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# “My Whole Heart and Soul is in this War”

## The Letters and War Service of Sergeant G.L. Ormsby<sup>1</sup>

**Tim Cook**

The 424,000 service men of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) who sojourned overseas in the Great War formed the greatest exodus of Canadians up to that point in the nation's history. Almost all who served King and country were civilians. Before the war, the small Canadian permanent force had remained fairly isolated from the rest of society, more likely to be viewed as parasitic layabouts than the country's defenders.<sup>2</sup> But this new democratic army of civilian-soldiers came from all walks of life and almost all left loved ones behind.

Although soldiers were forced to survive under the most trying of circumstances in the trenches, letters and care packages were the life-line back to home. “The incoming mail is always the event of the day, the men crowding around for their message from home,” recounted Lieutenant W.B. Forster. “It is also pathetic to see those who are not lucky turning away sometimes with tears in their eyes.”<sup>3</sup> Illiterate soldiers remained out of touch for up to five years unless others acted as their intermediary.<sup>4</sup> For those who could read and write, however, letters were an essential form of communication. Lieutenant Ian Sinclair wrote of his aching loneliness, reminding his parents, “it was the first time I have ever been away from home.”<sup>5</sup> His parents' own comforting letters have been lost, like most of the home front correspondence, likely reduced to a sodden pulp

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by the hard conditions of campaigning.

The traces of these written conversations remain a one-sided dialogue. But soldiers' letters provide an insight into the Canadian war experience.

Despite personal and formal censorship sometimes dulling the more poignant accounts of battle or trench warfare, the letters that crossed the Atlantic did not provide a sanitized view of the war. Passion, sorrow, fear,

and hope were all captured in print by weary, dirty soldiers who thought of their loved ones at home before exhaustion overtook them at night. Cumulatively, such letters, like those between Sergeant George Ormsby and his wife, Maggie, provide invaluable insight into the mentality of Canada's front line soldiers.

Sergeant Ormsby's service with the 15th Battalion lasted from May 1915 to September 1916, and during that time he witnessed most of his close friends killed or maimed. He, too, was cut down on the Somme battlefield, invalided out of the line with several wounds. Yet during the difficult 17 months of trench warfare, with its long hours of boredom and exhaustion mixed with periods of terror, his detailed correspondence with Maggie remained an important emotional support, helping him to endure the terrible strain of the Western Front.

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Canadian War Museum (CWM), George Meitcaif Archival Collection, 2000-0013-11

The Ormsby family, ca. 1919. The Ormsby's second daughter, Catherine, was not yet born.

thousand men had trained for months, practiced their musketry and bayonet skills, dug trenches, and learned to advance in measured bounds, only to be nearly wiped out in a week of battle. The 15th lost a staggering 671 infantrymen wounded or killed of the roughly 1,000 who started the battle. There were few survivors from the three forward companies, two of which had fully faced the second lethal chlorine gas attack of the war. One post-battle report noted that at least 33 men from the 15th Battalion had been killed outright by gas, and many more likely went uncounted, either shot or struck by shrapnel fire as they flopped around, wheezing ravaged breaths through corrupted lungs.<sup>7</sup>

When the survivors staggered out of the line, they could see their battalion was in ruins. Reinforcements were needed desperately. The 30th Battalion, recruited largely from British Columbia, was broken up and Private George Ormsby and about 300 others from his regiment were sent to France to fill the gaping holes in the ranks of the 15th Battalion. The new men said their disappointed goodbyes to their mates, who would be dispersed throughout existing battalions. However, as George wrote to Maggie, after hearing of the exploits of the 1st Division, "I am proud to be a Canadian."<sup>8</sup>

The 15th Battalion was raised in Toronto, based on a core of men from the 48th Highlanders of Canada. The 48th had, like other prewar militia units, been stripped of its long heritage and replaced by the new numerical CEF battalions. The 15th Battalion fought well in the first major Canadian engagement of the war at the Second Battle of Ypres in April 1915, despite having its lieutenant-colonel, John A. Currie, flee from the front. Found drunk and perhaps shellshocked in a rear area, he was sent home, and in that peculiar Canadian way, also promoted.<sup>6</sup> But a good commanding officer would not have saved the 15th at Ypres. They had suffered horrible casualties like all Canadian infantry units of the 1st Division. Nearly a

Like more than 70 percent of the First Contingent, George was foreign-born, and the war helped to shape his sense of Canadian identity.<sup>9</sup> Ormsby had come to Canada after an unhappy early life in Ireland. Born in Ballycastle, County Mayo on 16 April 1879, his loving family of five sisters, aged 14 to three weeks old, were devastated when their mother, Susan, died of birth complications. His father, after whom he was named, remarried quickly. It appeared to be more for the children's sake than out of love. Sadly, the new mother saw the children as a burden. As the father worked the farm, the children were neglected. The tall but sickly young George, who had been successfully

home-schooled for many years, was shipped off to a public Catholic school. As a Protestant he reported long afterwards that he spent most of his days simply trying to survive vicious schoolyard fist-fights.

Realizing his life was unlikely to improve, and after seeing a number of his sisters emigrate to America, he left Ireland for Glasgow, Scotland. George tried to enlist in the army at the age of 14, but was turned down due to his age and poor health. Mired in poverty, he worked menial jobs before stowing away on a ship to Montreal two years later. He knew nothing of the country, but was advised to head west. He made it as far as Northern Ontario where he was a miner and later a transporter of goods. In 1902, after having failed the medical exam to enlist for overseas service in South Africa, he boarded a Canadian Pacific Railway train and finally saw the west. He continued to support himself with a variety of jobs, and lived the life of a bachelor. However, at a public dance at Lumby, British Columbia, George Ormsby met a handsome, Presbyterian school teacher, Maggie MacArthur, who fled into his arms to escape a drunken lumberjack.

