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## Preparing for War: The 25th Battalion in Halifax, 1914–15

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# Preparing for War

## The 25th Battalion in Halifax, 1914-15

Robert N. Clements

Edited by Brian Douglas Tennyson

When the First World War broke out in August 1914, thousands of Canadian men, young and not-so-young, rushed to enlist, anxious to participate in the great adventure and fearful that it might be over before they got to Europe. Canada's initial commitment of 30,000 men was easily met and just days after the first contingent had sailed for England the government announced that it would raise a second contingent of 20,000 men, plus another 2,000 to reinforce the first contingent.<sup>1</sup> Two battalions would be raised in the Maritime provinces; one of them was the 25th, which was the first battalion organized and raised entirely in Nova Scotia.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike the first contingent, which had been called to Valcartier Camp in Quebec for training, the new units remained in their respective military districts for training. Accordingly, the 25th's initial training took place in Halifax, where it was headquartered, during the winter of 1914-15 and the battalion sailed for England in May 1915. It went to France in September 1915 and participated in all of the Canadian Expeditionary Force's major battles, and on the morning of 11 November 1918 found itself entering the city of Mons, site of the first clash between British and German troops in August 1914. Following the armistice, it went on to participate in the occupation

**Abstract: The 25th Battalion was authorized in November 1914 and recruited men from throughout Nova Scotia before departing for England in May 1915. It spent the winter and early spring of 1914-15 in Halifax, where it was based at the Armoury and on the Common. Robert Clements, a native of Yarmouth, enlisted in the battalion in November 1914 and served in it throughout the war, rising to the rank of lieutenant. Many years later he wrote an informal history of the battalion, giving a colourful account based on his personal experiences and observations. These excerpts from his soon to be published manuscript, describe the battalion's experiences in Halifax as the men trained, coped with inadequate equipment and inexperienced officers, and prepared to go overseas.**

of Germany until, finally in April 1919 it returned to England, and a month later sailed home to Halifax, almost precisely four years after its departure.

It seems remarkable, almost 90 years after the end of the war, that no one has yet written a history of the 25th Battalion. Ralph Lewis' *Over the Top with the 25th* (Halifax, 1918) and Gerald McElhenny's chapter in *M.S. Hunt's Nova Scotia's Part in the Great War* (Halifax, 1920) provide brief accounts, and F.B. MacDonald and John J. Gardiner later added a brief history entitled *The*

Twenty-Fifth Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force: Nova Scotia's Famous Regiment in World War One (Sydney, 1983), which focused on the Second World War. More recently, Brian Douglas Tennyson's *Percy Willmot: A Cape Bretoner at War* (Sydney, 2007)<sup>3</sup> provided a very personal account of one man's experience in the 25th, although Willmot's extensive correspondence focused on his own experiences with little overt reference to the battalion.

In fact, however, an excellent full-scale history of the battalion was written in the 1970s but never published. Like Lewis and McElhenny, the author served in the 25th throughout the war and therefore wrote an eye-witness account based on personal experience. Born in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia on 12 May 1894, Robert Nehemiah Clements was the son of Edgar Norwood and Charlotte Van Norden Clements. The Clements family could trace its history back to some of the earliest settlers of the Chebogue-Yarmouth area, arriving in 1769. Initially engaged in the fishery, the Clements prospered, becoming ship builders and owners and inter-marrying with the Killams, the most prominent shipping dynasty in Yarmouth if not all of Nova Scotia in the mid-19th century.

After graduating from Yarmouth Academy in 1911, Robert Clements began working at the Bank of Montreal

in Yarmouth but in November 1914 he enlisted in the 25th Battalion. He served in it throughout the war, going overseas in May 1915 and returning in May 1919. He was promoted to quartermaster sergeant of "A" Company in February 1915 and was commissioned in the field in September 1916. Mentioned in despatches in August 1917, he was wounded in August 1918, awarded the Military Cross and promoted to the rank of captain.

Following the battalion's demobilization, he returned to Yarmouth and began his business career in a cotton mill which his

grandfather had helped to establish and which was then the major employer in the town. He subsequently moved to Montreal, remaining in the textile business and in 1931 founded a textile machinery sales agency. Upon his retirement in 1965 he wrote "Merry Hell," his history of the 25th Battalion. He subsequently revised the manuscript in 1975-6 and donated copies to the Public Archives of Nova Scotia and the National Archives of Canada. He died at Camp Hill veterans' hospital on 31 January 1983.

Clements' unpublished manuscript has languished in the archives for more than 20 years but

remains unpublished. These excerpts from the early chapters provide an exceptionally lively personal account of the formation and early training of the 25th Battalion in Halifax during the winter of 1914-15 and include many colourful anecdotes never previously told that reveal much about the energized chaos of that period. It is presented exactly as Clements wrote it except that I have corrected his appalling spelling and eccentric grammar, combined paragraphs to make the text flow more smoothly, and omitted some peripheral material. I have also added explanatory footnotes where they seemed necessary.

The 25th Battalion started recruiting at Halifax, Nova Scotia, following the call from Ottawa in November 1914 for men to form part of the Second Division, supplementary to the first Canadian troops already en route to England. The response was rapid and effective. Large numbers of men quickly came forward from every part of the province.<sup>4</sup>

Some recruits came from the docks and shipping in port, others from local militia regiments with a small amount of peace-time training. There were salt bank fishermen from Lunenburg and Newfoundland, farmers from the Annapolis Valley, coal miners and men from the steel works at Sydney and Glace Bay in Cape Breton, some as much at home in Gaelic as in English. From the southwestern countries came deep sea sailors and lumbermen, many with Acadian names marking their French origins. Others came from Cumberland and Colchester with early family origins in the dales of Yorkshire. More men arrived from Antigonish and Pictou, where the landing of the original settlers from the famous ship *Hector* was still a sacred memory.

At that time British consuls in the New England states, being resident in a neutral country, could not do any

active recruiting. They did, however, direct several small groups of British-born young men to Halifax. Some went right on through to England but quite a few enlisted in the 25th Battalion where they found a ready welcome.

Recruits on arrival were checked by medical examination and if found acceptable were recorded by name and given numbers. They were then issued with two blankets, a mattress cover known in army language as a "palliasse," together with a pillow case of similar material. Both the latter were stuffed by the prospective soldier with straw from a large pile in a corner of the armory. Each was assigned to a company and given a bunk located in one or other of the hastily-prepared barrack rooms.

