

2017

Death at Licourt Revisited

Cameron Pulsifer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh>



Part of the [Military History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pulsifer, Cameron "Death at Licourt Revisited." Canadian Military History 26, 2 (2017)

This Research Update is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

RESEARCH UPDATE

Death at Licourt Revisited

CAMERON PULSIFER

Abstract: New Information comes to light about the five fatalities that occurred in the 1st Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade on the River Somme on 25 March 1918, as discussed in an article published in 2002.

IN THE SUMMER 2002, when I was working as an historian at the Canadian War Museum, I published an article in *Canadian Military History* (CMH) titled "Death at Licourt: An Historical and Visual Record of Five Fatalities in the 1st Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade, 25 March 1918."¹ The article recounts the details of an unfortunate incident involving the deaths of five Canadian members of the 1st Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade that occurred during the great German offensive in the area of the River Somme on 25 March 1918. New information has since come to my attention that relates directly to the incident discussed in that article and which significantly adds to and enhances the information that it provides. The intent of the present article is to bring this new information to light as both a supplement and a complement to the original article.

The motor machine brigade, or 'motors' as they were familiarly called, had travelled down to the Somme from the Vimy area to help deal with a major developing crisis in the war on 23 March 1918. The British Fifth Army, under General Sir Hubert Gough,

¹ Cameron Pulsifer, "Death at Licourt: An Historical and Visual Record of Five Fatalities in the 1st Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade, 25 March 1918," *Canadian Military History*, Vol. 11, Summer 2002, 49-64.

was very thinly stretched along a fifty-kilometre (km) line of front that stretched between British Third Army to the north and the French Sixth Army to the south. On 20 March, it was struck by a massive German assault, codenamed 'Operation Michael,' which was intended to be the first in series of gigantic offensives intended to destroy the willingness the French and British Armies to fight and force them into a negotiated peace. Fifth Army threatened to crumble before the might of the German attackers. Within three days its units were pushed back in some places as far as 20 km. The barrier of the River Somme and its eponymous canal, which ran alongside it to the west for a 25 km. stretch of river between Péronne in the north to the village of Ham in the south, appeared within easy reach of the German attackers. If the canal were crossed, the critical rail juncture of Amiens lay only some 40 km. further west. This was the situation on 23 March, when the 'motors' arrived to lend support to Fifth Army in its life and death struggle.

The incident discussed in the original article took place two days later, on 25 March. By then the Germans had actually succeeded in crossing the canal. One of this unit's armoured Autocars (one of eight, designed and initially commanded by Raymond Brutinel, that had come overseas with the First Canadian Contingent in 1914) had been caught in the early stages of the German onslaught across the River Somme. The car was severely shot up with the officer commanding, and what I thought to be the entire four-member crew, being killed. The new information that has come to my attention requires this information to be revised in one important respect. In addition, as already noted, it casts fresh and illuminating light on the incident and the final moments of the car and its crew. This information should definitely be added to the published record. With all *CMH* articles now being available on line, it is a simple matter, using the resources of Google, to access both it and the original article so that they can be read together and compared. The original can be viewed simply by googling "Death at Lisourt," or through the following URL: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol11/iss3/>. Photographs and maps can be found in it.

I wrote the original article to clarify the story behind a couple of quite graphic photographs that showed this shot-up car, its machine gun belts looping around it, and the dead bodies of its crew strewn about, both inside and outside the car. One of these photographs, which is in the collection of the Tank Museum in Bovington, Surrey,

in the United Kingdom, was fairly well known. It is reproduced in the book by Bovington's historian, David Fletcher, *War Cars: British Armoured Cars of the First World War*, which was published in 1987.² Fletcher correctly identifies the photograph as having been taken during the German March Offensive of 1918. Sometime in 2002, however, another, similar, image came to my attention which to my knowledge had never been seen before. This image, which was startlingly more clear than the one owned by Bovington, shows the same scene but taken slightly earlier and from a slightly different angle. This second image had been recently acquired by collector Michel Gravel, of Cornwall, Ontario, who had purchased it off the web. There it had been identified as depicting a disabled German armoured car. Aware that this was not the case, Michel brought his recently-acquired treasure into the Canadian War Museum to see if anyone could tell him what it actually was. The photograph came to my attention and, aware of the photograph that had been published in Fletcher's book, and having done some work of my own on the Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigades, I was able to identify the vehicle as one of this unit's eight armoured Autocars.³ Indeed, the CWM had the only surviving example of these cars in its collection. At this point it was on display in the museum's galleries, which were then located in the old CWM at 330 Sussex Drive in Ottawa. It continues to be a prominent and dramatic component of the First World War exhibit in the present-day CWM on Lebreton Flats in Ottawa.