George was smitten. He pursued Maggie and courted her with gift novels by Thackeray and Dickens. They were married in 1906. As required, Maggie quit her job and the two of them went north to farm in the British Columbia interior. They bought 900 acres for \$2,250 and carved out a living in the spring of 1908. It was a hard, solitary life, and Maggie, who had given birth in 1909 to a daughter, Margaret, was unhappy. She convinced George to sell the farm, which they did for a significant profit. They returned to the city, first Vancouver, and then back to the Lumby region. Together, they built a large general store with a lively dance hall above it. Although George suffered wracking coughs from chronic bronchitis, the Ormsbys were leading citizens in the village, and prosperous enough to have another child, Hugh.<sup>10</sup>

The excitement of war in August 1914 continued to swell during the fall, and George, 35-years-old with a sickly cough, decided to enlist. At 5 foot 11 inches he looked the part of the tall colonial. Obviously his bronchial problems were ignored by the medical officer, the local druggist, and George's friend. He signed his attestation papers

on 10 November 1914 and became a private in the 30th Regiment of BC Horse.

Maggie was furious. George had left her, their business, and the two young children to fight overseas. As a strong-willed woman who had always participated in running the farm or the store, she had been abandoned. But like thousands of other wives, she was forced publicly to bite back her anger due to the patriotic upswell within the community. Privately, however, she worried about her husband and how she would cope in his absence. Events were little helped by one of George's first letters from Camp Vernon, where he was training. He instructed her to sell off the store's merchandise.<sup>11</sup> Maggie closed down the store, and even tracked down locals to pay off their debts. Then she waited for word from her husband, who was soon overseas, while she cared for two young children, wondering how she would keep food on the table.

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“**K**ee up courage Dear and don't be afraid, and if it should happen that I do go under, I trust you will be proud that I have had the courage to get out and fight against such a domineering race,” wrote George to Maggie in his first letter from France. “Should Germany win this war then may God help Canada – in fact the whole world.” Having traded in his trousers for a kilt, George was slowly indoctrinated into the culture of the 15th Battalion. He was told by one veteran how “the boys found [a Canadian soldier] crucified to a door with bayonets through his hands and feet.”<sup>12</sup> This apocryphal story of German barbarity no doubt added to his belief in the justice of the cause, but George had long been committed to the conflict.<sup>13</sup> The overrunning of little Belgium and the desire to support liberty in the face of German militarism had already taken precedence over his ongoing sadness at being away from the family: “You have no idea how much I miss the little tots,” George wrote.<sup>14</sup> But he also knew why he was fighting: “Those Germans are brutes who fear neither God nor man.”<sup>15</sup> Contrary to the views of many historians and war poets who maintain that this optimism was blasted from the soldiers once they spent any time in the trenches, George would not succumb to this supposed feeling of purposelessness.<sup>16</sup>

By the beginning of May, sports, light drill, and inspections allowed the Canadian Division's survivors to recover "from the strain and fatigue of the last two weeks."<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, Ormsby and his fellow recruits began to join them in the trenches. The massive weight of firepower from machine guns and artillery had forced the soldiers on all sides to dig into the earth to find cover. These underground cities, separated by the blasted, uninhabited no-man's-land, ran hundreds of kilometers from Switzerland to the North Sea on what came to be called the Western Front. The front lines were held in strength, but behind them were support and rear trenches joined by a series of communication trenches that ran perpendicular to the front. Saps and listening posts were pushed into no-man's-land, where small groups of infantrymen were posted to provide advance warnings of enemy attacks. Every day and night soldiers shored up the crumbling walls, filled sandbags, and rebuilt sections that had been damaged by artillery fire.

Life was filled with long periods of boredom interspersed with moments of terror.

"It seems so funny to be reading your letters with hundreds of guns firing all around – such a terrific uproar...it is something like a ton of dynamite going off – last night I saw one fall and it flung the dirt into the air higher than the trees," wrote George. But the surprised response to the novelty of the trenches was nonetheless mixed with determination to see it through to the end. George remained buoyed by his beliefs and from ongoing news of German military actions. Within two weeks of arriving at the front, George was shocked to hear of the sinking of the *Lusitania* by a German U-boat in early May, with the loss of nearly 1,200 lives. He saw it as nothing less than a "cowardly act. Our chaps and in fact the whole army is furious. I am afraid there will be very few prisoners taken by our boys." George volunteered for a machine gun section, so that he would be "able to mow down the brutes in thousands, and I trust when our machine comes into action that mine will be the hand to use the gun... all I ask for is just one clean ten minutes of uninterrupted fire."<sup>18</sup>

Ormsby and his companions were not long in the trenches before they were ordered into the Canadians' second major engagement of the war: the Battle of Festubert. Fought from 15-27 May 1915, Festubert involved British, Canadian, and Indian troops supporting a larger French offensive further south in the Artois region of France. As part of the British operation, gunners unleashed a then-enormous bombardment of 100,000 shells, but it did little to soften the German defences. The opening phases of the battle were a terrible slaughter as battalions of infantry were hurled in frontal assaults against mostly undamaged trench systems.

The 15th Battalion entered the battle on 20 May. Although a number

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"I am dreadfully homesick and I am longing to be home with you and the children again... For comfort I read your letters and look at your pictures and I can tell you they are a great comfort to me." George Ormsby.