At first there were not any uniforms. The men paraded and were given preliminary drill instruction as they stood on arrival. Gradually, uniforms began to appear from that mysterious source, the quartermaster's stores. The NCOs got first pick as usual. It was several weeks before the entire unit of some 1,200 men was completely and uniformly covered.

Each temporarily possessed two suits of Stanfield's "Unshrinkable" woollen combinations (quickly

christened Stanfield's Unstinkables), two pair of woollen socks, one top shirt, one sweater coat, officially known as a cardigan jacket, one pair of pants, one regulation jacket, one overcoat (called a greatcoat), one cap, one pair of woollen gloves, and one pair of strong non-elastic braces to hold up the pants. A metal maple leaf cap badge plus two smaller collar badges and two shoulder badges marked "Canada" appeared about the same time.

Oh yes, one other item: the famous puttees, consisting of two long rolls of cloth some three inches wide, to be wound around the legs from boot tops to below the knees. It took long and painful training to acquaint the entire assembly with the proper system of applying these attachments. Some never did learn and one such became generally known as "Feather Legs." He was a smallish man with an "Old Bill" mustache and among other virtues he had a weak bladder, so care was always necessary to see that he was kept in the lower tier of bunks. One night he found relief in one of the company sergeant-major's boots, which had been carefully polished and set out near a hot water pipe to be kept warm for the morning. The resulting explosion provided a news



**This postcard shows men of the 25th Battalion marching through Halifax, carrying their Ross Rifles, ca.1915.**

item for the whole unit for several days thereafter but no one squealed in spite of considerable pressure and Feather Legs escaped the threatened dire punishment. He made the grade as far as England but it is not clear that he ever got to France. In any case he disappeared somewhere along the way and was never heard from again. The foregoing deed remains his one claim to fame.

The old army game of "one man one shirt" prevailed from the start. A small 5' 7" 135 pounder received with the quartermaster's blessing a garment large enough for someone 6' 2", weighing upwards of 200 pounds and vice versa. After much trading and help from Sergeant Jack Henry,<sup>5</sup> the regimental tailor and his staff, the unit gradually reached a point where it was reasonably fit to be seen in public. All civilian clothing was flogged for beer money to the

second-hand dealers on Water Street or sent back to the old home for use by younger members of the family not yet old enough to enlist.

One of the main problems was boots. The current style for the well-dressed young blade of those days was a brilliant yellow creation with sharply pointed toes, a sad choice for pounding the armory parade square and even sadder for training on the Common and the slopes of Citadel Hill during the snow and slush of a Halifax winter. Naturally, that is exactly what was issued to the troops. They came in large wooden cases and assorted sizes. Again, the usual scramble trying to match a size eight boot to a size eleven foot was followed by more horse trading and not a few unusual combinations, complicated further by the fact that several cases contained sample boots, all for one foot.

Winter was well under way. One hour outside completely wrecked the footwear of all so unfortunately exposed to the elements. The soles of that first issue were made of pressed paper, not even the cheapest leather. One soaking was enough to make them fall apart completely. Fortunately, most of the men had kept their own original boots. With these they managed to avoid becoming entirely barefooted. Others in desperation bought good stout boots from local stores with their own money. New supplies of better service quality and design effectively shod the battalion prior to leaving for overseas on May 20th, 1915.

Further items of presumed utility were issued early on. These included one heavy clasp knife (good quality), one each metal knife, fork and spoon, one cloth folder containing needles, thread and spare buttons (officially

described as a housewife, shortened by tradition to "Hussif"). Mess tins were not needed at that time. The troops were fed off enamel plates, with heavy mugs for tea, served in large mess halls in the basement of the armories building. Issue of rubber ground sheets was delayed until movement to England some months later.

Other extra items were razors and shaving brushes. These were real dillies. The blades were soft steel or tin, disgracing even the Woolworth stores of that era. It was impossible to cut even a soft piece of cheese with them. The brushes were made out of some sort of rope fibre. They fell to bits at the first wetting, another case of buy your own and like it. Many had safety razors but good straight razors were not uncommon. Unlike today's generation, most men knew how to use a straight razor without cutting their own throats or generally making an unholy mess of their chin.

A cloth roll arrangement was given out to carry the eating utensils, razor and brush and other small items. All this list plus such personal effects as the individual desired to retain were kept in a canvas kit bag supplied along with the bedding at time of enlistment.

Lacking any real war experience the authorities had to look for guidance to records of the South African war. After a few weeks of foot drill instruction and preliminary organization, the process of turning men into pack mules got under way. This involved issue of an outfit officially known as Oliver equipment. It comprised a leather belt and an assortment of straps in various shapes, all held together by buckles and rings. The ball pouch for ammunition fitted on the belt in front. A bayonet in scabbard also hung on the belt on the left side. The water bottle in its sling hung on the right side supported by a long strap over the left shoulder crossing the wearer's chest. A fabric haversack

for small items including emergency rations (one can of corned beef and a few rock-hard biscuits) hung on the left side over the bayonet position. Its strap crossed the chest in the opposite direction to the water bottle strap. These two straps effectively restricted the soldier's breathing, particularly when the bottle was full and the haversack loaded.

When complete, the man's kit bag carrying all his other possessions was supported on straps on his back. In full marching order it was expected that his blanket or blankets would be rolled and strapped on his load above the kit bag. Added to all this was the long Ross rifle (rated to weigh nine and a half pounds but actually more nearly twelve to fourteen pounds). How any man could be in shape for effective fighting after several hours on the road under such a load has never been clearly established.

Training with this equipment went some distance in separating the boys from the men. It brought out physical defects not evident through the medical examinations at the time of enlistment. Those who could not make the grade were honourably discharged and sent home. Their places were quickly taken by other new recruits.

This equipment was used throughout the training period in Halifax from November 1914 to May 1915. Taken overseas, it continued in use until replaced by the web model just a few days before movement to France on September 15th, 1915. It is certain that no man temporarily decorated and loaded with that Oliver equipment will ever completely forget it.

At the start the battalion was organized on the South African war model, with a headquarters staff and eight companies of about 120 men each. After some weeks this was modernized, changing to four companies of roughly 250 men per company, each then divided into four platoons.

Before the change, several interesting situations developed. According to tradition, each company commander was held responsible for preparing his own company payroll. Drawing the funds through battalion HQ cheque, he paid his own men. Whatever their other talents, most of these officers had little previous experience of such duties. Previous banking experience could quickly lift a private to three stripes and a sergeant's rank.<sup>6</sup> This meant welcome relief from parade duties two days each week, to draw up the company payroll, go to the bank with the officer to count the money, and later pay it out to the worthy rank and file. Shortly after the change to four-company formation, a regular paymaster and staff were supplied from district headquarters and the company officers were relieved of that responsibility.

