

The Barrier and the Damage Done

Converting the Canadian Mounted Rifles to Infantry, December 1915

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Abstract: The Canadian Mounted Rifles were a rising phenomenon in the prewar period based on military exigency, the need for a form of light cavalry and mobile firepower, the financial realities governing the Canadian military, the success of mounted rifles in the Second Boer War, and a supposed affinity of Canadians for this form of warfare. When tested on the Western Front in a minor operation, however, the mounted rifles floundered, which confirmed the decision to convert them into infantry because of their unsuitable organisation, leadership flaws, the demand for more infantry, and tensions between senior commanders.

“Regarding the 1st and 2nd Mounted Brigades, I stated that I considered their discipline and training not what it should be. I am still of that opinion, and the sooner those responsible for that discipline and training realize this truth the better for all concerned.” *Major-General Arthur Currie, 10 December 1915*

“The consternation raised at Canadian Headquarters by this barrier was tremendous, quite out of proportion to the causes...” *Johnston G. Chalmers*

IN THE DARK of the new moon of 2 December 1915, Silesians of the 11th Reserve Infantry Regiment (RIR) crept to within 125 metres of the Canadian frontline and built a three-metre high barrier across

the Ploegstreet-Messines road.¹ The defending Canadian Mounted Rifles' (CMR) failure to prevent the Barrier's construction or to destroy it was the final confirmation of the Canadian Corps' high command's judgment that the CMR were not suited for service on the Western Front, with the result that they were converted to infantry. In terms of Canadian operations, this minor skirmish would not merit mention, except that it dealt a blow to a military concept that was a centrepiece of Canadian prewar defence policy. This article will examine what the mounted rifles were, how they became important, their suitability for operations on the Western Front, what happened at the Barrier, and its consequences.

There is little Canadian historiographical interest in the mounted rifles despite the important position the CMR held in Canadian prewar defence considerations. In comparison, the Australian Light Horse (ALH), the equivalent to the CMR, continues to be a subject of considerable popular and scholarly interest, including two major Australian war movies, *The Lighthorsemen* (1987) and *Gallipoli* (1981), and a website with over 12,000 entries.² While there are regimental histories of two of the converted CMR battalions and a history of the Royal Canadian Dragoons (RCD), there are no academic studies on the Canadian phenomena of the mounted rifles.³ There is a rich historiography on the role of cavalry in the British Army from the Second Boer War to the First World War, as well as a thesis on the Canadian Cavalry Brigade.⁴ Standard histories of the Canadian army by Granatstein, Morton, and Stanley only briefly

¹ "Barrier" is capitalised here and throughout the article to distinguish it from other obstacles and to denote its importance. German formations are *italicised*.

² For more on the popular memory of the ALH, see Jean Bou, *Light Horse: A History of Australia's Mounted Arm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1–3; "Australian Light Horse Studies Centre," http://alh-research.tripod.com/Light_Horse/.

³ S. G. Bennett, *The 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles, 1914–1919* (Toronto: Murray Printing, 1926); Johnston, *The 2nd CMR*; Brereton Greenhous, *Dragoon: The Centennial History of the Royal Canadian Dragoons, 1883–1983* (Belleville, Ont.: Guild of the Royal Canadian Dragoons, 1983).

⁴ Some of the works include David Kenyon, *Horsemen in No Man's Land: British Cavalry and Trench Warfare 1914–1918* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2011); Spencer Jones, *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army, 1902–1914* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012); Stephen Badsey, *Doctrine and Reform in the British Cavalry 1880–1918* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008); Stephanie Elizabeth Potter, "Smile and Carry On': Canadian Cavalry on the Western Front, 1914–1918," PhD, University of Western Ontario, 2013.

touch on the mounted rifles, if at all.⁵ Even books focused on the prewar developments such as Morton's *A Canadian General*, Miller's *A Knight in Politics*, and Wood's *Militia Myths*, make only passing references to mounted rifles despite their popularity leading up to the First World War.⁶ Campaign accounts of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) such as Cook's *At the Sharp End* and Nicholson's official history describe, in vivid detail, the initial successful November 1915 raid on German positions by the 2nd Infantry Brigade but do not discuss the reasons for the CMR conversion.⁷ The sole article on the Barrier was in *The Legionary* in 1935 by Edwin Pye, on the staff of the official historian. The focus of the article was on the successful attack by the 5th Battalion and included a brief description of the earlier CMR abortive operations but not the consequences.⁸ Owing in part to the heavy losses suffered by the CMR formations at Mount Sorrel and on the Somme in 1916, few personal papers of CMR members survive from the period covered.⁹

DEFINITIONS

The differences between the forms of mounted forces can be confusing, so it is necessary to define the terms used in this period. In the British army's parlance, which the Canadian military followed, mounted troops encompassed cavalry, mounted infantry, mounted rifles, and yeomanry. British cavalry in 1914 fought in two

⁵ J. L. Granatstein, *Canada's Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 27, 42–25; Desmond Morton, *A Military History of Canada*, 5th ed. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2007), 98, 106–107; George F. G. Stanley, *Canada's Soldiers: The Military History of an Unmilitary People*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1974), 256, 266, 281.

⁶ Desmond Morton, *The Canadian General: Sir William Otter* (Toronto: A.M. Hakkert, 1974), 143, 147, 233, 242; Carman Miller, *A Knight in Politics: A Biography of Sir Frederick Borden* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010); James A. Wood, *Militia Myths: Ideas of the Canadian Citizen Soldier, 1896–1921* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 88, 91 124–125.

⁷ Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1914–1916* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2007), 191, 347; G. W. L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914–1919* (Ottawa: R. Duhamel, Queen's Printer, 1964), 124–125, 134.

⁸ “La Petite Douve” and How the 5th Battalion Crashed the Barricade, *the Legionary*, July 1935, Edwin Pye, GAQ 5-66, RG24 v1825, LAC.

⁹ A rare exception was Captain John Symons, who is quoted later in the paper, served in the 4th CMR and died at Mount Sorrel.

ranks—mounted and dismounted—with rifles, swords, and in lancer regiments with lances and could deliver cavalry charges. Mounted infantry were foot soldiers who rode horses for mobility. They fought exclusively on foot and were not instructed or regarded as horse-soldiers.¹⁰ Yeomanry and mounted rifles were considered cavalry soldiers, also trained to fight mounted and dismounted but with the rifle as their principal weapon and in a single rank.¹¹ These were part-time soldiers, and the army did not believe there was sufficient time to train them to cavalry standards for shock action. The implications of this meant the mounted rifles drilled to perform all the functions of cavalry other than the charge, including scouting, counter-reconnaissance, raiding, and outpost duties. As the Earl of Dundonald, the British commander of the Canadian militia, stated in his foreword to the *Canadian Cavalry Training, 1904* manual: “The rifle, then, is the weapon for cavalry in the future; especially for cavalry like the Canadian which has but a short time for training.”¹² The considerable instruction needed to create cavalry capable of launching successful charges was a function of training the men to wield bladed weapons on horseback and the horses and men to ride stirrup to stirrup in a concentrated mass at speed. The Germans determined that although their cavalry conscripts had two years of service there was insufficient time to develop them to be proficient both in mounted and firepower tactics.¹³

MOUNTED RIFLES PREWAR HISTORY

At Confederation, the Canadian military had no significant history with traditional cavalry as Canada’s closed-in terrain limited the use of cavalry.¹⁴ The initial Canadian militia forces were primarily infantry; with the cavalry so little esteemed that in the Fenian raids of 1866 the authorities called them out too late to fight at the

¹⁰ Army Great Britain, *Field Service Regulations. Part I. Operations. 1909 with Amendments 1912* (London, 1912), 14–15.

¹¹ The Yeomanry were British Territorial Army troops, which were part-time soldiers, like the Canadian Militia. War Office General Staff, *Yeomanry and Mounted Rifles Training - Part I & II* (War Office, 1912), para 1.

¹² *Cavalry Training Canada 1904* (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1904), i.

¹³ Badsey, *British Cavalry*, 49.

¹⁴ Greenhous, *Dragoon: The Centennial History*, 54.

Battle of Ridgeway.¹⁵ The limited role of cavalry and the high cost of raising, training, and maintaining cavalry regiments were powerful disincentives to raising mounted units. Accordingly between 1869 and 1883, the government authorised thirty-one infantry regiments but only five cavalry regiments, and those few probably only to satisfy social status requirements and to provide scouting.¹⁶

In 1883, the government established a small Permanent Force (PF) to provide an instructional cadre to the more numerous part-time soldiers of Canada's Non-Permanent Active Militia (Militia).¹⁷ Included in this new regular army was a troop of cavalry for instructional, garrison, and ceremonial duties. In the aftermath of the North-West Rebellion of 1885, where extemporised volunteer mounted forces provided most of the scouting functions, the military established a school of mounted infantry in Winnipeg to train the local militia.¹⁸ In 1892, the commander of the Canadian forces amalgamated the two mounted units of the PF into what became the Royal Canadian Dragoons.¹⁹ By 1900, the Canadian cavalry was languishing with only eleven regiments in comparison with eighty-eight infantry regiments.

While the terrain in central Canada was poor cavalry country, there was still a need for the traditional functions of light cavalry—scouting, raiding, and outpost duties. The answer to the conundrum of how to provide cavalry that did not require extensive training was mounted rifles. In the open spaces of British-occupied frontier societies in the nineteenth century, such as Australia, South Africa, and Canada, the authorities needed rifle-armed forces able to cover ground swiftly, scout, and do outpost duty. The British first raised a form of mounted rifles in the South African Cape Colony in 1827. Usually on the frontier, highly-trained cavalry capable of shock action were not available or suitable, but volunteers who could ride hard, shoot straight, and fight mounted and dismounted would suffice. The success of the volunteers in this role during the North-West Rebellion

¹⁵ Ibid., 6–8.