CWM 2000-0013-12, George Metcaif Archival Collection, 2000-0013-12

George Ormsby in the trenches,  
Western Front, 1915.

of Canadian assaults had already been reduced to a bloody shambles, the corps commander, Douglas Haig, ordered further attacks. Four companies from the 16th and 15th Battalions scrambled out of their shallow trenches at 1945 hours on 20 May while it was still bright. Advancing in waves, with two or three yards between men, the Canadians faced machine gun and rifle fire across open fields, which flew, as one attacker noted in his diary, "like sleet."<sup>19</sup> Soldiers were hit and then hit again as they fell to the ground. Most men showed unfaltering discipline as they were cut down, struggling forward to keep their parade-ground march.

That anyone could survive such a hurricane of fire seemed unbelievable. But still the Canadians advanced, finding holes in the barbed wire, gravitating to the precious few areas of dead ground that provided some cover, firing at the Germans as they alternately ran and crawled forward. Crossing water-filled ditches and trenches, the steadily-thinning ranks pushed through the forward German lines, bayoneting and shooting the enemy in grim close-quarter combat. By the end of the night, they had captured the orchard that was their objective. It was the farthest point reached by British forces during the battle, and it was renamed Canadian Orchard. But attesting to the fruitless nature of the operation, even this furthest point was later evacuated to straighten out the line and avoid enfilade fire.

The two companies of the 15th Battalion suffered 150 casualties, close to a 50 percent loss rate.<sup>20</sup> George Ormsby served during the battle as an ammunition runner for his machine gun team. He moved back and forth through a hail of bullets, watching soldiers being killed all around him. "The first sight that greeted my eyes when I went back to the trenches was dozens of the 30th



lying dead on the field...It is heartbreaking."<sup>21</sup> As he wrote later to Maggie, "I have seen such horrible sights and suffering... Such devastation and bloodshed you could not imagine it nor believe it unless you saw it."<sup>22</sup>

The battle raged on for another week at the shocking cost of 2,468 casualties. The Canadians inched their way forward 600 yards on a one-mile front: four men injured or killed for every yard of muddy ground captured.<sup>23</sup> The Canadian Division had lost more than 8,500 men in just two battles.



CWM George Metcalf Archival Collection, 2000-0013-16.1

Using his illegal camera, Ormsby snapped a photograph of his friend Sergeant Alfred Salter seated behind a Colt Model 1914 machine gun.

The 15th Battalion reformed again, integrating yet newer groups of reinforcements, and continued its rotation in and out of the front lines. Any time in the forward trench placed a heavy strain on the soldiers, and George felt his 36 years were working against him. The steady exertions of trench fatigues and chores, and the seemingly unending flow of casualties were difficult on all: "I hardly sleep at all and certainly not more than three hours per day."<sup>24</sup> But George was a survivor. He had pulled himself out of poverty several times, and the trenches were one more hurdle in his life. Nonetheless, he found the feeling of helplessness while waiting especially trying. "It would not be so bad if the Germans would only attack but they are acting on the defensive and we do the attacking, then they beat it but we lose the men. If we could only get at them with the bayonet it would be alright but they won't stand up to this." Snipers and shells took their toll, as did poison gas. George

was poisoned by chlorine in the summer of 1915, and laid up in a billet for four days with heaving lungs and frequent vomiting.<sup>25</sup> His already weak lungs were further ravaged, but he did not write about it to Maggie, likely to not worry her further. Throughout the war and for the rest of his life, however, he would be wracked with deep coughs.

"I am dreadfully homesick and I am longing to be home with you and the children again... Every time I go to sleep I dream that the war is over and that I am back again home. For comfort I read your letters and look at your pictures and I can tell you they are a great comfort to me."<sup>26</sup> His letters to Maggie continued throughout his tour on the Western Front, and not only did he worry about the bullets, bombs, and the trenches "awful with mud," but he ached to know that Maggie and the "kids" were being cared for. He had assigned \$20 of his \$33 a month to be sent to her. That, along with the \$20 separation allowance

from the government and \$25 of the Canadian Patriotic Fund, a private charity organization that distributed millions raised by citizens to soldiers' families, he hoped would be enough to keep them fed.<sup>27</sup> But there were delays throughout the process, and six months after he had enlisted, Maggie had still not received either army or CPF payments.<sup>28</sup> He sent soothing letters to his wife and angry ones to Ottawa. The trenches did not weaken his resolve to do his duty, but like many soldiers, he fought an additional war against military bureaucracy. As well, he kept a private vigil against the guilt of leaving loved ones behind.<sup>29</sup>

The letters remained a life-line for both husband and wife: precious words and sentiments that moved back and forth across the Atlantic. George shared his postwar dreams with Maggie, and she, one can only assume, did the same.<sup>30</sup> He tried to explain why he had enlisted: "My whole heart and soul is in this war and the way the Germans have acted has aroused my fighting blood."<sup>31</sup> Upon seeing Belgian refugees, he wrote that he felt he was "fighting for the fatherless and the oppressed."<sup>32</sup> Maggie was proud enough of her husband that she forwarded some of his letters to the local newspaper. George was horrified when she sent him clippings, fearing retribution from the censors and, no less inconsequential, teasing from his mates in the trenches. It was not uncommon for newspapers to publish soldiers' letters, but George had hoped that Maggie would keep his own correspondence from public eyes. Yet despite their weekly communication of a few hundred words, much in their lives went unrecorded.

