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Longing and Loss from Canada's Great War

Tim Cook and Natascha Morrison

*"Tell Aileen I still have the Teddy Bear and will try to hang on to it for her, it is dirty
and his hind legs are kind of lose but he is still with me."*

Letter, Lawrence Rogers to his wife, Janet, 25 September 1916.¹

Ten-year-old Aileen Rogers of Cowansville, Quebec, presented the teddy bear to her father, Lawrence, after he enlisted to serve overseas in the Great War. The bear, small, brown, and with stumpy arms and legs, was a favourite of Aileen. She had carried it through her childhood, keeping it close to help her to deal with the childhood traumas of loneliness and late night fears. She now ceremoniously handed it to her father, who promised to keep it near him throughout the war. The teddy bear would see training camps in Canada and England, and then the muddy, rat-infested trenches of the Western Front. Rogers would carry it as he cringed under the fall of high explosives and as he ran through a hail of shrapnel to retrieve wounded men in his role as a stretcher-bearer. The teddy bear would be a tangible link between a family left behind, waiting, worrying, and wondering, and a father serving overseas, dealing with many unnatural stresses, including the anxiety of having left his wife and two young children to fend for themselves. The teddy bear, which spent much of the war in her father's knapsack, or buttoned up in his left breast pocket, would come home to Aileen. Sadly, her father would not.

* * * * *

Lawrence Rogers left his farm and his wife of 13 years, Janet May Weaver Rogers, as

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well as their two children, Aileen, ten, and Howard, seven, to don the King's uniform. While Rogers cared deeply for his family and the farm that he had built up with his sweat and toil, the pull of war was too much. As young men from the surrounding farms put down ploughs and shovels one by one; as the dirt roads became increasingly empty of farm hands; and as the spaces in the pews of the Rogers' local Anglican church became more obvious, Rogers fought a silent, internal battle about whether it was right to let others fight for things in which he believed. At age 37 he was old by the standards of the war yet he yielded to his doubts on 11 February 1915 and enlisted at Sweetsburg, Quebec, in the 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles (5th CMR). Although he had no militia experience, he was made a sergeant, no doubt because of his age.

Lawrence Rogers' letters were filled with longing for his family, but he also felt he could not live with himself had he remained on the farm while so many of his countrymen served overseas. However, as his letters illustrate, he found it particularly hard at night, either in the training camps or at the front, where "I have too much time to think and it gives me the blue devils when I lay awake and think of you dear and the kiddies, but then I feel it was my duty and when a man feels that it is a strong pull to do right."²

The 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles trained in the camps at Valcartier and later Sherbrooke. The mounted rifles had no horses, so much of their time was spent marching and learning rudimentary military skills. As Lawrence wrote to his dear Janet, "It is hard to see the use of them [marching and parade-ground drill] when what the men want is to be taught how to use the rifle and bayonet. Some of them could not load one of the service rifles... and instead of teaching them that and the care of arms we get ½ hour drill saluting and paying compliments, something absolutely useless."³ The endless drill, dust and discipline wore on all men. Crowded tents, ob-

noxious mates, and even bread infested with cockroaches, meant that life in the camps was trying at all times. They learned that serving one's country meant living without many of the amenities to which they had grown accustomed. "Some of the fellows I am afraid have gotten cold feet and are trying to back out of it as gracefully as possible," wrote Rogers. He was not impressed. "Some of them admit that if they had not thought the war would be over by now they would not have enlisted."⁴

The training camps in England were little better than those in Canada, although Rogers was far closer to the front where he yearned to be. Here, the 5th CMR was attached to the 8th



Lawrence Rogers photographed early in the war.

Canadian War Museum (CWM) 200400015-003

Brigade in the newly-formed 3rd Division commanded by Major-General M.S. Mercer. The division arrived in France in October 1915 but Rogers had been left behind in England, as there were too many men. He felt the blow keenly, confiding to Janet that "I made a fool of myself by crying." His hurt feelings were not soothed by an abusive officer, one who had been left behind by his unit several months earlier, who accused Rogers and other unwanted men of being "a bunch of bums and no good."⁵ Rogers redoubled his efforts to get back to his unit, and rejoined the 5th CMR in early December after casualties to shellfire, snipers, and sickness re-

quired replacements to fill the ranks.