Rates of pay started with privates at \$1.10 per day, followed by lance corporals at \$1.20, corporals at \$1.35, sergeants at \$1.50, company quartermaster sergeants at \$1.65, company sergeant majors at \$1.75, and 1st class warrant officers at \$2.00. Rum was \$1.00 a quart. At a private's pay of \$7.70 a week he had about seventy cents for luxuries after providing for the necessities of his temporary situation. The claim was that there were fifty-seven barrooms in the city at that time, the same number as the well known pickles. Whether true or false, it made a good story. Certainly, there was not any lack of refuge for the weary in need of liquid refreshment and support.

### Trial and Error

The South African war had ended about 12 years before the start of World War I. A number of the first recruits carried South African war medal ribbons and laid claim to some degree of combat experience and military knowledge. This led to some

early decisions which rather quickly required revision.

It was first thought that these veterans would be ideal candidates for non-commissioned rank. Quite a few of the early sergeants and corporals were selected from that group. A second group originally from parts of Great Britain also appeared to qualify for consideration, based on various terms of peacetime service in the regular British army. A fair proportion of both types really did make good. Their work helping in training the totally inexperienced majority should be recognized and acknowledged.

Alas, in spite of these advantages, quite a few were somewhat less than successful. For various reasons some had to be returned to the ranks. The history of one such South African worthy may be worth a brief review. Promoted to sergeant's rank, he was given charge of a squad of men from Cape Breton who were still in civilian clothes. Out on the Common in front of the armory building, under his officer's supervision he started to teach them squad drill. When the officer was called to the orderly room in the main building to answer a telephone, the sergeant moved his men at the double well south along the drill area.

Here he halted them, removed his cap, and passed through the ranks taking up a collection. The recruits, yielding to his pressure, contributed reluctantly. This quickly changed to delight when the sergeant marched them smartly down a side street into the nearby barroom. After lining them up at the counter, he dumped the collection from his cap and ordered drinks all around. Additional donations were quickly forthcoming. A search party hastily organized following the officer's return finally located the missing group and persuaded them to return to barracks. Any possibility of further drill instruction that day had vanished. Result: one sergeant

reduced to corporal and forty men confined to barracks for two days.

The second time the corporal, still acting as a drill instructor, tried the same thing he was caught before he could deploy his troops to advantage. That evening he took the proceeds to finance a two-day personal holiday. Finally apprehended by the military police, he was returned to the armoury under escort. Result: one corporal reduced to private, fined, and confined to barracks for two weeks.

A few weeks later a third breakout brought about his discharge and return to civilian life. That only lasted long enough for him to re-enlist in the 40th Battalion then organizing at Aldershot, Nova Scotia. When the 25th required a re-enforcement draft prior to sailing for England in May 1915, our hero returned with other 40th Battalion men.

To hasten the early organization program, two senior colour sergeant instructors from the RCRs [Royal Canadian Regiment] were attached to the 25th.<sup>7</sup> Under their supervision all NCOs and junior officers were given intensive training. A series of lectures outlined their duties and responsibilities. NCOs were trained in special classes to act as drill instructors to the new recruits. All phases of military organization, starting with squad drill through company and battalion formations and movements were introduced and gradually perfected.

With the issue of the then Canadian army standard Ross rifles and bayonets, arms drill was started, together with training in the care and operation of this equipment. During the winter season it was not possible to practice with live ammunition at outside ranges. There were several shooting galleries in the basement of the armory where service rifles loaded with light powder gallery ammunition could be safely used. In addition to drill movements carrying rifles on parade and in training

marches, good progress in actual shooting and firing exercises with related instruction was possible. When the weather cleared in the spring the men were taken in suitable groups to outside ranges for more advanced training with full load live ammunition.

## Manpower

The medical examinations prior to enlistment were fairly effective as far as they went, but quite often failed to reveal at once a variety of physical defects. These came to light rather quickly under the strains of the hard training which followed. Some wastage developed from the start. In all such cases these men were given honourable discharge and returned to their homes without delay.

There were other reasons which caused some loss of personnel and need for replacements. Continued bad conduct in a small number of instances resulted in dishonorable discharge and return to civilian life. The very few cases of desertion resulted in severe punishment when the offenders were caught and returned. A few got away completely and were never seen again, at least as far as any 25th Battalion record can be traced. Most of the losses were due to physical breakdown. Where bad conduct or desertion did develop it was usually due to inability to adjust to military discipline and the restrictions of army life.

There were many other reasons for desertion, some of which may seem hard to believe. For some time after the battalion was organized there were strong barrack-room rumours suggesting an early end to the war and forecasting that the 25th would never go overseas. Weeks passed without any definite indication of early movement. Two men of Scottish origin decided they would not wait any longer and disappeared without a trace.

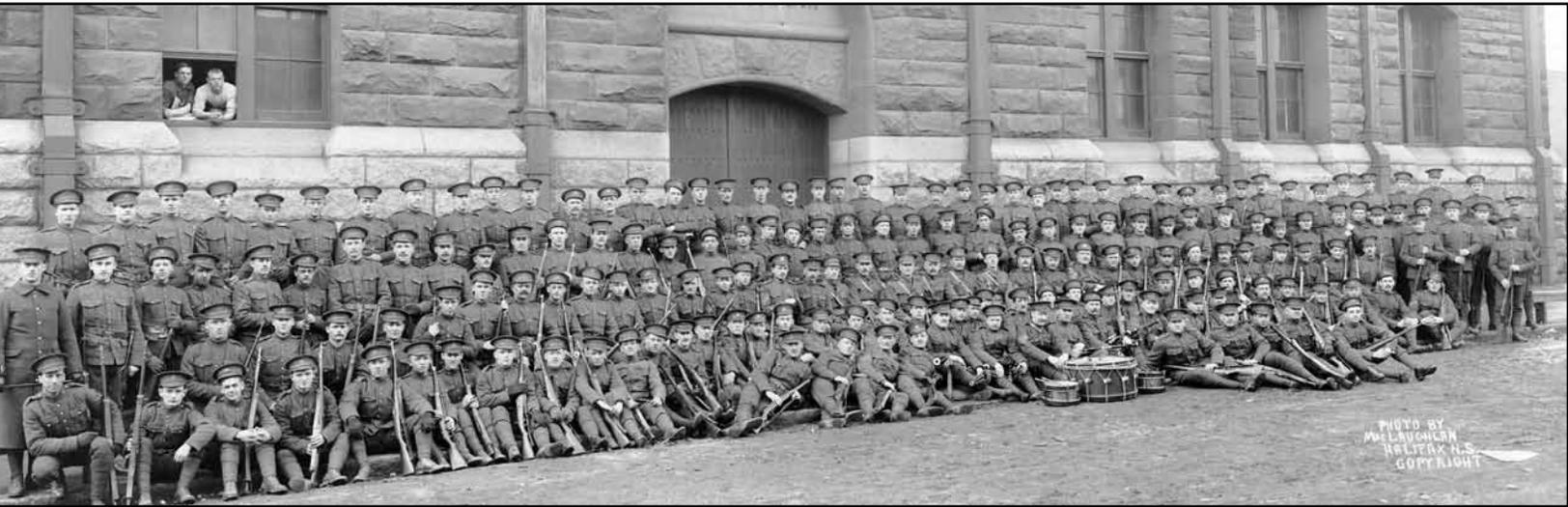
At this point it is necessary to temporarily and briefly turn ahead to the early months of 1916. By that time the 25th had moved from Halifax to England, completed training there, and moved to France in September of 1915. Since then they had been steadily engaged in trench duty in the Kemmel sector at the south flank of the Ypres salient. At least a year had passed since the departure of the two Scotch lads. On a trip out of the front line to a tent camp in reserve near Locre, the men over the wire fence in the next section of tents were a