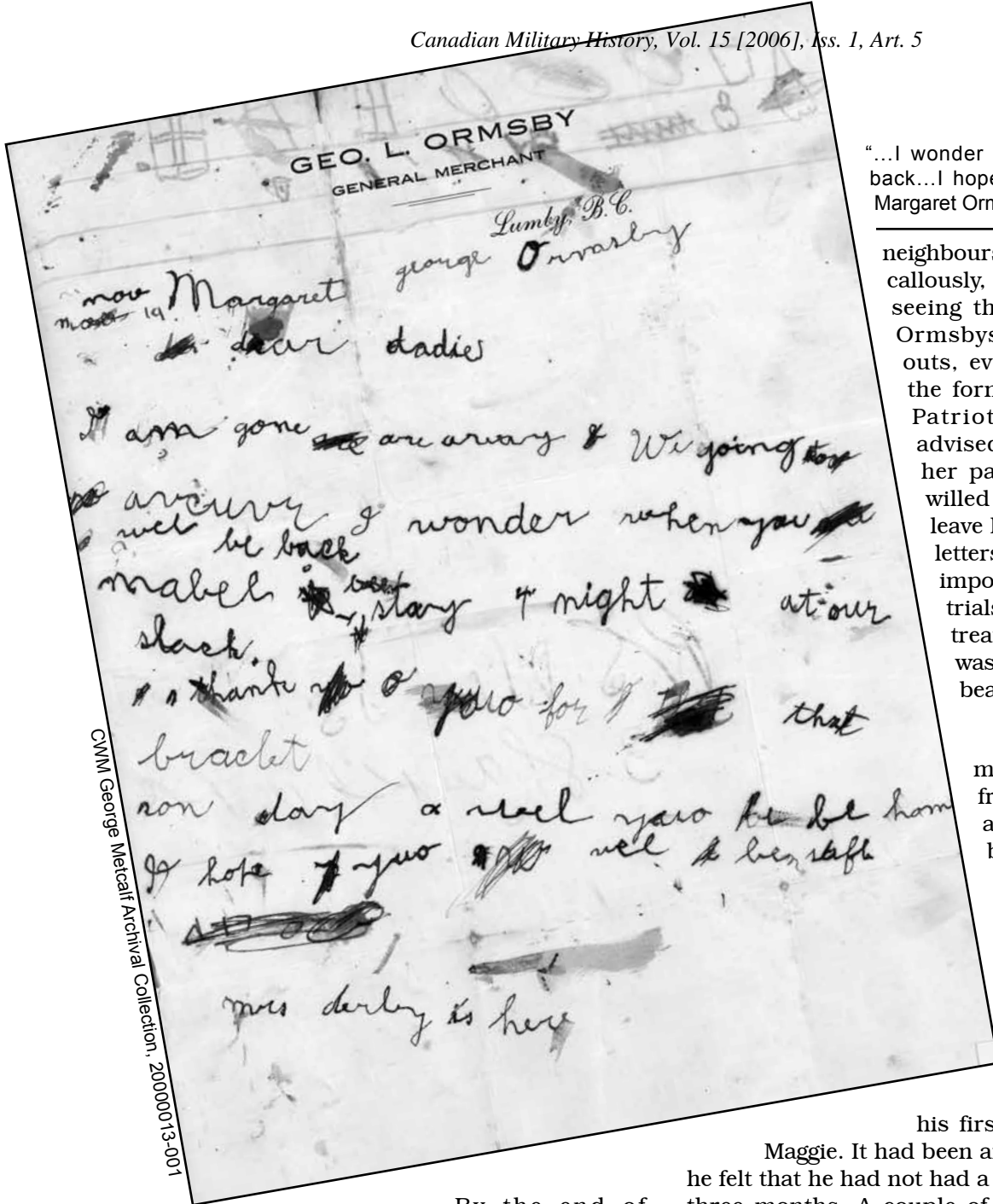
Continually worried about finances, George asked Maggie to send him their camera in the summer of 1915. He hoped to snap some "valuable pictures," since "some papers in England offer and pay as high as £200 for good snap shots and I have seen scenes which beat anything."<sup>33</sup> Because it was forbidden to use a camera in the front lines for fear of turning over valuable information to the enemy, he likely sent this request in a precious green letter, periodically issued to soldiers and not subject to censorship.<sup>34</sup> Attesting to the clandestine nature of the request, George asked that the camera, film, and developing solution be sent to him in empty cookie jars. He planned to shoot

the war from the trenches and then find a dark dugout among his trusted mates to develop the pictures. George also asked sheepishly for some instructions, since he wasn't quite sure about how to use the camera. After it arrived, he managed to send back a series of snapshots of himself and Lumby men in the trenches to Maggie, but he did not sell anything to the newspapers. His hopeful project was cut short when one of his scoundrel companions stole his camera, perhaps giving pause to the oft-repeated notions expressed in the phrase of the "brotherhood of the trenches," and its connotations of mateship.<sup>35</sup>

Life in the line continued to be fraught with difficulties and it was surely an understatement when he wrote to Maggie that "War was no picnic." By mid-August, he had not had his "boots off for fifteen days."<sup>36</sup> As a machine gunner he spent longer periods in the trenches, as the defensive firepower of his Colt weapon was needed to protect the battalion while in the line. The trials of trench warfare were wearing on him and he complained "that now a man has not got a fighting chance, a shell comes along and wipes him out and he has not had the satisfaction of striking a blow in return."<sup>37</sup> And the shelling never stopped. "Lots of boys cannot stand the incessant pounding and their nerves go to pieces. I notice lots of them looking at least 10 years older than when they left Victoria."<sup>38</sup> Almost every letter contained a reference to a recently wounded friend or acquaintance: with the steady litany of names, the war was a strain for George, but terrifying for Maggie, who could only wait and wonder if she might one day see her husband's name on a dreaded casualty list.

