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The Second Battle of Ypres and 100 Years of Remembrance

RYAN B. FLAVELLE

Abstract: The 100th Anniversary of the Second Battle of Ypres was marked with Royal Attendance of a remembrance ceremony and, perhaps more importantly to most Canadians, a “shout-out” to the battle given by Don Cherry on Coach’s Corner. The ways in which this battle has been remembered and written about have shifted significantly in the last 100 years, and this paper attempts to chart some of the ways in which it has been understood by scholars and soldiers.

JUST OUTSIDE OF the Belgian town of Ypres, a few paces from the village of St. Julien, at the former site of an intersection known as Vancouver Corner, the granite figure of a brooding soldier—bowed but unbroken—rises on a granite plinth to monumental height. At eleven metres high, the soldier looks down on an otherwise sleepy intersection. The base of the memorial is inscribed simply with the word “Canada.” It is surrounded by trees, farm buildings, and military cemeteries—thirty-two can be found within the twenty kilometres enclosed by Ypres, Vancouver Corner, and Langemark, more than one military cemetery per square kilometre.¹ The soldier’s face, bowed in the position of repose, is anonymous. He emerges from the top portion of the granite slab, and only his head, shoulders, and arms are visible. His rifle cannot be identified as either the much-maligned

¹ Figure calculated using Google Earth and data from, “Cemeteries in the Ypres Salient, Belgium,” *The Great War 1914–1918* available at <http://www.greatwar.co.uk/places/ypres-salient-cemeteries.htm> [Accessed 12 April 2013].



Frederick Clemesha's "Brooding Soldier" at Vancouver Corner near Ypres. [Author]

Ross or the Lee-Enfield, instead it is only the impression of a weapon given by a straight line of granite broken by the familiar crook of the rifle's stock. The soldier's hands lay at rest in the "Position of Arms Reversed," claiming neither victory nor glory, perpetually reflecting on the fate of his comrades-in-arms resting nearby.²

THE BROODING SOLDIER AND THE SECOND BATTLE OF YPRES

The statue was the creation of Frederick Chapman Clemesha and was erected on 8 July 1923. Clemesha's design reflects his experiences of war and his talents as an architect. Born in England and emigrating to Canada in 1901, Clemesha was married to Isabel Bernice Riddell on 4 August 1914, the day that Britain declared war on Germany, and the day after his thirty-eighth birthday.³ The rapidly

² "St. Julien Canadian Memorial," Veterans Affairs Canada available <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/memorials/belgium/stjulien> [Accessed 12 April 2013]. On Clemesha's memorial see also, Andrew Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers: The 1st Canadian Division at War, 1914-1915* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 268-271.

³ "Clemesha: Frederick Chapman," *Pioneers and Prominent People of Saskatchewan* (Winnipeg: Canadian Publicity Co., 1924), 101. Also available at: <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~cansk/P-PP-SK/101.html> [accessed 10 April 2013].

deteriorating situation in Europe surely did not play a role in the couple's wedding plans, and it must have been hard for the couple to imagine that the war would have any personal impact on them when they were married. This is especially true given Clemesha's religious persuasion; he was a member of the Society of Friends (a Quaker), a group that traditionally holds itself aloof (for doctrinal reasons) from violence of any variety, and especially military service.⁴ But neither his marital nor his religious status would long stand in the way of his joining the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), and he was commissioned into the 46th Battalion just over a year after the war (and his marriage) began.⁵ In 1919 he would return to Regina, and once again took up his work as an architect.

His description of his design makes clear that he was not attempting to commemorate victory, but rather sacrifice:

Cultured Europe will look to Canada for something more than good taste—something of bigness, vigour and untrammelled youth should find expression—for our part we do not wish to brag or to glorify militarism. To the citizen soldier and the parents of the 50,000 who did not return the thought of achievement and victory cannot be disassociated from the thought of sacrifice. To this end the military position “resting on Arms Reversed” will be recognized as a *soldierly expression of such a thought*, the emblem and inscription may claim victory. [Italics added]⁶

⁴ Quakers were even exempted from compulsory the Military Service Act as members of “historic peace churches.” Nevertheless, Dorland records that “A few young Friends [Quakers] to whom the Peace Testimony of the Society was merely traditional, either were swept along with the popular current, or they joined the army, conscientiously believing that this war was really different from other wars and that in this direction lay their duty.” Arthur Garnatt Dorland, *A History of the Society of Friends (Quakers) in Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1927), 324, 308–329. See also Amy Shaw, *Crisis of Conscience: Conscientious Objection in Canada during the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 47–54.

⁵ “Attestation Paper – Frederick Chapman Clemesha,” *Soldiers of the First World War CEF*, available http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/cef/001042-119.02-e.php?image_url=http://data2.archives.ca/cef/ren2/025046a.gif&id_nbr=105478 [accessed 11 April 2013].

⁶ F.C. Clemesha, “Canadian Battlefields Memorials Commission Design Competition Submission of F.C. Clemesha,” *Veterans Affairs Canada* available http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=memorials/ww1mem/vimy/sg/01_artwork/04_competition [accessed 12 April 2013].

A plaque attached to the base of the statue makes clear that this monument was principally placed at the site to commemorate the Second Battle of Ypres, “This column marks the battlefield where 18,000 Canadians on the British left withstood the first German Gas attacks of the 22nd–24th of April 1915. 2,000 fell and here lie buried.”⁷ The detail and accuracy of the soldier’s accoutrement must have been influenced by the sculptor’s time in uniform. He was careful to model the 1908 pattern infantry webbing precisely, and the lines of the soldier’s helmet and strap are both accurate and indicative of someone who has suffered in uniform.

In this sense, Clemesha’s monument is fitted to a contemporary soldier’s sensibility, as someone who has mastered the details of life in uniform is loath to see those details misrepresented. For example, Major Talbot Papineau would write to Beatrice Fox—an American artist with whom he was carrying on a romantic correspondence—an uncharacteristically acerbic letter dismissing her design for a soldier’s memorial to the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry (Papineau’s regiment) at Voormezele. “If you intend to represent a soldier in uniform you should have the real thing before you. In the model there is not a single article of clothing or accoutrement that is correctly designated. The shape of the trousers and the way the puttees are rolled is of real importance.”⁸ Although Clemesha’s memorial has neither puttees, nor trousers, the importance of the details of a soldier’s uniform is clearly important to him in his design.

The overall effect is to draw the viewer into the mind of the soldier, who seems trapped in his own thoughts.⁹ As such, the brooding soldier is an apt point at which to begin any narrative of the Second Battle of Ypres. It is, for example, the image that Nathan Greenfield uses to begin his history of the battle, *Baptism of Fire*: “the soldier has stood sentinel on the plain that soaked up so much Canadian blood.”¹⁰ The soldiers who suffered through the battle seem to have every right to brood. The Canadians, British, and French

⁷ Details on the plaque and sculpture available at, “St. Julien Canadian Memorial,” *Veterans Affairs Canada*.

⁸ Talbot Papineau to Beatrice Fox quoted in, Sandra Gwyn, *Tapestry of War: A Private View of Canadians in the Great War* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1992), 335.

⁹ It must, of course, be borne in mind that the soldier is not thinking of anything, as his head is made of stone.

¹⁰ Nathan M. Greenfield, *Baptism of Fire: The Second Battle of Ypres and the Forging of Canada, April 1915* (Toronto: Harper-Collins, 2007), xix–xx.

colonial soldiers were present for the first German use of poison gas in the war, and were thus almost wholly unprepared for its effects.¹¹ They were armed with a rifle—the Ross—that was prone to jam under the conditions that they faced in Ypres, a weapon that would become a political (and later historiographical) bugaboo.¹² They were subjected to an extended and brutal shelling that, in part, targeted the town of Ypres so as to clog the streets with refugees, making it harder to move up reinforcements. They undertook a near suicidal counterattack on the night of 22–23 April, (one which prompted Queen Elizabeth II to wear a 10th Battalion pin 100 years later) and bore the brunt of the German infantry offensives over the ensuing days. They were gassed again on 24 April, when the Germans made a last effort to push through the thinly held Canadian lines. At the cost of 5,500 casualties, 2,000 of them killed, the First Canadian Division succeeded in denying a German breakthrough and reforming a precarious front line.¹³

The brooding soldier's example has been mirrored by flesh and blood soldiers, scribes and scholars who have reflected on the Ypres salient—a tiny chunk of unconquered Belgium as politically important as it was tactically untenable—and the battle that occurred there in April 1915.¹⁴ Many of the central themes and tropes of the wider

¹¹ Although the first use of gas by the Germans, and the first use of poison gas on the Western Front, the use of gas in warfare is not without its antecedents. The Germans used poison gas against the Herero in German South-West Africa (modern Namibia), which was the first (but unfortunately not the last) genocide in modern history. As well, both German and French units used irritant shells (tear gas) earlier in the war. See Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial German* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 249, 328–329.

¹² For a general text on the Ross Rifle see, Roger Phillips, Francis Dupuis, and John Chadwick, *The Ross Rifle Story* (Sydney, N.S.: J.A. Chadwick, 1984). For the differing views on the Ross see, for example, Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers*, 10–12. A. M. Wilms, “Decision Making the Case of the Ross Rifle,” *Canadian Public Administration* 2, no. 4 (1959), 202–213. J.L. Granatstein, *Marching to Armageddon* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1989), 48–49, 109–110.