¹⁶ Ibid., 10.

¹⁷ Desmond Morton, *Ministers and Generals: Politics and the Canadian Militia, 1868–1904* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 84.

¹⁸ Stanley, *Canada's Soldiers*, 256.

¹⁹ Morton, *The Canadian General*, 147.



“Surrender of Commandant Botha to Canadian Mounted Rifles (ca. 1902)” by Arthur H. Hider. [Arthur H. Hider collection. Library and Archives Canada, 2010-00043-9, Box 2000832240]

and the Boers in the Majuba campaign of the First Boer War in 1881 validated the concept.²⁰

The experience of cavalry in the American Civil War acting as a mobile force providing light cavalry functions also stimulated interest in mounted rifles. Armed with rifles and in the case of the Federals, repeating ones, the cavalry fought almost exclusively as a form of mounted rifles.²¹ This experience had a powerful influence on George Denison, the Canadian author of *Modern Cavalry* who argued the time of the *arme blanche* had passed and firepower was key for the cavalry.²² Denison, in turn influenced British cavalry reformers, like Edward Hutton who commanded both the Canadian and Australian militaries at the turn of the century.²³ Hutton was part of a long, spirited debate in the British army and other continental armies regarding the role of cavalry with the introduction of rifles, machine guns, and rapid firing artillery. During this debate, the British army raised mounted infantry and mounted rifles units as

²⁰ Bou, *Light Horse*, 11–22.

²¹ Potter, “Canadian Cavalry on the Western Front,” 19.

²² George Denison, *Modern Cavalry: Its Organisation, Armament, and Employment in War* (London: Thomas Bosworth, 1868), 10, 13.

²³ *Ibid.*, Bou, *Light Horse*, 6.

a way of reducing the cost of mounted forces.²⁴ Two proponents of this approach, Edward Hutton (1898–1900) and Earl of Dundonald (1902–1904), were commanders of the Canadian Militia, and they played a major part in fostering mounted rifles in Canada.²⁵ This concept was further bolstered by its alignment with the Canadian self-image as rugged, independent, and resilient frontiersmen who were consummate horsemen and expert marksmen. Thus, Canadian volunteers required minimal training to be effective mounted rifle troopers. Major-General L. Herbert, the British commander of the Canadian Militia in 1892 described them as “full of fair, manly spirit, full of zeal and the very stuff that makes fine soldiers.”²⁶

The final and arguably most critical influence was the success of mounted rifles on both sides in the Second Boer War. The Boers, fighting in the manner of mounted rifles, stymied the forces of the British Empire for over two and a half years and mounted rifles units from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa performed well and, in some cases, outshone their British equivalents.²⁷ The Canadian engagements at Leliefontein, where the RCD won three Victoria Crosses (vcs), or the detachment of four Canadians of the 2nd CMR who held off sixty Boers at Honing Spruit on 22 June 1900 demonstrated what the CMR could achieve.²⁸ The majority of Canadian units raised for the Boer War were a form of mounted rifles, with seven regiments of CMR, twelve squadrons of South African Constabulary, and Strathcona’s Horse, a privately-raised mounted rifles regiment, while only one infantry battalion served overseas.²⁹

All these threads combined made a convincing case for expanding mounted rifles in Canada, as it solved the challenge of providing a form of light cavalry and mobile firepower, at a cost acceptable to the Canadian government, and that matched the supposed nature and sensibilities of Canadians. The result was a great increase in mounted rifles units, with twenty-five regiments authorised, or converted from

²⁴ Badsey, *British Cavalry*, 63.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 61; Bou, *Light Horse*, 26; Morton, *Ministers and Generals*, 134.

²⁶ Morton, *The Canadian General*, 142.

²⁷ Badsey, *British Cavalry*, 90.

²⁸ For more on how the Canadians performed see William Stewart, “Richard Turner’s South African Campaign,” *The Canadian Army Journal* 14, no. 2 (2012).

²⁹ The 1st CMR was renamed the RCD part way through its service in South Africa. The only infantry unit to serve in South Africa was the 2nd Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment.

infantry from 1901 to 1913 out of the thirty-five cavalry regiments in the militia in 1914—only fifteen infantry regiments were authorised in the same period.³⁰ Based on the popularity of the mounted rifles and population trends, most of these units formed in the western and central provinces.³¹ The British head of the Canadian Militia, Earl of Dundonald, abolished the sword in Canadian cavalry when he took command in 1902 effectively converting all the Canadian cavalry into mounted rifles.³² He established this principle in his *Cavalry Training Canada 1904* manual that governed Canadian training until the British 1912 *Yeomanry and Mounted Rifles* manual superseded it, and it continued the policy of only training in firepower tactics. For instance, in the western militia camps from 1911, drill focused on mounted rifle tactics, musketry practice, and dismounted and mounted movement, with only one exercise including a charge.³³

WAR

With Britain's declaration of war on 4 August 1914, Canada was also at war, although it could determine the nature and scope of its contribution to the war effort.³⁴ The British government accepted the offer of a Canadian infantry division on 6 August.³⁵ Accordingly, the large number of militia mounted rifle units contributed men, with units such as the 5th Battalion (Western Cavalry) consisting primarily of men from mounted rifles regiments. No militia mounted rifles regiments accompanied the PF RCD and Lord Strathcona's Horse (LSH) regiments in the First Contingent.³⁶

³⁰ This total includes the largely nominal 33rd Vaudreuil and Solanges Hussars and one regiment was disbanded. The infantry total includes the 1st Canadian Grenadier Guards. Department of Militia and Defence, *The Quarterly Militia List of the Dominion of Canada (Corrected to June 30, 1914)* (Ottawa: Department of Militia and Defence, 1914).

³¹ Wood, *Militia Myths*, 88, 124–125.

³² Badsey, *British Cavalry*, 62.

³³ Potter, "Canadian Cavalry on the Western Front," 49.

³⁴ A. Fortescue Duguid, *The Canadian Forces in the Great War 1914–1919*, vol. 1 (Ottawa: Minister of National Defence, 1938), 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5–23.

³⁶ The 6th Battalion was formed primarily from the Fort Gary Horse and went overseas as an infantry battalion. A. Fortescue Duguid, *The Canadian Forces in the Great War 1914–1919, Chronology, Appendices and Maps*, vol. 1 (Ottawa: Minister of National Defence, 1938), Appendix 85.

Before the First Contingent arrived in England in October 1914, the Canadian government offered a second, including four regiments of CMR. The War Office was noncommittal about accepting the offer, but, despite this lack of interest, the government authorised these regiments on 7 November 1914. Part of the rationale was to satisfy western Canadian demands for greater participation by the mounted arm.³⁷ Shortly thereafter, the Militia Council authorised a further nine regiments after Turkey's declaration of war in the expectation of mobile operations in Egypt and a break in the deadlock on the Western Front.³⁸ The British War Office accepted the four CMR regiments for service in Egypt and asked how many more Canada could raise.³⁹ As an indication of the Minister of Militia Sam Hughes' confidence in the CMR readiness, he claimed Canada could send a brigade of three CMR regiments to Egypt in January 1915, if the British provided transports and escorts, with another brigade to follow a month later. Hughes' estimate was wildly off-base as the CMR brigades did not reach England until the summer of 1915, and, as will be discussed, there were serious doubts regarding their training and capability.⁴⁰

The Militia Council formed two CMR Brigades, each with three regiments. The Council appointed Lieutenant-Colonel F.O. Sissons to command the 1stst CMR Brigade consisting of the 1stst, 2ndnd, and 3rdrd CMR Regiments and Colonel C.A. Smart to lead the 2nd CMR Brigade composed of the 4th, 5th, and 6th CMR Regiments. Francis Ogletree Sissons, forty-one years old, was a successful horseman and rancher with extensive land holdings around Medicine Hat, Alberta. He raised the 21st Hussar Regiment in Medicine Hat in 1908, as part of the expansion of mounted rifles regiments, and commanded it as a Lieutenant-Colonel until his transfer to the Retired Officers' list in December 1913.⁴¹ The Militia Council appointed him to command the Alberta-based 3rdrd CMR Regiment on 12 November 1914.⁴² The

³⁷ Ibid., Appendix 254.

³⁸ Once in England, the 7th to 13th CMR regiments, like the majority of the Canadian infantry battalions, were disbanded for replacements. Barbara Wilson, "Guide to Sources Relating to Units of the Canadian Expeditionary Force - Canadian Mounted Rifles," (Library and Archives, Canada, 2012).

³⁹ Duguid, *Canadian Forces in the Great War - Appendices*, Appendix 8.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 434.

⁴¹ Defence, *Quarterly Militia List*; "Fonds Med-371 - Frances Ogletree Sissons Family Fonds," available at <http://www.albertaonrecord.ca/frances-ogletree-sissons-family-fonds>.

⁴² F.O. Sissons Service Jacket, RG150 Acc1992-93/166, Box 8953, LAC.



