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CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM

# Munnings and the Canadians

TIM COOK & ANNA ENGLAND

*Abstract: Sir Alfred Munnings painted the Canadian Cavalry Brigade and the Canadian Forestry Corps as part of the Canadian War Memorials Fund during the First World War. In the first half of 1918, Munnings, England's most renowned equine artist, depicted the Canadians in sketches and on canvas, and he eventually produced over 40 works of art. This article will explore Munnings's interactions with the Canadian cavalrymen and lumberjacks in uniform, while providing additional insight into his works of art that are held at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa.*

*Sommaire: Sir Alfred Munnings a réalisé les œuvres consacrées à la Brigade de cavalerie canadienne et au Corps forestier canadien lorsqu'il était artiste pour le Fonds de souvenirs de guerre canadiens, durant la Première Guerre mondiale. Dans la première moitié de 1918, Alfred Munnings, le peintre équestre le plus renommé d'Angleterre, a illustré les Canadiens dans des croquis et sur toile, pour réaliser plus de 40 œuvres d'art. Cet article examine les interactions de l'artiste avec les chevaliers et les bûcherons canadiens en uniforme, et offre des renseignements complémentaires sur ses œuvres qui sont conservées au Musée canadien de la guerre, à Ottawa.*

SOME 620,000 CANADIANS ENLISTED or were conscripted in the Great War, with the Canadian Corps being the primary Canadian fighting formation on the Western Front, reaching 100,000 strong in early 1917. The Corps's four infantry divisions fought together for the first time at Vimy Ridge in April 1917, and the formation was commanded by Canadian-born Sir Arthur Currie from June 1917. Canadian politicians in Ottawa and soldiers overseas, especially Currie, were adamant that the four divisions fight together in the Corps. This was justified for operation reasons—with the Canadians learning to work with one another over time and being able to pool

firepower and resources—and such action also ensured that Canada’s forces were not lost amid the several hundred Allied divisions on the Western Front.

While Canada’s focus was on its Corps overseas, and also on Canadian airmen who served in the British flying services, there were other units that did not fight with the Corps but were still part of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. There were hospital units in the Mediterranean, training formations in England, forces sent to Northern Russia in 1919, and thousands of individual Canadians spread throughout British and Allied forces. Moreover, two important and large units fell outside the Corps: the Canadian Cavalry Brigade and the Canadian Forestry Corps. They have been largely forgotten in the public memory of the war in Canada.

And yet the cavalry and forestry units were documented for future generations. Sir Alfred Munnings (1878-1959) is one of England’s most renowned equine artists, known for his evocative depictions of rural British life and sport. During the First World War, the Canadian War Memorials Fund invited Munnings to depict the Canadian Expeditionary Force as an official war artist. While his eye was drawn to familiar themes such as horses and landscapes near the front, the war broadened his focus and allowed him to contribute to the war effort. Munnings said that his experience with the Canadians on the Western Front, and his resulting works of art, won him his place as an influential artist. He would write later in life, “I have often wondered had there been no 1914-18 war whether painting people on horseback would have absorbed the greater part of my efforts in the years that followed.”<sup>1</sup>

Munnings painted the Canadians from January to June 1918, and captured their legacy in oil, watercolours, and sketches. This article will explore Munnings’s interactions with the Canadian cavalymen and lumberjacks in uniform, while providing additional insight into his works of art that are held at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa.

<sup>1</sup> Stanley Booth, *A.J. Munnings: An Appreciation of the Artists and a Selection of his Paintings* (London, Sotheby’s Publications, 1986) 8.