seamen on a freight ship for Britain. With seamen rather in short supply, no questions were asked.

Immediately on arrival they made their way to Scotland and enlisted with the Gordons. The action they got was quite a bit faster and more than they anticipated. In exchange for the Dardanelles tour, they had given up the Canadian rate of pay of \$1.10 per day, equal to about five shillings and sixpence, for the British rate of little more than one shilling, possibly worth some thirty cents Canadian. To a good Scotsman

in shaving, washing and cleaning clothing and equipment, preparing for the daily parade of the whole battalion in platoon and company formation.

All men were required to shave daily. No excuses were accepted for lack of attention to this detail. Clothing was expected to be brushed clean with nothing torn or out of place. Boots had to be thoroughly clean and polished. The same applied to belts and all other leather equipment worn on parade. All buttons and badges must be in place, with none missing.



**"C" Company, 25th Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Forces in front of Armouries.**

battalion of the Gordon Highlanders.

They were newly-arrived in Belgium following evacuation from the Dardanelles disaster a few weeks earlier. There was much visiting back and forth between the two camps. Shortly after dark the first night, two kilted Gordons quietly enquired their way to the tents of "A" Company of the 25th. There, sharing whatever refreshment could be hastily procured, they told their story. Weary of delays and the uncertainties of the situation in Halifax and incidentally not too popular with their company commander, they had decided to hasten their personal quarrel with the Germans. They bought some second-hand clothes from a dealer on Water Street and then signed on as

the financial sacrifice was more of a blow than the other unfortunate results. There were one or two further visits before the 25th moved back for another tour in the front line.

There is not any record of later contact with these two heroes, or what their ultimate fate may have been. At least it showed that all deserters were not cowards.

### Spit and Polish

Early and sustained attention was given to personal cleanliness and correct military appearance at all times. After reveille, usually no later than 7:00 am, there was a brief PT parade followed by breakfast. From then until 9:00 am the time was spent

These, together with belt buckles and metal fittings must be cleaned and polished to an extra high shine. Rifles and bayonets when carried were to be completely cleaned, oiled and in first-class working order at all times.

At the 9:00 am parade a careful check was carried out by the company commanders and platoon officers. Any unfortunate offenders failing to pass inspection had their names taken and were booked to appear at 11:00 am at the company office for disciplinary action. A first offence of a minor nature usually was settled by a strong lecture. If carelessness and lack of attention continued the culprits were handed various periods of being confined to barracks. Exceptional cases were given one

or more parades of pack drill. Both these types of punishment will be described in more detail further on.

Normal working days were from 7:00 am to 5:00 pm, followed by supper. All those not detailed for some duty, or being confined to barracks for their presumed or proven sins, were then free to go out and follow their own devices until 10:00 pm. Late leave until 12:00 midnight could be secured by a limited number each day. It had to be applied for and covered by a special pass issued from the orderly room. There were also a few men of Halifax residence who for a time were granted permanent sleeping-out passes. These had to report back no later than 7:00 am each day.

There was only one official entrance and exit from the armory, through the front door on North Park Street. The guard room was located at this point. All men leaving or entering had to report to the sergeant of the guard. Part of his duty was to see that each man was properly dressed before passing through to the street. In this duty he was aided by the regimental provost sergeant stationed at the same post during most of the evening hours.

Clothing had to be properly worn, all buttons shining and fastened, no badges missing, belts in place, knitted woollen gloves on hands and not missing or in the pockets of their greatcoats. For a time, men were required to carry what were known as swagger sticks. These were short tapered sticks about two feet long, usually with a small metal cap at the top and a ferrule at the bottom. These were not a free issue and had to be purchased by the men themselves. The purpose was not really as the name seemed to suggest, to add a bit of swank to the soldier's appearance. It was simply that when he carried a stick in his hand he could not go along with that hand in his pocket, a practice which was considered to be most unmilitary. With stick

in left hand and right hand busy saluting officers along the route of his wanderings, the problem of sloppy appearance with hands in pockets was largely eliminated. Senior NCOs and officers carried full-length canes.

Under some conditions, sergeants when walking out also carried sidearms (bayonet in scabbard on the belt). This regulation concerning sidearms was cancelled by army order early in 1916 following a severe riot at Bailleul in France, near the Belgian border. NCOs' bayonets were snatched and used by some of the rioters. A number of serious wounds resulted before the fighting was controlled. No one from the 25th had any part in that particular trouble. The battalion was in the trenches some miles away at the time. Through the usual channels of the cookhouse chronicle and the latrine gazette they did learn most of the important details soon after.

### Guard Duty

In the first few weeks the number of qualified sergeants and corporals was limited. That meant that guard duty came around quite often. In spite of numerous rehearsals and instruction periods, the daily ceremony of changing the guard was for a time somewhat less than a finished military exercise. There was also the problem of teaching the men on sentry duty to make sure they knew their instructions and passed them on properly to their replacements when relieved. Usually the guard consisted of a sergeant, one or two corporals or lance corporals, and sixteen men. Four sentries were posted, one on each side of the armory. The other 12 were held in the guard room to control any prisoners and supply relief every two hours to the sentries outside.