I could tell Michel nothing much beyond this, however. Fletcher provides no detail as to how the car and its crew came to their ill-fated circumstances, and I had no idea either. I was greatly chagrined by my ignorance and struck by the fact that no one knew the story behind such a vividly depicted scene of Canadian struggle and sacrifice in the war. I determined to do what I could, as both an historical and honourific project, to clarify the circumstances under which the car had come to such an unfortunate end and to identify its deceased crew members. Both Michel Gravel and Bovington

² David Fletcher, *War Cars: British Armoured Cars of the First World War*, (London: HMSO, 1987), 72.

³ Cameron Pulsifer, "Canada's First Armoured Car Unit: Raymond Brutinel and the Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigades of the First World war," *Canadian Military History*, Vol. 10, (Winter 2001, 44-57. The term Autocar refers to the name of the manufacturer, Autocar, of Ardmore Pennsylvania, which was one of the major automobile manufacturers of the period.

agreed to let me use their photographs in anything I published on the matter. Indeed, Bovington came up with another photograph from its collection that had been taken on the same occasion and that had not been published before. This was a close-up of the interior of the car's rear, showing its two Vickers machine guns, with the dead body of a Canadian soldier on the floor beside them. Clearly all three photographs had been taken by the advancing Germans as a record of their battlefield success. Clearly too the car had been extensively looted before they were taken.

I was able to piece together the story recounted in the first article through the use of the unit's war diaries and a number of post-war accounts. Briefly, the 1st Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel W.K. "Tiny" Walker, had proceeded from the Vimy area southwards to the Somme on 23 March 1918. The unit's "A" and "B" Batteries were equipped with four each of Brutinel's armoured Autocars. The hitherto independent Eaton, Borden, and Yukon Batteries, which had only recently been formally incorporated into the brigade, made up "C," "D," and "E" Batteries respectively. They carried their machine guns in light British-made Napier lorries. At 1600 hours, the brigade reached the headquarters of Sir Hubert Gough, which, having moved back from one locality to another in recent days, was then located in the town of Villers Bretonneux, some 15 km. to the east of Amiens. (Villers Bretonneux would be as far as the Germans got in their offensive; but that is another story.)

As recorded by Walker, the harassed Gough decreed that the role of the unit should be "to fill gaps occurring at any point along the army front." Gough especially stressed that "the line of the River Somme between Ham and Péronne must be held at all costs."⁴ This in effect meant that the unit's machine guns were to be deployed wherever they were most needed. In the context of this March retreat, in which the British were seriously lacking machine guns, having lost a great many in the first days of the German assault, these instructions were probably as sound as any that could have been proffered.⁵ Moreover,

⁴ W.K. Walker, "The Great German Offensive, March 1918, with some Account of the Work of the Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade," *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, Vol. III, (1926), 404.

⁵ On the British lack of machine guns, see Tim Travers, *How the War Was Won: Command and Technology in the British Army on the Western Front, 1917-1918*, (London: Pen & Sword, 2005), 63-64.

the unit was now, more than ever before, capable of carrying such orders out. For the first time since its arrival at the front in June 1915, the trench lines had broken down and mobility had returned to the battlefield. Establishing his own headquarters at Villers Bretonneux, Walker soon had four of his batteries moving off towards threatened areas at either end of the threatened stretch of the River Somme. The first to go were “D” and “E” batteries, under the command of Captain H.F. Meurling, to the southeast to join the headquarters of Fifth Army’s XVIII Corps at Roye, to the west of Ham. From there they were sent northeastwards to Nesle. Later he sent “B” and “C” Batteries, under Captain E.H. Holland, to the northeast to join VII Corps in the Péronne area, where a gap was threatening to open between the forces of Fifth Army and Third Army to its north. Both groups of motor machine gunners were to remain intensely involved in fighting the enemy in their respective zones of operation for the next couple of weeks, suffering many casualties and extensive damage to their vehicles. “B” Battery lost one of its armoured Autocars near Hourges on the Amiens-Roye road on 31 March. Its entire crew managed to escape, however. Neither of these two groups suffered the loss of a vehicle along with all but one of its crew. This was to become the singular fate of one of the cars of “A” Battery during the fighting that took place on 25 March.