Rogers served as a stretcher-bearer with the 5th CMR's small medical staff. Each battalion had between 12 and 16 stretcher-bearers commanded by the medical officer. The stretcher-bearers did not have to participate in the regular military fatigues that plagued the infantry, and were therefore occasionally derided by the poor bloody infantry as bomb-proofers (men safe in the rear away from the shells). They were not. The stretcher-bearers were close to the front and consistently risked their lives to bring in wounded men or carry them to the rear. This poem, entitled "The Stretcher-Bearer," from the soldiers' trench newspaper, *The Listening Post*, sums up the role

of the body-snatchers, as the stretcher-bearers were sometimes known:

Who lies around his tent all day,
Spends sixteen hours in the hay?
The blooming Stretcher-Bearer.

Who says, when we go 'stand to,'
'Well, so long, boys,' or 'Tootle-lo'?
The blooming Stretcher-Bearer.

Who played at poker, won the 'mom,'
Had all the players on the run,
And put the sergeants on the bum?
A blooming Stretcher-Bearer

But when the shells are falling thick,
Who with us to the last will stick,
And drag us to a shell-hole quick?
The good old Stretcher-Bearer

Who binds our wounds up under fire,
Knows not the meaning of 'retire,'
And works on smiling in the mire?
The plucky Stretcher-Bearer.

So you who thinks he has a sinch,
Remember that he doesn't flinch,
For you may holler in a pinch:
'Hi, double, Stretcher-Bearer!'⁶

Rogers settled into the trench warfare of the Western Front. There was no escaping the lice and the mud, the rats and the flies. "We are getting used to a lot of things I never thought I could stand....Tell the kiddies that as I am writing there are about a hundred birds singing in a tree outside our dug-out just as if there was no war on at all, and on the other side of the dug out you can hear big guns going off and shells whistling over head."⁷

"You have seen the pictures of the wounded coming in, helping each other, one propping the other up....we don't allow ourselves to look on the blue side of things or the hardships[,] if we did we

would all go to pieces."⁸ Despite the strains of combat and dealing with injured comrades, he enjoyed the fellowship of the trenches. His mates helped sustain him, even though he would write, after five months at the front, that "I have aged several years in the last couple of months."⁹ The threat of snipers and shrapnel fell heavily on everyone. Lawrence Rogers was due to be pulled out of the line for a rest in April 1916, but one of his men had an attack of nerves and could not go into the line, so he replaced him. In a second letter he noted that other soldiers "take a dose of Caster Oil or anything else to get off parade and so they report sick in the morning but it don't always work."¹⁰ This type of malingering was a constant worry to the authorities in general and Lawrence Rogers in particular, especially after his August 1916 appointment to the position of medical sergeant. His duties included sorting through the men on daily sick parade. Every day he inspected the truly ill and those who feigned it. Many claimed they were worn-out,