At irregular intervals, once each twenty-four hours, the whole guard was turned out for inspection by the orderly officer of the day.

During his tour of duty he checked the condition of the guard room and prisoners' section. It was also customary for him to visit the sentries to see that they were carrying out their duties properly and understood their instructions. For the first few days the only arms available for the sentries were two old muskets of South African vintage. One of these was carried by the sentry on the beat on North Park Street in front of the building. The second was used by the man on the Cunard Street side. On the other two sides the sentries carried swagger sticks only.

One night the front-door sentry got curious and removed the bolt from his musket. He did not know how to put it back again. While seeking help from his friend on Cunard Street, they heard the orderly officer approaching, so quickly parted and resumed marching their beats. After the proper challenge the officer inspected the sentry and then demanded his musket, which the lad promptly passed over to him. This, of course, was completely contrary to correct military practice. The officer, in checking out this lapse, pointed out that he could have shot the sentry with his own weapon. The sentry replied politely while hiding a slight smile that the musket was not any good because "I've got the bolt in my own pocket."

The officer, being a good sport, called it a draw. He continued on his rounds but the story got around. In its way it made certain no other sentry was ever caught out by the same trick. Incidentally, that sentry returned with the battalion four years later as a commissioned officer with a fine combat record.

### Guard Room Capers

When the building was hastily converted into a barracks it lacked a proper guard room. One was built inside along the wall near the front door. The structure was made of

matchboard about one inch thick and in two parts. The inside room held the prisoners and the outside section was the guards' quarters. The prisoners' section had a low sloping platform of wood on the floor for sleeping purposes. Blankets were provided but any idea of comfort was not part of the arrangements.

One pay night this section was well filled. The heat from the stove evidently took effect on several of the new arrivals, already somewhat unsteady from their earlier travels. Shortly after midnight a group on the inside worked the stove loose from its moorings. With a mighty heave they threw it right through the light wooden wall and out onto the floor. At that time the floor in the building was made of wooden blocks saturated with creosote.

When the stove burst open it scattered live coals in all directions

and started many fires. Fortunately, there was good fire protection with water valves and sections of good hose nearby. The guard was at once fully engaged in controlling the fires. All the prisoners promptly departed through the hole in the wall, seeking the greater comfort of their regular bunks in the sleeping rooms.

After order had been restored and the fires extinguished the sergeant of the guard checked his record list of prisoners. It took all the rest of the night to locate them, one by one. When found, they were winkled out of their warm bunks to return to the now heatless confines of the prisoners' quarters. Next day the hole was fully repaired, the wall reinforced and a new stove installed. This time it was out in the guards' quarters. Only the pipe extended through the inside room, high up

along the ceiling. It gave out just enough heat to take off the chill.

## Canteen

A canteen of sorts was opened along the wall at the back end of the main floor. It was operated under civilian management and control. Almost from the start this led to dissatisfaction. The men had good reason to feel they were being given poor quality at inflated prices. This developed into a threat to take matters into their own hands and tear the place to bits. Fortunately, the battalion command took some notice of these complaints. There were also adverse reports from the daily rounds of the orderly officers. Sufficient improvement was made to keep tempers under control.

At first the canteen operated dry but soon draft beer was made



available. Here again, poor quality and weak strength caused a raging protest which threatened for a time to get out of hand. A better grade of beer with a bit more authority was soon provided. This canteen operated and served its purpose until the departure of the battalion for overseas in May of 1915. It could never be rated any great success. Barely adequate would about fit its utility and operation. No doubt the financial returns were extremely satisfactory to the promoters.

### Pack Drill

The most common form of punishment for minor offences was CB (confined to barracks). This did not involve being excused from any parades or instruction periods. It meant that unfortunates were kept in barracks after the day's work was over. To make sure they did

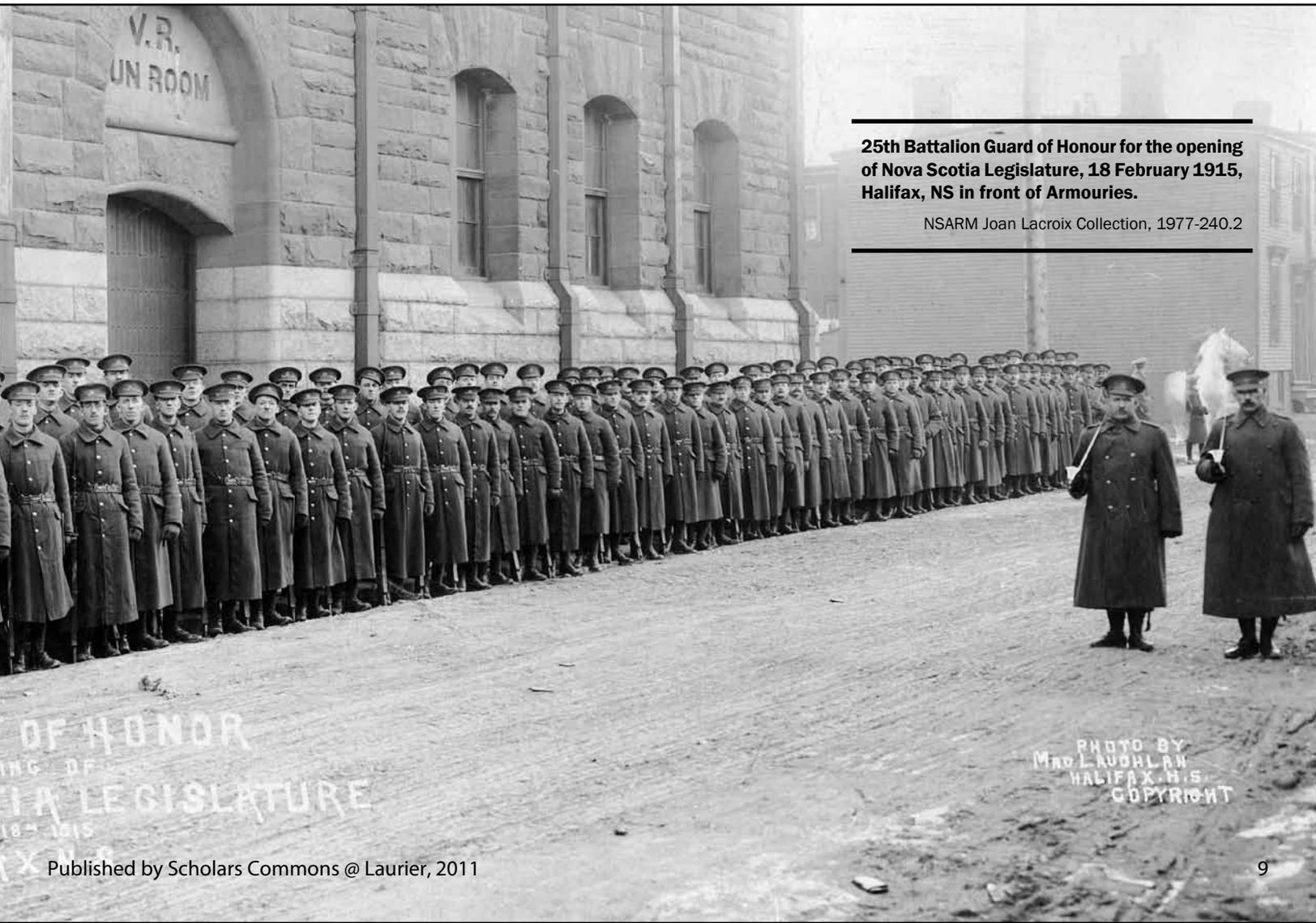
not slip out during the 5:00 pm to 10:00 pm liberty period, their names and numbers were lodged with the sergeant of the guard at the door.