*Fatigue Party Making Bomb-Proof Shelter in Smallfoot Wood* by Sir Alfred Munnings (1918). Oil on Canvas. [Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 19710261-0449]

### THE EARLY YEARS

Alfred Munnings had a talent for art from an early age. Born into a family of millers in Mendham, Suffolk, on 8 October 1878, young Alfred's childhood was spent on farm lands where his father worked at the local grain mill. Munnings' interest in pastoral landscapes and farm animals, particularly horses, was influenced by his exposure to similar scenes as a young child. His father also taught him to draw horses, using flattened scraps of used envelopes as a sketch pad. His mother, seeing his artistic potential, ensured that he had private drawing lessons. Alfred had a good mind for memorizing poetry and prose, but he was no scholar, and even at a young age he had an anti-authoritarian streak that made him a difficult pupil. He happily left school at 14 to apprentice for Page Brothers & Co., a publishing firm in Norwich that specialized in lithography. He learned his craft by working long hours, and through study at the Norwich School of Art.

Sketching, drawing, and painting at every opportunity, he developed a good hand and a steady eye for his subjects. He studied horse anatomy, bone structure, muscles at rest and work, and he enjoyed painting little mares and robust Suffolk Punches alike. In 1899, Munnings' work was formally recognized by the art community, as *Stranded* and *Pike-fishing in January 1898* became the first of his works to be included in the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition.<sup>2</sup> From that point on, art dealers and specialists viewed him as a promising painter.

While establishing himself as an artist, Munnings lived a scrappy, larrikin-like existence, swearing and drinking to excess, always looking for the next commission. He fell in love with Florence Carter Woods, who came from a wealthy family that had earned its fortune in the brewing industry. The two were married on 19 January 1912. A few months later, in March 1913, Munnings had a successful solo exhibition, "Horses, Hunting and Country Life," at the Leicester Galleries in London. Alfred and Florence's marriage was tumultuous—with his outbursts and incivility paired with her depression and unhappiness—and it ended in tragedy when Florence killed herself by drinking prussic acid on 24 July 1914.<sup>3</sup>

The 37-year-old artist was still grieving and in shock when Britain went to war on 4 August 1914. He tried to enlist in the army three times that year, but he was rejected each time because he was blind in his right eye. The despondent artist took to long treks through the English countryside, painting in the field, evading the occasional farmers who thought he might be a German spy. In such rough conditions, Munnings became a very fast painter, applying paint rapidly and in thick strokes.

Embarrassed to be seen in civilian clothes when so many men were in uniform, he eventually secured war-related work in early 1917. He worked at the Remount Depot at Caldecott Park, near Reading, which was responsible for one thousand horses per week. Most of the horses came from Canada, and they had to be cared for after the harrowing trip across the Atlantic, tested and treated for mange, and restored to health before going to France. Over 11 months, Munnings strengthened his already deep affinity for the horses in his care, but

<sup>2</sup> Booth, *A.J. Munnings*, 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Goodman, *What A Go!: The Life of Alfred Munnings* (London: Collins, 1988)



*December, 1917—Nightfall* by Sir Alfred Munnings (1918). Oil on Canvas. [Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 19710261-0442]

he was not a little dismayed to realize that he was restoring the health of horses who would be sent to their probable deaths in service along the Western Front. He continued to look for other opportunities where he might play a role in the war effort.

#### **CANADIAN WAR MEMORIALS FUND**

Canadian-born Lord Beaverbrook (Sir Max Aitken) established the Canadian War Records Office in early 1916. Using his own considerable resources, the millionaire press baron had taken it upon himself the previous year to publicize the story of the Canadians in service along the Western Front. His newspaper accounts of the Canadians at the April 1915 Battle of Second Ypres had raised the



profile of the Canadians, and he followed this up with his best-selling book, *Canada in Flanders* (1916).<sup>4</sup>

In 1916, Beaverbrook established official photographers and camera men to serve on the Western Front and to capture the Canadians in battle and behind the lines. And while the dynamic newspaper man had little knowledge of art, he felt it important to document the Canadians on canvas. Beaverbrook was particularly frustrated that there were no available photographs of the Canadians at Second Ypres, other than a few snapped by soldiers illegally with Kodak cameras. Beaverbrook felt that works of art were a more permanent record than photography, which would contribute to his goal of laying “down the bedrock of history.”<sup>5</sup> He would create a legacy of historical records for future generations of Canadians and historians.