¹³ Casualty figures taken from, Greenfield, *Baptism of Fire*, Appendix B 367–369.

¹⁴ The argument that Ypres was the key to the channel ports, and thus that its protection was tantamount to the protection of Britain from invasion, has been consistently reiterated from the time of the battle onwards. However, the actual significance of the salient, a tactically untenable position, is more difficult to gauge (especially considering that the Allies prevented a German breakthrough). Claiming that, if the defence of Ypres had been unsuccessful in April 1915, the Germans would have been able to somehow win the war is a case of historical “what if” in the worst possible sense.

Canadian narrative of the war would emerge out of, and in response to, the valiant stand of the Canadians at Ypres. This narrative has been contested on a number of occasions, but contains certain recurrent elements, all of which emerged from the actions of the 1st Canadian Division. The way that the story of this battle was (and is) told by participants and historians is structured so as to be an introduction to the First World War, and the horrors attendant to it. Thus it is important to trace the way that this story emerged and how it continues to be told. Second Ypres forms the genesis of the ways that Canadians thought of and continue to think of the war. Understanding how this narrative was created, how it was structured and used by Canadians past and present is thus central to understanding how Canadians became introduced to the realities of the First World War. In saying this, it is not my intention to detract from the veracity of these narratives, but merely to chart the way that story has been told from April 1915 to the present day.

The central themes of the story are as follows: the soldiers, like Clemesha's soldier, embodied the best of Canadian manhood. Although composed of admirable raw material, they were inexperienced, and this inexperience would be both beneficial and detrimental to their defence of the salient. A thinly veiled racism, or perhaps more appropriately "race pride" (in the words of Colonel George G. Nasmith), would consistently be cited, as the reinforcing Canadians were juxtaposed with the panicking and retreating colonial French soldiers who were fleeing from the line while gasping in terror, having received the brunt of the chlorine attack.¹⁵ This battle would also serve a key propaganda role in characterizing the Germans as a barbarous enemy, a conception strengthened by the sinking the *Lusitania* in the summer of 1915 and the stories of the crucified Canadian sergeant. The latter, a most emblematic and "especially interesting fiction"—had its origins at the battle, and the story's veracity has been debated since the war's conclusion.¹⁶ At the time however, the image of the evil enemy would be used relentlessly in recruiting campaigns in the ensuing months, and would catalyze the

¹⁵ George Nasmith, *On the Fringe of the Great Fight* (Toronto: McClelland, Goodchild and Stewart, 1917), 97.

¹⁶ See below for a more thorough analysis of the trope. Quote taken from, Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 2nd Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 117–118.

decision of many to join the CEF. The motivational power of the battle would be firmly entrenched a few months after the war when John McCrae penned “In Flanders Fields,” a poem that continues to shape our narrative of the war and its remembrance.

Arguably the most significant historiographical shift however, occurred almost fifty years after its conclusion, with the introduction of the story of men forced to “piss on a rag and stuff it in [their] mouth if [they] want to live”—the desperate decision that a slim minority of soldiers made to urinate on a rag and cover their faces to counteract the effects of the chlorine gas.¹⁷ The idea was that the urea would counteract the effects of the chlorine (which had been identified by a number of individuals very shortly after the battle began). The story of soldiers being forced by necessity to stuff, “piss soaked cloths down their throat” would come epitomize the horror of the battle, even though this story was almost entirely absent from the early responses of soldiers and scholars.¹⁸

After the end of the Second World War, the story began to gain more currency and has since firmly embedded itself in the overwhelming majority of popular Canadian accounts of the war. In so doing, the story of the battle began to move away from the “high diction” that had predominated within the narrative, and towards a more prosaic “war is hell” telling that was a fixture of the 1960s.¹⁹ A dialectical process between these two narratives has seen both enshrined within the modern conception of the Second Battle of Ypres.²⁰

It is impossible to say precisely what motivated Frederick Clemesha in this decision to join the CEF, but given the atmosphere in Regina, and the centrality of the narrative of German barbarism exemplified by the *Luisitania* and the Second Battle of Ypres, it seems safe to speculate. In 1914 and early 1915, Clemesha’s architectural partnership with Francis Portnall—both emigrants

¹⁷ Tim Cook, “‘A Proper Slaughter:’ The March 1917 Gas Raid at Vimy Ridge,” *Canadian Military History* 8, No. 2 (Spring 1999), 11.

¹⁸ The only exception to this rule is the second hand and unspecific account in, Armine Norris, M.C., “*Mainly for Mother*” (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1920), 164.

¹⁹ Another useful dichotomy dealing with narrative would also be the dichotomy between official and popular memory. In this sense, the story of Second Ypres cannot be seen to have diverged greatly from the “official” version until after the Second World War. See, Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 10–12.

²⁰ The best discussion of the dialectical process in history and popular culture is, to my mind, Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1951).

from England—seemed to be thoroughly successful. Clemesha was the secretary-treasurer of the Saskatchewan Association of Architects, and seems to have been a leading citizen in Regina, at least within the architectural community. After the war began, they had built a number of “artistic residences” in Regina. In 1914, the newly married Clemesha (together with his business partner) completed the residences of E.D. McCallum, Lorence V. Kerr, and W.H.A. Hill.²¹ The market was going through a bit of a boom, and whereas “Several years ago a house costing \$15,000 was quite a novelty ... [today] there are scores of houses costing \$15,000 and upwards ... Regina has now become known as ‘a city of beautiful homes.’”²² They had even been awarded the commission to complete work on Winnipeg’s City Hall, but that commission was never completed as both Clemesha and Portnall joined the CEF in September.²³

The pair advertised in the professional section of the *Leader*, so perhaps Clemesha awoke, poured himself a bowl of Kellogg’s Corn Flakes, (whose “Undisputed Leadership” was advertised together with a Union Jack and a line of soldiers marching), and opened the pages of the *Leader* to read—on a daily basis—of the atrocities committed by the Germans. Perhaps, on his way to his office at suite one of the Credit Foncier Building he passed one of the “dead walls, bill boards and boardings” that the federal government had secured access to in a large, Canada-wide, order on 23 April.²⁴ Such public spaces would have been filled with recruiting posters exhorting passers-by to “Do Your Bit,” or “Follow the Example” of the “Heroes of St. Julien and Festubert.”²⁵ Perhaps it was the 13 September front page headline of the *Leader*, a report of the speech of Lloyd George, which finally persuaded him to join. “Trumpet Call to the Empire” it proclaimed, “BRITONS MUST SACRIFICE ALL THEY OWN AND ALL

²¹ Ibid., 22–26. See also, “Clemesha, Frederick Chapman,” *The Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Canada 1800–1950*, available <http://www.dictionarofarchitectsincanada.org/> [accessed 20 April 2013]. “Portnall, Francis Henry,” *ibid.*

²² F.C. Pickwell, “Residential Work of Regina,” *Construction* 8, No. 1 (Jan, 1915). 23.

²³ Of course, the economic picture was not as rosy as the trade journal *Construction* makes out. In 1914 the prairies provinces were only slowly emerging from a depression. See, John Herd Thompson, *The Harvests of War: The Prairie West, 1914–1918* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978), 7–32.

²⁴ *Regina Leader*, 24 April 1915, 3.

²⁵ “Canadian War Poster Collection,” *McGill Library Digital Collections* available <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/warposters/> [accessed 12 April 2015].



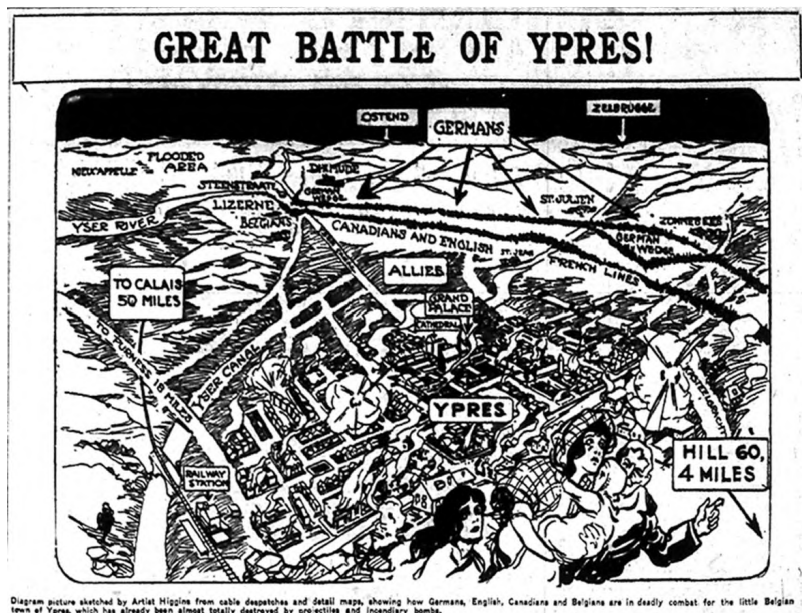
"The Sweet Heart of Corn." Kellogg's ad in the *Regina Leader*, April 1915. [Regina Leader]

THEY LOVE FOR NATIVE LAND IF FINAL VICTORY IS TO BE ASSURED."²⁶ Two days later, he was in Camp Hughes signing his attestation papers. The effect of such messages must have played some role in his decision to take a commission in the CEF. Why else would a thirty-eight-year-old successful, newly-wed, Quaker take up the call to arms? That his design would one day memorialize the battle that may have led him to join the CEF seems all the more fitting.