Whenever the bugler blew the defaulter's call, they had to report near the guard room at the double, to answer their names at a roll call. For those whose transgressions were of a more serious nature, other methods of control were put into effect. For being absent without leave (AWOL), the sinners, whether following voluntary return or when caught by the military police, lost their pay for the time absent. They could be fined additional sums, depending on the length of time away and the seriousness of related breaches of military regulations.

Among other methods of bringing the more stubborn types down to earth, there was a system known as "pack" drill. These poor

souls, in addition to being confined to barracks, were paraded after the full day of general instruction. They were loaded down with all their equipment, including full packs and carrying rifles. Assembled in squad formation during evenings and weekends, they were marched up and down the length of the armory floor for periods of an hour or more with few rest breaks. A week or so of that treatment was enough to convince most of them of the error of their ways. As the battalion was sorted out and settled down to business, this form of discipline was discontinued. There were other more sensible methods developed for dealing with sinners where necessary.

It did not take long for the troops to adopt the old army code that "the only crime in the army was in getting caught." It was held clear that if caught, the punishment was to be



**25th Battalion Guard of Honour for the opening of Nova Scotia Legislature, 18 February 1915, Halifax, NS in front of Armouries.**

NSARM Joan Lacroix Collection, 1977-240.2

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**Above and opposite: 25th Battalion marching along South Park Street turning into Spring Garden Road, Halifax, before embarking for Europe, May 1915.**

taken like a man without whimpering or resentment. Where resentment did arise it was usually due to being wrongly accused and punished, or in feeling the sentence too severe or vicious when given for some minor offence.

### Kit Inspection

Earlier in this record details are given of the various items of kit and equipment graciously bestowed by a kindly government on each eager candidate for military service. Having done so, the next problem was to convince the recipients of the importance of retaining possession of these gifts intact and carefully preserving them as custodians for the rightful owners, "the Department of Militia and Defence."<sup>8</sup>

Thus, another burden was added to the already overloaded and disillusioned military infant class: kit inspection. At irregular intervals and calculated short notice, the men were made to produce and display for review all of their official possessions. Depending on the time and location, a pattern for laying out the items was prescribed. The inspecting party took careful note of all missing pieces. Shortages were replaced from

quartermaster's stores and the cost charged to the unfortunate losers.

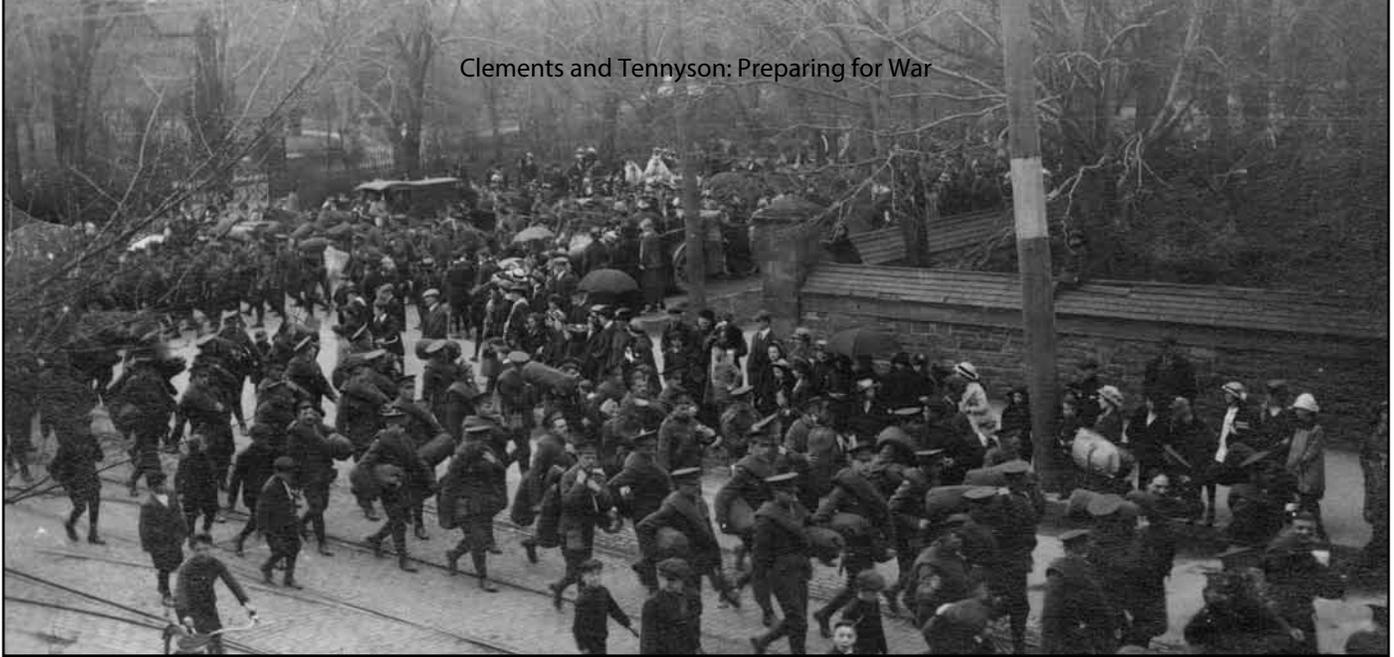
Numerous methods developed for avoiding the sacrifice of hard-earned cash under this type of official pressure. A convenient absence on duty elsewhere at the time of inspection was helpful, as was the temporary loan of missing items from some companion in another company already past this barrier a few hours or even a few minutes earlier. This involved quick sleight of hand, with the same or similar pieces being passed from one to another. This was doubtful, but worth trying as a last resort. A temporary loan from some sympathetic company quartermaster sergeant or his storeman, frequently at the subsequent cost of a couple of beers or a packet of cigarettes, also worked. Outright theft from some less alert or green recruit was not unknown.