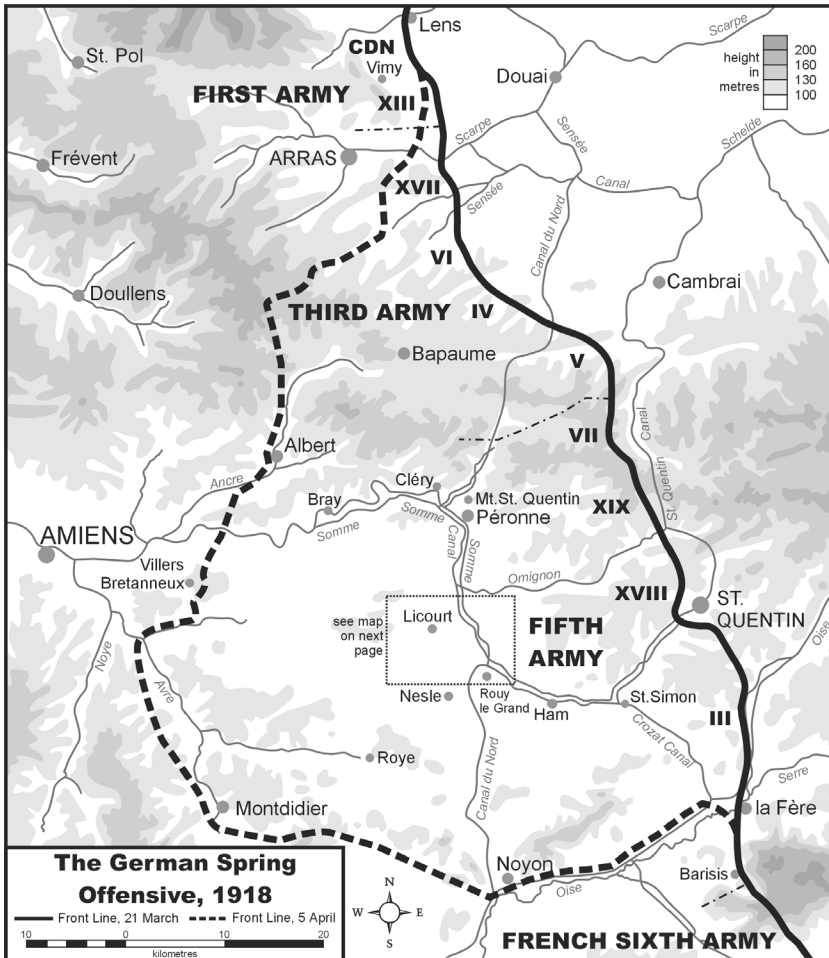
Lieutenant-Colonel Walker kept “A” Battery behind at Villers Bretonneux after sending the other four off to their different destinations along the Somme. However, the next day, 24 March, an urgent request came from the British XIX Corps to send assistance. XIX Corps occupied the territory between XVIII Corps to the south and VII Corps to the north. In response Battersby’s “A” Battery was sent eastwards to join the British 8th Division’s 24th brigade. The latter’s headquarters were in the village of Marchlépot, which lay about twelve km. southwest of Péronne and about seven km. west of the Somme River and Canal. “A” Battery’s four armoured Autocars arrived there in the late afternoon. Command of the force was in the hands of Major W.F. Battersby MC, in one car, with the other three being commanded respectively by Lieutenants W.H. Smith, W.G. Cuttle, and W.P. Adams. The 36-year old William Falconer Battersby was from Tavistock, Ontario, and had been a mining and mechanical engineer in civilian life. The original article gave the number of his crew as four, assuming that that there were three machine gunners (one short of the usual number). These were

identified as Private Osmond Culbert Begin, aged 26, of Hamilton, Ontario, who had been a clerk in civilian life; Private Donald Douglas Brooks, aged 20, a bank clerk from Weymouth, Digby County, in Nova Scotia; and Sergeant Cyril Vidal, aged 25, of Jamaica in the West Indies, who had enlisted in Toronto and again listed his profession as clerk. The driver, who sat in the front cab with the commander, was Private Robert Walker Connell, aged 24, of Toronto, who had been a chauffeur in civilian life.⁶

The commander of 24th Brigade was ready with work for them. He was concerned about the line of the Somme River and Canal about seven km. to the east and worried whether any Germans had succeeded in crossing it (as indeed they had at some points). Taking advantage of the Canadian vehicles' mobility, he ordered Battersby to proceed with another of his cars to the west bank of the Somme near the village of Cizancourt to investigate. Battersby chose Lieutenant Cuttle and his car to accompany him. Here it should be remembered that the cars were road bound and had no cross-country capability. To get to Cizancourt, Battersby and Cuttle had to take a road that led three km. southeast to the village of Licourt, and then turn left onto another road that led five km. northeast to Cizancourt. Once at Cizancourt the two turned right and made their way some distance south along a road that ran parallel to the canal's west bank. Battersby and his car went a bit further south where they indeed ran into a party of German soldiers on the canal's west bank. A skirmish resulted, with Battersby's gunners pouring fire into the ranks of the enemy and the latter directing rifle fire and hurling hand grenades against him. Only a few dents and scrapes resulted before the enemy dispersed. Battersby remained in position for the next few hours, however, pouring raking fire into the fields on their own and the other side of the canal to harass any enemy who might be hiding there. He then rejoined Cuttle and the two cars headed back to 24th Brigade headquarters by the same route that they had come.