By November of that year, the mud and slush in the trenches was nearly unbearable, with George's kilt doing little to protect his legs from the cold. Yet he was still proud of his service, claiming that he would never be shown the "white feather" like so many men in Canada who would be accused of cowardice.<sup>39</sup> Despite his ongoing patriotic sentiments, it must have been heart-breaking for him to receive a letter from his daughter, Margaret, who, in crooked, slanting letters, wrote: "I wonder when you will be back...I hope you wil[l] be safe."<sup>40</sup> It was sufficiently powerful for him to keep it on his person for the next year through fierce fighting and even his own terrible wounding.





CWMM George Metcalf Archival Collection, 20000013-001

"...I wonder when you will come back...I hope you wil[!] be safe." Margaret Ormsby to daddy.

neighbours were treating her callously, taking pleasure in seeing the once-successful Ormsbys driven to hand-outs, even if they were in the form of the Canadian Patriotic Fund. George advised her to return to her parents, but strong-willed Maggie refused to leave her home. George's letters betray anger at his impotence: on top of the trials of warfare, the ill-treatment of his family was almost too much to bear.

"I am sitting in my dugout 225 yards from the Germans... and I am writing this by candle light, it is raining outside as usual. The dugout is very damp, all the sandbags are soaked through, but the roof is of sheet iron and is very good." So George started

his first letter of 1916 to Maggie. It had been an awful winter, and he felt that he had not had a "dry foot for nearly three months. A couple of weeks before, his machine gun section had lost their officer, the fifth in the last seven months."<sup>41</sup> There was a reason why the machine gunners and bombers called themselves members of the "suicide club," but this term, not surprisingly, was never passed on to Maggie.<sup>42</sup>

Around this time, with George now a long-service veteran, he was moved to the number one spot on the Colt machine gun. That meant he was aiming and pulling the trigger, while his number two guided the belt-fed bullets, and the other three members of his section raced back and forth to bring forward water and

By the end of 1915, Maggie and the children were living in poverty. But like many proud wives who did not wish to further burden their serving husbands, Maggie kept much of this to herself. As George remarked in one letter: "I would like to know how you are getting along financially, you never say how you are fixed." But there was no doubt that she and the children could no longer survive on their meager payments, steadily worth less as inflation increased the cost of living. As a result, Maggie had been forced to sell off the Ormsby's prized horses, as well as their buggy, cutter, and harness. Added to this difficult decision, Maggie reported her disgust that several

tens of thousands of rounds of ammunition. The everyday banality and brutality of trench warfare continued until early June, when the Canadians were again thrown into battle in the Ypres salient. The Germans attacked the newly-arrived 3rd Canadian Division near Mount Sorrel in an attempt to wrest away the remaining high ground. A barrage during the early morning of 2 June 1916 shattered the Canadian front lines, obliterated trenches, killing hundreds. Waves of German soldiers stormed the shocked survivors. Despite stubborn resistance from many of the remaining defenders, the enemy advance gobbled up a thousand yards of battered trenches. By the end of the day, reinforcements established new lines to check the German surge.

The 15th Battalion was ordered to the front from its spot in reserve where soldiers had been resting and playing baseball. On the early morning of 3 June, the 7th, 14th, 15th, and 49th Battalions were selected to counterattack the enemy forces. It was a hasty, ill-conceived plan. Without proper reconnaissance of the front, the Canadians floundered over the broken ground and were cut down by enemy fire that had not been silenced by a sporadic supporting barrage. Friendly artillery fire also landed in their ranks and the 15th charged into what their war diarist called a "Perfect HELL of Artillery and Machine Gun fire."<sup>43</sup> The first line of soldiers wilted away, only to be replaced by second and third waves. It was a "most murderous affair," wrote George Ormsby.<sup>44</sup>

"We attacked and drove the Germans back and recovered a great part of the ground...Such bravery it would be hard to imagine and unless seen cannot be realized. I saw our boys go over the crest of the hill running for all they were worth and as they poured along in an irresistible charge they were mown down in hundreds. But they actually chased Fritz right back into the trenches and followed him in but of course none of them came back as they were out numbered 50 to 1. I was not far behind when this occurred certainly not more than 100 yards where we dug ourselves in and from which position Fritz could not dislodge us. Although he turned thousands of shells loose upon us. I don't think that any of the boys ever figured on coming out of that fight and personally I gave myself up as a goner."<sup>45</sup> The German machine guns and shells continued to rain down on the 15th Battalion, and after

suffering dozens of casualties, the order was given to fall back to the starting point and dig in. On 4 June, the survivors were relieved and trudged to the rear area, where they gulped their rum ration and slipped into sleep. They had sustained 290 casualties.<sup>46</sup>

During the rainy evening of 12 June, the veteran 15th Battalion marched forward to the front again to support another operation planned for the next day. The Canadians counterattacked as part of a carefully-planned set-piece battle. Infantry attacks were to follow a devastating artillery barrage into the enemy trenches. Behind the wall of whirling metal, the Germans were driven back, and Ormsby and his companions assisted the storm troops by bringing forward supplies and ammunition. The Canadians regained most of the losses of 2 June, killing and capturing thousands of enemy soldiers. But the two-week battle cost another 8,700 Canadian casualties.<sup>47</sup>