This touched a borderline about what could or could not be stolen from a comrade. Officially, it was a severe army sin but was viewed with considerable lenience by the rank and file. It was alright to pinch his knife, fork or spoon, his "hussif" or holdall, but God help you if you ever touched his food or water. Those two things were always sacred and any man who

broke that code never did it a second time.

### 1914 Hippies

Many pictures taken at the time reveal a temporary leaning toward cultivation of mustaches as a distinctive touch. While beards were permitted if not encouraged in the navy, they were completely taboo under army regulations. On the contrary, mustaches were allowed and very much in style. No special permission was required, so the competition both as to size and variety provided a certain amount of interest throughout the ranks. It may now be hard to realize that in 1914 mustache wax was in fact a commercial commodity, quite widely used to achieve desired effects. Some were grown with the longest possible ends, then heavily waxed and turned up in real Kaiser Bill style. Others had the waxed ends extended straight out as far as they could be persuaded to grow. Many were what later became known through Bairnsfather's drawings<sup>9</sup> as the "Old Bill" type: rather ragged and lacking any clearly defined contours. Another name for that lot was "soup strainers." Some were just plain busy,



close cut and trimmed to suit the owner's ideas of comfort and manly appearance.

Advocates of these facial adornments sometimes justified their growth by claiming that shaving the upper lip was bad for the eyesight. Gradually interest slackened and most of the mustached group returned to the normal clean-shaven habit. A few old-timers stuck it out and treasured their facial masterpieces to the end of their army service.

### Army Diet

Authorities of that period seemed to regard food simply as a supply of adequate and acceptable fuel to stoke the human boiler. Evidently it was expected to generate the necessary amount of energy to keep soldiers alive and strong enough to absorb the shocks of army existence. Such things as vitamins, proteins and balanced diets were unheard of and never mentioned.

The 25th did not suffer from any lack of sufficient nourishment. Compared to the standards of home-cooked choice and variety, there was a distinct difference. The catering, if so it could be called, leaned heavily on bread, bacon, cheese, jam, tea and baked beans. One meal per day usually was based on meat and vegetables, largely potatoes, turnips and cabbage. There was an

occasional roast, but generally in the form of stew. Now and then a pie was offered. Those in the kitchens, while listed as cooks, would scarcely qualify for the title of chefs. Some of their efforts in the line of pastry were almost historical. Concerning cheese and jam particularly, most Canadians did not mind modest portions with other foods now and then. To be asked to consume these two items daily, in pound lots in order to survive, was more than most of them could endure.

In the men's search for variety, the local restaurants did a fine business whenever the cash position of the troops would permit. For some weeks at the start, the doctor and his staff entertained each morning a sick parade of upwards of 100 men, complaining of stomach disorders. The manufacturers of the standard army remedy, Number 9s,<sup>10</sup> must have been able to declare several extra dividends from the profits on the increased volume of business thus developed. Those with family connections or friends in the Halifax area were treated to home-cooked meals from time to time. For the majority it was army cooking all the way.

Many soldiers are never happy until they have something to growl or grouse about. Food is always a prime subject for complaint. Frequently the loudest protests come from those

who in fact are getting more and better food than they ever previously enjoyed. In all fairness, it should be here recorded that the quality and quantity of the food was very good. It was monotonous at times and its preparation left much to be desired for flavour and service. Even so, the real proof was evident in the condition of the men as the weeks passed. At no time before or after were they in as fine physical shape as during the months of their training period. They stood erect and strong, without an ounce of excess fat, clear-eyed, clean-skinned and fit as men could be made. The test came when they were called upon to withstand the conditions they had to face and endure a few months later as they entered active service at the front in France and Belgium.

### Rum Doings

Other problems quickly developed as recruiting proceeded and the armory was filled with some 1,200 men. Contrary to all rules and regulations, those so inclined succeeded in bringing in bottles of assorted alcoholic beverages. In those days all liquors were more mature, smoother, and with greater authority than their current namesakes. It was long before Mackenzie King put water in the whisky and then taxed us on the water.<sup>11</sup>

In a hot and crowded barrack room, a couple of quarts of forty over-proof Demerara rum uncorked and consumed to wash down tasty bits of dry salt cod or dried capelin could perfume the air beyond description. The effect on the proprietors was equally drastic and the resulting turmoil easy to imagine.

Every possible effort was made to control and prevent this practice. Every man was checked and searched at the guard room when returning from travels outside. A very few trying to get by at that point had their bottles taken from them and were made to answer to the authorities the next day. Extra men were posted at the sides of the building to prevent any attempt to hoist bottles by rope from the streets to the windows. In spite of all these precautions a considerable flow continued.

In pursuing our study of this situation, attention must turn to the design of the armory building. At the southwest corner near the intersection of North Park Street and Armory Place there is a round tower. Inside this tower is a circular staircase with steps going down to the basement and the main stairs leading up to the gallery and the rooms connecting to it. At the main floor level there were openings in the stonework about 12" wide by 24" high, evidently intended as ventilation inlets for a certain amount of fresh air. There is no record of who was the first bright soul to realize the possibilities of these openings.

Someone certainly did, because it was quite simple to place a bottle on the ground close to the least visible opening and then report to the guard room for return to barracks. After being well checked, searched and certified as beyond suspicion, the owner of the liquid merchandise only had to enter the tower out of sight of the guard room, reach through the opening and pull in his precious deposit. He could then proceed up the stairs to his quarters in perfect

safety and receive a warm welcome from his thirsty associates. This very effective procedure continued successfully for several weeks. Alas, like many other such arrangements the good news gradually spread. Somewhere along the line the provost sergeant discovered the details of the whole operation.