Col. F.O. Sissons, heading a parade of the Third Canadian Mounted Rifles (3rd CMR) down Second Street SE in Medicine Hat. [Esplanade Arts & Heritage Centre Archives, Harry Maxwell Family Fonds, 0433.0001]

Council provisionally selected Colonel Victor Williams, a PF cavalry officer to command the 1st CMR Brigade. Sam Steele, the commander of Military District #10, which included Alberta, protested the order as “I regret to state that I consider that this appointment to command of the 1st Brigade C.M.R. would be unpopular in the West at the present time.” Instead, Steele recommended Sissons as a superior candidate with longer service than other prospects, more experience, and was respected in the West.⁴³ Steele’s plea worked, and the Council appointed Sissons to command the 1st CMR Brigade on 1 March 1915.⁴⁴

At the start of the war, Smart was a colonel commanding the 4th Eastern Township Mounted Brigade, a prominent cavalry officer, and the president of the Canadian Cavalry Association. He was forty-seven, a wealthy manufacturer, and well connected in Quebec and Conservative circles. He was friends with John Wallace Carson, Sam Hughes’s ‘Special Representative’ in England, one of the conduits through which Hughes controlled affairs in England. Smart regularly

⁴³ Steele to Secretary, Military Council, 16 February 1915, HQ 593-4-1 (A-D), RG 24 v1366, LAC.

⁴⁴ F.O. Sissons Service Jacket, LAC.

corresponded with Carson and was quite willing to use the connection to advocate for promotion and preferment.⁴⁵ On 26 January, the Adjutant-General provisionally appointed Smart to command the 2nd CMR Brigade, but he did not get permission to form the brigade until 18 May 1915.⁴⁶

In a decision that was to have major consequences for the mounted rifles, the CMR Brigades were to serve in France as dismounted infantry. In May 1915, in the aftermath of the costly Second Battle of Ypres and the Battle of Festubert, the Canadians lacked trained replacements, so the Adjutant-General requested the CMR agreement to serve at the front as dismounted units. Smart agreed, but only if the existing organisation and establishments were retained, and that they were “to be mounted when the British War Office required mounted troops.”⁴⁷ The Adjutant-General responded that there he saw no ‘present reason’ why the organisation would have to change, which indicates the extent to which Canadian authorities were unaware of the realities of the Western Front.⁴⁸ It was likely that if the CMR served in Egypt, they would have been hampered by a poorly managed rear base given the chaotic experience of Canadian administration in England up to late 1916.⁴⁹

Raised in the winter of 1914–1915, the CMR were scattered in small units owing to the shortage of large training and billeting facilities, and this hindered their training. The *Yeomanry and Mounted Rifles* manual of 1912 guided the CMR instruction, supplemented by bayonet, entrenching, and signalling training.⁵⁰ Much of the mounted training was of limited value to units that were to fight as infantry. Further, the men spent three-and-a-quarter hours a day on stable duties, which detracted from their time available for other training tasks.⁵¹ As a result, the CMR received less relevant training for their future duties

⁴⁵ Defence, *Quarterly Militia List*; Smart to Carson, 23 September 1915, 6-S-19, RG9 III-A-1 v213, LAC; Smart, Charles Allen Service Jacket, RG150 Acc92-93 v8993, LAC.

⁴⁶ AAG 4th Division to Smart, 18 May 1915, 45-6-1, RG24 v4483, LAC.

⁴⁷ Smart to OC 4th Division, 18 May 1915, 45-6-1, RG24 v4483, LAC.

⁴⁸ AG 4th Division to Smart, 20 May 1915, 45-6-1, RG24 v4483, LAC.

⁴⁹ For more on the chaos, see Desmond Morton, *A Peculiar Kind of Politics* (University of Toronto Press, 1982). William F. Stewart, “‘Every Inch a Soldier’: New Perspectives on the Military Career of a Controversial Canadian General, Sir Richard Turner,” PhD, University of Birmingham, 2012, Chapter 5.

⁵⁰ OC 4th CMR to GSO, 2nd Division, 7 May 1915, 34-3-15, RG24 v4335, LAC.

⁵¹ Potter, “Canadian Cavalry on the Western Front,” 76.

than an infantry unit for the same period of instruction. There were many complaints about the low standard of infantry training conducted in Canada, but it was still of greater value than the CMR stable duties, riding outposts, and practicing raids. There were complaints from within certain CMR units that after seven months of training, the men still did not have horses and had not fired their rifles.⁵²

The 1st CMR Brigade arrived in England in June 1915 and the 2nd CMR Brigade in July.⁵³ Once in England, their training focused more appropriately on route marches, entrenching, and bomb throwing.⁵⁴ The CMR ethos, however, was still oriented to their mounted role, as the 4th CMR Regiment did not turn in its spurs until nine days before crossing to France.⁵⁵ While in England, the commander of the 6th CMR Regiment lost his position when he was found drunk on manoeuvres and later escaped detention, which would not have raised the reputation of the CMR leadership in the minds of the Canadian Corps' senior commanders.⁵⁶ Both brigades spent approximately three months in England in training to prepare for the front, with the 1st CMR Brigade reaching France on 22 September and the 2nd Brigade on 24–25 October.⁵⁷ The 1st CMR Regiment began its first tour in the frontlines on 4 October 1915 and was relieved a week later.⁵⁸ For most of October and November, the 1st CMR Brigade provided work parties every night and so had little opportunity for additional training. In total, it received less than a month training in France.

Alderson identified problems with the CMR almost immediately they arrived. Alderson inspected the 3rd CMR Regiment on 12 October 1915, and he sharply criticised the shabby state of the men, harnesses, and saddlery. Surprisingly, his long list of criticisms was documented in the regimental war diary, because most war diaries scrupulously

⁵² Slowness of CMR Training, C.9-75 RG25 A-2 v151, LAC.

⁵³ Wilson, "Guide to Sources Relating to Units of the Canadian Expeditionary Force - Canadian Mounted Rifles," 2, 5.

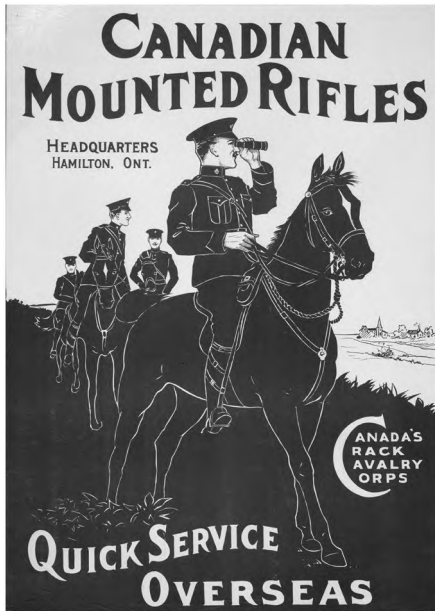
⁵⁴ War Diary, 4th Regiment Canadian Mounted Rifles, 17 and 20 September 1915, RG9 III-D-3 v4947, LAC.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 15 October 1915.

⁵⁶ No verdict was recorded in the available court martial papers, although it is likely he was convicted. R.H. Ryan Court Martial, September 1915, 9857-1, RG150 8, LAC.

⁵⁷ War Diary, 1st Regiment Canadian Mounted Rifles, 22 September 1915, RG9 III-D-3 v4946, LAC; War Diary, 2nd Brigade Canadian Mounted Rifles, 25 October 1915, RG9 III-D-3 v4946, LAC.

⁵⁸ W.D., 1st CMR Regiment, 4 October 1915, LAC.



Canadian Mounted Rifles recruitment campaign. [Library and Archives Canada C-095277]

avoided recording negative comments.⁵⁹ In another uncommon step, the war diary of the 2nd CMR Regiment directly condemned the 1st CMR Brigade's leadership with "The Regiment is and has been rather handicapped owing to lack of information or explanation re Brigade orders and administration generally."⁶⁰

Initially, there was no meaningful role for the CMR Brigades, as they were effectively reduced to labour units in October and most of November. Alderson wrote the British Army Council on 19 November recommending converting the CMR into infantry, as part of a third Canadian division. The existing organisation made it difficult to arrange reliefs of infantry units.⁶¹ Alderson convinced the Council that it was necessary to convert the CMR into an infantry brigade. The Canadian government approved the proposal on 3 December.⁶²

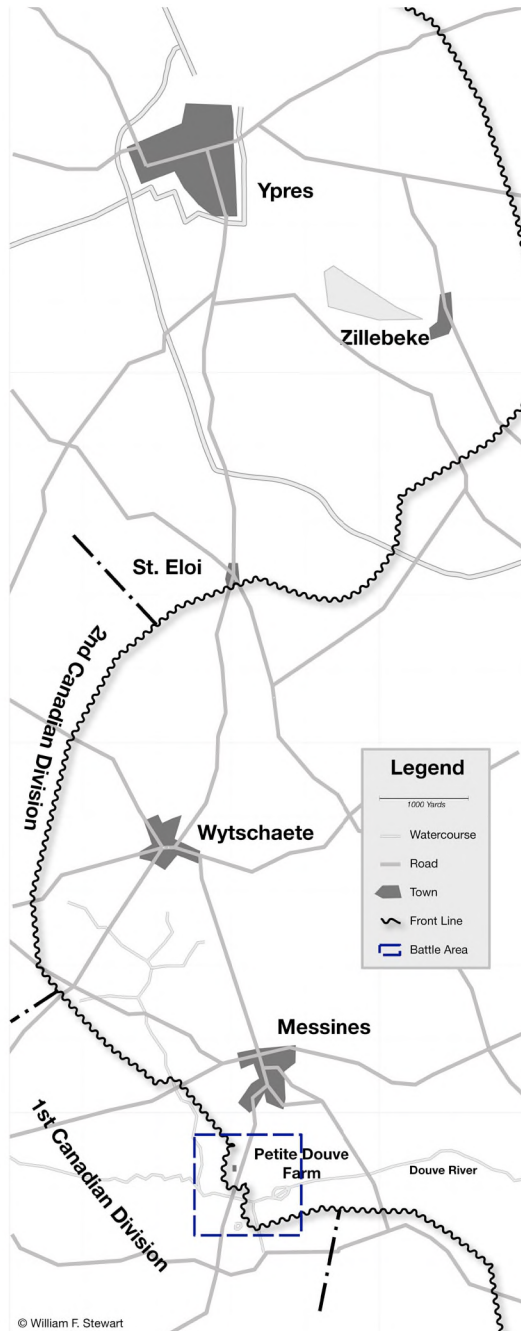
⁵⁹ War Diary, 3rd Regiment Canadian Mounted Rifles, 12 October 1915, RG9 III-D-3 v4946, LAC.