On 23 April, before the news of the battle was broken to Canadian newspapers, a reader of the *Leader*, like Clemesha, might be forgiven for thinking that the war was going well. A front page story, reprinted from the London *Daily Mail*, heralded that recruiting was "satisfactory." "Lord Kitchener declared that recruiting had been most satisfactory and gratifying, that the health of the troops was splendid ... He wished to impress upon the country the necessity of increasing the supplies of artillery ammunition, adding 'There is no limit to the amount required.'"²⁷

²⁶ *Leader*, 13 September 1915, 1. The source for the next six pages (except where indicated) will be the *Regina Leader*, April–June 1915. Dates will be given in brackets.

²⁷ *Regina Leader*, 23 April 1915, 1.



Artist Higgins' sketch of the battle. *Regina Leader*, May 1915. [Regina Leader]

But by the next day, the first garbled news of the German gas attack in the Ypres salient was given space in the paper through the mechanism of a “French official statement” which made no mention of the Canadians. “In Belgium the surprise caused by asphyxiating bombs used by the Germans to the north of Ypres has no grave consequences. Our counterattacks, vigorously supported by British troops on our right, and also by Belgian troops on our left, was developed with success.” By 26 April, the torrent broke when the *Leader* got news of the battle. Using a typeset size that had not been seen in months, the front page trumpeted that the “BEHAVIOUR OF CANADIAN TROOPS MAGNIFICENT,” “CANADIAN CASUALTIES ARE EXTREMELY HEAVY.” Quoting a *Morning Post* correspondent, the story is given in the form familiar to much of the writing about Second Ypres. The Canadians had “avenged” themselves upon the foe, the French colonial troops, who had been “caught in the stupefying fumes of gas bombs [sic], were taken at a disadvantage, and ... were forced to give way.” The central point was that the battle was “unique as being the first great event of its kind in Canadian history, for the Canadian troops can claim it as their own

and the glory of it.” The “Gallantry of Canadians Rings Throughout the Empire” and the troops “Won Laurels that Cannot Whither.” The list of the fallen officers (the names of the Other Ranks had not yet been compiled) ran on to four columns of print, and was presaged with “But Things Like This, You Know, Must Be After a Famous Victory.”²⁸ Although one would think that “the glory of it” would be hard to see for the troops who had been blinded and suffocated by gas, and shelled mercilessly for days, that response—commonplace to a modern eye—seems almost wholly absent from the report. Indeed, to further reinforce the gay unconcern of their soldiers, the newspaper reported that, “Regina Boys in Trenches Wanted to Know How Hockey League Finished—More Bothered Over that than Over German Snipers.”²⁹

By 1 May, Sir Max Aitken (later Lord Beaverbrook)—that gnomish Canadian press baron, politician, and propagandist who had installed himself as a king maker and “official witness” of the CEF in London—would send along a more complete account of the battle.³⁰ Aitken opened with the “glorious” part that the Canadians had played in the “recent fighting in Flanders.” He soon moved on to the bereaved kin of the valorous dead who should be proud of their “husbands, sons or brothers who have given their lives for the Empire.” The battle had been bloody, “even as men appraise battles in this callous and life-engulfing war. But as long as brave deeds retain the power to fire the blood of Anglo-Saxons, the stand made by the Canadians in these desperate days will be told by fathers to their sons.” He set the record straight on how the Germans deployed the gas, not by asphyxiating bombs but by, “means of force pumps and pipes laid out over the parapets.” To close, Beaverbrook could not resist restating his pride in the Canadian race: “They fought their way through the day and through the night and then through another day and night. [They] fought under their officers until, as happened to so many, they perished gloriously, and then fought from the impulsion of sheer valour because they came from fighting stock.”

Yet another story of a German atrocity began to edge out the battle in May. When a German U-Boat torpedoed the RMS *Lusitania* on 7 May, this fresh example of the Hun’s disregard for the rules of

²⁸ Ibid., 26 April 1915.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ For more on Beaverbrook as official witness see, Gwyn, *Tapestry of War*, 259–263.

civilized warfare was splashed across the front page. “On Last Lap of Journey Lusitania was Torpedoed No Warning was Given—With Two Thousand Persons Aboard, Huge Atlantic Liner Became Victim of German Submarine.” Over the following week the torpedoing was used to its maximum propaganda potential. “Passengers Tell of Terrible Experiences;” “Lusitania was Jockeyed into Position by Number of Submarines is Belief.”³¹ Clearly (at least in the pages of the *Leader*), the news of the *Lusitania*—following, as it did, on the heels of the news of Second Ypres—was indicative of the barbarousness of the Germans, and the necessity of bringing the war to a successful conclusion.

The result of these pieces of news was to galvanize recruiting efforts. “Another effect of the sinking of the Lusitania has been to boom recruiting. Every recruiting office reported today that more men had presented themselves for service than for weeks past. The main hall of the recruiting office in London was crowded with men waiting for medical examination.”³² The news of the German atrocities, coupled with the high casualties caused by the Second Battle of Ypres would lead to a spate of ads and renewed vigour in the recruiting effort throughout English Canada.

An example of a contemporary exhortation to duty is given by Reverend H.T. Lewis, who issued a “Stirring Appeal to Canadians” on 26 April. “You have all heard the news by now,” Lewis begins. “Those with whom we shook hands a few months ago as we bid them Godspeed and a safe return—among them our intimate friends—are among the killed and wounded.” Lewis, exhorting the faithful at the Metropolitan Church in Regina, argued that upon the war’s conclusion, Canadians would have to reconceptualise their patriotism. What Canada needed (after the war) was, “a broader outlook which will prevent another disaster. So long as patriotism is small enough to look across border lines and see in other countries probable foes instead of brothers, so long will the world be menaced by such conflicts as the present.” But, of course, such philosophies would have to be bought with the lives of young men. “To secure such a patriotism we must help to pay the price ... The Empire needs you boys. I hate to say ‘Go’ when I think of the mothers, who always have to bear the brunt of the sacrifice... But, thank God, the Canadian mothers can

³¹ *Regina Leader*, 10 May 1915.

³² *Ibid.*

pay the price and you should not, must not, hold back.”³³ Later, a full length ad for the Patriotic Fund asked Canadian men, “What Are You Doing? Over 6,000 [sic] Canadians were killed or wounded in the recent battle of Ypres. Every day sees a heavy toll taken on Canada’s brave sons fighting at the front ... Your Duty Is Plain.”³⁴

The emerging narrative of the Canadian stand in the Ypres salient and its effects on recruiting was not—of course—limited to Regina or the *Leader*. The Toronto *Globe*, for example, related the news of the battle in much the same way, “Canadians Prevent a Disaster at Great Cost ... General French Tells of the Brilliant Charge ... ‘Saved the Situation.’”³⁵ “Canadian Wounded Bayoneted to Death – German Frightfulness is Wreaked on the Troops From the Dominion – Latters’ Revenge, though, is Swift and Terrible.”³⁶ The *Manitoba Free Press* stated that “Canadian Troops Play Glorious Part for Empire,” and that “Canadians Fighting Back to Back Did Valiant Work with Bayonets ... Winnipeg and West Paid Heavy Toll In Strenuous Fighting in Flanders.”³⁷ The *Ottawa Citizen*, ran with General French’s statement that, “Heroic Canadians Saved Day ... Gallantry and Determination Saved Situation; Their Conduct Magnificent Throughout.”³⁸ “150,000 Men Canada’s Reply to Hun Outrages at Ypres—Third and Fourth Contingents will be Rushed Forward Earlier than First Planned—and More When Kitchener Wants Them.”³⁹ The *London Free Press* stated that “Canada’s Heroes Seal in Blood Bond of Empire ... Bitterness is growing against the Germans.”⁴⁰ Seeking a fitting historical example that mirrored the valour of the troops, the paper settled on Tennyson, “Charge of Light Brigade Outdone by Canadians.”⁴¹

The only newspaper that seemed to dissent from this narrative was Henri Bourassa’s *Le Devoir*, which devoted considerably less space to the valiant stand of the Canadians than did the English Canadian dailies. The first news of the battle is buried on the fourth

³³ Ibid., 26 April 1915.

³⁴ Ibid., 11 May 1915.

³⁵ *The Globe*, 25 April 1915, 1.

³⁶ Ibid., 27 April 1915.

³⁷ *Winnipeg Free Press*, 26 April 1915, 1.

³⁸ *Ottawa Citizen*, 24 April 1915, 1.

³⁹ Ibid., 30 April 1915.

⁴⁰ *London Free Press*, 1 May 1915, 1.