George survived, but many of his best friends were killed or wounded. One of them, Percy Graves, was a victim of shell shock. George had received a slight wound from a spent bullet in the leg, and as it was being treated, he stopped in to comfort his friend. "He is out of his head at times and is quite sensible at others but he attributes his pain to some disease, says he has been in hospital three weeks and has not been in any battle, when as a matter of fact I know that a week ago he was out in billets and was in the best of health as I was talking to him then." A corporal told him his friend had been found unconscious in a trench after the battle. "I feel so sorry for poor Percy, he was crying when I saw him. He is a fine soldier – he will be alright after a few months rest." Having seen the terrible effects of war, George was sympathetic to his friend, and others, who succumbed to shell shock. The battle had been a shattering affair, and during the fighting three of the other four machine gunners in his section had been killed. "When I go around looking for some friend and find he is gone under it makes a fellow feel bad; this is the worst part of the war, the morning after with the ranks sadly thinned."<sup>48</sup>

George was promoted to corporal upon his return to the battered 15th. His regiment was back up to strength but "fully 70% are new men," he complained. The veteran Ormsby had seen

too many friends killed and maimed to escape bitterness, but it was not directed against the supposed futility of the war. Instead, he felt that British politicians or generals were taking too long to train new troops, continuing to sacrifice the “old timers...who are kept at it incessantly.” Still, he took solace in staring at the pictures of Maggie, Margaret and Hugh. Attesting to the time that had passed, he commented worriedly about a recent photograph: “what a change two years have made in [Margaret]; I would not know her at all.”<sup>49</sup>

In early September the Canadian Corps moved further south to the Somme region in preparation for a renewed British offensive. The battle there had raged since 1 July 1916, chewing up men and material in ghastly attritional fighting where forces attacked and counterattacked over the same ground. The Germans had constructed intricate defences along the front, based on deep dugouts, thirty to fifty feet below ground, capable of resisting all but the heaviest of artillery fire, and linked to the rear by communication trenches. On the surface, dense barbed-wire entanglements lay in front of the trenches to slow attackers, while machine gun posts covered the angles of approach across the barren terrain.

All units that spent time on or near the Somme front lines haemorrhaged casualties from artillery, sniper, and machine gun fire. But the 15th Battalion's first tour was shocking even for veterans, and George was struck by the overpowering smell of rotting flesh. The pounding of the guns never ceased. After three days at the front in early September, the 15th Battalion lost over a hundred casualties.<sup>50</sup> There was worse to come.

The successful Canadian offensive on 15 September 1916 captured the ruined village of Courcellette and the surrounding region, but the subsequent fighting was costly and painful. Trench raiding and battle patrols occurred every night as the Canadians probed the enemy lines for weakness. Heavy rain saturated the shattered terrain, reducing it to a quagmire. Lieutenant-General Sir Julian Byng's Canadian Corps was ordered to prepare for another attack on 26 September, and the 15th Battalion would be a part of the offensive.

The 15th moved into the front lines on 24 September, five hundred yards east of the shattered village of Pozières. Artillery bombardments pounded the trenches day and night. A chance shell exploded on Battalion headquarters, igniting a supply of gasoline, which killed 11 and wounded 33.<sup>51</sup> The operation continued despite losing many of the battalion's officers. Elements of 11 Canadian battalions attacked at 1235 hours in broad daylight. The artillery barrage had been desultory across the front: barbed wire remained uncut, machine gunners unhindered. Some 3,000 Canadians charged, including Ormsby and his fellow Highlanders.

Before the battle, Maggie had likely received a short letter from George written on 17 September that was designed, in his words, “to let you know that I am alive and well.”<sup>52</sup> She knew of nothing else except for reports in Canadian papers highlighting the success of the corps. Yet the long lists of names of killed and wounded could not be hidden behind patriotic platitudes. Nonetheless, it would have come as a terrible shock in early October to receive a letter from Sergeant Alfred Salter, one of George's friends, that her husband had been wounded on the 26th when a shell “burst very close to him.”<sup>53</sup> Salter informed Maggie that George had walked to the rear, so he hoped it was not too serious. But she was desperate for information. Her George had been wounded almost a week before: was he recovering, would he be maimed, or worse?

Finally, a letter by George, written on 4 October, put her at ease. He had been wounded in three places about an hour after the advance, with shrapnel passing through his back and shoulder. His legs and spine were hurting continuously, but he welcomed a “jolly good rest” after more than a year in the trenches. Amidst the brave exterior of the note, however, he confided that the “Somme is a dreadful place, the man that gets a decent wound there is lucky as I certainly consider myself.”<sup>54</sup> George also felt that “I have done my share,” and while he still believed in the cause, it was time for others to take his place in the firing line. This must have provided some relief for Maggie.

George moved to a number of convalescent hospitals throughout Britain, but his wounds

were more serious than first thought, and he healed slowly. His persistent cough worsened too, as his weakened body succumbed to a number of illnesses. He was tested for tuberculosis, which came up negative, but his prewar bronchitis and his wartime gassing often left him wheezing for breath. Despite this slow recovery, he confided privately to Maggie that "When I see all the poor chaps going around with legs and arms off I consider myself lucky in escaping so easily."<sup>55</sup> Like many front-line soldiers, George missed the companionship of the trenches, but also reveled in the idea of returning to his family. He had done his bit.

It would be nine more months of painful rehabilitation before he was sent back to Canada in June 1917 to be formally discharged early the next year. His wounds were considered so serious that he received a 100% pension, uncommon at the time.<sup>56</sup> George returned to his family after three years and they began to rebuild their lives together. The letters of love, intensified by the distance and trauma of war, had been the easy part; understanding how to reconnect and communicate with words and whispers was far more difficult.