⁶⁰ War Diary, 2nd Regiment Canadian Mounted Rifles, 16 October 1916, RG9 III-D-3 v4947, LAC.

⁶¹ Alderson to Army Council, 19 November 1915, 8-8-8A, RG9 III-A-1 v43.

⁶² Proposal for 3rd Division, Secretary of State for the Colonies to Governor General, 26 November 1916, RG24 v6996, LAC.

Ypres Front: November–December 1915



The 2nd CMR Brigade was attached to Major-General Arthur Currie's 1st Division for training purposes, as was the common practice.⁶³ Unfortunately, the commander of the 2nd CMR Brigade, Colonel Smart, had less than a month with the brigade before falling ill. He remained in the barracks from 24 November 1916 until 16 December 1916, so he missed the Barrier engagements.⁶⁴ He was diagnosed with diabetes in May 1916, which probably explains his illness.⁶⁵ Like the 1st CMR Brigade, the 2nd spent most of October and November providing work parties.

BARRIER

Currie was eager to give his 2nd Infantry Brigade a rest and an opportunity to train after six months in the line without relief.⁶⁶ Accordingly, on 22 November 1915 Seely's Force replaced the 2nd Infantry Brigade for a two-week period, later extended by another week.⁶⁷ Seely's Force was an improvised formation consisting of Brigadier-General J.E.B. Seely's Canadian Cavalry Brigade and the 1st CMR and 2nd CMR Brigades, but without any additional staff or communications support for Seely's headquarters. It reported to the 1st Division. Seely was a British politician from a wealthy coal mining family and firmly enmeshed in the highest echelons of British society. Seely served in the Boer War with distinction as a squadron commander in a yeomanry regiment and won the Distinguished Service Order (DSO). He was a rising star in the British Liberal Party when the British prime minister appointed him the secretary of state for war in June 1912. Seely, however, had to resign during the Curragh Incident in March 1914, where Anglo-Irish cavalry officers quit over the possibility they would have to suppress Ulster Protestant forces contesting the government's plan for Irish home

⁶³ W.D., 2nd CMR Brigade, 6 October 1915, LAC.

⁶⁴ Smart, Charles Allen Service Jacket, LAC; W.D., 2nd CMR Brigade, 16 December 1916, LAC.

⁶⁵ Smart, Charles Allen Service Jacket, LAC.

⁶⁶ War Diary, 5th Battalion, 22 November 1915, RG9 III-D-3 v4949, LAC.

⁶⁷ 1st Canadian Division to Canadian Corps, 7 December 1915, 11/16, RG9 III-D-2 v3987, LAC.



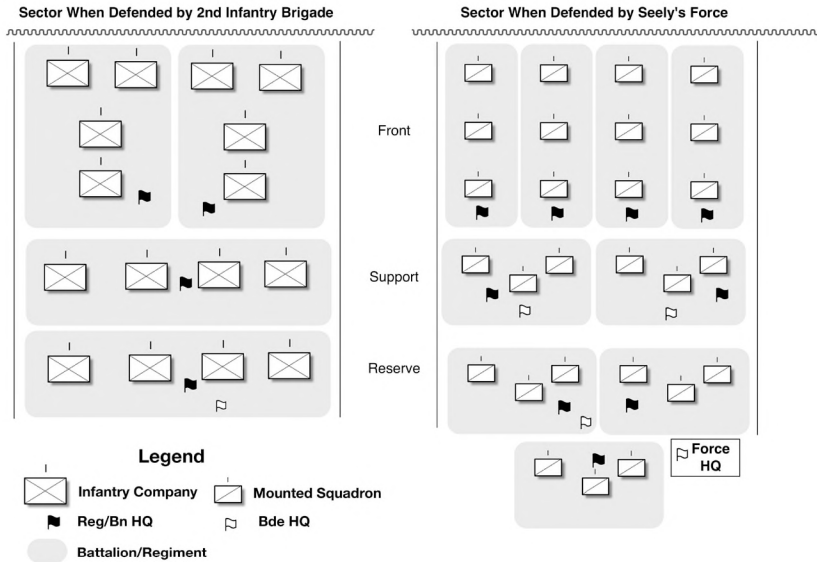
Kitchener's two targets: Brigadier-General Seely talks to Sam Hughes on the left, August 1916. [Canadian War Museum EO-0686]

rule.⁶⁸ Without consulting the Canadian government, Field Marshal H. Kitchener, the secretary of state for war appointed Seely to lead the Canadian Cavalry Brigade on 28 January 1915. The brigade consisted of the RCD, LSH, and King Edward's Horse (KEH), an imperial regiment of men from the dominions residing in Britain. According to Seely's grandson, this appointment accomplished two ends. It sidetracked Seely, and clipped the wings of the obstreperous Canadian minister of militia, Sam Hughes.⁶⁹

By all accounts, Seely—'tall, thin and elegant'—was personable, but he was in a difficult position. There were abundant militia politicians in the CEF without saddling it with a British one. Seely's qualifications were comparable to many CEF commanders, however, the other British officers in the CEF were all professionals and usually highly-trained. Seely was not a professional, had no staff

⁶⁸ One of the leaders of this protest was Hubert Gough, who Canadian commanders later intensely disliked because of his command practices on the Somme in 1916. For more on the Curragh Incident, see Ian Frederick William Beckett, *The Army and the Curragh Incident, 1914*, vol. 2 (Toronto: Random House of Canada Ltd, 1986); Brough Scott, *Gallop Jack: A Grandson's Search for a Forgotten Hero* (London: Macmillan, 2003), 146–147; Potter, "Canadian Cavalry on the Western Front," 54.

⁶⁹ Scott, *Gallop Jack*, 190.



2nd Infantry Brigade and Seely's Detachment Defensive Scheme Comparison. [By author]

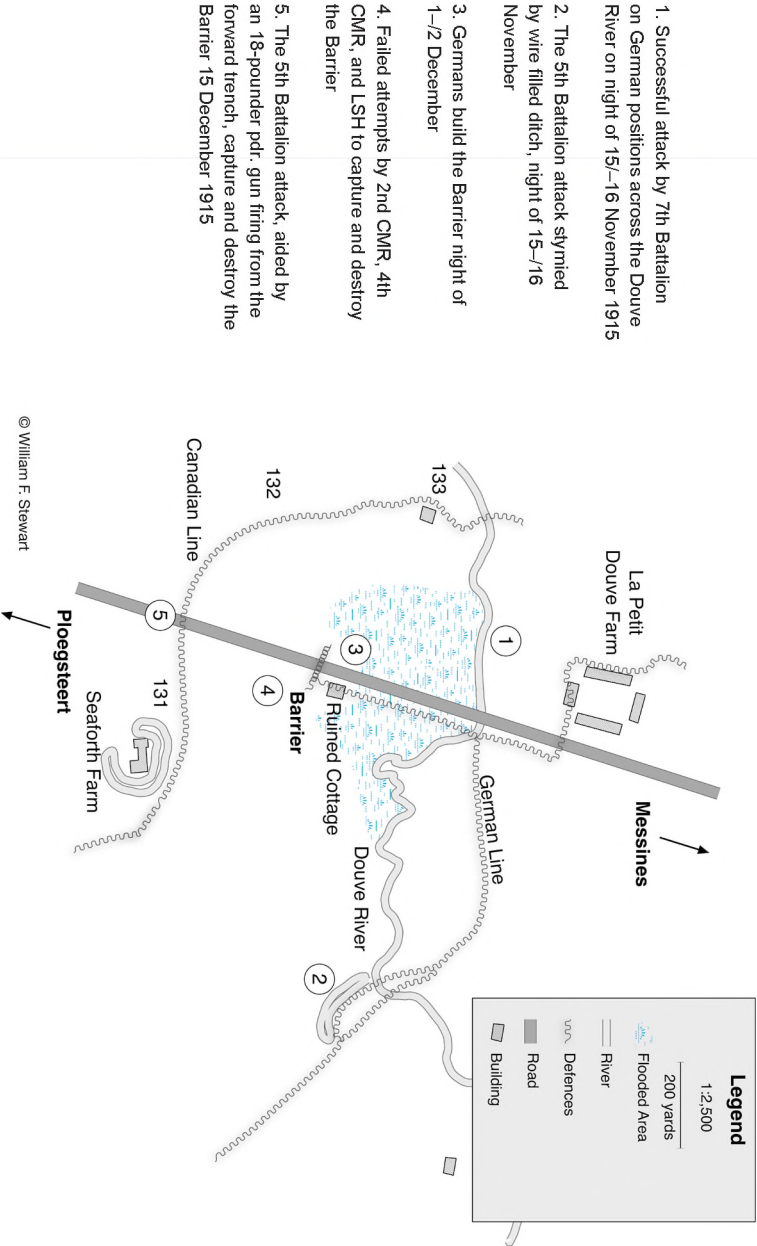
training, and had not served with the Canadians, and the senior British commanders in the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) had grave doubts regarding Seely's competence.⁷⁰ As a result, there was a natural tension between Currie, who resented political interference, and Seely, the British embodiment of this influence.⁷¹

A critical issue in employing the CMR on the Western Front was their organisation was poorly suited for the conditions. Seely's Force required three times as many headquarters dugouts as the brigade it replaced, because it included three mounted brigades each of three regiments with three squadrons totalling twenty-seven squadrons

⁷⁰ For more on the complaints see Haig Diary, 5, 21 November, 1916, Part 1 No. 96, Haig's Autograph Great War Diary, Haig Papers; NLS; Kiggel to Canadian Representative, O.B./742, 25 January 1916, 177/6, RG 9 III-D-1 v4746, LAC. Seely's grandson and Potter, in her thesis on the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, argue Seely was the victim of animus from the Curragh Incident. Scott, *Galloper Jack*, 223–224; Potter, "Canadian Cavalry on the Western Front," 74, 261–266.