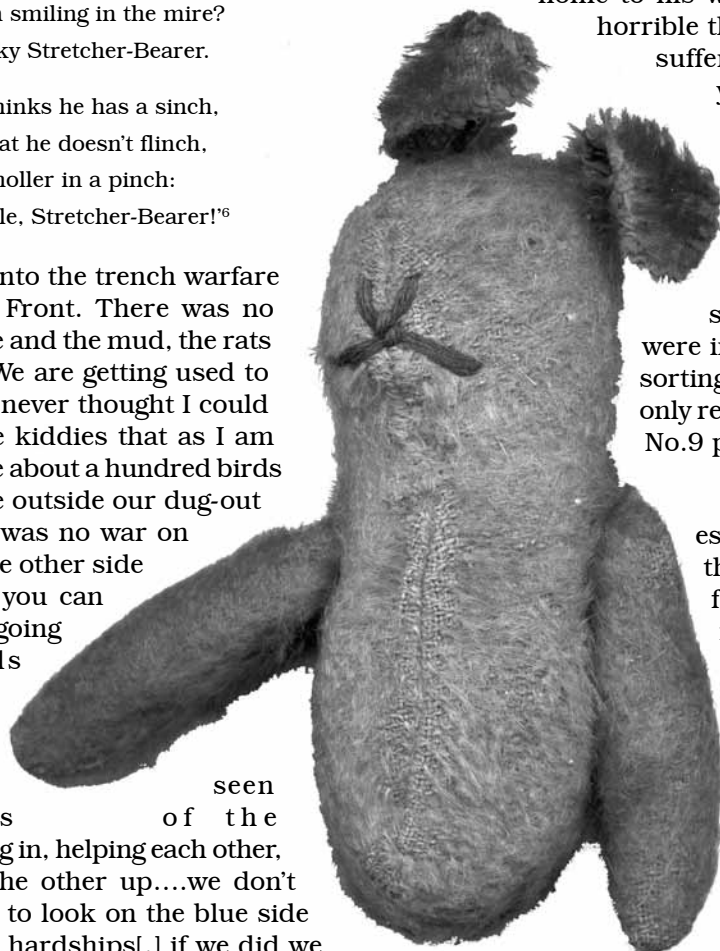
both physically and mentally. Rogers wrote home to his wife: "real shell shock is a

horrible thing if you ever saw a man suffering from it I don't think you would ever forget it[,]

but then there is the fellow who comes in and says he is shell shocked we kick those kinds out and send them back up the line."¹¹ The medical sergeant and medical officer were instructed to be ruthless in sorting out the men, and often the only relief given to the sick was the No.9 pill – a mild laxative.¹²

For soldiers desperate to escape from front line service, they often had harsh words for those in authority, which now included Rogers. He seems to have taken it in stride, especially after surviving the killing battles of Mount Sorrel in June 1916 and the Somme later that same

The Rogers teddy bear, now in the collection of the Canadian War Museum.



CWM 200400015-001



Library and Archives Canada (LAC) PA 1121

Canadian stretcher-bearers tend to a wounded German soldier on the Vimy battlefield, April 1917.

year. Indeed, Rogers distinguished himself and was awarded the Military Medal for gallantry in caring for the wounded during the Mount Sorrel fighting.

Throughout these fierce battles, Rogers continued to care for the wounded. Often they came in trickles from the effects of stray shell fire or snipers; but during the big battles in mid-September and early October, there was a deluge of bleeding, shattered men. The massive artillery bombardments and arcs of machine-gun fire took a terrible toll on attackers and defenders. Trenches were captured and lost, recaptured and lost again. "One officer that I dressed simply cried with rage and disappointment and some of the men were doing the same thing, believe me it was awful discouraging to have to give up after all the work we had in getting [the trench]."¹³ Rogers was often moving forward with the rear waves of advancing troops, looking to bind the wounds of the injured and pull casualties into moderately-safer shellholes.

"We have just come through another awful experience and there are very few of us left, hardly any of the old boys."¹⁴ Like many long-service veterans, Rogers had a hard time coming to grips

with the slaughter and the constant loss of life. But he kept a steady stream of correspondence to his beloved wife, whom he relied on for moral support. "Our opinion out here is that the women at home are ever so much braver then we are, it may be in a different way but it is there just the same."¹⁵

The Canadian Corps was pulled into reserve throughout much of the winter of 1916/17, where it had a chance to absorb the harsh lessons of the Somme and incorporate new troops into the battered units. Much of the time at the front was spent fighting the awful mud and rain, rather than the enemy. Rogers confided to his wife that after roughing it in the trenches for so long, he would, upon his return to Canada, "have to learn all over again how to live in a civilized way."¹⁶

The 5th CMR was a part of the Canadian Corps assault on Vimy Ridge in April 1917. Rogers again served at the front, aiding the wounded, and although the 5th CMR was not in the first wave of attacks, it suffered from enemy shellfire while attempting to consolidate the newly-captured trenches. Brigadier J.H.E. Elmsley reported that over four days of fighting, his brigade, consisting of the 1st, 2nd, 4th and 5th CMR, lost 34 officers and 993 men.¹⁷