This suggested several interesting possibilities. After some thought he consulted with a sergeant due for guard duty a day or two later. Also, he enlisted the assistance of the sergeant tailor whose personal quarters and tailoring shop were located in the basement not far from the bottom of the tower stairs. It was arranged that when the sergeant took over the guard the provost sergeant would watch the openings from a safe position. When he saw a deposit being made, he would rap twice with his cane on the entrance door. Then the sergeant of the guard would take plenty of time to check the incoming man or men. While this was going on, the provost sergeant would proceed to collect the bottle or bottles, bring them in under his coat and deposit them for safekeeping with the sergeant tailor in the basement.

It was not hard to foresee the result of these manoeuvres. First of all the original owners nearly wrecked their arms reaching through the openings, trying to find their bottles which by then were long gone. Then, they came back to the guard room with requests to be allowed out for only a brief interval because of some forgotten errand which demanded immediate attention. To all such pleadings the sergeant of the guard refused any permission, which of course could only result in loud protests and harsh words from the injured parties. In the end the sergeant's weight prevailed and the disappointed and angry lower ranks were forced to go to bed minus their anticipated night cap.

The harvest of that night's work kept the three sergeants supplied

with a private stock of assorted select brands of winter comfort for several weeks. The losers took their disaster without much personal ill-will toward the group which had outguessed them. There could not be any repeat, as with the former secret now common knowledge, the openings were fixed with heavy iron bars leaded into the stone. The openings between bars were much too small to permit any bottles to be pulled through. It had been a fine idea while it worked, but like many others it was too good to last. Once in a while an odd bottle did get through the gate to the inside, but the main flow had been blocked. An improved degree of nocturnal peace prevailed from then on.

### The Officers

A quick look at the record shows that the original officers were drawn from the different then existing militia regiments in Halifax and throughout the province. While all of them had some rough understanding of military organization and formation movement, it must be admitted that they were in most respects just as green as the men they were trying to train and command. It would hardly be correct to describe many of them as dedicated to the army as a profession.

It is fair to say that the officers of the 25th Battalion as a group compared very favourably with those in other units of the Canadian army at the time. Naturally some were better than others. When the curtain finally went up and they faced active combat service, they fully justified the confidence which had been placed in them. Many of them were far better than just good and proved it at the cost of their own lives.

One or two incidents during the training period in Halifax are worth a brief review. In those days officers were required to own and periodically carry swords. In addition

to their other duties they had to take instruction in sword drill and go through the prescribed motions on certain mock ceremonial parades. It gave the irreverent other ranks great entertainment to watch several of the shorter officers trying to draw and later sheath swords two or three inches too long for them. They were always a bit late in getting them and putting them back, which gave the whole performance a rather ragged appearance, scarcely up to the desired regimental standard. When movement was involved, their efforts to avoid getting the swords between their legs were an unending delight to their less exalted followers.

How anyone could imagine carrying a sword into the trenches is hard to understand. As time went on the swords were less often seen but they were taken along to England. In the end, just before movement to France they were carefully packed and marked with the owners' names for transfer to some central storage depot. It was never very clear if any of them were reclaimed by survivors or sent back to the next of kin of those who did not return.

## Foreign Travel

As the winter wore away and spring came along, activity quickened. Route marches were longer. Athletic competitions were encouraged. Trips to rifle ranges for firing practice with live ammunition developed. Rumours multiplied and kept everyone on edge. Some felt the Second Division would never leave Canada. Then the First Division moved from England to France early in February. By the end of that month it had joined the British forces in the trenches.

In the press, place names began to be mentioned: Neuve Chapelle in March, then on April 22nd, 1915 the second battle of Ypres began. In a few days details of the use of poison gas for the first time became known.

At once, another rumour spread, this time that the Second Division would be broken up and the men used to replace casualties suffered by the First Division. Each day brought a new idea. Finally, uncertainty ended. The sailing date was set. Relatives from all over the province came to spend a last day or two and say farewell to their husbands and sons.

At last the day arrived. On May 20th, 1915, the first complete Nova Scotia infantry battalion said goodbye to the armory building which had been its home for nearly seven months. Loaded down in full marching order, it formed up for the last time on the great floor. Then, led by its bands, it marched out and down through the city to board the Cunard liner *Saxonia* at Pier Two. No one on that day could foresee the passage of four full years less only five days before this great battalion would return on the *Olympic* on May 15th, 1919, to once again march through the city on its way back to the same old building to be demobilized and take its place in history.

6. This, of course, is precisely what happened to Clements.
7. Born in the Channel Islands in 1889, Frederick Gerald Lauzanne was a career soldier who emigrated to Canada and enlisted in the Royal Canadian Regiment. At the outbreak of war he was seconded to the 25th Battalion as an instructor. In July 1915 he transferred into the unit and subsequently rose to the rank of captain. Similarly, Frank Goddard (born 1882) was a native of Birmingham, England, who came to Canada and enlisted in the Royal Canadian Regiment. He too was seconded to the 25th Battalion and also in July 1915 transferred into the unit.
8. Actually, the department did not adopt this name until 1926. During the First World War it was called the Department of Militia and Defence.
9. Bruce Bairnsfather (1888-1959) served in the British army during the war but became famous as the creator of "Old Bill," a cartoon character who represented the practical philosophy of the British private soldier during the war. His drawings, which appeared weekly in *The Bystander*, were subsequently published in the six-volume *Fragments from France*. Later books included *Carry On Sergeant!* (1927), *Old Bill Looks at Europe* (1935) and *Old Bill Stands By* (1939). He also published two volumes of memoirs, *Bullets & Billets* (1916) and *From Mud to Mufty* (1919).
10. Laxative pills.
11. In December 1942 the government of William Lyon Mackenzie King adopted regulations requiring the dilution to 40 percent of all spirits sold in Canada.

## Notes

1. A. Fortescue Duguid, *The Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War 1914-1918* (Ottawa, 1938), I, p.127. Sydney *Daily Post*, 7 October 1914.
2. GC McElhenny, "The 25th Battalion," in M.S. Hunt, ed., *Nova Scotia's Part in the Great War* (Halifax, 1920), p.71. Born in Windsor, Gerald Chisholm McElhenny (born 1890) enlisted in the 64th Battalion in August 1915 but was subsequently transferred to the 25th as a lieutenant and was later promoted to captain.
3. Percy Willmot (1884-1919) was born in Birmingham, England, but was living in Sydney when he enlisted in the 25th in November 1914. He survived the war but died in December 1919 as the result of wounds received at Cambrai in October 1918.
4. Actually, the call from Ottawa was made in October. The 25th Battalion was recruited solely in Nova Scotia.
5. John Francis Henry (born 1890) was a Halifax tailor before enlisting in the 25th Battalion in November 1914.

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