The first artist hired, British painter Richard Jack, produced on a large canvas the heroic Canadian stand.<sup>6</sup> *The Second Battle of Ypres, 22 April to 25 May 1915* became an iconic work and during the course of the war over 100 British, Belgian, and Canadian artists followed Jack’s lead. Beaverbrook turned his attention to other matters and appointed Paul Konody, art critic of the *Daily Mail* and the *Observer*, to select artists to paint for the CWMF in Canada, Britain, along the Western Front, and in other theatres of war. Early in January 1918, Konody invited Munnings to join the project as a civilian and paint the Canadian Cavalry Brigade in action.

## THE CAVALRY

The Canadian Cavalry Brigade was raised as part of the First Contingent in 1914. Permanent Force cavalry regiments, the Royal Canadian Dragoons and Lord Strathcona’s Horse, formed the core of the brigade, along with two batteries of Royal Canadian Horse Artillery. The later addition of the Fort Garry Horse completed the formation. At full strength, each of the three cavalry regiments had

<sup>4</sup> Tim Cook, *Clio’s Warriors: Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006) 14-16.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Cook, “Documenting Canada’s Great War,” The Canadian Encyclopedia Online.

<sup>6</sup> For the war art program, see Maria Tippett, *Art at the Service of War: Canada, Art and the Great War* (Toronto : University of Toronto Press, 1984).



*Watering on the March* by Sir Alfred Munnings (ca. 1917-9). Oil on Canvas. [Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 19710261-0452]

526 officers and men, and horses. In 1916, a machine gun squadron of some 230 soldiers was added, who manned 6 Vickers. There were also signallers, a field ambulance and, of course, veterinarians. The brigade was a self-contained battle group, 2,500 strong.

The basic fighting unit of the cavalry was the squadron, commanded by a major or captain, along with four troops, commanded by a lieutenant, each with four sections (with seven privates and a corporal each). The troopers were armed with the Short Rifle, Magazine, Lee Enfield Rifle Mark III, a cut-down version of the infantry rifle, and the 1908 Mk 1 sword, a straight-edged weapon with a covered grip, which had a 35-inch blade.

But there were few cavalry charges during the war, as barbed wire and trenches slowed any assault, while rapid-firing artillery and machine guns cut down horses and men. Instead, the cavalry units fought dismounted in the trenches from early May 1915 after the terrible casualties to the Canadian Division in the aftermath





*A Canadian Trooper and his Horse* (unfinished) by Sir Alfred Munnings (1918). Oil on Canvas. [Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 19710261-0460]

of the Battle of Second Ypres. Serving in the Givenchy sector, the cavalymen learned the deadly art of patrolling No Man’s Land and preparing for an enemy attack, while also the far less glamorous role of digging and filling sandbags, shoring up trenches, and all the menial tasks that fell to the “poor bloody infantry” along the Western Front.

The brigade received their horses again in early 1916 and carried out operations behind the lines, serving with several British cavalry divisions. The Canadian Cavalry Brigade’s time for sustained battle arrived in March 1917, as the Germans pulled back their lines to more secure positions in preparation for the coming Anglo-French Arras offensive. Canadian cavalry units rode forward to harass the retreating and vulnerable enemy as they left their prepared positions, and Lieutenant Frederick Harvey of Lord Strathcona’s Horse was later awarded the Victoria Cross for rushing an enemy machine gun nest alone on 27 March 1917. His citation read, in part: “German soldiers defending the village opened fire with rifles and a machine

gun at very close range on Harvey's leading troop as it advanced, causing heavy casualties. Lieutenant Harvey ran forward well ahead of his men, jumped the barbed wire protecting the enemy position, shot the machine gunner and captured the gun." Throughout these skirmishes, the Canadian cavalry units fought mounted and dismounted, and there were additional battles at the end of the year.