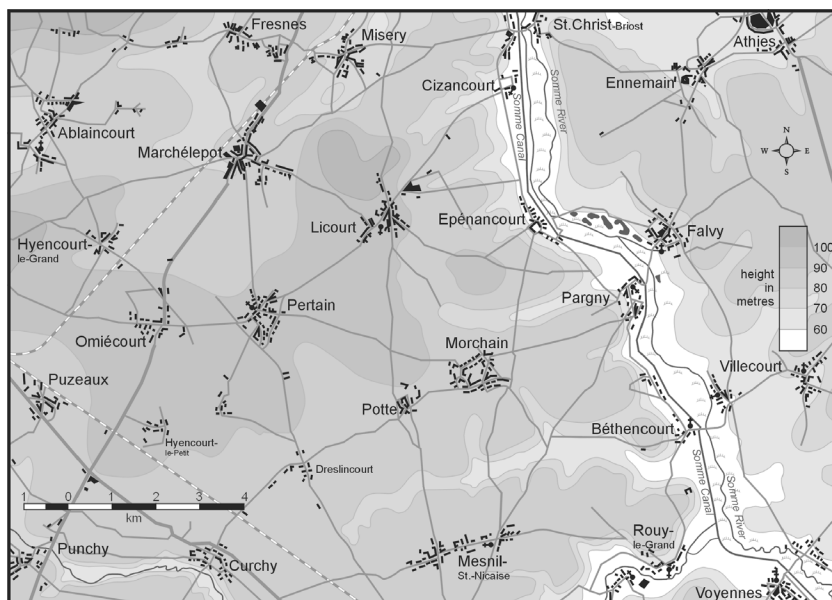
In the meantime, British commanders were planning a counterattack, scheduled for 0900 hours on the 25th, which was

⁶ The motor machine gun brigades' records usually give the name of the commander of a vehicle, but rarely the names of its crew members. The names listed were derived from the records of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, which list a total of five motor machine gun brigade fatalities (Battersby, Begin, Brooks, Vidal, and Connell) on 25 March 1918. See also the "Circumstances of Death" files at the LAC. Mikan 46246.



Disposition of Allied Armies, Spring 1918. [*Canadian Military History* Vol. 11 No. 3]

meant to push the Germans decisively back across the canal and further east. Battersby's and the other three cars of "A" Battery were ordered to move forward at 0400 from Marchlépot to Cizancourt, to be in position to lend advance support. On the way, Battersby ordered Smith and Cuttle to take up positions outside a factory building about half way between Licourt and Cizancourt, presumably to be his own rear support. Battersby and Adams proceeded from Cizancourt south along the west bank of the Somme Canal, pursuing the same route that the major and Lieutenant Cuttle had taken the previous evening.



The Licourt Front. [*Canadian Military History* Vol. 11 No. 3]

The British plan represented the triumph of hope over experience. The Germans struck first, and before the day had finished, they had over-run the entire length of the Somme between Péronne and Ham. Indeed, they advanced a considerable distance to the west. The German artillery barrage commenced at 0850, and from the positions they had taken up, Battersby and Adams could view German troops pouring across the river and its adjacent canal. Battersby immediately sent a motorcycle despatch rider back to Smith and Cuttle with orders to get back to 24th Brigade Headquarters. He and Adams then commenced their own retreat, northwards towards Cizancourt. Meanwhile, to avoid German artillery that seemed to be zeroing in on his position, Cuttle had moved his car forward from the factory to a spot just outside Cizancourt. Smith stayed put, moving his own car into a sunken road for cover. For a time, he moved his two machine guns to the lip of one of the road's embankments to lend support to some British infantry. But when he discovered that the troops he was supporting had disappeared, he remounted his guns and himself vacated the area. In accordance with Battersby's instructions, he aimed to get back to Marchlépot. On reaching Licourt, where he would have had to turn right onto the road proceeding to Marchlépot, he received word, presumably by motorcycle despatch rider, that

Marchlépot had already fallen. As a consequence, he proceeded straight along the road that led southwestwards from Licourt to the village of Pertain. He stopped only when he had reached Omiécourt, which lay a couple of km. to the west of Pertain, and was still for the time being at least safely in British hands.⁷

Having moved his own car closer to Cizancourt, Cuttle was still there when Adams's and Battersby's cars came up the road from their positions to the south. Having been unable to turn around they were backing up, with Battersby's car in front and Adams's behind it. Conditions prevented any of the cars from turning around, with Cuttle pulling his own in behind Adams's, and the three then proceeding in line rearwards along the road to Licourt. They made it into Licourt, but as they were heading out of the village on the road leading southwest to Pertain, tragedy struck. Something, possibly engine problems, caused Battersby's car to pull off the road. It was following this manoeuvre that Battersby and four members of his crew were killed. This resulted in the scene depicted in the three photographs discussed above, and the letters quoted below. Only one of the crew's bodies was subsequently recovered – that of Osmond Begin, whose grave is situated in the British Cemetery at Pargny, a few km. southeast of Licourt, on the banks of the Somme Canal. The other bodies were never found, their names being inscribed on the Vimy Memorial as four of the war's Canadian missing.