⁴¹ Ibid., 3 May 1915.

page of the paper, and the story is not of the Canadian stand, but of the enemy offensive, “*La Plus Grande Bataille de La Guerre – L’Ennemi Sur L’offensive ... les Alliés, au nombre desquels se trouvent les Canadiens résistant héroïquement malgré les pertes subies.*”⁴² Betraying the paper’s editorial slant on the question of stamps, a box inset on the next day’s newspaper asks, “*Pourquoi nos ministres ne voient-ils pas à nous faire donner des timbres de guerre BILINGUES ou, du moins en FRANÇAIS?*” Indeed, the question of the language in which war stamps would be issued took up more room on the page than did the Second Battle of Ypres. Later, citing a telegraph sent from Colonel H.H. McLean to Sam Hughes, the paper accused the Colonel of jingoism. “*Le Canada Pendant La Guerre ... [Colonel McLean] disant du’il nous fauith metre sur la ligne de combat 100,000 hommes, et dans la réserve, 50,000 autres troupiers. Ce colonel exagère, mais il ne manqué pas de jungos pour parler comme lui.*”⁴³ The pages of *Le Devoir* seem to be an anomaly within Canadian press coverage of the battle. Whereas Bourassa was circumspect in his coverage, English Canadian newspapers were liable to beat their readers over the head with news of the battle.

Recruiting figures which had begun to lag in April and May 1915 saw a sharp upturn for the remaining months of the year.⁴⁴ Whereas Clemesha joined together with 463 other officers, his partner, Francis Portnall enlisted as a Private soldier together with 14,818 others. The spring of the same year had seen only half this number of men joining.⁴⁵ This spike in recruiting must be seen as resulting, in part, from the narrative that developed surrounding the Second Battle of Ypres and the sinking of the *Lusitania*. Historian Jonathan Vance agrees, writing that, “As the reports streamed back of Canadian soldiers fighting through the haze of poison gas to stem the German attack, clerics, academics, politicians, and business leaders filled the air with patriotic rhetoric, exhorting the people of Canada to gird

⁴² *Le Devoir*, 24 April 1915, 4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 27 April 1915.

⁴⁴ Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914–1919: The Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer and Controller of Stationary Canada, 1963), Appendix “C” Appointments, Enlistments, Strength and Casualties.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

themselves for the fight.”⁴⁶ The Canadian artist A.Y. Jackson would remember his decision to enlist in a similar vein:

At the railway station one morning I heard the first news of the battle of St. Julien [Second Ypres]. I knew then that all the wishful thinking about the war being of short duration was over. I remember a poster which ended any doubts I had about enlisting. ‘You said you would go when you are needed,’ it proclaimed in large letters. ‘You are needed *now*.’⁴⁷ [*Italics in original*]

For men like Jackson, Portnall, Clemesha, and the tens of thousands of other Canadians who volunteered after the battle, the narrative of Second Ypres—as espoused from the street corner and the pulpit—had the power to exhort them to do their duty, and take up arms against the evil Hun.

SOLDIERS’ NARRATIVES, RUMOURS, AND EARLY HISTORIES: THE CRYSTALLIZATION OF THE STORY

The initial reaction of Canadian soldiers who were in the Ypres salient to the news reports of their stand seems to be positive. The narrative that emerged above in the newspapers—one which juxtaposed the brave and valorous stand of the Canadians with the barbarous and illegal atrocities of the Germans—seemed to please those who endured the battle. For example, Captain J.W. Ross, previously a medical student at the University of Toronto who served with the 9th Battery at Ypres, wrote home that, “perhaps in view of all the nonsense that has been talked about the Canadians in the past, [you will be] a little puzzled to know how much of what you see in the papers to believe. For once in a way, I think the newspapers are within the mark ... the conduct of our Canadian infantry has been so splendid that too much cannot be said of it.”⁴⁸ Ross further hoped

⁴⁶ Jonathan Vance, *History of Canadian Culture* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2009), 218.

⁴⁷ A.Y. Jackson, “Reminiscences of Army Life, 1914–1918,” *Canadian Art* XI, no. 1 (Autumn 1953), 9.

⁴⁸ “Ross, James Wells - Letter 7 May 1915” *The Canadian Letters and Images Project*, available <http://www.canadianletters.ca/letters.php?letterid=3247&warid=3&docid=1&collectionid=202> [accessed 12 April 2013].

that the battle would stimulate recruiting efforts, “The papers here say and I hope it is true that the heavy Canadian casualties have stimulated recruiting at home. That is the only proper answer[.] We all hate and loathe the whole business but the job must be finished and it is foolish to suppose the [G]ermans will be easily beaten.”⁴⁹ This view was reinforced by Ross’ friend, George Blackstock, who wrote to support Beaverbrook’s account of the battle, “I will now try and give you a short account of what we have been through in the last two or three weeks. As it has been said in papers ... I can give you a few more details. The account by the Canadian Eye Witness was quite good, so I will not dwell on it very much.”⁵⁰ The themes of the newspapers’ narrative spoke to the pride that the soldiers felt for their actions and those of their comrades, and the hope that the battle would teach Canadians that it was their duty to support the cause.

Indeed the valour of the cause and the righteousness of the stand, juxtaposed against the barbarousness of the enemy, overarch descriptions of the horror and drudgery of the battle in many of the soldiers’ memoirs and letters. For example, Blackstock’s long and careful account of his experiences, which ran to seventeen closely typed pages (despite his presage that he would not “dwell on [the battle] too much”) cite many of the tropes inherent to the story. He believed that the battle had evoked admiration and a new sense of pride in being in the First Division, and being Canadian, “It was really wonderful day and night, every single man worked like a hero without falter, and in fact it applies to the whole division and every Canadian ought to be proud to be a Canadian.”⁵¹ The Germans, on the other hand, had broken every moral and legal law of warfare. Norman McIntosh wrote to his mother and father in June 1915 that, “The Germans are a dirty lot of fighters. They have killed thousands by that awful gas ... [they] pile their dead (and wounded too, I guess) up in front of the trenches and just barely cover them with earth, and when our big guns fire on their trenches, the dead and decayed bodies are all stirred up ... Of course they only do this when they are going

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ “Ross, James Wells - Letter 10 May 1915” *The Canadian Letters and Images Project*, available <http://www.canadianletters.ca/letters.php?letterid=3247&warid=3&docid=1&collectionid=202> [accessed 12 April 2013].

⁵¹ Ibid.

to retire (or run away).⁵² The battle had taught Canadians that the Germans must be and could be defeated.

The stories of the German atrocities that emerged from Second Ypres—their use of poison gas and the continually repeated claims that they had bayoneted the wounded—would be added to when the story of a crucified Canadian sergeant emerged from the battle. Dark rumours of the Germans' conduct towards a captured Canadian sergeant had been circulating in the immediate aftermath of the battle: in essence, the story went that a group of Germans (usually given as four) had taken an (as yet) unnamed Canadian sergeant (or sergeants) prisoner, and had used bayonets to pinion him or them to a barn door or a tree.⁵³ The *Toronto Daily Star* published an account of these rumours on 11 May, “Canadian was Crucified, Was Clamped to Tree – German Bayonets Thrust Sixty Times into the Body of a Sergeant.”⁵⁴

The story had many adherents, including Private Harold Peat who claimed that, “three of our Canadian sergeants” had been crucified. “I saw the marks of bayonets through the palms of the hands and the feet.” After identifying himself as an eye-witness (who knew “a sergeant of Edmonton ... who has in his possession ... actual photographs of the crucified men”), Peat narrated the event in an entirely unbelievable fashion. “I was told that one of the sergeants was still alive when taken down, and before he died he gasped out to his saviours that when the Germans were raising him to be crucified, they muttered savagely in perfect English, ‘If we did not frighten you before, this time we will.’”⁵⁵ That someone had been crucified was largely believed during the war. For example, William Vincent Gauthier recalled a conversation he had in Bonn, while stationed with the Army of Occupation in Germany,

The first night in Bonn we were in a house and I couldn't speak German and this old lady was trying to make me understand something. Finally she stood against the wall with her arms spread out and she said “Christ, Christ” which I couldn't understand but my buddy could speak German so he spoke to her and she wanted to know if it was

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ See for example, *Toronto Daily Star*, 11 May 1915, 1. Harold R. Peat, *Private Peat* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Publishers, 1917), 154-156.

⁵⁴ *Toronto Daily Star*, 11 May 1915.

⁵⁵ Peat, *Private Peat*, 154.

true[.] Had the Germans crucified a man to a barn door[?] it certainly was true.⁵⁶

Even though Gauthier made no claim to have been an eye-witness, he still accepted the story without any doubts, a testament to how Canadians viewed the Germans even after the war was concluded.