### MUNNINGS AND CAVALRY

Alfred Munnings joined the Canadian Cavalry Brigade in late January 1918. He wore civilian clothing and carried three stretchers and a box filled with canvases, paper, watercolours, oils and brushes. He immediately painted devastated buildings and structures that represented the war's annihilating effects, as well as the tranquil French countryside that seemed untouched by war. In his works from this period, even in seemingly idyllic ones, the war seems to brood over the horizon, and he sometimes situated the cavalrymen amid ruins of battle. But he seemed almost incapable of engaging with the death and destruction of battle, and none of his works depict the grisly nature of industrialized warfare or the aftermath of battle.

Not a stuffy or highbrow painter, Munnings won over the dominion cavalry troops he painted, telling tales, reciting poetry, and singing bawdy songs and ballads. His bon vivante, scoundrel spirit fit into the jovial atmosphere of Brigadier J.E.B. Seely's headquarters. Seely, an experienced British officer, long-time member of Parliament at Westminster, and Secretary of State for War from 1912 to 1914, later wrote that all the Canadians under his command "loved the man."<sup>7</sup> The British painter, in turn, thought highly of the horsemen: "I can generally get on with most people, and certainly could get along with these Canadians. They were the finest and best fellows that I have ever met."<sup>8</sup>

Seely was one of Munnings's first subjects. On a cold day in late January 1918, with frost on the ground and Munnings standing on a duck-board to stay out of the muck, Munnings painted Seely and his famed horse Warrior from a distance of about 10 feet. After posing for an hour, Seely left to attend to brigade work and was replaced on

<sup>7</sup> Goodman, *What a Go!*, 135.

<sup>8</sup> Sir Alfred Munnings, *An Artist's Life* (London: The Museum Press, 1951) 303-304.



*Major-General The Right Honourable J.E.B. Seely* by Sir Alfred Munnings (1918). Oil on Canvas. [Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 19710261-0450]

Warrior by his batman, who wore one of the brigadier's beribboned uniforms. Munnings and the batman had a good laugh, as officers and troopers passed by and saluted the batman on the horse thinking he was the brigadier.

### **GERMAN OFFENSIVES**

The Germans launched a surprise offensive on 21 March 1918. Dozens of divisions attacked behind a hurricane of shellfire and gas. Fast-moving German infantry attacked deep into the Allied lines, surging forward and around areas of resistance. On a 60-kilometer-front, the British forces suffered some 38,500 casualties on the first day of battle. Of these, 21,000 were taken prisoner.<sup>9</sup> The British

<sup>9</sup> Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2003) 289.

high command fretted that their soldiers' morale was on the verge of breaking.

For a brief period in late March, it looked like mobility was restored to the stagnant front. The Germans made daunting gains and the British Third and Fifth armies, already weak and overextended, were on the verge of collapse. The British rushed reinforcements to the front and in the face of these sustained enemy operations, the cavalry rode into battle to stabilize the front. This was the type of warfare they had been preparing for, and as mounted infantry they could be rushed to exploit success or, in this case, act as a fire brigade to slow the enemy's drive.

From almost the start of the offensive, the Canadian cavalry were engaged in battles and skirmishes with the enemy. They rode towards the action, dismounted, and fought as riflemen from hastily dug trenches or protected areas. Trooper F.G. Cole of the Royal Canadian Dragoons, wounded in one battle recalled, "I looked around and much to my surprise there was not a living soul in the yard, and quite naturally I was scared not knowing how long I had been there and nobody alive to talk to."<sup>10</sup> On the morning of the 24 March, the Germans attacked near Villeselve. A detachment of Canadian cavalry, commanded by British Major-General A.E.W. Harman, attacked to retake the lost ground. The Canadians charged the enemy but were forced back by concentrated fire.<sup>11</sup> During this desperate last week in March, the Canadian cavalry helped to check the enemy advance in isolated sectors, or at least make it painful for him to continue to make deep inroads. The Canadian Cavalry Brigade suffered heavy casualties, with the three regiments down to about 250 strength each.<sup>12</sup> Captain S. H. Williams of the Strathconas said that in the aftermath of one engagement, "There were dead men and horses scattered all over the area."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Breerton Greenhous, *Dragoon: The Centennial History of the Royal Canadian Dragoons, 1883-1983* (Ottawa: Guild of the Royal Canadian Dragoons, 1983) 221.