⁷¹ A. M. J. Hyatt, "Sir Arthur Currie and Politicians: A Case of Study of Civil-Military Relations in the First World War," in Richard Preston and Peter Dennis, eds., *Swords and Covenants* (Croom and Helm, 1976), 151, 159; Tim Cook, *The Madman and the Butcher* (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2010), 180.

Barrier and Vicinity: November–December 1915



1. Successful attack by 7th Battalion on German positions across the Douve River on night of 15–16 November 1915

2. The 5th Battalion attack stymied by wire filled ditch, night of 15–16 November

3. Germans build the Barrier night of 1–2 December

4. Failed attempts by 2nd CMR, 4th CMR, and LSH to capture and destroy the Barrier

5. The 5th Battalion attack, aided by an 18-pounder pdr. gun firing from the forward trench, capture and destroy the Barrier 15 December 1915

and thirteen headquarters of regimental strength or greater.⁷² In contrast, the 2nd Infantry Brigade had sixteen companies and five headquarters (one brigade and four battalion headquarters). The infantry were organised in groups of four, with four companies to a battalion and four battalions to a brigade. The mounted forces consisted of sub-units of three, with three squadrons composing a regiment and three regiments a brigade. Each squadron was roughly two-thirds the strength of an infantry company, so a CMR regiment, with an establishment of 552 all ranks, including twenty-four officers, could field only slightly more than half the men of a full-strength infantry battalion.⁷³ Further, a CMR regiment had a higher allowance of specialists, such as saddle makers, shoe-smiths and farriers for the 594 horses assigned to the unit. Contrast this with the war establishment for an infantry battalion with thirty officers, 991 other ranks, and sixty-six horses.⁷⁴

These problems were not intractable, as three ALH brigades overcame the challenges when committed dismounted to the Gallipoli campaign. They had the same issues of the lack of interchangeability and excess headquarters, but the solution was to permanently assign them a portion of the front, and they performed well.⁷⁵ Throughout the war on the Western Front, British cavalry divisions served as dismounted formations holding the line, and by 1916, British command developed a standard formation that alleviated some of the issues that confronted the CMR. Each cavalry brigade served as a dismounted battalion of approximately similar strength to an infantry battalion but consisting of three over-strength companies, each provided by one of the three cavalry regiments. This allowed the insertion of dismounted forces without disarranging the defensive scheme, unlike the situation with the CMR.⁷⁶

Seely's Force defended the extreme southern sector of the Canadian Corps, approximately 3,000 metres south of the Belgian

⁷² Regiments consisting of LSH, KEH, RCD, and the six CMR regiments.

⁷³ A Regiment of Mounted Rifles, War Establishment, 2 January 1915, 34-3-12, RG24 v4335, LAC.

⁷⁴ The two Canadian divisions at the front followed this establishment. Divisional Establishment 1915 and Amendments; War Establishments Part VII. New Armies 1915 LAC, RG24 v22003, LAC, 20.

⁷⁵ Bou, *Light Horse*, 144.

⁷⁶ Bruce I. Gudmundsson and Duncan Anderson, *The British Army on the Western Front, 1916*, Battle Orders (Oxford; New York: Osprey Pub., 2007), 32–33.

town of Messines in the Douve River valley. The Douve was a slow meandering river, which was subject to frequent flooding in the rainy conditions of the winter of 1915–1916. Most of the valley area was sodden and likely to be under water after a heavy rainfall. The road running between Messines and Ploegsteert to the southwest was important, as it was the only area in the valley that was not flooded.

Seely's Force faced the Silesian 11th RIR of the 117th Division. The Germans formed the 117th in April 1915, but the 11th RIR was a prewar reserve unit.⁷⁷ Shortly after forming, the 117th Division fought in the French spring offensive in May and then at Loos in September. In both battles, it suffered heavy losses. By 1918, it was regarded as a second-rate division, so given the casualties it had already suffered in 1915, it was unlikely it was a first-class formation in late 1915.⁷⁸

The trigger for the Barrier operation was the 2nd Infantry Brigade's notably successful two-battalion raid on German positions across the Douve River, on the night of 15–16 November 1915. The 7th Battalion used portable bridges to cross the river, cut the German wire, and seize and hold part of the German frontline for twenty minutes. They brought back twelve prisoners and claimed to have inflicted up to fifty casualties on the Germans, with only one Canadian accidentally shot.⁷⁹ The 5th Battalion encountered an unexpected sunken wire-filled ditch and was stymied in its attack. The raid brought considerable attention from the Allied side. The commander-in-chief of the BEF, Sir John French, characterised the attack as “a brilliant little operation” in his final despatch.⁸⁰ French circulated the raid's plan throughout the British forces as a model of how to conduct such operations, and even the French showed interest.⁸¹ Sir John was concerned that too many units were adopting a ‘live and let live’ attitude which he believed would atrophy the troops' offensive spirit, and raids like Petit Douve would increase their

⁷⁷ “Reserve-Infanterie Regiment Nr. 11,” available at http://genwiki.genealogy.net/RIR_11.

⁷⁸ General Staff Intelligence Section, *Two Hundred and Fifty-One Divisions of the German Army Which Participated in the War (1914–1918)* (Government Publishing Office, 1920), 610.

⁷⁹ Lipsett to Currie, 20 November 1915, GAQ 5-66, RG24 v1825, LAC.

⁸⁰ Sir John French, “Sir John French's Tenth Despatch, 31 July 1916,” http://www.1914-1918.net/french_tenth_despatch.html.

⁸¹ La Petite Douve, LAC.

aggressiveness.⁸² The success of the raid added to Currie's reputation; thus, he would be especially sensitive to any failure on that sector.

The German brigade commander responsible for the sector was anxious that the raid would encourage further enterprises.⁸³ To preclude a repeat of this embarrassing raid, the local commander planned on creating an advanced listening post halfway between the German and Canadian lines, and the only position certain to be above the floodwaters was the Messines-Ploegsteert Road. The Germans started making plans for the operation well in advance. The night selected for building the Barrier was a new moon and sure to be dark. The Canadian trenches in the immediate vicinity of where the Barrier was to be built were regularly shelled to keep the defenders tied down repairing damage. For instance, the German bombardment on 30 November was three times the usual rate of shelling.⁸⁴ Further, the night before building the Barrier, the Germans cut off a Canadian listening post in front of trench 131 closest to the road to ensure the defenders were blinded.⁸⁵ A Canadian Corps intelligence summary reported the bridge over the Douve on the road was repaired.⁸⁶ This warning did not appear to raise any alarms among the defenders.

Heavy German shelling on 1 December inflicted sharp losses on the 3rd CMR Regiment, with ten killed and sixteen wounded. Officer casualties were so heavy that a major from another unit had to take over command of the forward squadron. The shelling also interrupted communications between the 1st CMR Brigade and its superiors.⁸⁷ This shelling, beyond the casualties and damage to trenches, had two effects on the future of the CMR. First, the lamentable administration of the 1st CMR Brigade elicited a stinging critique from Currie regarding their failure to report any deaths from the shelling.⁸⁸ Second, Colonel Sissons, of the 1st CMR Brigade, made no effort to get in touch with his superiors for six hours during the communications interruption.⁸⁹ Owing to the multiple administrative and command issues in

⁸² Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare, 1914-1918: The Live and Let Live System* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1980), 95.

⁸³ La Petite Douve, LAC.

⁸⁴ War Diary, 1st Division, RG9 III-D-3 v4826, LAC, 30 November 1915.

⁸⁵ W.D., 2nd CMR Brigade, 1 December 1915, LAC.,

⁸⁶ War Diary, Canadian Corps, 2 December 1916, RG9 III-D-3 v4812, LAC.

⁸⁷ W.D., 1st Division, LAC, 1 December 1915.

⁸⁸ 1st Canadian Division to Canadian Corps, 7 December 1915, LAC.