The rumours were given artistic expression at Beaverbrook's Canadian War Memorial Fund (CWMF) post-war exhibition at Burlington House in London. Derwent Wood's sculpture, *Canada's Golgotha* (1919) shows in bronze a soldier bayoneted to a barn door while the foul enemy mockingly jeers him. The sculpture was, in the words of an historian, a testament to the public's "unhealthy emotions."⁵⁷ The Weimer government took umbrage with this public presentation of, in their view, an unproven accusation and the Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Freiherr Langwerth von Simmern lodged a formal complaint through the neutral Swiss embassy. After the Canadian government sponsored a report (authored by the head of the Overseas Military Forces of Canada Sir Edward Kemp) on the atrocity, they found that the evidence was inconclusive. "Wood's sculpture was a tool of war, the war was now over, and the unverifiable accusations made by the bronze must stop."⁵⁸ After *Canada's Golgotha* was displayed in Washington, it was quietly crated up and the bronze spent the next decades in a vault at the National Gallery in Ottawa.⁵⁹

Recently this debate has been reignited by the dissertation research of Iain Overton, who discovered the letters of a British nurse and a Private William Freeman, both of whom claimed that the victim was Sergeant Harry Band, a noncommissioned officer (NCO) in his Freeman's platoon. "I am very sorry to say that it is perfectly true, Harry was crucified" Freeman writes, "But whether he was alive

⁵⁶ "Gauthier, William Vincent: Memoir, My Three Years and Eleven Months in the Services," *The Canadian Letters and Images Project* available <http://www.canadianletters.ca/lettersphp?letterid=10675&warid=3&docid=5&collectionid=411> [accessed 26 April 2013].

⁵⁷ Maria Tippet, *Art at the Service of War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 81-87.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 83.



Derwent Wood, "Canada's Golgotha." (1918). Photo appeared in *Saturday Night*, 15 February 1919. [Saturday Night]

at the time no one can say for sure.”⁶⁰ The evidence, as presented in a documentary based on Overton’s PhD thesis, approaches a smoking gun, but cannot be taken as wholly conclusive. However, it does seem to support the author’s assertion that, “If Private Freeman’s evidence had been available to Sir Edward Kemp’s 1919 inquiry, the Canadian government would have had a far stronger case for the existence of a crucified soldier.”⁶¹ The letters also have the benefit of proposing a realistic possibility as to the identity of the crucified soldier.

Whether or not a sergeant, perhaps Harry Band, was crucified at the Second Battle of Ypres, the story resonated with Canadians during the war. In the story, the juxtaposition of the valiant Canadians with the evil Hun is taken to the highest plains of rhetoric. The unfortunate sergeant is cast as the Christian saviour, the Son of God

⁶⁰ Iain Overton’s Master of Philosophy Thesis was never published and is not readily available (based on correspondence with him). He helped create a documentary based on his research, which aired in the UK in 2002. The letter from Private Freeman is quoted therein. See Iain Overton, ‘The Crucified Soldier,’ Channel 4 (2002), available at <http://www.youtube.com> [accessed 13 April 2013].

⁶¹ Ibid. See also, Iain Overton, “Nurse’s Note Lends Credence to Story of Crucified Soldier,” *National Post*, 14 April 2001, B7.



William Roberts, *The First German Gas Attack at Ypres*. (1918). [National Gallery of Canada 8729]

himself. The Germans play the role of the Sadducees and Pharisees, and they stand scorning God's covenant with man.⁶²

The CWMF exhibition served to further codify the narrative of Second Ypres with works of art other than Wood's *Canada's Golgotha*. Indeed, unlike Wood's sculpture, these paintings would continue to affect the narrative in the years that followed, displayed prominently as they are at the National War Museum in Ottawa. Richard Jack's staged, enormous and panoramic *The Second Battle of Ypres, 22 April to 25 May 1915* (1918) shows a wounded officer—bandage tied around his head in the traditional way of presenting a battlefield wound—exhorting his men forward towards the enemy. William Roberts' *The First German Gas Attack at Ypres* (1918) shows ludicrously dressed fleeing Algerians, who are juxtaposed with

⁶² Mathew 23.15 "How Terrible for you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You sail the seas and cross whole countries to try to win one convert; and when you succeed, you make him twice as deserving of going to hell as you yourselves are!"

Canadian artillerymen frantically reloading their pieces. Roberts' painting is, to my eye, a superior indication of the confusion and determination that must have greeted the German gas attack, but both reinforce the core mythos of Ypres; a brave and determined group of soldiers fighting against terrible odds and succeeding, where other nationalities turned and fled.

By the time of the CWMF exhibition, the battle, the war, and the entire remembrance project had found its voice in the words of John McCrae. Indeed, "In Flanders Fields" has become so central to war remembrance that it is only vaguely that we recall its origins at Second Ypres. To every Canadian schoolchild, the poem is a yearly event, recited with quasi-religious fervour. McCrae's poem was written during the battle, and in response to the death of his friend and fellow officer Alexis Helmer. As such, even though the poem was not published until December 1915, it must be seen as a product of Second Ypres. Indicative of how deeply embedded McCrae's poem is in Canadian culture, in the 1950s, the Montreal Canadiens' general manager asked that a line from it be painted on the walls of the *Canadiens* dressing room. Ken Dryden, a former goalie for *les rouges* remembers its presence, and the row of photos above it:

Across the room, there is something else. For journalists, it is *la différence*, the glimpse that tells the story. Large photoed heads of former Canadiens players now in the Hall of Fame gaze down at the room from a horizontal row, and beneath them, their words in French and English to each of us below:

*Nos bras meurtris vous tendent le
Flambeau, a vous toujours de le porter bien haut!*
To you with failing hands we throw
The torch, be yours to hold it high!

But tradition and style are one thing, a live team is quite another. One head ... has a moustache inked in.⁶³

Dryden, in his curiously elegant way, identifies both the high-diction of McCrae's line, and the red-blooded response of those who interact with it.

⁶³ Ken Dryden, *The Game* (Toronto: Wiley, 2003), 10.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these themes form the core of the story of Second Ypres in the memoirs and early histories of the war. For example, Peat, who “set out to write a book of smiles” before, “the seriousness of it all came back to me and crept into my pages,” describes the battle in familiar terms. “Marvellous is the only word to describe the endurance ... They withstood the gas, and they withstood wave after wave of attacking German hordes.” “It was our strength against theirs—no, it was white man’s spirit against barbarian brutality.”⁶⁴ His chapter on Ypres largely mirrors Aitken’s official witness account, right down to a rudimentary sketch of the effect of the gas on the allied lines.⁶⁵

George Nasmith, a Canadian medical officer who identified the gas as chlorine on the first day of the battle, describes the pride that he felt when Canadian reinforcements advanced towards the gas cloud, “Then our hearts swelled with a pride that comes but seldom in a man’s life the pride of race. Up the road from Ypres came a platoon of soldiers marching rapidly; they were Canadians, and we knew that our reserve brigade was even now on the way to make the attempt to block the German road to Calais.”⁶⁶ Like him, Frederick Palmer, an American touring the lines in 1915, reinforces the centrality of the Canadian’s racial origin and frontiersman’s spirit in their stand at Ypres.

A man used to a downy couch and an easy-chair by the fire and steam-heated rooms, who had ten thousand a year in Toronto, when you found him in a chill, damp cellar of a peasant’s cottage in range of the enemy’s shells was getting something more novel, if not more picturesque, than dog-mushing and prospecting on the Yukon; for that contrast we are quite used to ... The Canadians enlivened life at the front; for they have a little more zip to them than the thoroughgoing British. Their climate spells ‘hustle,’ and we are all the product of climate to a large degree.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Peat, *Private Peat*, forward, 146–147. The fact that the Germans were as white as Peat does not seem to occur to him.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 145. See also, Sir Max Aitken, M.P., *Canada in Flanders: The Official Story of the Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 2 vols. (Toronto, Hodder and Stoughton, 1916), 151–53.

⁶⁶ Nasmith, *On the Fringe of the Great Fight*, 97.

⁶⁷ Frederick Palmer, *My Year of the Great War* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1915), 351.

Palmer believed that the battle reinforced Canada's position within the British Empire and army, "all imperial politics aside, [they] fought their way into the affection of the British army ... They made the Rocky Mountains seem more majestic and the Thousand Islands more lovely."⁶⁸ Privately and publically, the early remembrance of the Second Battle of Ypres served as an example of the Canadian spirit transposed to Belgium.

Canadians proved prickly regarding anyone that contested this version of the battle. The best example of this sentiment was the vigorous challenge that A.F. Duguid, the Canadian official historian, posed to his British counterpart, Sir James Edmonds over how Second Ypres was to be portrayed in the British Official history. At stake were the reputations of Generals Sir Arthur Currie who had commanded the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade (CIB), Sir Richard Turner who had commanded the 2nd CIB, and Sir E.A.H. Alderson who had commanded the First Canadian Division. The dispute was fostered by General Sir Thomas D'Oyly Snow, the commander of the British 27th Division and a man described by one witness as "the rudest officer in the British army."⁶⁹ On 24 April 1915, Snow had received an exhausted and exasperated Currie who had, perhaps incorrectly, left his headquarters in search of reinforcements for his hard pressed brigade.⁷⁰ Currie's presence and bedraggled appearance infuriated Snow, whose response likewise infuriated Currie:

He roundly abused me and told me to get out, shouting at me to 'give them hell, give them hell.' I asked if I might send a message to the 1st [Canadian] Division, but had no sooner sat down at a table to write the message when I was told that I was taking much too long over it. That was an insult so at variance to the treatment which one officer should receive from another of superior rank that I was almost dumbfounded.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Timothy H.E. Travers, "Allies in Conflict: The British and Canadian Official Historians and the Real Story of Second Ypres (1915)," *Journal of Contemporary History* 24 (1989), 315. See also, Tim Cook, *Clio's Warriors* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006), 48–55.