<sup>11</sup> Sir James Edmonds, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1914-1918, volume I* (London: Macmillan, 1933) 405-6.

<sup>12</sup> John R. Grodzinski and Michael R. McNorgan, "'It's a charge, boys, it's a charge!'" Cavalry Action at Moreuil Wood," in Donald E. Graves with John R. Grodzinski (eds.) *Fighting for Canada : Seven Battles, 1758-1945* (Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, 2000) 254.

<sup>13</sup> S.H. Williams, *Stand to your Horses: Through the First World War 1914-1918 with the Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians)* (Manitoba: D.W. Friesen and Sons, 1961) 187.



*Fort Garrys on the March (I)* by Sir Alfred Munnings (1918). Oil on Canvas. [Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 19710261-0456]

### **BATTLE OF MOREUIL WOOD**

On 30 March, German forces advanced on Amiens, a crucial French logistical city. Its loss would have been disastrous for the Allies. Seely's brigade was ordered to stop the German juggernaut, even though after a week of battle and hard riding the force was exhausted. Most of the regiments had lost about half their strength, with some of the best officers, NCOs, and men had been killed or wounded.

The 223 Saxon Infantry Division moved into Moreuil Wood, advancing amid the beech trees in early bud, about 20 kilometres south-west of Amiens. A little after 9:00am, the Royal Canadian Dragoons advanced on foot through the forest, which covered about 400 acres, clashing with the advance German forces, while two squadrons of the Lord Strathcona's Horse also moved through the woods from the North to the South. The fighting was fierce and chaotic among the trees.



At least a battalion of German soldiers, numbering close to 1,000, were steadily driven back. At one point in the battle, Captain Roy Nordheimer of the Royal Canadian Dragoons recounted that he ordered a bayonet charge. “We drove the enemy out.”<sup>14</sup> To catch the Germans coming out of the wood to the southeast, Brigadier Seely ordered the last remaining squadron of LSH, C Squadron with about 75 troops, to ride around the north-east corner and shatter the vulnerable enemy.

Thirty-three-year-old Lieutenant Gordon Flowerdew led the squadron. He had come to Canada in 1903 and was a British Columbia fruit farmer, having also run a butcher shop and general store. As a dashing young bachelor, a sportsman, and a prewar militiaman, he had enlisted in August 1914. Now, on the morning of 30 March, before Flowerdew set off to run down the Germans, Seeley said to him that this was “the most adventurous task of all; but I am confident you will succeed.” Flowerdew replied with a grin, “I know, sir, I know, it is a splendid moment. I will try not to fail you.”<sup>15</sup>

With some Germans still in the north-east corner of the wood, Flowerdew ordered Lieutenant Harvey, commander of 2 Troop, who had earned a Victoria Cross in 1917, to eliminate it. Harvey set off, killing a number of Germans and then dismounted and fought his way forward, an action for which he would be recognized with a Military Cross.

That cleared the way for Flowerdew to lead his three remaining troops to round the north-east corner. Before them, Flowerdew and his men saw Germans in the open fields. Flowerdew cried out, half turning the saddle, “It’s a charge boys, it’s a charge!” Reg Longley, his boy trumpeter, raised his trumpet to sound the charge, but German fire cut him down before he could give the call.

Flowerdew’s 75-member squadron rode down on the 300 Germans. A mass of horses galloping at 400 yards a minute was the definition of shock and awe. On the receiving end were two lines of German infantry, about 300 yards to the front. They were supported by a battery of six 150mm artillery and a machine gun company armed with the Maxim 08 heavy machine gun.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Greenhous, *Dragoon*, 224-5.