Rogers saw his share of mud and misery during the battle, but he was most affected by the hundreds of horses that littered the battlefield. "One of the saddest sights along the roads now – and one I feel terribly [about] – are the dead horses [...] poor animals it is something awful to see them lying all along the road just worn out. If anybody writes about the heroes of the war they

surely ought [sic] to mention the Horses who have played such an important part in helping us win."¹⁸

Having survived the rigours of the battlefield and proved himself a dependable soldier – Rogers commented to his wife that in over a year he had never once missed going into the line – he was recommended for a commission. He left for

CWM 200400015-005

May 4/17

Dear Howard

Just a little letter to let you know that Daddy has not forgotten his boy altho I have not written for some time. You see we are so busy beating the Pritzus that I hardly have time to write to anybody but Mother. I had a letter from Uncle Fred and he told me that he too is a Daddy. I bet he is awful proud of it. Glad to hear that you had done so well at School keep it up

"Daddy has not forgotten his boy..." A letter from Lawrence Rogers to his son Howard.

officer training in May 1917, attending a number of battle schools in France. Here, away from the front, he had a chance to think about his year and a half of service. Like many men, he felt it was unfair that the soldiers at the front suffered for their country, while able-bodied men at home were shirking their duty. By September, a month after he had returned to his battalion as an officer, he was increasingly frustrated by those at home who were railing against conscription. Like 90 percent of the CEF, he would vote for conscription, and further expressed a belief – not uncommon in the trenches – that the anti-conscription die-hards in his home province of Quebec might be more easily convinced if only the military turned “a few machine guns on them and beat them up then perhaps there would be something doing.”¹⁹

Rogers was with the 5th CMR when the Canadians attacked at Passchendaele in October 1917. The Canadians had been ordered to that front to re-establish Field Marshal Sir Douglas

Haig's failed offensive, which had begun in late July. An unending rain of shells had shattered the water-table, and then a ceaseless rain had reduced the battlefield to a bog of shellcraters filled with scummy water. Thousands of unburied, rotting corpses further corrupted the ground. In this environment the Canadians were ordered to deliver victory. They did, but it cost almost 16,000 casualties over four battles.²⁰ One of the dead was Lieutenant Lawrence Rogers.

He was killed on 30 October 1917. Rogers was stationed at a forward regimental aid post, where he provided emergency medical care to the wounded men who arrived bleeding, battered, and slipping into shock. While outside attending to a wounded man who had collapsed in the mud, Rogers was killed when a shrapnel shell exploded over him and sent shell fragments and shrapnel tearing through him.

Rogers' mates found his body after the battle. His identification tag was removed, and

Lawrence Rogers was buried near St. Julien, but his final resting place was obliterated by German artillery fire. His name is now recorded on the walls of the Menin Gate in Ypres along with the names of nearly 55,000 other British and Commonwealth soldiers (including 6,940 Canadians) who were killed in Belgium and have no known grave.

Photo by Mike
Bechthold



The Board of Pension Commissioners for Canada
AUTHORITY FOR PENSION PAYMENTS

This is your Pension
No. **22896**
Please quote in all correspondence

ROGERS

(Pensioner's surname)

ROGERS

(Surname of member of forces)

(Regimental No.)

MRS. JENNIE MAY WEAVER

(Pensioner's given name)

A.O. Weaver, 345 Lansdowne Avenue, Westmount, Que.

(Post Office)

LAWRENCE BROWNING

(Given names of member of forces)

Lieutenant

(Rating or Rank)

WIDOW & CHILDREN
(Relationship to member of forces)

5th C.M.F.

(Ship or unit)

Entire Disability _____ % Statistical Code No. _____
Pensionable Disability _____ % Class _____

AWARD

For Pensioner _____ \$ 60.00 a month
For Married Pensioner (additional Pension) _____ \$ 27.00 a month
For 2 children or brothers or sisters (additional Pension) _____ \$ a month
Addition to Pension for helplessness _____ \$ a month
Total _____ \$ 87.00

Amount of adjustment payment from
to _____ at \$ _____

PARTICULARS OF CHILDREN OR BROTHERS OR SISTERS

Name

Date of Birth

Date child attains age limit

ADJUSTMENT

Pension on behalf of the child ETHEL AILEEN
ROGERS be continued for a further period of one year from
July 9, 1921.