⁷⁰ Currie, *Clio's Warrior's*, 50–53. See also, Tim Cook, *The Madman and The Butcher: The Sensational Wars of Sam Hughes and General Arthur Currie* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2011), 87–97.

⁷¹ Travers, "Allies in Conflict," 314–315.

Edmonds had received an account from Snow of the interview that portrayed Currie as “all in,” and mentally and physically incapable of exercising his command. “Edmonds’s basic contention was that First Canadian Division was out of touch and in ignorance of the situation so that Major-General Snow, GOC [General Officer Commanding] of the neighbouring 27 Division, really ran their battle.”⁷² Both contentions—that Snow had irresponsibly refused aid to the hard-pressed Currie, and that Alderson, Currie, and Turner had each lost the ability to command their formations for periods of the 24 April—likely held some truth. To further complicate matters, the war diaries of the 1st Canadian Division as well as the 2nd and 3rd CIB were missing. Edmonds was suspicious that their absence was evidence of a cover up on the part of the officers in question.⁷³

Edmonds may well have had a point—and there is a significant amount of scholarship devoted to the question of Alderson, Currie, and Turner’s conduct during the battle—but the question touches on a larger issue in the post-war remembrance of Second Ypres.⁷⁴ Duguid devoted months to compiling and circulating rebuttals to Edmond’s narrative of the battle. After reading Edmonds chapter, Turner stated that an “Anti-Canadian atmosphere or spirit ... permeates the narrative.”⁷⁵ Currie, in an oblique reference to Snow, summed up the historiographical divergence from the Canadian perspective, “The old regular soldier was back at his game and clearly determined that the civilian soldier was not entitled to very much respect.”⁷⁶ Here we see the larger problem raised by this debate. The Canadians were keen to remember Second Ypres as a valiant victory won by citizen

⁷² Travers identifies five areas in which the narratives of Duguid and Edmonds diverged, they are “(1) the question of the ‘disappearing’ war diaries, and the reliability of the replacement reports/narratives; (2) Currie’s orders to retire on 24 and 25 April; (3) the reason for Currie’s visit to Snow’s 27 Division Headquarters on 24 April; (4) the question of whether Snow or 1 Canadian Division really ran the Canadian side of the battle; and (5) the ‘disappearance’ of 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade on the evening of 25 April.” *Ibid.*, 304, 312.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 304.

⁷⁴ See for example, *Ibid.* Tim Cook, *Clio’s Warriors*, 48–70. Hugh Urquhart, *Arthur Currie: The Biography of a Great Canadian* (Toronto: Dent, 1950). George H. Cassar, *Hell in Flanders Fields: Canadians at the Second Battle of Ypres* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2010), 230–240. Wesley C. Gustavson, “Competing Visions: Canada, Britain and the Writing of the First World War,” *Canada and the British World: Culture, Migration and Identity* ed., Douglas Francis and Phillip Buckner (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007).

⁷⁵ Travers, “Allies in Conflict,” 321.

⁷⁶ Quoted in, Cook, *Clio’s Warriors*, 54.

soldiers, and were loath to have that narrative overarched by stories of the breakdown of command within the division, and its usurpation by an experienced British regular. The British, on the other hand, were tired of the Canadians taking too much credit for the victory. In the words of Lord Horne (GOC First Army), the Canadian “Corps is perhaps rather apt to take all the credit it can for everything, and to consider that the BEF consists of the Canadian Corps and some other troops.”⁷⁷ This debate demonstrates that Canadians had developed a narrative of bravery, sacrifice and skill-at-arms surrounding the Second Battle of Ypres, and that they were willing to defend the veracity of that narrative against any challenge.

PISS-SOAKED RAGS: THE CURIOUS EMERGENCE OF THE CENTRAL MODERN TROPE OF THE BATTLE

The image of horrible death could not, forever, remain absent from the prevailing narrative of a battle that had seen so much of it, but the way that horror was introduced to the core of the story of Second Ypres in Canada is surprising. Of course, within the tales of Second Ypres there were stories of the dead, but the horror and sting of it was often removed. Beaverbrook—the fountainhead of the narrative of Second Ypres—gives an example. In the chapter on Second Ypres in his *Canada in Flanders*, Beaverbrook speaks of the casualties of the battle in monumental terms. To begin with, he plagiarizes himself, and cannot resist republishing this line from his eye-witness report, “[they fought] until, as happened to so many, these perished gloriously, and then fought from the impulsion of sheer valour because they came from fighting stock.” Death in the pages of *Canada in Flanders*, is almost always spoken of in a similarly lofty fashion, “When one man fell another took his place.” “This charge, made by men who looked death indifferently in the face—for no man who took part in it could think that he was likely to live.” “After exertions as glorious, as fruitful, and, alas! as costly, as soldiers have ever been called upon to make.” Only once does he make specific mention of anyone’s death below the rank of Lieutenant, “It is, perhaps, worth mentioning that two privates of the 48th Highlanders, who found their way into the trenches commanded by Lieut. – Colonel ...

⁷⁷ Quoted in, Travers, “Allies in Conflict,” 319.

Lipsett (90th Winnipeg Rifles), 8th Battalion perished in the fumes, and it was noticed that their faces became blue immediately after dissolution.”⁷⁸ In this last quote, we find the impetus for the change in the way that the story of Second Ypres would be told in the years after the Second World War.

Death by chlorine asphyxiation was a horrific thing, but for Canadians to truly conceptualize any part of the Second Battle of Ypres to be horrible there had to emerge a story not of horrible death, but of horrible life. Specifically, the story of soldiers forced through desperation and ingenuity (it might be added that this ingenuity was a citizen soldier’s prerogative) to press cloths dampened with their own urine to their mouths in order to survive and continue to fight.

This trope emerged from the CBC radio program *In Flanders Fields*, which aired between 11 November 1964 and 7 March 1965. This was a period of relatively intense interest in the First World War, fifty years after the event. It was also a period of historical revisionism, as the “Lions led by Donkey’s” narrative was emerging in force. Characterized by the British movie *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1963), and a spate of popular histories which took up the film’s themes, this new historical presentation would influence the CBC’s narrative. In the words of one historian, “These works contributed to a clear historiographical trend in the 1960s that focused on attacking the supposedly outdated, inept, and even ruthless leadership of the First World War.”⁷⁹ The goal of the program, as envisioned by its leader Albert Edgar Powley was to, “use oral history to tell the story of the First World War to a new generation of Canadians who knew little of the war’s events or of its significance.”⁸⁰

Episode Five, “The Second Battle of Ypres,” provides the first instance of a soldier stating that he urinated on a rag to ward off the effects of the gas. J. Sprotson of the 4th Divisional Artillery (a unit which did not exist at the time of the Second Battle of Ypres, Sprotson served with the 8th and 10th Battalion before moving to the

⁷⁸ Beaverbrook, *Canada in Flanders*, 48–63.

⁷⁹ Teresa Iacobelli, “A Participant’s History?”: The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the Manipulation of Oral History,” *The Oral History Review* 38, no. 2 (2011), 335.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 334.

artillery and becoming an officer) provided the following story.⁸¹ “Men were coughing, spitting and choking, and we didn’t know what to do till the M.O. of the 14th Battalion, Colonel Scrimger, was rushing up and down telling everyone to urinate on your pocket handkerchief, tie it over your mouth, and he saved thousands of lives.”⁸²

Colonel, (Captain in 1915) F.A.C. Scrimger, won the Victoria Cross on 25 April, three days after the Germans launched their gas cloud, for sheltering and evacuating Captain MacDonald, who was wounded in the neck and shoulder. During a heavy bombardment that threatened to bury the pair, Scrimger shielded MacDonald’s body with his own.⁸³ Scrimger, who survived the war, makes no mention of ordering men to urinate on their handkerchiefs on 22 April in any of the letters that he sent after the battle. Moreover, none of the early commentators on Scrimger’s conduct of the battle make mention of the story. It is possible that the focus of Scrimger’s battle narrative naturally migrated towards the story of how he won the highest military honour in the British Empire, and scant attention is paid to his conduct on 22 April in any of the documents that deal with Scrimger’s life.⁸⁴ It is also possible that he simply neglected to mention this horrible order that he issued. Finally, it is possible that it was not Scrimger at all who issued the order to urinate on their rags. His was a famous name to emerge from Second Ypres, and it

⁸¹ Joseph Sprotson’s identity and unit affiliation has proven more difficult to ascertain than the majority of CEF soldiers that one encounters. To begin with, his name is misspelled in the transcript of *In Flanders Fields*, spelled Sprotsin vice Sprotson. No attestation papers exist for anyone named Sprotsin, but between 7 and 10 individuals named Sprotson attested. Of these individuals only Joseph Sprotson, originally with the number 41068, (when he attested in September 1914) but who later (March 1920) became a lieutenant, could be the individual quoted by CBC. His second attestation paper (to become an officer) lists his former service as with the 5th Battery CFA, and the 10th Battalion. The original attestation paper lists his unit as the 8th Battalion. When asked what unit he served with during the war, Sprotson probably gave his last unit affiliation (the 4th Canadian Divisional Artillery, which appears on the transcript).