<sup>15</sup> Grodzinski and McNorgan, “It’s a charge, boys, it’s a charge!”, 262

<sup>16</sup> For the best account of the battle, see Grodzinski and McNorgan, “It’s a charge, boys, it’s a charge!”



*Charge of Flowerdew's Squadron* by Sir Alfred Munnings (1918). Oil on Canvas. Munnings created the most famous artistic rendition of the battle. With Munnings unwilling or unable to come to grips with the death and destruction on the Western Front, this is his only battle painting. Moreover, he did not witness the charge as he was sent away on 25 March to a safer position far to the rear of battle. Over the years, some have questioned Flowerdew's attack formation, which was likely more ragged than that depicted on canvas. Munnings shows the squadron in line—three troops side by side, each troop in two ranks. Flowerdew is at the centre. It is a powerful work, a stirring display speed, power, and movement caught on the canvas, but also with a foreshadowing of the carnage to follow. Witness the horse rearing up in the centre, and two rider-less horses in the bottom right. [Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 19710261-0443]

The Canadian force was outnumbered and outgunned. Riding at the gallop, the riders drew their swords, leaned forward into the saddle, and extended their right arm in front with the sword pointed slightly downward. The ground thundered and the horses threw up clods of mud from the field. As one of the Strathcona's remarked of the frenzied action: "There is not much I can tell of the actual charge, because everything happened with such speed and fury....Everything

seemed unreal, the shouting of men, the moans of the wounded, the pitiful crying of the wounded and dying horses.”<sup>17</sup>

A single German machine gun can fire 400-500 bullets a minute. The Strathconas faced at least half a dozen. The carnage was awful. Sergeant Tom Mackay, leading 1 Troop in the charge, was found after the battle to have 59 bullet holes in a single leg – and his other leg was so badly pulped from even more bullets that surgeons could not count the individual wounds. Flowerdew, in the lead, was shot in both legs and the chest, but somehow stayed on his steed.

Two direct hits from field guns tore great gaps in the LSH charge, but somehow the cavalry kept speed to crash through two formations of German defenders, sabering many as they went. The survivors wheeled about and galloped again on the Germans, but their second charge was far less effective, their numbers reduced by their ghastly casualties.

Most of the men were shot from their horses or their animals were killed. Those not hurled to the ground dismounted and took cover in the woods, engaging a fire fight with the Germans who were vulnerable in the open. Of the 75 troopers, 24 were killed almost immediately; another 15 later died of their wounds. Almost everyone else was wounded, while the horses suffered multiple wounds from small arms fire.

The battle did not end with Flowerdew’s charge. In fact, the more significant fighting took place in the wood later in the day in fierce combat. When a British regiment of three infantry battalions relieved the Canadian cavalry brigade at 9:30pm, it went into reserve. But the Canadians came back the next day, the brigade only 448 strong, and fought another brutal day of battle in see-saw combat over Moreuil Wood and Rifle Wood (to the north-east). They stopped the German drive, inflicting heavy losses, capturing 121 prisoners, and 13 machine guns.<sup>18</sup> The Canadian cavalry had fought for almost ten days, never faltering, even in the Battle at Moreuil Wood when they were outnumbered and outgunned.

<sup>17</sup> Grodzinski and McNorgan, “It’s a charge, boys, it’s a charge!”, 264.

<sup>18</sup> G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer and Controller of Stationery, 1962) 371; *Report of the Ministry: Overseas Military Forces of Canada 1918* (Ottawa, 1919) 342.