⁸⁹ Carson to Hughes, 28 December 1915, 6-S-137, RG9 III-A-1 v215 LAC.

the 1st CMR Brigade, Seely sacked Sissons that day with Currie's concurrence.⁹⁰ The commander of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Edwin Alderson, later stated, "I do not think that Colonel Sissons is qualified or has the personality to train men for war."⁹¹

On the night of 1–2 December, the Germans "noiselessly removed the *pavé* blocks from the rear of the fallen tree, and, screened by the projecting branches, dug a trench across the road; utilizing the stone blocks together with bricks from the cottage ruins for the base of the parapet."⁹² The Barrier ran across the width of the road and was anchored with strong points on each flank. The 2nd CMR Brigade did not report the presence of the Barrier until daylight on 2 December and the 1st CMR Brigade until 3 December; further indicating the lax performance of the brigade.⁹³ Seely ordered the 1st CMR Brigade to probe the position, and the 2nd CMR Regiment sent its bombing officer and two men. They threw several bombs that fell short, received bombs that fell short, and retreated. They reported there was no wire in front of the Barrier.⁹⁴ A staff officer from Seely's Force, then, ordered Lieutenant-Colonel Bott 2nd CMR Regiment to make another attempt that night—causing the regiment to complain about insufficient time for planning.⁹⁵ The patrol encountered wire and was unsuccessful. Bott apologised in his report: "I am sorry the result was not as satisfactory as one could wish but our men were not prepared to cope with wire entanglements which had been put up since the first demonstration."⁹⁶

The 1st Division sent Seely's Force a peremptory demand "report why German works spoken of in your situation report this evening was not reported before. What steps are you taking to drive Germans out and destroy it tonight?"⁹⁷ The regimental history of the 2nd CMR

⁹⁰ War Diary, 1st Brigade Canadian Mounted Rifles, 1 December 1915, RG9 III-D-3 v4946, LAC; Canadian Cavalry Brigade to 1st Canadian Division, 9 December 1915, 11/16, RG9 III-D-2 v3987, LAC.

⁹¹ Alderson to Carson, Undated, (12–27 December 1915), 6-S-137, RG9 III-A-1 v215 LAC.

⁹² La Petite Douve, LAC.

⁹³ W.D., 2nd CMR Brigade, 2 December 1915, LAC; W.D., 1st CMR Brigade, 3 December 1915, LAC.

⁹⁴ W.D., 2nd CMR Regiment, 3 December 1915, LAC.

⁹⁵ Johnston, *The 2nd CMR*, 16.

⁹⁶ W.D., 2nd CMR Regiment, 4 December 1915, LAC.

⁹⁷ 1st Canadian Division to Seely's Force, Undated (2 or 3 December 1915), 34/16, RG9 III-D-2 v4017, LAC.

claimed, "The consternation raised at Canadian Headquarters by this barrier was tremendous, quite out of proportion to the causes."⁹⁸ Seely ordered the 2nd CMR Brigade to attack the Barrier supported by artillery.⁹⁹ As what seemed to accompany operations of the CMR, the heavy artillery battery commander cancelled his portion of the bombardment owing to inadequate observation and communications.¹⁰⁰ Seely's resulting timid orders were for a patrol to observe the Barrier for an hour while the artillery hammered the position. Hampered by "exceptionally heavy wind and rain," the patrol from the 4th CMR Regiment watched while the artillery fired 700 shells in a vain attempt to destroy the obstacle and then following orders withdrew. The resulting German counter bombardment inflicted five casualties and badly damaged the Canadian front trench.¹⁰¹ Thwarted again, Seely had to report to the 1st Division that the Barrier was not destroyed, but he improbably claimed observers heard many screams coming from the German position.¹⁰²

The Canadian Cavalry Brigade replaced the 2nd CMR Brigade on 5 December. The next attempt on the Barrier was by LSH on the evening of 8–9 December. Patrols reported the German position lightly held, so the plan was to rush the Barrier, pull it down, and blow up what remained. The assault started at 1:45 a.m., as the sixteen-man party crept along the left side of the road to get into position. Instead of a small party of defenders, forty Germans guarded the Barrier, and they smothered the attack in hand grenades. Three men were wounded and captured, although they were reported killed at the time. Only two of the party escaped wounds or capture in the German counterattack. Despite the reconnaissance and claims that the men knew the ground, the LSH was badly surprised by the strength of the German defenders and the attack a fiasco.¹⁰³ Seely was in a difficult position as three separate operations were abject failures, and he was quarrelling with Currie.

⁹⁸ Johnston, *The 2nd CMR*, 16.

⁹⁹ W.D., 4th CMR Regiment, 3 December 1915, LAC; 1st Canadian Division G.500, 4 December 1915, 34/16, RG9 III-D-2 v4017, LAC.

¹⁰⁰ 1st Canadian Division Artillery to 1st Canadian Division, 4 December 1915, 34/16, RG9 III-D-2 v4017, LAC.

¹⁰¹ W.D., 2nd CMR Brigade, 4 December 1915, LAC.

¹⁰² Seely to Kearsely, 5 December 1915, 34/16, RG9 III-D-2 v4017, LAC.

¹⁰³ 1st Division to Canadian Corps G10-57, 10 December 1915, 34/16, RG9 III-D-2 v4017, LAC; Report on Minor Operations Carried out by Lord Strathcona's Horse, 8 December 1915, 34/16, RG9 III-D-2 v4017, LAC.

Seely's fumbling and Currie's anxiety regarding the CMR resulted in the 2nd Infantry Brigade's insertion into the line a week early on 10 December. The 5th Battalion complained that the, "Trenches in very bad condition, waterlogged. Dugouts caving in and parapets in state of disrepair."¹⁰⁴ On 11 December, Currie ordered the 2nd Infantry Brigade to eradicate the Barrier. The greater experience of the 2nd Infantry Brigade was evident in the operation's planning and conduct. The rising floodwaters of the Douve River meant it was impossible to outflank the Barrier, so it had to be attacked directly. First, the Barrier was heavily bombarded for three days to obtain registration, cut the German wire, and reduce the garrison. The attack was further aided by an 18-pounder gun firing directly on the Barrier from the frontline. After painstaking preparation, a vehicle from the Motor Machine Gun Brigade towed the gun to a position just out of earshot of the Germans. The gunners manhandled it to a previously-prepared hole cut in the parapet. At zero hour, it commenced firing and the first round killed half of the defenders. At 2:05 a.m. 15 December 1915, three parties of attackers from the 5th Battalion launched their assault. The German wire created an obstacle that slowed down the attackers, but the Canadians had little difficulty in overwhelming the small garrison. Four Germans were killed and two captured with only minor injuries to the Canadians.¹⁰⁵ The attack was a success, but this was not surprising given the disparity of forces. It showed the considerable discrepancy in effectiveness between the 1st Division and Seely's Force.

DAMAGE DONE

There was a litany of complaints about the CMR before and during the Barrier operation, with the final and harshest criticism coming from Currie—Seely's superior. In a two-page excoriation of the CMR brigades sent 7 December, Currie wanted to insert the 2nd Infantry Brigade a week early, as he no longer trusted the two CMR brigades with holding the front—something no other Canadian formation was

¹⁰⁴ W.D., 5th Battalion, 10 December 1915, LAC.

¹⁰⁵ The Germans only lightly held the Barrier at night with a small party of volunteers. La Petite Douve, LAC; G10-56, 10 December 1916, LAC; Minor Operations, LSH, LAC.

criticised for. He listed multiple deficiencies with the two brigades, albeit he thought the men “a splendid lot.” He complained that at times only thirty percent of the men requested for working parties arrived punctually, and often the work was unsatisfactory. More importantly, the inability of the CMR to prevent the Germans building the Barrier and the abortive efforts to destroy it meant the CMR lost the 2nd Infantry Brigade’s “moral ascendancy” over the Germans and “it will cost the Infantry Brigade something to get it back.” Further, the CMR were lax regarding reports. Currie investigated engineer complaints regarding the 1st CMR Brigade, probably related to work parties, and found their complaints justified. Worse, two of the CMR regiment commanders had nothing but excuses when Currie confronted them, which particularly angered him. He summarised the issues as “The worse features about these cases of bad discipline and bad training which I have enumerated is that those concerned do not realise the serious nature of their shortcomings.” Currie’s reference to discipline meant the CMR officer’s readiness to fulfill orders and not to the behaviour of the troops. He recommended the authorities either reorganise and retrain the CMR as infantry or withdraw them.¹⁰⁶

Seely received a copy of Currie’s denunciation, and responded with a tepid defence partly based on his only taking command of the CMR as they entered the line. He admitted to the claimed deficiencies in returns and work parties, and thought “greater vigilance might have prevented the enemy” from building the Barrier. Seely admitted the CMR lacking in “knowledge and efficiency in many respects” but they continued to stoutly defend their positions despite the heavy shelling. He claimed there was no desertion, no insubordination, and CMR troops stood up to the heavy shelling, as well as any men. This was not a stirring endorsement, as a commander should expect their troops not to desert or show signs of insubordination.¹⁰⁷

The problems with the CMR reached the new Commander-in-Chief of the BEF, General Sir Douglas Haig.¹⁰⁸ In his view, while the CMR training and discipline was deficient, the “cause of any failures that had occurred must be attributed to the want of exercise of

¹⁰⁶ 1st Canadian Division to Canadian Corps, 7 December 1915, LAC.

¹⁰⁷ Canadian Cavalry Brigade to 1st Canadian Division, 9 December 1915, LAC.

¹⁰⁸ Douglas Haig replaced French as the commander-in-chief on 10 December 1915.



Canadian Mounted Rifles troopers in the trenches. France, 1915. [Library and Archives Canada PA 107276]

command on the part of the Commander of the Detachment.”¹⁰⁹ This strongly indicated Haig believed Seely was to blame. Possibly owing to a combination of the troubles encountered by Seely’s Force and Seely’s remaining influence, the British high command reorganised and remounted the Canadian Cavalry Brigade on 26 January 1916.¹¹⁰

Currie’s damning report combined with Alderson’s complaints meant the already agreed upon conversion was imperative and needed to be accelerated. Brigadier-General Tim Harington, the Canadian Corps’ senior general staff officer, reported to the Second Army that the CMR were not combat effective, and their existing commanders and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) could not rectify the situation. This

¹⁰⁹ Kiggel to Cdn. Representative, LAC.