⁸² “Transcript – ‘Flanders Fields’ #5 ‘The Second Battle of Ypres,’” 4.

⁸³ W.B. Howell, “Colonel F.A.C. Scrimger, V.C.,” *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 38, no. 3 (March 1938), 279–281.

⁸⁴ See, *Ibid.* Nasmith, *On The Fringe of the Great Fight*, 92–94. “Letter from Captain F.A.C. Scrimger, V.C.,” *Canadian War Museum: Canada and the First World War*, available <http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/guerre/pdf/2-a-1-d-letter-from-scrimger-kl.pdf> [accessed 25 April 2013]. J. George Adami, M.D., F.R.S., *War Story of the Canadian Army Medical Corps*, 2 vols (London: Colour Ltd., 1919), 2:105, 137, 143–146.

is possible that Sprotson misremembered the events of 22 April, or attributed an order given by somebody else to Scrimger. Nasmith writes of spending time with Scrimger at an *estaminet* before the gas attack was launched on 22 April, and indicates that he re-joined his battalion before the first gas attack occurred.⁸⁵ However, nowhere does the story appear in any of the contemporary accounts of Scrimger's conduct, most of them focusing on how he won the VC on 24 April.

This final possibility is supported by another interview conducted for *In Flanders Fields*, which never aired. John Uprichard of the 8th Battalion gives a different version of the story. As he describes it, the men were forced out of necessity and lack of water to urinate on their rags, and the suggestion was provided by George Bell:

Now, whether there's any neutralizing effect in the urine, I couldn't tell you but we were run out of water. You see, they weren't able to get supplies up and you weren't very fussy on what you done then because we were taking water out of the other fellow's bottles, if they had any, and you didn't have much opportunity. You were just cuddled for protection most of the time so I think that helped. Bill Cox and I, I don't know how many done it but I understand that Captain Bell who was a very, very fine man, he was taken prisoner and he died here several years back. Apparently he advocated to some of the men that they do this and they done it and he also done it apparently. He was supposed to be the first one that instructed them to do that.⁸⁶

Uprichard seems downright bashful and has to work his way up to making himself understood.

This story, however, is complicated by George Bell's own memoirs in which he states, "Piss on your handkerchiefs and tie them over

⁸⁵ Nasmith, *On the Fringe of the Great Fight*, 92–93.

⁸⁶ "The Second Battle of Ypres – Partial Transcript Interview with John Uprichard: 8th Battalion," *Library and Archives Canada Oral Histories of the First World War*, available <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/first-world-war/interviews> [accessed 23 April 2013].

your faces,' yells our lieutenant."⁸⁷ Bell identifies an unnamed third party as the originator of the order.

The origin and veracity of the "piss-soaked rags" story is thus at least as difficult to disentangle as the story of the crucified Canadian. Take for example the article written by Captain H.H. Matthews, which gives an account of his experience as a company commander in the 8th Battalion (the battalion most likely to have peed on rags on either 22 or 24 April). He is careful to note—with a staff officer's eye for detail—that on 24 April, "In expectation that we might be gassed dixies of water had been placed at intervals along the trench, handkerchiefs and empty bandoliers had been wetted in the hope that by keeping something damp over our mouths and noses the effect of the poisonous gas would be nullified ... It is to this precaution that I attribute the fact that the company suffered as little as it did."⁸⁸ Wet rags, certainly, but urine escapes his story.

After *In Flanders Fields* was aired, the contradictory nature of the evidence from the battle did not prevent its explosion as a narrative tool used to tell the story of Second Ypres. Although I could only find one instance of the story being told prior to the airing of *In Flanders Fields*, the story has become the centrepiece of narratives of Second Ypres after 1965.⁸⁹ Amongst the first popular historians

⁸⁷ Quoted in, Tim Cook, *No Place to Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 25, footnote 45, 243. Cook also cites Cosgrove as a source who mentions urinating on rags, but Cosgrove makes no mention of the story in the book he published after the war, even though he treats with the battle. "Who amongst us on that smiling Spring day, as we held the line in front of ancient Ypres, can e'er forget that silent, menacing, all-devouring, grey-green cloud of poison gas let loose by, as the Algerians gaspingly cried, The Father of all Evil. Men in their spleen did strength sinking to the ground in dreadful contortions dying after hours of agony their dying words crying curses upon the fiends in human form who could be such damnable cowards, and could violate in such a manner all the tenets and creeds of a humane world!" Lieutenant-Colonel L. Moore Cosgrave, *Afterthoughts of Armageddon* (Toronto: S.B. Gundy, 1919), 14.

⁸⁸ Lieutenant-Colonel H.H. Matthews, "An Account of the Second Battle of Ypres, April, 1915. – Being the Experiences of a Company Commander prior to and during the fighting," *Canadian Defence Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (April 1924), 39.

⁸⁹ The second-hand story is told by Armine Norris, and skilfully mixes high diction (the Canadians selflessly holding on), with the horror of the war. Note how he identifies Langemarck (the site of a battle involving Canadians in 1917) instead of Ypres or St. Julien as the area where it occurred. "When the gas came and only wet handkerchiefs could enable them to hang on at Langemarck they wet them in the only way they could, with urine, and tied them round their noses and mouths. Just imagine men doing that not to save their lives but to save their trenches." Norris, "Mainly for Mother," 164.

to pick up on this trope, Daniel Dancocks' uncritical treatment is typical. Citing the documentary, Dancocks writes, "In the meantime, Scrimger ... came up with a more immediate solution ... No doubt using more direct language, he instructed the men of his battalion 'to urinate on your pocket handkerchief [and] tie it over your mouth.' This unpleasant emergency measure ... saved countless Canadian lives during the next several days."⁹⁰ Tim Cook and J.L. Granatstein are probably the two best known authors responsible for this shift. Take for example Cook's account of gas warfare, and the way that the story is inflated beyond Sprotson's initial account.

As the green-yellow death cloud floated through the Canadian lines, men passed on hurried advice to "piss on a rag and stuff it in your mouth if you want to live." The urine reacted with the gas and generally protected the lungs. Those in the path of the cloud who covered their mouths with the foul rags generally survived the gassing; those that could not or would not, died or were severely disabled.⁹¹

Here, Cook implies that the only way that the Canadians survived the gas attack (and he is not specific as to whether he is discussing that of 22 or 24 April) was through the use of "foul rags." No mention is made of the fact that rudimentary gas masks were provided to the battalions by 24 April, or that the gas affected only a (relatively) small number of Canadians on 22 April.⁹² Instead, the incredible Canadian stand is told as being made possible only through the foul expedient of the piss-soaked rag.

When appearing on CBC Radio, Cook identifies the tactic with saving the lives of many on 24 April. "And this time even though the Canadians do not have gas masks they do not break. They stand there, their officers tell them use a wet handkerchief, or piss on a rag, hold it against your mouth and that will protect you. Well for some soldiers it did and for some it didn't, there are a large number

⁹⁰ Daniel G. Dancocks, *Welcome to Flanders Fields* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988), 162–163.

⁹¹ Cook, "A Proper Slaughter," 11.

⁹² There is, of course, debate about who actually received these gas masks, which were made of cotton. See Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers*, 188–189. Iarocci quotes George Bell as a recipient.

of Canadians that end up dying and being suffocated to death.”⁹³ Granatstein enshrines the story in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Military History*, writing that on 22 April, the opening day of the battle, “the Canadians ... held their positions, though their left flank was now open. Men urinated on their handkerchiefs or puttees, trying to negate the effect of the chlorine, a partial solution at best.”⁹⁴ Pierre Burton, never one to pass up a good story, includes it in his work, “Though the Canadians on the French right stood firm, clutching urine-soaked handkerchiefs to their noses, the line had been badly broken.”⁹⁵ Wherever one looks for the standard narrative of Second Ypres within the modern historiography, they are likely to come across this story.

While I was discussing the research for this paper with others who do not have a background in the First World War—friends, colleagues from other areas, and librarians—I was always met with a look of recognition when I mentioned the story, even amongst those who could not identify it as originating in the Second Battle of Ypres. The disgusting idea of a soldier being compelled to cover his face with piss encapsulates the narrative of the stand in a way that is hard to forget; at least to a modern audience. Conversely, it could be argued, that to participants and the first generation of writers of the war, the story was simply too hard to tell.

Perhaps the best Canadian novel of the First World War was written by someone who was not born until a decade after its conclusion. Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*, a book that might have been considered pornographic to Canadians in the 1920’s, won the Governor General’s book award in 1977. It remains one of Canada’s most discussed novels, and tells the story of Robert Ross, a Canadian officer who was nineteen-years-old when the war broke out. In it, Findley demonstrates an understanding of the modernistic spiritual emptiness engendered by the war.⁹⁶ One of the ways that he illuminates

⁹³ Cook interview for, “First World War: Gas! Gas!,” *CBC Ideas*, available <http://www.cbc.ca/archives/categories/war-conflict/first-world-war/the-first-world-war-canada-remembers/gas-gas.html>.

⁹⁴ J.L. Granatstein and Dean F. Oliver, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Military History* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2011), 491.