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**B**ut George's health emergencies were not yet over. He spent much of 1919 in a veterans' hospital, recovering from influenza. His children remembered him coughing and hacking throughout his life. There were night terrors and insomnia, evidence that sometimes the worst scars came not just from shrapnel or poison gas, but from the psychological wounds of war. This was a legacy that most trench soldiers carried with them but rarely discussed.

Under the Soldier's Settlement Act, George bought ten acres of land outside of Vernon in the Okanagan Valley. With his gas-poisoned lungs, he felt he needed to work outdoors and not in a store. Although it was situated in a fertile area, the Ormsbys had been sold poor land, like much of the land that was available to veterans. They refused to give up, however, and overcame the hurdles of poor irrigation, crop failures, and medical bills. By the early 1920s, their back-breaking toil had allowed them to diversify into poultry- and apple-production.

George had left school at 14, but remained a man of letters throughout his life. He wrote two unpublished novels, one of his life as an immigrant, and the second of his war experience. While the Ormsby family struggled through the 1920s and was devastated as fruit farmers during the Depression, George and the better-educated Maggie pushed their children towards formal education. Margaret Ormsby was awarded her doctorate in History in 1937 and would go on to be a pioneering historian of British Columbia. She was one of the few women who taught at the university level in the 1940s. Her brother, Hugh, would go on to earn his MD in 1937, serve in the Second World War as an eye specialist, and have a distinguished postwar career in ophthalmology. A third child, Catherine, was born in 1923 and earned degrees from Queen's University and Simon Fraser. These academic careers were all quite remarkable for a family that barely survived the Depression. But education and writing, it would seem, were an important part of the Ormsby family's life.

Despite the passion of their letters back and forth, it is also clear that there were problems between George and Maggie in 1914. George had no interest in Ireland, and perhaps only a little more in England, but he believed in what he saw Britain standing for: liberty and progress. He was swept up in the excitement of 1914, but with a successful business and a small family, there would have been far less pressure on him to enlist than on single, healthier, and younger men. There may have been other push factors, according to their children, of unspecified problems in their marriage. Whatever the case, the war separated them, but their letters brought them together. And together they remained for another 60 years until George died in 1967 at the age of 88, his beloved Maggie following him six years later.<sup>57</sup>

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**M**ore than 600,000 Canadians enlisted in the First World War, and 424,000 served overseas. Of these, more than 60,000 were killed, and at least double that number were wounded. Sergeant George Ormsby's war career was like many in the CEF, spanning 17 months. Very few men lasted the entire war. Ormsby was involved in three major battles and forced to endure the ongoing trials of the Western Front. Yet Ormsby

was different than most men, as he was older, married and had children, unlike nearly 80 percent of the men in the CEF who were single and, on average, a little over 26-years-old.<sup>58</sup>

That George's letters survived attests to how they were treasured by Maggie. She must have read and reread them, staring at the hastily-scratched script, hoping to glean in those words what her husband was experiencing in the trenches. Waiting for the weekly correspondence was both exhilarating and agonizing. What did a gap in the delivery of letters or postcards mean? Had the mail been lost, or had the loved one fallen? For many, wartime letters, bound and pressed, arranged and archived, remained the last tangible link to a father or brother or son who would never come home. Through those letters from the front we have traces and glimpses into the private world of George and Maggie. Nonetheless, while soldiers' letters remain in public archives and museums, in private attics and drawers, those which captured the sentiments of families left behind, parents, women and children, remain part of the nation's lost history. Historians have only begun to explore this ordeal by loved ones of waiting and worrying at home.<sup>59</sup>

George Ormsby's letters offer valuable insights into the experience of trench warfare. The official War Diaries and reports of operations provide broad indications of the movement of hundreds, even thousands of men. And while there are glimpses into the private world of individuals through some types of official documentation, it remains the letters, diaries, and memoirs that throw light on the trench warfare experience. In the case of George Ormsby, his letters tell us much about his war in the trenches, the trials of combat, the appalling weather conditions, and his ongoing reliance on support from home. Perhaps of most interest, however, is Ormsby's assessment of why he was fighting in a war thousands of miles away from his family. Quite simply, he believed in the cause. He saw German militarism as something that had to be stopped, and he was willing to risk his life to do it. Thousands of other Canadians felt the same. That is worth remembering since much of the popular memory surrounding the war is infused by the belief that soldiers were somehow tricked into serving their country as they naively went off to war.<sup>60</sup> There is no doubt that few

foresaw the terror of the trenches, but George Ormsby is a reminder that not all soldiers had such patriotic or idealistic beliefs blasted from them in the cauldron of fire on the Western Front.