CHECKED BY

P.B. 30 Date 29/10

Date of commencement of pension _____
To be reviewed in _____ months.

The Board of Pension Commissioners for Canada
upon it hereby authorizes the payment of pension

Signed at Ottawa this _____
CB72

Typed by

Checked by

R.P.C. Form 250B Mult.



BUCKINGHAM PALACE.

I join with my grateful people
in sending you this memorial
of a brave life given for others
in the Great War.

George R. I.

his personal items were collected and sent to his family in Canada. His wedding ring, letters from his family, and Aileen's teddy bear were among the possessions. Rogers was buried near Zonnebeke, north-east of St. Julien, the site of the famous battle in April 1915. But his grave was later pulverized by enemy shell fire and his body was lost. Like almost 7,000 other Canadians killed in Belgium, Rogers was later commemorated on the Menin Gate in Ypres.

Back home in Quebec, his family grieved for a husband who would never return and a father who would never see his children grow up. The teddy bear remained in the family's possession for another eight decades, passed gently from generation to generation, a constant reminder of a father, then a grandfather, and finally a great-grandfather who had given his life to serve King and country.

Postscript

The teddy bear was brought to the attention of the Canadian War Museum in 2003 through a nation-wide contest, organized by the Dominion Institute and partners, to encourage Canadians to share their stories of military history with one another. The teddy bear was later donated to the CWM and is now a central artifact in the museum's new permanent galleries.

While the teddy bear is a little worse for wear, and has lost its hind legs over the years, it remains a powerful and poignant reminder of how artifacts carry with them stories of life and death, grief and joy. Not every soldier carried a teddy bear, but tens of thousands had mementos from loved ones, be they letters or private talismans. These artifacts were a reminder to the soldiers of those at home, and a reassurance that they were not forgotten. Many Canadians survived the ordeal of the trenches, but more than 60,000 did not. They never returned to their loved ones. There were no last goodbyes. The grief of 60,000 dead for a country of not yet eight million citizens was unimaginable, casting a grim pall over nearly every community across the country. Sometimes it takes a little teddy bear, a seemingly innocuous, but poignant, artifact, to remind us of the sacrifice made by Canada's

Great War soldiers, and the war's impact on the families left behind.

Notes

1. CWM, 20040015-005, Lawrence Rogers collection, 25 September 1916. All letters from Lawrence to his wife.
2. 24 June 1915.
3. 15 September 1915
4. 21 October 1915.
5. 25 October 1915. See the recent memoir, John R. Hughes (ed.) *The Unwanted: Great War Letters from the Field* (University of Alberta Press, 2005).
6. *The Listening Post* 29 (1 December 1917), p.36.
7. 22 March 1916.
8. 2 April 1916 & 16 April 1916.
9. 30 April 1916.
10. 5 March 1916.
11. 20 June 1917.
12. For malingering, see Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion, 1999).
13. 5 October 1916.
14. 5 October 1916.
15. 23 December 1916.
16. 16 February 1917.
17. RG 9, III, v. 3846, 51/5, 8th Brigade, Summary of Operations.
18. 15 April 1917.
19. 12 September 1917. For the soldiers' vote, see Desmond Morton, "Polling the Soldier Vote: The Overseas Campaign in the Canadian General Election of 1917," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 10 (November 1975); on conscription, see J.L. Granatstein and J.M. Hitsman, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977).
20. For the Passchendaele campaign, see Daniel Dancocks, *Legacy of Valour: the Canadians at Passchendaele* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1986).

Tim Cook is an historian at the Canadian War Museum, where he recently curated the South African and First World War permanent gallery. His first book, *No Place To Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World War* (UBC Press, 2000) won the C.P. Stacey award. His second book, *Clio's Warriors: Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars*, has recently been published by UBC Press.

Natascha Morrison graduated from Carleton University with an Honours Degree in History in 2006. She is currently working with The Properties Group Ltd. and has plans to pursue a Masters Degree in Library Science.