¹¹⁰ The Canadian Militia cavalry regiment the Fort Gary Horse replaced the KEH. Potter, “Canadian Cavalry on the Western Front,” 119; Seely to General ?, 22 November 1915, RG9 III-C-2, LAC; War Diary, Canadian Cavalry Brigade, RG9 III-D-3 v4954, LAC, 26 January 1916.

was a serious indictment of the CMR command cadre.¹¹¹ Adding to their woes, Major-General M. Mercer, the commander of the Canadian Corps Troops, inspected the CMR regiments, and his findings were devastating. He reported “neither of these Brigades know anything about infantry work and have no instructors capable of teaching it, and that there is a certain amount of resentment at being reorganised as infantry, and in his opinion the Brigades lack discipline, though the material is excellent. The task is, therefore, more difficult than that of training raw recruits.”¹¹² The Second Army, on 24 December, authorised the formation of the 8th Brigade by consolidating the six CMR regiments into four infantry battalions—the 1st, 2nd, 4th, and 5th CMR, along with additional personnel from England.¹¹³ Brigadier-General Victor Williams took command of the 8th Brigade on 29 December 1915.¹¹⁴ Williams was a PF cavalry officer who served in the Boer War in the RCD, commanded the RCD, was the Inspector of Cavalry from 1907 to 1912, and was the Adjutant-General at the start of the war.¹¹⁵ He was an experienced officer but had no infantry service. Williams’ command was brief, as he was captured in the opening stages of the German attack on Mount Sorrel on 2 June 1916.

Were the CMR markedly worse than other Canadian units in their initial commitment at the front? Most Canadian units had problems with training and discipline, such as the issues faced by the 1st Canadian Division on Salisbury Plain over the winter of 1914-1915.¹¹⁶ At the Second Battle of Ypres, however, the division performed better than is usually asserted despite the manifest command and staff failures at the brigade and division levels.¹¹⁷ No Canadian units experienced the number and severity of complaints regarding unit leadership as did the CMR. Further, Canadian commanders, like Currie, were unlikely to make allowances for recently arrived units

¹¹¹ Harington to 2nd Army, G.478, 16 December 1915, 109/9, RG9 III-C-1 v3868, LAC.

¹¹² Canadian Corps to 2nd Army, 19 December 1916, 109/9, RG9 III-C-1 v3868, LAC.

¹¹³ The 3rd and 6th CMR Regiments were disbanded with their personnel going to the remaining CMR units. War Diary, Canadian Corps, Second Army O.B./1140, 24 December 1915, RG9 III-D-3 v4812, LAC.

¹¹⁴ W.D., 1st CMR Brigade, 29 December 1915, LAC.

¹¹⁵ Defence, *Quarterly Militia List*, 59.

¹¹⁶ Nicholson, *CEF*, 36–38; Cook, *At the Sharp End*, 69–82.

¹¹⁷ For more on the performance of the 1st Division, see Andrew Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers: The 1st Canadian Division at War, 1914–1915* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 35, 96; Stewart, “‘Every Inch a Soldier,’” 74–75.

given the rising reputation of Canadian forces, such as the credit to Currie's division for the earlier raid across the Douve.

On 31 December, Alderson called the officers of the two brigades to the headquarters of the newly raised 3rd Division to announce the breakup of the two CMR brigades and the formation of the 8th Brigade.¹¹⁸ To train the infantry, the 1st and 2nd Divisions supplied instructors and the new brigade spent January in intense training. The conversion to infantry involved a change to using the infantry drill manual and orders of command, which were a major adjustment especially for the NCOs and officers. The brigade entered the line on 31 January 1916.¹¹⁹

There were extensive changes to the command structure to reflect the new organisation. A captain in the 4th CMR Regiment expressed the hope "they can find a way of changing us into infantry without cutting anybody's head off."¹²⁰ The conversion, however, did result in heads rolling. The commander of the 1st CMR Brigade, Colonel Sissons, was sacked, and he resigned his commission. He promptly returned to Canada with his Aide-de-camp and probably only his standing in Canada prevented his being cashiered for incompetence.¹²¹ Smart of the 2nd Brigade refused the offer to command one of the newly converted CMR regiments, and Carson found his old friend a reserve brigade in England.¹²² Smart was resentful about his removal despite his special handling and complained to Steele, now commanding a training command in England, and Carson. Later in 1918–1919, Smart was a considerable thorn in the side of the government.¹²³ Lieutenant-Colonel A.E. Shaw, the commander of the defunct 6th CMR Regiment, replaced Lieutenant-Colonel H.I. Stephenson of the 1st CMR Regiment. As was common practice, Stephenson complained to Steele about losing his regiment.¹²⁴ The commander of the 4th CMR Regiment transferred as he did not want to command an infantry

¹¹⁸ The 3rd Division consisted of the 7th and 8th Brigades already in France and the 9th Brigade forming in England. W.D., 2nd CMR Brigade, 31 December 1915, LAC.

¹¹⁹ War Diary, 8th Brigade, 31 January 1916, RG9 III-D-3 v4894, LAC.

¹²⁰ Symons to Dear People, 27 December 1915, MG30 E456, Symons Fonds; LAC.

¹²¹ Carson to Alderson, 28 December 1915, 31/4, RG9 III-C-2 v3884, LAC.

¹²² Carson to Hughes, 26 January 1916, 6-S-19, RG9 III-A-1 v213, LAC.

¹²³ Steele Diary, 4 January 1916, 2008.1.1.2.68, Steele Fonds; Bruce Peel Special Collections Library, University of Alberta; Turner to Kemp, 5 April 1919, MG27 II D9 v136, Kemp Fonds; LAC; Turner to Kemp, 3 April 1919, MG30 E46 v7, Turner Fonds; LAC; Brigadier-General Charles Smart File, 10-S-68, RG9 III v331, LAC.

¹²⁴ Steele Diary, 12 January 1916, Bruce Peel Special Collections Library, University of Alberta.



Lieut.-Col. J.C.L. Bott, O.C. 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles in 1915. [Library and Archives Canada PA 025227]

unit, and Major J.F.H. Ussher replaced him.¹²⁵ The two brigade majors of the CMR Brigades and the commander of the 3rd CMR Regiment, Lieutenant-Colonel I.J. Whitaker, also returned to England.

The majority of the officers understood the need to convert, but there were still many who refused to serve in the infantry. Alderson's attitude to the CMR did not help matters, as the regimental history of the 2nd CMR Regiment reported Alderson telling the newly converted unit that "after keeping us waiting long after the time set for the inspection, kindly told us were not quite soldiers yet, but might hope to be some day."¹²⁶ Official policy stipulated that the requirements of the service governed officers' transfers. In this instance, however, given the unpopularity of the conversion and that they were Canadians, the office responsible for managing officer's careers, allowed transfers out of the CMR.¹²⁷ The 3rd Division indicated twenty-five officers transferred in the wake of the reorganisation, suggesting the depth of frustration at

¹²⁵ Bennett, *4th CMR*, 13.

¹²⁶ Johnston, *The 2nd CMR*, 18.

¹²⁷ Vesey, AMS for MS, 27 January 1916, 31/4, RG9 III-C-2 v3884, LAC.

the forced conversion.¹²⁸ There were few positions available for cavalry officers in a combat role, so most ended up in England.

The 1st Division did not let the CMR forget about their failure, including a piece of doggerel in the trench newspaper of the 7th Battalion criticizing the CMR.¹²⁹ The situation grew so rancorous that Currie had to order his division to stop disparaging the CMR. This was an element of Alderson's replacement, Lieutenant-General Sir Julian Byng's efforts to eliminate the petty jealousies and contention between the divisions to create a truly Canadian Corps.¹³⁰

The reputation of the CMR suffered another blow when the 8th Brigade faced the main thrust of the German attack at Mount Sorrel on 2 June 1916 and suffered crippling losses. The 2nd CMR Battalion was in reserve and did not participate in any attacks, yet still suffered fifty percent losses, the 1st CMR Battalion in the frontline lost 557 men out of its 692, and of the 4th CMR Battalion had only seventy-six remaining out of its initial 702 officers and men.¹³¹ The Germans also killed or captured the brigade commander and three of the four battalion commanders, and the experience shattered the nerves of the one survivor, Bott of the 2nd CMR Battalion.¹³² As a result of devastating losses, the brigade had to be rebuilt and retrained again, this time with instructors from the British Guards Division.¹³³ The brigade performed well at Courcellette in September 1916 and it experienced similar successes and failures, as did other units during the remainder of the Somme campaign and continued success in the battles and campaigns in 1917 and 1918.

As a comparison to the fate of the CMR, the Australian Light Horse and New Zealand Mounted Rifles served with distinction in the Middle East as mounted rifle formations, other than when holding the line at Gallipoli. British yeomanry regiments did not serve on the Western Front in yeomanry brigades, but five served with regular cavalry brigades on the Western Front, and eleven as corps cavalry regiments, with eight of these later converted to infantry in 1918,

¹²⁸ 3 CID A/50-17, 31 January 1916, 31/4, RG9 III-C-2 v3884, LAC.

¹²⁹ "The Barricade," *The Listening Post*, 30 March 1916; Johnston, *The 2nd CMR*, 16.