The new information is in the form of two letters that were written by two members of the 1st Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade who had been at, or close to, the action that resulted in the German photographs being taken. The letters were sent to express condolences to the mother of Osbert Culbert Begin, only months after Osmond lost his life. In the original article, I remarked upon the oddity that the crew was one short of the usual number of machine gunners.⁸ One of the letters, written by No. 14619 Private Charles John Archer, dated 27 July 1918, shows this indeed was not the case. Archer had been the car's fourth machine gunner and survived the incident that killed all his crew mates! Begin, he wrote, had been his number 2 gunner. The other letter, dated 25 May 1918, was written

⁷ Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG 9-III-D3 Vol. 4987, File 627, (Mikan 2005980), War Diary 1st Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade, Appendix 27, Narrative of Lieut. W.H. Smith.

⁸ See 58.

by No. 419 Private Charles Farrington Peterson, who had been in the area in another of the cars (probably Smith's), but was not close to the incident himself. He had received his information from witnesses to the event.

While the sources used for the earlier article indicate in a general sense how Battersby and his crew came to be in Licourt that fateful morning, none explains precisely how they wound up in the situation so vividly documented in the German photographs. This the two letters quoted below clarify and thereby complete the story embarked upon in the earlier article. Obviously, the letters meant a great deal to Mrs. Begin, as she preserved them, as did her family over several generations. Both letters, especially Peterson's, express concerns that in providing the information they do, they do not add to Mrs. Begin's grief over her loss. Nonetheless, both, but especially Archer's, hold nothing back, indeed border on the gruesome, in describing the deaths of Osmond and the other occupants of the car. Similar grisly scenes, would of course, have been all too frequent occurrences in the experience of the two writers, both of whom had been at the front for three and a half years. This raises the question of whether such forthrightness may have simply reflected the ordinariness that such scenes had come to occupy in the two letter writers' lives.

The letters are in the possession of Mr. Michael Elliott of Stoney Creek, who, when he read my original article some years ago, was quite startled to see that it described the same incident discussed in two letters that he had in his possession. Michael and I eventually came into contact through the resources of the web and, in due course, Michael sent me copies of the letters. I was thrilled to see these two accounts, which in ways provided a close-up lens on an event that hitherto I had been able to discern only vaguely, as through a dense mist. Michael has since kindly agreed to let me publish them, which I do here.

Osmond Culbert Begin was Michael's paternal grandmother's uncle. A number of family transfers over the years eventually resulted in the letters coming into Michael's possession. It should be noted that at some point (there is no record as to precisely when) someone in the family had typed copies made of the letters and, in due course, the originals (presumably handwritten) disappeared. The copies do seem to be accurate versions of the originals, however. All the details they contain relating to the writers' service at the time the event happened correspond to information contained in their personal military files at Library and Archives Canada. In addition, sufficient details about

the incident they describe accord with what is already known about it, to leave no doubt that the letters are what they purport to be. Nothing comes across as made up or purposefully untrue. Therefore, one can be confident that the letters are indeed authentic and faithful copies of those actually written by Archer and Peterson.

Peterson's letter, dated 25 May 1918, was the first to be written. Born on 25 January 1892, in Truro Nova Scotia, Peterson was raised as a Congregationalist, probably a strong one, given the pronounced religiosity of his letter. At the time that Canada entered the war in August 1914, he was studying agriculture at McGill University in Montreal. Having completed three years of his study, on 20 March 1915, he enlisted in No. 3 Canadian General Hospital, which was then being mobilized at McGill. He went overseas to England with this unit in May 1915, and to France with it a month later. On 13 October 1916, however, Peterson transferred to the 1st Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade, for the purpose, so his transfer documents stated, of entering "more active service." He served with this unit continuously until 31 May 1918, when he transferred to England for training with the Royal Flying Corps. It was from here that he wrote his letter to Mrs. Begin.⁹ It reads as follows, with no changes made to the typed text:

England. May 25, 1918

Dear Mrs. Begin

I have intended writing to you for a long time regarding your son "Os" (as I always called him) but we were rather busy during April and then I left suddenly for England. I found I lost his home address and had to write back to France for it, and I suppose now it does seem such long time since he was killed the last of March.

In writing you this letter I sincerely hope it will not cause you extra grief in bringing back memories. As far as I found out no one wrote home concerning him and so I only think it right that you should know a few details. I was not with him at the time as he belonged to a different section and my gun car [probably Smith's] was a few miles in another

⁹ LAC, RG 150 1992/166 Box 7764-56, Personal Military File, 419 Private Clyde Farrington Peterson.

part of the line but I learned all the details that were to be known from the ones who were there. The car was in an advanced position on a road in the open country and they were firing the guns at the time that the Germans were advancing several hundred yards away. The boys back on the road who saw it never have been able to say for certain whether it was a burst of bullet fire which hit the car. Two of the boys who knew how to drive a car immediately went up the road to get it out. Besides Os the driver had been killed in his seat. Also the major and another gunner. They tried to drive the car away but something was hit in the mechanism of the car and they couldn't. The Germans were advancing all the time and these two boys had to run finally to get back. As it was the car with those in it fell into German hands. I had a strong feeling for a long time that even though Os was badly wounded he might have been cared for afterwards by the Germans. But these two boys who last saw them say they were all dead in the car before they left it. But even if there was any chance of them recovering in German hands we should have heard of it before now. It was only because I thought so much of Os that I had a little hope for him. Because I wasn't there I couldn't believe it for a time, but now I feel quite certain that he died a true son of God. This happened on a road leading south of Marchlepot about a mile out. It is well behind the German lines today, but if it is ever my chance I will look around the village for his grave. I know the exact spot by the map of the road.

