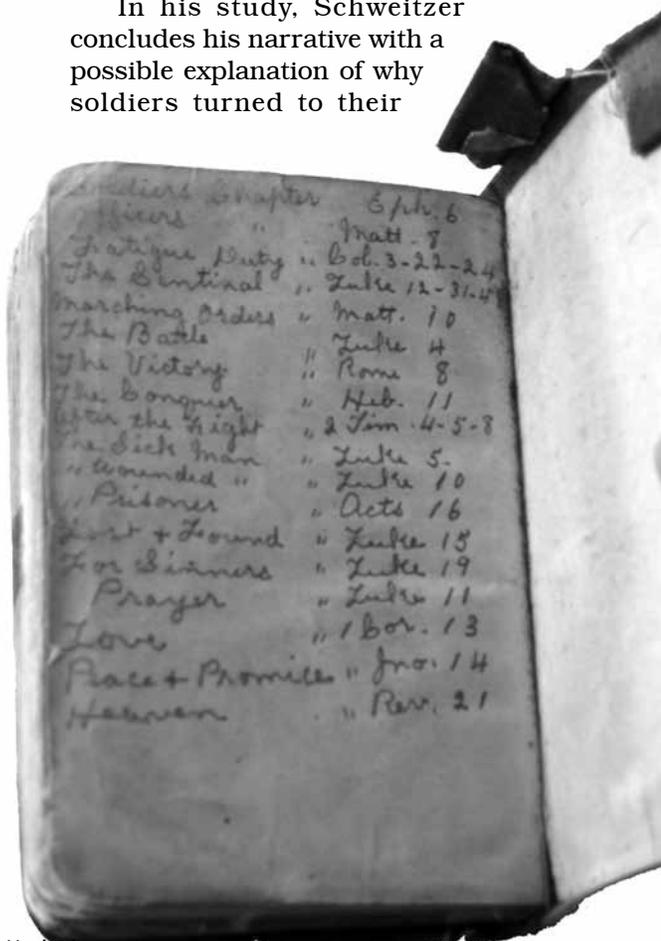
In his book, *The Cross and The Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt among British and American Great War Soldiers*, Richard Schweitzer attempts to examine the religious responses of British and American soldiers within the context of battle. His observations, taken from various correspondence such as personal diaries and letters home, demonstrate that Lance Corporal Spratlin's annotations were not atypical of the observations made by other believers at the front. Schweitzer suggests that many soldiers sought, in their faith, a way in which to manage stress on the eve of battle. Schweitzer provides the example of a private who felt that reading the ninety-first Psalm calmed his nerves prior to combat.⁶ In his Bible, Spratlin scribbled the words "The Battle - Luke 4." This passage, which discusses Satan's temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, has the Devil using the ninety-first Psalm, "He shall give His angels charge over you, To keep you... In their hands they shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone."⁷ As a means of tempting Christ, the Devil suggests that if Jesus is really the son of God, according to Scripture, Jesus will be protected if he throws himself off the pinnacle of the temple. For believers however, the Devil is misinterpreting the Psalm which is meant to illustrate that God will protect his people, not to use God's power in an irrational spectacle.⁸



Its application, on the eve of battle, would suggest that soldiers, who were also believers, understood the protection provided by God. *Luke 4* also alludes to the devil's on-going attacks and the need for Christians to confront Satan in many forms.⁹

Schweitzer continues his analysis in the framework of the battle narrative by suggesting that, with the exception of prayer as a means of coping with imminent danger, religion was absent during battle but would re-emerge as an important element after combat.¹⁰ Religion was used both to cope with the recent deaths of comrades and as a means to express thanks for survival.¹¹ There is nothing in Spratlin's notes which would suggest that he sought comfort from any particular passage in the heat of battle itself, however, there are three notations which intimate the end of battle: 'The Victory' – *Romans 8*, 'The Conquer' – *Hebrews 11*, and 'After the Fight' – *2Timothy 4:5-8*. Paul's letter to the Romans speaks of the journey through suffering to glory, of the ultimate freedom, eternal salvation and the victory over sin that comes with trust in Christ.¹² *Hebrews 11* reminds its readers of all those who have shown faith in history and provides confirmation of the promised time when there is understanding of why things happened the way they did. Both messages were hopeful and one can only imagine that they would have provided Spratlin with the strength to endure the suffering of war in the hope of God's promises being fully materialized.

In his study, Schweitzer concludes his narrative with a possible explanation of why soldiers turned to their



religious faith before and after battle. He quotes one soldier who claimed that prayer was simply a way to make one feel better, that prayer offered comfort to him in the way that alcohol provided comfort to others. Recognizing that this type of psychological theory is not the only way to observe soldier's religious views, Schweitzer acknowledges it is potentially one reason why soldiers turned to faith before and after combat.¹³ This could easily apply to Spratlin, we know from letters home that, in addition to prayer, he also sought comfort in cigarettes and British beer, (the fundamentals of his faith were clearly more important than the Presbyterian messages of temperance), yet this model on its own is difficult to impose on Spratlin's experience. His work as a stretcher-bearer often meant the aftermath of battle, while maybe slightly less dangerous in terms of personal safety, was still an emotionally draining time which required him to be acutely aware of the consequences of the conflict. After the battle was not time for thanks and memorial reflection for Spratlin, it was the time to bring messages of comfort and hope while aiding those in pain.

Outside of the battle narrative, Spratlin's notations also suggest a way to cope with other situations brought on by the war. Fatigue duty, the potential to be taken prisoner and sentry duty were all duly noted in Spratlin's remarks. Each circumstance had a Bible passage scribbled beside it, suggesting a way to get through the mundane aspects of life on the western front.