¹³⁰ Byng replaced Alderson as Canadian Corps commander in May 1916. Cook, *At the Sharp End*, 345.

¹³¹ Johnston, *The 2nd CMR*, 22; Cook, *At the Sharp End*, 351; Bennett, *4th CMR*, 19.

¹³² Bott Correspondence File, 6-B-516, RG 9 III-A-1 v119, LAC; Elmsley to 3rd Division, 12 November 1916, 2/4, RG 9 III-C-3 v4144, LAC.

¹³³ Canadian Corps G.541, 8 June 1916, 109/8, RG9 III-C-1 v3868, LAC.

owing to a dearth of infantry replacements. The yeomanry regiments, much like the Canadian units that served in the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, trained and served like full-fledged cavalry formations. As David Kenyon in *Horsemen in No Man's Land* argues, British cavalry including Canadian and yeomanry units performed far better than is usually acknowledged but their operational contribution was hampered by command and communication limitations at senior levels of leadership in the cavalry and overall army up to 1918.¹³⁴ Prewar British cavalry units trained to infantry musketry standards with the same rifle used by the infantry, and so were far more capable than continental cavalry units in holding the line. Further, British cavalry retained a much larger corps of prewar men, NCOs, and officers than did infantry units throughout the war. As a result, the cavalry were better trained and prepared for active service than were the CMR.¹³⁵ Further, thirty-two yeomanry regiments converted into infantry or machine gun battalions reached the front in 1918 in reaction to the German spring offensive.¹³⁶

POSTWAR DEVELOPMENTS

Surprisingly, the failure at the Barrier did not dramatically affect the postwar fate of the CMR. The 1919 Otter Committee on the postwar organisation of the army created a “revisionary, largely notional, land force establishment” that looked back rather than to the future.¹³⁷ One of the striking aspects of the proposed structure was that, despite the limited role of cavalry on the Western Front, militia cavalry regiments only dropped from thirty-five in 1914 to thirty-one regiments in 1921. In *Militia Myths*, Wood argues the retention of cavalry regiments was more for their suitability for quelling uprisings like the Winnipeg Strike of 1919 than their war fighting

¹³⁴ David Kenyon, *Horsemen in No Man's Land: British Cavalry and Trench Warfare, 1914–1918* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2011). e-Book.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, Loc 6001.

¹³⁶ John Ellis and Michael Cox, *The World War I Databook: The Essential Facts and Figures for All the Combatants* (London: Aurum, 2001), 154–157.

¹³⁷ John A. English, *The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign: A Study of Failure in High Command* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 19–20.

capabilities.¹³⁸ The Canadian cavalry now had a mixed heritage, as the Canadian Cavalry Brigade trained and fought as traditional cavalry, so the prewar mounted rifles concept was unproven in battle. In Australia, based on the experience of the ALH in Palestine, the militia units were trained to full cavalry status.¹³⁹ Like Australia, the Canadian mounted rifles fought a long rearguard action to justify mounted forces in a country where machinery was increasingly replacing horses.¹⁴⁰ The viability of cavalry was further imperilled by the military's motorisation, and all the cavalry regiments that served overseas in the Second World War were converted reconnaissance or armoured units.

CONCLUSION

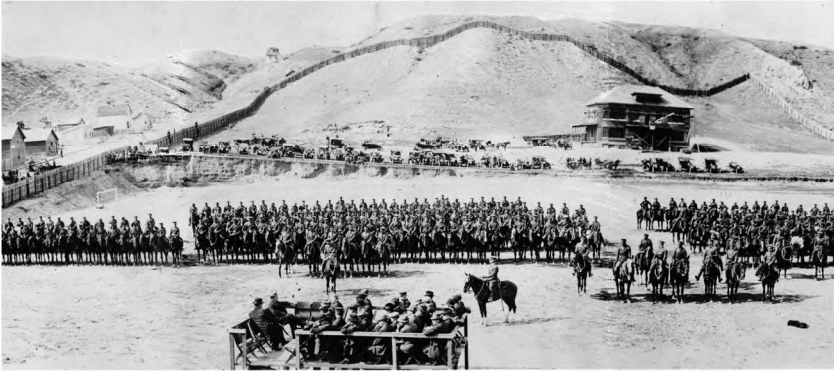
The CMR were born out of the mix of military exigency, the need for a form of light cavalry and mobile firepower, the financial realities governing the Canadian military, and a supposed affinity of Canadians for this form of warfare. The success of mounted rifles in the two Boer wars strongly indicated this hybrid of infantry and cavalry was an ideal fit for militaries dependent on volunteer part-time soldiers. When tested on the Western Front, however, the mounted rifles floundered, with the units at the front converted into infantry and no further mounted rifle regiments raised. Five factors of organisation, leadership, training, the demand for more infantry, and tensions between senior commanders all contributed to this failure. The CMR organisation and concept envisioned operating across long distances and not engaging the main enemy force for a sustained period, which was the situation on the Western Front. Its fundamental organizing principle of units of three did not conform to defensive positions designed for the infantry's organisation of four. As a result, it was a difficult task to deploy the CMR in defences designed for infantry units.

Compounding the problems with the organisation was the CMR weak leadership. Sissons' sacking and resignation was unusually

¹³⁸ James A. Wood, *Militia Myths: Ideas of the Canadian Citizen Soldier, 1896–1921* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 258–264.

¹³⁹ Bou, *Light Horse*, 229–230.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 238.



View of the Third Canadian Mounted Rifle troops, organized by Lt. Col. F.O. Sissons on parade of inspection on the athletic grounds in Riverside, 1915. [Esplanade Arts and Heritage Centre Archives, Cypress Club Fonds, 0126.0029]

brutal for the CEF, where face-saving reasons were usually found for failures' transfers back to England or Canada.¹⁴¹ For instance, the authorities masked failures as egregious as the 16th Battalion's Lieutenant-Colonel J.A. Currie's fleeing at the Second Battle of Ypres. He was reported as returning to Canada because of gas poisoning.¹⁴² Sisson's removal, therefore, suggests a particularly poor performance. Further, Smart, despite his close ties to Hughes and Carson, received no further commands at the front. The probable conviction of the commander of the 6th CMR Regiment also tarnished the reputation of the CMR leadership. The departure of so many officers refusing to serve in the infantry also indicated an unfavourable attitude among some CMR officers. It was clear that there were problems with the CMR leadership, and more seriously, they seemed unaware of the issues or at least refused to acknowledge them.

Inadequate training for their dismounted role also hampered the CMR. Although embodied for almost a year by the time of the Barrier, the focus on mounted rifle drill resulted in an inadequately trained CMR. Rather than shifting to a full infantry training when dismounted, the CMR received only supplemental instruction in the

¹⁴¹ For examples from the 2nd Division in the aftermath of St. Eloi, see Stewart, "Every Inch a Soldier," 141, 150.

¹⁴² Note on Back of Letter Creelman to Duguid, Undated MG30 E8 v1, Creelman Fonds; LAC; Kim Beattie, *48th Highlanders of Canada, 1891-1928* (Canada: The Highlanders, 1932).

infantry arts. Given the later complaints about training, the CMR officers did not know enough of infantry drill to effectively train their men. Further, the stable duties detracted from the time needed for trench warfare preparation.

The larger issue of a two division corps had a major effect on the fate of the CMR. With two divisions it was effectively impossible to withdraw a division for rest and training; hence, the need for more infantry. Adding a third division solved this problem, and the CMR unsuitability for trench warfare made them an obvious candidate for conversion. Even with a brilliant performance at the Barrier, the CMR would still have been converted, but their failure made it much easier to justify the change.

Tensions between Currie and the Canadians and Seely's command of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade affected the CMR reputation. Currie did not suffer fools gladly nor was he willing to make allowances, so the CMR effectiveness under Seely was certain to nettle Currie. It is apparent from the exchange of letters that Currie had little or no respect for Seely's competence, and this also affected his view of the CMR. Further, Currie was certain to be sensitive to any failures in a sector where his 2nd Infantry Brigade had won so many accolades with its November raid.

The Barrier engagement was less than a minor operation but the CMR operations, even taking into consideration their situation, demonstrated clear deficiencies. Currie was correct that their organisation, training, and leadership were faulty, and Seely's less than inspiring defence indicated there were serious issues in the two CMR brigades. Their failure was as much a result of poor preparation by the Canadian Corps in readying them for the front. The weeks the two brigades provided working parties in October and November would have been better spent in intense infantry training. After the Barrier, the new 8th Brigade spent a month in instruction before the Canadian Corps considered it could be trusted with defending a section of the front, so there was sufficient time to ready the CMR. It was not, however, until the CMR received further training after the defeat at Mount Sorrel did the CMR battalions perform at the standard of the rest of the Canadian Corps.

The Barrier demonstrated the consequences of committing a force to a task for which they were not intended. As the success of the ALH in Palestine indicates, the mounted rifles concept was viable but only if the right conditions pertained. Given the unforgiving nature of the

Western Front, it was unrealistic to expect troopers drilled to fight in mobile engagements to serve as infantrymen without extensive training. It further suggests that the organisation, training and leadership of the CMR was too narrowly focused on a single mission and lacked the ability to adapt to new tasks.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William F. Stewart (independent scholar) earned his PHD from the University of Birmingham (UK) in 2012, after a thirty-year career in senior management positions in high tech. He is an independent scholar examining the tactical, operational, and administrative aspects of the Canadian Corps in the First World War. His book *The Embattle General: Sir Richard Turner and the First World War* is to be published in November 2015.

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