Few people can realize under what condition we worked there. Everything was in chaos most of the time. Except for our cars we wouldn't have been able to get our wounded out at all. My battery did not have very many casualties. Only that one time did the boys get into serious difficulty. Some of the other batteries lost heavily and I often wonder how any of us got out at all. As the only Canadian unit there we done all we could do. Could we have had the whole Canadian Corps there to work with things might have been better.

I joined the motor brigade about the same time Os came and being in the same billet we became very close friends. Because we understood each other so well he was the best friend I had there. He was so sincere and straightforward. A great many thought him envious but they did not know him. But then in Belgium last Fall [i.e. at Passchendaele] where things were very hard he was at his best and overcame where the strongest became worn out. He never looked for favours but always done

one if he could. He never altered and his straightforwardness won him respect on all sides. What I always liked about him was that if anyone cast a slur to him or done him a dirty trick he would never stoop to do the same thing. Os and I would often walk together and talk of our life and the things to be attained in life. We understood each other perfectly and I grew to look upon him as a very close friend, one who would help you and on whom you would help. He was a good Christian boy and I can say the army life, rough as it is, never spoiled him. He never smoked or drank, or let foolish desires carry him away. And so I think, Mrs. Begin, you may take comfort in your grief for him in that he lived like a man never knowing a white feather in this battle of life and death and he dies a man who need never be afraid to meet his God. God will be good to such men. Grief comes hard, I know, at times, and I hope this letter won't increase it any, but be of good cheer and thank God that your son has done his bit for mankind and gone forth a true son of God. I will always think of Os because I miss him like a brother. I hope I have not written too much about him, but rather felt it was my duty as a close friend of his.

I am not with the M.M.G. Bde any more, but am in England now with the Royal Flying Corps. If you wish to reach me the enclosed address will find me. [Not available]

Yours very truly.

(Signed) Clyde F. Peterson

Peterson never got the opportunity to serve with the Royal Flying Corps (or the Royal Air Force as it was by then officially titled). The war ended before his training finished. He embarked to return to Canada on 18 June 1919, and died, aged 47, in 1939.

The Begin family had Peterson's letter published in a local newspaper soon after they received it. In this format, it came to the attention of Private C.J. Archer, who read it while in hospital in England, and was prompted by it to write his own letter. He had, in fact, been the only member of Battersby's crew to survive, Begin, as noted, having been his No. 2 machine gunner. As the only survivor of the action that killed Begin, he seems to have felt it incumbent on him to provide for Mrs. Begin his own perspective on what happened to her son. Born in Portsmouth England, Archer had

emigrated to Canada, where he settled in Gunton, Manitoba. On his Attestation Paper, completed at Valcartier in September 1914, he gave his occupations as ‘traveller’ and farmer, and recorded pre-war service with the militia’s Fort Garry Horse. He joined the 1st Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade just as it was leaving England to go to the front in June 1915, and served with it continuously until the incident described here. It should be noted that in his internal address, Archer gives his rank as “Gnr.” [Gunner], which was only legitimately used in artillery units. Machine gunners sometimes liked to use this designation too, but their own equivalent was definitely that of private. The letter reads as follows, again with no changes made to the typed text.

From #14619

Gnr. C.J. Archer

1st C.M.M.G. Bde..

C.M.G.C. Depot

To:

Mrs. Begin Hamilton, Ont.

Dear Madam,

A friend of mine showed me a cutting from a newspaper, written by Pte Clyde F. Peterson, referring to the death of your son, “Osmond.”

Myself being his No. 1 gunner can verify most of the statements made by Pte Peterson, I being the sole survivor of the Armoured Car crew, in which your son was serving during the action on the Cambrai front. [Here it must be pointed out that Archer was way off base, as in reality the action took place some 40 km. further south.] This, dear Madam, is the full report of your dear boy:-

On the morning of March 25th, 1918, we went to a forward spot on the Canal du Nord [*sic* – i.e. the Somme Canal], from where we were to make a counter-attack on the German outposts. Before starting the

action the Germans attacked on the French front a short distance from Peronne. We were ordered to go and help them, to keep the Germans from crossing the Canal. Before reaching there, the attack was made general all along the front, so we had to help our own men who were falling back, owing to superior numbers against them. We took our position in a village (the name I am uncertain of) near the village of Misery [located about five km. north of Licourt]; at that time the enemy were at very close quarters and your son Osmond, was, with another man, detailed as look-out on the road to protect us being surrounded as we were about a mile [1.6 km.] from the British front line. The enemy then took possession of the village and advanced on both flanks. We engaged the enemy at close range, your son and the other man still holding their position when the enemy opened a hard rifle fire from some windows. "Osmond" was the first to get hit and he was struck in a vital spot. The bullet entered his body and struck the spine on its way out and death was instantaneous. His partner was also hit, but laid in agony for a period, but beyond human aid. Major Battersby, our commander, was next to be killed, being hit in the head. The other gunner was then killed, leaving the driver and myself unhurt. Almost immediately I was struck in the right eye and temple, knocking me unconscious.