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## Notes

1. The author would like to thank Catherine Marcellus, the daughter of George Ormsby, for her support in writing this article, including sending additional information to Ottawa and reading an earlier draft. Sarah Klotz, Cameron Pulsifer, and Sharon Cook also read drafts and their critical comments improved the final piece.
2. For the prewar impression of permanent force soldiers in Canadian society, see J.L. Granatstein's *Canada's Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).
3. Charles Lyon Foster (ed.), *Letters From the Front: Being a Record of the Part Played by Officers of the Bank in the Great War, 1914-1919, Volume 1*. [1920] p.49.
4. For education in the CEF, see Tim Cook, "From Destruction to Construction: The Khaki University of Canada, 1917-1919," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 37.1 (Spring 2002), pp.109-143.
5. Daniel Dancocks, *Welcome to Flanders Fields: The First Canadian Battle of the Great War: Ypres, 1915* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988), p.67.
6. There is, not surprisingly, no mention of this in his memoirs. John A. Currie, "*The Red Watch*": *With the First Canadian Division in Flanders* (Toronto: McClelland, Goodchild & Stewart, 1916).
7. Library and Archives Canada (LAC) RG 24, v. 7734, file D.H.S. 3-4, Casualties 15th Battalion, March & April, 1915. For a discussion of gas casualties at Second Ypres, see Tim Cook, *No Place To Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World World* (University of British Columbia Press, 1999), pp.30-4.
8. Canadian War Museum. 20000013-008, George Ormsby collection, George to Maggie, n.d. [late April 1915].
9. Colonel A.F. Duguid, *Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War, 1914-1919, General Series, Volume I*, (Ottawa: J.O. Patenaude, Printer to the King, 1938), p.53.
10. I am indebted to Catherine Marcellus for sharing with me a family history of George Ormsby. The early history of Ormsby is drawn from Catherine Marcellus, Libby Marcellus, Caitlin Williams, Joanna Williams, *Home Fires Burning: A Story of Love and War* (unpublished manuscript). Catherine Marcellus donated the letters to the Canadian War Museum, and they can be accessed in its archives. See the George Ormsby fonds, 20000013-008.
11. George to Maggie, 28 March 1915.
12. George to Maggie, 8 May 1915.
13. This event was later investigated and proved to be untrue. Still, the power of the rumour continued throughout the war and often provoked Canadians to commit similar atrocities. For the myth of the crucified Canadian, see Desmond Morton, *Silent Battle: Canadian Prisoners of War In Germany, 1914-1919* (Lester Publishing Limited,

- 1992); for Canadian soldiers executing prisoners in retribution, see the forthcoming, Tim Cook, "The Politics of Surrender: Canadian Soldiers and the Killing of Prisoners in the Great War," *The Journal of Military History*.
14. George to Maggie, 16 November 1914.
  15. George to Maggie, 28 March 1915.
  16. See, for starters, Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975) and, as a useful rebuttal, Brian Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).
  17. War Diary, 14th Battalion, 6 May 1915.
  18. George to Maggie, 10 May 1915.
  19. H.M. Urquhart, *The History of the 16th Battalion (the Canadian Scottish), Canadian Expeditionary Force, in the Great War, 1914-1919* (Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada, 1932), p.79.
  20. War Diary, 15th Battalion, 20 May 1915.
  21. George to Maggie, 3 June 1915.
  22. George to Maggie, 10 June 1915.
  23. G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919* (Queen's Printer, 1964), p.103.
  24. George to Maggie, 20 July 1915.
  25. LAC RG 150, 1992-93/166, box. 7483, Personnel file of Sergeant George L. Ormsby, regimental number 77545.
  26. George to Maggie, 10 June 1915.
  27. Desmond Morton, *Fight or Pay: Soldiers' Families in the Great War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004).
  28. George to Maggie, 27 July 1915.
  29. George to Maggie, 10 June 1915.
  30. George to Maggie, 20 April 1915; 28 July 1916.
  31. George to Maggie, 20 April 1915; 10 June 1915.
  32. George to Maggie, 10 May 1915.
  33. George to Maggie, 6 August 1915.
  34. For Canadian photography in the First World War, see Peter Robertson, "Canadian Photojournalism during the First World War," *History of Photography* 2.1 (January 1978).
  35. This was a phrase often used in the postwar years by soldiers looking back on their war experiences and the important role of companions.
  36. George to Maggie, 19 August 1915.
  37. George to Maggie, 9 September 1915.
  38. George to Maggie, 12 December 1915.
  39. George to Maggie, 11 November 1915.
  40. Margaret to Daddy, 19 November [1915].
  41. George to Maggie, 22 December 1915.
  42. George to Maggie, 28 January 1916.
  43. War Diary, 15th Battalion, 3 June 1916.
  44. George to Maggie, 1 July 1916.
  45. George to Maggie, 7 June 1916.
  46. War Diary, 15th Battalion, 4-5 June 1916.
  47. For an overview of the battle, see D.J. Goodspeed, "Prelude to the Somme: Mount Sorrel, June, 1916," Michael Cross and Robert Bothwell (eds.), *Policy by Other Means: Essays in Honour of C.P. Stacey* (University of Toronto, 1972).
  48. George to Maggie, 7 June 1916.
  49. George to Maggie, 24 August 1916.
  50. Kim Beattie, *48th Highlanders of Canada 1891-1928* (Toronto: Southam Press, 1932), pp.166-167.
  51. Beattie, p.170.
  52. George to Maggie, 17 September 1916.
  53. Alfred Salter to Maggie, 29 September 1916.
  54. George to Maggie, 4 October 1916.
  55. George to Maggie, 18 October 1916.
  56. For postwar pensions, see Desmond Morton and Glenn Wright, *Winning the Second Battle: Canadian Veterans and the Return to Civilian Life: 1915-1930* (University of Toronto Press, 1987).
  57. Much of the postwar history of the Ormsby family is drawn from Catherine Marcellus, Libby Marcellus, Caitlin Williams, Joanna Williams, *Home Fires Burning: A Story of Love and War* (unpublished manuscript).
  58. Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1993), pp.278-9.
  59. For recent works, see Robert Rutherford, *Hometown Horizons: Local Responses to Canada's Great War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004) and Morton, *Fight or Pay*.
  60. For the popular memory of the war, see Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory. The First World War: Myth and Realities* (Headline Book Publishing, 2001), Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble* (University of Vancouver Press, 1997); Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front*.

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