⁹⁵ Pierre Burton, *Marching as to War* (Toronto: Anchor, 2002), 145.

⁹⁶ See, for example, Donna Palmateer Pennee, “Imagined Innocence, Endlessly Mourned: Postcolonial Nationalism and Cultural Expression in Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*,” *English Studies in Canada* 32 No. 2–3 (2008) 89–113.

this theme is through the medium of piss-soaked rags, complete with the twist that Ross is the only man capable of performing under pressure. Overlying the story of Second Ypres onto the story of St. Eloi's Craters, Findley writes of a group of Canadians who only had one gas mask between them. Ross, alert to his duties as an officer, "dug into his underwear for his penis ... It had shrunk with fear." Finding it, Ross prays, "*dear Jesus, let me piss*" and then passed the rag, "dripping like a dishcloth ... [to] the other man and said to him: 'Put it over your face.' But the poor daft crazy was so afraid and so confused he put the cloth on the top of his head."⁹⁷ Perhaps this was the "more direct language" that Dancocks refers to.

The themes inherent to Findley's work—exemplified by the retelling of this new tale—work to dissociate the war with the traditional "high diction" that was, and is, used to describe it. Absent is heroism or virile manhood. Sexualities are confused, and Ross is raped by British soldiers later in the work (the subtext being that Canada, too, had been violated). Thus, Ross and Canada's innocence and tranquility is malevolently shattered by the war. Knowing Ross's story, it is impossible to speak of the war in reverential tones. The war is squalid, sordid and ugly. This seems to mirror the ways in which historians began to think of the war at the time that Findley wrote the novel.

Findley's work could be contrasted with that of Alden Nowlan, whose poem "Ypres 1915" deals specifically with the question of how the Canadians made their stand, and what the veracity of that stand did to influence Nowlan's regional and national pride. He is fully conversant with the narrative of the battle, but also doubts how much can be taken as really true.

I know the picture is as much a forgery
as the Protocols of Zion, yet it outdistances
more plausible fictions: newsreels, regimental histories,
biographies of Earl Haig.

It is the motivational power of the tale of the battle, and the regional pride that it evokes which allows this "forgery" to "outdistance more plausible fictions." To begin, the clownish and outlandish appearance of the fleeing French territorials is introduced:

⁹⁷ Timothy Findley, *The Wars* (Toronto: Penguin, 2005 (first published 1977), 124–125.

The Moors are running
Down the right side of the road.
The Moors are running
in their baggy pants and Santa Claus caps.
...
The Moors are running.
And on the left side of the same road,
the Canadians are marching in the opposite direction.

But how do these men hold the line? Why would the French flee and the Canadians stand? Nowlan does not introduce the expedient of urine to his narrative, but tells the tale as it very well may have been:

Perhaps they were too shy
to walk out on anybody, even Death.
Perhaps their only motivation
was a stubborn disinclination.

Private MacNally thinking
You squareheaded sons of bitches,
you want this God damn trench
you're going to have to take it away
from Billy MacNally
of the South End of Saint John, New Brunswick.

Pride, bashfulness, and stubbornness are the qualities that allow them to hold on:

And that's ridiculous, too, and nothing on which to found a country.
Still
It makes me feel good, knowing
that in some obscure, conclusive way
they were connected with me
and me with them.⁹⁸

Here we see the dialectic of nation-building and national myths brought down to its most elemental level. There is no room in

⁹⁸ Alden Nowlan, "Ypres 1915," *An Exchange of Gifts* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1977), 121–123. First published in *The Mysterious Naked Man* (1969).

this poem for debased humanity, but only for Billy MacNally, a product of his town and his nation. Findley's work is a child of the historiographical shift which took place in the 1960s, whereas Nowlan's seems to descend from McCrae but—even though they seem mutually exclusive—both conceptions have been enshrined in the Canadian understanding of Second Ypres.

CONCLUSION: ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF REMEMBRANCE

One hundred years after the Second Battle of Ypres, and the number of pilgrims to the site of the brooding soldier memorial shows no sign of waning. In Saskatchewan, one does not even need to go to Ypres (or the internet for that matter) to see the brooding soldier; his image is printed on every veteran licence plate in the province. It is unlikely that most people in Saskatchewan know that the creator of that image was a Quaker who went against the non-violent teachings of the church and served as an officer in the CEF. Nevertheless, the image maintains its power and visibility in the public Canadian remembrance project.

Another example of this project was provided to Canadian viewers of the hockey game between Winnipeg and Anaheim on 20 April 2015 by Don Cherry. "Grapes," as he is affectionately known by hockey-loving Canadians, is never one to shy away from a chance to speak at the top of his voice about hockey's warriors, or Canada's troops. The clip is led into by Ron Maclean, who plays Sancho de la Panza to Cherry's Quixote, "the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Ypres [sic] and we'll get to that but the foot-soldiers." Following Maclean's lead in, Cherry conflates the "foot-soldiers" of the Calgary Flames who have allowed them to take a 3-1 series lead over the Vancouver Canucks, with the troops of the First Canadian Division. "Yes I compare hockey players to soldiers, the team, the First Canadian Division they were the best 100 years ago, our first battle, and we are the best." For him, the spirit of the soldiers of the First Canadian Division is embodied in the contemporary battles that Canadian teams like the Calgary Flames, and Canadian players, like Kris Russell, TJ Brodie and Brandon Bollig, fight on a daily basis.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Jeff Simmons, "Coach's Corner: Flames depth stands out," available <http://www.sportsnet.ca/hockey/nhl/coachs-corner-flames-depth-stands-out/> [accessed 4 April 2015].

The montage put together by the *Coach's Corner* crew, narrated by Cherry, is indicative of the standard narrative of the battle. Cherry is not a military historian, although he has a much larger Canadian audience than any of us who might claim that professional prerogative. His description of the battle, informed by the hyper-patriotism that makes the Ron and Don Show so successful, is a mixture of truth, half-truth, and fiction.

Here it is the 100th anniversary of the First Canadian Division they were in the battle line and yesterday in England, they honoured them the queen did. That was the gas that the Germans put on 'em and the allies the British and the French they ran back. We held it! They came the second time and they gassed them again and they held 'em again until reinforcements could come again. First Division were the best soldiers in the world and we never ran, unbelievable these guys.¹⁰⁰

Behind Cherry runs video clip which shows gas being released from canisters, but not all of the video could possibly be from Second Ypres. German and French soldiers can be identified by their uniforms and helmets, but there are no Canadians in the video that opens the clip. Cherry's assertion that "that was the gas" is thus probably false, but the point seems somewhat petty as the actual gas would likely have looked somewhat similar to the clip shown. Similarly, Cherry's assertion that the "British and the French" ran back is false, only the French did. The British provided reinforcements to the hard-pressed Canadians. Cherry does not mention the First or Third Battles of Ypres (the former being the last stages of the race to the sea in August 1914, and the latter being Passchendaele), and refers to the battle as simply "Ypres." He also seems unaware that other nationalities were there to support them. But of course neither of these facts is important to the narrative that has emerged in the last 100 years.

Next, Cherry seems to paraphrase Nowlan's "Billy MacNally" when he presents the case of two soldiers who fought in the battle. "Y'know these are the guys, Scotty Davidson he won the cup with Toronto and he volunteered that summer and he was killed over there. And we got George Richardson he was a millionaire and they named the station at Canadian Football Station in Kingston over

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

‘em ... Captain James Sullivan made a trophy for them ... and y’know what the trophy was? It was the Memorial Cup.” Here we see another example of the everyman Canadian, undaunted by the greatest horrors that can be unleashed by the evil enemy holding the line and taking their place in the modern understanding of what the battle means to Canadians.

Now that there are no longer living men who fought in the First World War, it seems that its remembrance must necessarily continue to be a mixture of truth, conjecture, and falsehood. Who is to say exactly who issued the order to “piss on a rag,” or whether a Canadian was really pinioned to a barn door with bayonets?

The traditional “high diction” narrative of Second Ypres seems likely to remain unassailable. The stand of the Canadians was incredible, and there is no denying the heroism of men who tenaciously held out. In the end, the story of Second Ypres was most thoroughly written by the First Canadian Division—an organization that had not existed eight months prior—who incredibly managed to hold the line against gas (that most heinous of crimes) and then against waves of German attacks; and then to counterattack over open ground in near suicidal charges on the night of 22–23 April. The magnificence of this stand will continue to assert itself within the Canadian historiography. Perhaps, in the end, Beaverbrook was right, “as long as brave deeds retain the power to fire the blood of Anglo-Saxons, the stand made by the Canadians in these desperate days will be told by fathers to their sons.”¹⁰¹ However, the idea that raw courage saw them through must be at least partially tempered by more prosaic realities, and I am inclined to agree with Iarocci’s thesis that “Although they had plenty of it, courage alone was not what saved the Canadians from total annihilation at Second Ypres. It was skill and training, along with good morale and positive leadership that saw them through their trial by fire.”¹⁰²

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¹⁰¹ Aitken, *Canada in Flanders*, 2 vols., 1:47.

¹⁰² Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers*, 10.

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THE CANADIAN CORPS AT WAR