When I recovered, I found the driver killed, so I, being nearly blind, was unable to recover the car with the bodies. So I went to the remaining car [almost certainly Adams's] and they sent two men to bring in the car. But the car was disabled, so had to leave it to escape being captured. The enemy captured the car and the bodies in it.

I beg to state, dear Madam, that your boy would be treated with the respect of a brave enemy. I was acquainted with your son from the time he joined our unit and put on my gun in November 1915. I found him an honest and straightforward boy and always willing to do a good turn for all. He was very popular amongst us all in the section. He died fearing God and defying the enemy. His memory will always remain with me to the last, as we were like brothers. Please let me extend to you my deepest sympathy, as I know your son had earned his reward in his Home above.

If any further information is required, I will gladly furnish it to the parents of a brave son, who died a noble death on Monday, March the 25th, 1918. He gave his life for his parents and his country.

I trust that you will receive these few lines safely, and I am only too pleased to be able to furnish you with this information, seen actually with my own eyes, and now I close by asking you to allow me to remain as yours,

Very sincerely,

(Signed) Chas. A. Archer

Archer wrote these lines from hospital in England, where he was recovering from his wounds. He had got off fairly lightly, compared to the fate of his comrades. Two small pieces of bullet had lodged in his left thigh and a gunshot had grazed his right eye affecting the lid and the pupil. The two pieces of bullet were easily removed from his thigh and the wound healed quite quickly. That in the eye proved more troublesome, however. Its sight had been destroyed and Archer remained blind in it for the rest of his life. He died on 22 February 1972.¹⁰

Both accounts provide more graphic accounts of the demise of Battersby and his crew than we have had before, certainly more than is in my original article.¹¹ Both do contain errors and there are some disparities between the two accounts. Mistakes as to location can no doubt be attributed to the confusion of the fast-paced battle in which they were involved. As Archer was actually present in the car at the time the incident happened, and was its lone survivor, his account certainly provides the more close-up view. However, his account is decidedly the more inaccurate as to where the incident happened. As noted, he locates it as occurring near Cambrai on the Canal du Nord, which was about 40m km. further north! Discrepancies occur in other accounts as well, although none are as egregious as Archer's. Peterson has it happening in "open country" about "a mile [1.6 km.] south Marchlépot, or about a km. northwest of Licourt.

¹⁰ LAC, RG 150 1992-93/166 Box 208-47, Personal Military File, 14619 Private Charles John Archer.

¹¹ Peterson, personal military file.

This is more understandable, as Marchlépot, was the site of 24th Brigade's headquarters at the time that the cars of "A" Battery first reported to the area, and they were frequently moving between it and Licourt. It should be noted too that in an account published in 1926, "Tiny" Walker also locates the incident as having taken place "on the Licourt-Marchlépot [*sic*] road."¹² (For the location of these various localities, see the maps pages 6 & 7.)

Of all the official accounts that mention the incident, however, the most detailed is contained in H.T. Logan's and M.R. Levey's unpublished "History of the Canadian Machine Gun Corps, C.E.F." Completed in 1919 under the direction of Raymond Brutinel, this remains the most detailed account in existence of the organization and actions of the Canadian Machine Gun Corps in the war (although it does leave out certain critical events, such as the Battle of Hill 70). Based upon the unit's war diaries, and having been written only a year after the events described, doubtless with access to witnesses, Logan and Levey provide a more detailed account of the activities of "A" Battery on the days of 23-25 March 1918 than appears anywhere else. Indeed, their account was the major source for the detail of the car's last days provided in my first article. They unambiguously locate the site of the incident involving the deaths of Battersby and his crew as having been Licourt.¹³ Based upon Private Archer's letter quoted above, and a rereading of Lieutenant Smith's account, contained in the motor machine gun brigade's brigades war diary, I am more than ever convinced that this was indeed the case.

Archer definitely redeems himself as to the incident's location when he writes that it transpired in a village, of whose name he was "uncertain," but which was "near the village of Misery." The aptly named Misery was only five km. due north of Licourt. His certainty that Battersby and his crew "took up [their] positions in a village" would rule out the claims made by Peterson and Walker that it occurred "in open country," on the Licourt-Marchlépot road. This

¹² Walker, "The Great German offensive of 1918," 407.