Luke 12: 31-48 – 'The Sentinel', with this notation Spratlin draws parallels between Sentry duty and Luke's account of the second coming. Luke discusses Jesus' return at an unexpected time, and warns the faithful to be watchful for Him, work diligently and obey his orders.¹⁴ *Acts 16* – 'Prisoner', in this passage, specifically verses 22-25 Paul and Silas are beaten and jailed, despite their situation they continued to praise God, setting an example for others. *Colossians 3:22-24*, beside this passage Spratlin had scribbled 'Fatigue Duty', routine, but exhausting tasks such as cleaning and digging performed by soldiers. The corresponding passage in the book of *Colossians* discusses work as an act of service to God, if one considered menial tasks to be an act of worship this would take the boredom out of the duties.¹⁵

Hand-written annotations on the back page of Spratlin's bible.

Before leaving for war Spratlin had a family portrait taken. He is shown here with his wife, Mary Ethel, and his daughters, Florence (left) and Janet (right). Toronto, probably early 1916.

Spratlin makes three annotations concerning different aspects of the end of battle. One of them, labeled 'After the Fight,' was *2Timothy 4:5-8*. It is the clearest reference to death amongst all of the passages noted by Spratlin. The Bible passage itself expresses the Christian belief in, and hope of, eternal life and salvation in Christ.

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.¹⁶

Interpretations of this verse suggest that, the Apostle Paul, when faced with the end of his life, was certain he had been faithful to his calling. Death was not a tragedy for he knew he would be rewarded by Christ. No matter how difficult the struggle seemed, he kept fighting knowing that with Christ it would all be worth it.¹⁷

There are two letters which were written after Spratlin's death that give us some insight into how this man of profound faith was regarded amongst his peers and superiors. Captain Alexander MacDonald, the regimental medical officer had been working with Spratlin for several months on the staff of the Regimental Aid Post. MacDonald wrote to Spratlin's wife that her husband "appealed to all of us as a man of splendid principles, cheerful devotion to duty and he was greatly admired and liked by all." MacDonald continued, that he personally felt Spratlin's loss very keenly, and noted that Spratlin "died nobly in the performance of his duty, a high one indeed, that of assisting the wounded under fire. Believe me."¹⁸ Florence, Spratlin's youngest daughter, met MacDonald some years after the war when he coincidentally walked into the Toronto office building in which she was working. He felt the need to talk to her about the manner of her father's death.

The other correspondence, a standard letter written by the regimental chaplain, told Spratlin's wife of his burial place not far from where he



fell with 30 of his 3rd Battalion comrades. The chaplain's letter suggested that he "like the great Master was ready to lay down his life for his friends," and that Spratlin "lied in peace 'in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.'"¹⁹

The experiences of individual soldiers are important because they provide insight into the inspirations and motivations for going to war that now seem so far-removed from our 21st century perspectives. Always a contentious subject, notions of just war and its place as a valid Christian position, can get lost in the modern, secularized views of the world today. Spratlin's Bible, while not necessarily indicative of the experience of other Christian soldiers, does demonstrate that faith and war can be reconciled. Furthermore Spratlin's annotated scripture passages tell us that at least one Canadian, and probably many more, viewed the Great War as



Spratlin lies in the Toronto Cemetery, Demuin, France.

Notes

1. *Matthew 10*, as quoted and explained in the *Life Application Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1996), pp.1696-1698.
2. *Ephesians 6: 13-17*, as quoted and explained in the *Life Application Study Bible*, pp.2168-2169.
3. *Matthew 8:8-12*, as quoted and explained in the *Life Applications Study Bible*, p.1690.
4. Personnel Records, Frederick John Spratlin 138974, Library and Archives Canada, Awards Citations – Veteran's Affairs Canada.
5. *Luke 10: 8* as quoted and explained in the *Life Application Study Bible*, p.1850.
6. Richard Schweitzer, *The Cross and the Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt among British and American Great War Soldiers*, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), p.130.
7. *Luke 4: 9-11* and *Ps 91:11*, as quoted and explained in the *Life Application Study Bible*, p.1828.
8. *Ibid.*, p.1828.
9. *Ibid.*, p.1828.
10. Schweitzer, p.132.
11. *Ibid.*, p.135.
12. *Romans 8*, as quoted and explained in the *Life Application Study Bible*, p.2051.
13. Schweitzer, p.137.
14. *Luke 12: 31-48* as quoted and explained in the *Life Application Study Bible*, p.1859.
15. *Colossians 3: 22-24* as quoted and explained in the *Life Application Study Bible*, p.2193.
16. *2Timothy 4:5-8*, as quoted and explained in the *Life Application Study Bible*, p.2232.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. Letter from Captain W.R. Ramsay Armitage, Chaplain, 3rd Battalion to Mary Ethel Spratlin, 18 August 1918.

All photos supplied by author.

a war in defense of others and in keeping with their deeply-held Christian beliefs. He sought both inspiration and comfort from the words of Christ and applied them to his daily struggle that was the First World War. Spratlin fought the good fight, kept the faith and is home.

The Bible first came to the author's attention in 1991, when on a visit to her grandmother's house (Florence Spratlin). It was given to her because of the author's interest in the war-time experience of her great-grandfather. The Bible remains a treasured family possession. In 1997 the author carried the Bible down the aisle when she was married and it now hangs in a shadow box frame in the living room.

Michelle Fowler (MA, History, Wilfrid Laurier University), works as a research co-ordinator at the Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies and is mum to three kids.