¹³ H.T. Logan, M.R. Levey, "History of the Canadian Machine Gun Corps C.E.F.," II, "Operations", 172. Original in the possession of the Directorate of History and Heritage, Department of National Defence, Ottawa. This work traces in some detail the various routes taken by the cars of "A" Battery on 24 and 25 March. The historian of the Canadian Machine Gun Corps, C.S. Grafton, no doubt follows their lead in the information he provides in his official history, *The Canadian "Emma Gees,"* (London Ont.: Canadian Machine Gun Corps Association, 1938), 131-132.

makes it virtually certain that the village was Licourt. The most direct route to take in order to head westwards from Cizancourt was the road leading through Licourt. Indeed, Battersby and his cars had proceeded along this route at least three times since they had arrived in that area in their travels back and forth from Cizancourt. Moreover, to get to safety further west when retreating from Cizancourt on the morning of 25 March, it made no sense to turn right at Licourt and proceed northwest to Marchlépot, as word was by then out that it had already fallen. The wisest and quickest route to safety was to keep going through Licourt onto Pertain and, from there, further west to Omiécourt. As noted above, this was the choice made by Lieutenant Smith in his own retreat from Cizancourt.

Smith would have been on his way there when the three other cars of "A" Battery came through Licourt, with Cuttle in the rear, Adams in the middle, and Battersby in the most advanced, or eastwards position. In the meantime, the enemy forces were moving into Licourt from the north and the south and closing in on the three cars. At some point, Battersby's car was struck by enemy fire. Here, Archer's testimony that Begin and a fellow crew member had been sent ahead of the car to get a better view of its position *vis á vis* the enemy may be significant. This, of course, would have meant that the car was stopped. Quite possibly it was the engine problem that later attempts would fail to fix. In any event, this would have increased the crew's vulnerability to German fire. Archer also mentions that the enemy was firing from windows in a building. If they were on an upper floor, then Battersby and his crew, in their open top car, would have been sitting ducks for German marksmen.

When he saw that Battersby's car was in trouble, Adams had his own car move forward towards it to help. Indeed, as noted by both Peterson and Archer, a couple members of his crew rushed forward in a vain attempt to get aid to the stricken car. It was presumably then that the wounded Private Archer succeeded in pulling himself out from amidst the death and devastation that had struck his own car and into the relative safety of that commanded by Adams. With the attempts to restart Battersby's car's engine proving fruitless, Adams and Cuttle concluded there was nothing more they could do and had their cars retreat westwards to Pertain and then to Omiécourt. Here, like Smith before them, they halted, with Archer being absorbed into the Canadian Army Medical Corps' casualty clearing system. This would have been the fate too of both Cuttle and Adams, who were

both seriously wounded in the day's fighting. This no doubt explains why, unfortunately for the record of the day's events, there are no accounts written by them in the unit's war diaries.

Another reference to the services of "A" Battery during its intervention on behalf of the British army's 24th brigade in March 1918 has come to my attention since I wrote the earlier article. This comes from the 24th Brigade's war diary, which is now available (for a fee) on the website of the British National Archives in London. It reads:

Three [sic] armoured cars and a tank were ... attached to the Brigade at the beginning of the operation.

These armoured cars did excellent work, checking the Bosche east of Licourt.

On one occasion an armoured car coming round a corner [Battersby's on the evening of 24 March?] ran into a large party of Germans most of whom were killed by machine gun fire.

The tank was never used, as when orders were issued for it to move forward in conjunction with an infantry attack the officer in charge stated that there was a break down in the machinery which prevented it from moving.¹⁴

This does not tell us a great deal about the activities of Battersby and his group with 24th Brigade. It does not even mention that they were Canadian, although in crisis situations such as that which the 24th Brigade found itself, such distinctions often went unnoticed. The excerpt does show, however, that the services of the cars were appreciated by those they came to assist. The tank's breakdown was by no means a rare occurrence with this type of fighting vehicle. Brutinel's armoured Autocars were usually more reliable in this respect, with, on this occasion, tragic repercussions for Battersby and his crew.

Thus, it was on the western fringe of Licourt on the road leading to Pertain that Battersby and his crew met their unfortunate end.

¹⁴ National Archives, Great Britain, PRO WO95 /171814, 24th Infantry Brigade War Diary, March 1918.

This was where, except for Begin's, their remains were last seen. Peterson and Archer present vivid and poignant testimonials of the crew and its members' final moments. Both are fine examples of letters of condolence written by soldiers either serving at or recently returned from the front. Both too add a human face, non-existent in previous accounts, to the conditions under which the crews of the 1st Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade both served and died in their efforts to stem the mighty tide of the German Spring Offensive of March 1918.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cameron Pulsifer, Ph.D. worked as a historian at the Canadian War Museum (CWM) from 1991 to 2007. During much of this period his responsibilities included editing cwm contribution to this journal. He made many contributions of his own and has also published extensively elsewhere.