The total casualties to the brigade were 305 killed and wounded. The Saxons suffered heavily during this period, losing 70% of its strength over the week in which the battle was fought. Over the years there has been much exaggeration made of the battle and its importance, but the senior command was immediately drawn to the hard fighting and offered heady words. Shortly after the battle, General Henry Rawlinson, Commander of Fourth Army, said to the brigade: "We have been through a terrible crisis. Your recapture of Moreuil Ridge was a great feat of arms. It did much to turn the tide and save Amiens... I have asked that a cable be sent to Canada informing the Canadian people of your splendid deeds."<sup>19</sup> And in 1920, after the war, none other than General Ferdinand Foch, the Allied Supreme Commander in the last year of the war, said of the action: "I do not forget the heroism of the brave Canadian Cavalry Brigade. During the month of March the battles was at the gates of Amiens. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of March and on 1<sup>st</sup> April they succeeded by their magnificent action and offensive dash, in holding the enemy in check and definitely breaking his assault."<sup>20</sup>

### **FORESTRY CORPS**

After Munnings left the Canadian Cavalry Brigade in late March, two senior officers in the Canadian Forestry Corps (CFC) saw his paintings and invited him to depict the isolated forestry companies operating in France. Munnings agreed and later wrote, "I started afresh on another adventure," and he travelled in early April to paint the forestry companies in Normandy.<sup>21</sup>

In the static war of the trenches, wood was essential for everything from trench structures and pathways across No Man's Land to railway lines and underground dugouts. The Canadian Forestry Corps was formed in 1916 to supply wood for the war, when

<sup>19</sup> J.K. Marteinson and G.T. Service *The Gate: A History of the Fort Garry Horse* (Calgary: Commercial Printers, 1971), 32.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Cuniffe, *The Story of a Regiment: Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians)* (Edmonton: Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians) Regimental Society, 1995) 141.

<sup>21</sup> Munnings, *An Artist's Life*, 313.



*Building a Mill at Labergement* by Sir Alfred Munnings (1918). Oil on Canvas. [Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 19710261-0472]

the British government cabled Canada for assistance.<sup>22</sup> With German U-boats sinking hundreds of ships, it would be more effective to avoid crossing the Atlantic and cutting wood in Britain or France to meet the needs of the armies along the Western Front.<sup>23</sup>

Canada rapidly recruited 1,600 lumberjacks from across the country to fill the ranks of the 224<sup>th</sup> Canadian (Forestry) Battalion, with a large number coming from the Ottawa Valley. The 224<sup>th</sup> served in Surrey, Hampshire, Devonshire, and in Scotland. At these and other cutting sites, the Canadian lumberjack soldiers erected semi-permanent camps for months on end where they worked the land, using wagons, horses, and brute force to haul out the trees. They built mills to refine the wood that would be used to shore up

<sup>22</sup> *Report of the Ministry: Overseas Military Forces of Canada 1918* (Ottawa, 1919) 363.

<sup>23</sup> C.W. Bird and J. B. Davies, *The Canadian Forestry Corps. Its Inception, Development and Achievements* (London, 1919), 5.





*An April Day in the Forest* by Sir Alfred Munnings (1918). Oil on Canvas. [Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 19710261-0470]

trenches, lay across the mud and craters, and undergird the railway lines that stretched back from the front to the coast.

The Canadians' success and an insatiable demand for wood led to new units, such as the 238<sup>th</sup>, 230<sup>th</sup>, and 242<sup>nd</sup> Battalions, but also smaller drafts. Armed with axes rather than rifles, the forestry soldiers' work was just as important as that of any other soldier in the war effort. The Canadian Forestry Corps was authorized in November 1916, and continued to expand during the war. In another contribution to the Allied war effort, the Canadian government paid for the mills, trucks, and tools, and eventually some 22,000 Canadian lumberjack soldiers served in England, Scotland and France.

The lumberjacks included a large number of French-Canadian, Black, and Indigenous soldiers. They came from all parts of Canada, with large numbers drawn from traditional timber communities in the Ottawa valley and British Columbia. Officials in England were aware that many of the lumberjacks had spent decades harvesting wood and they tried to pair them in England or France with the



*Felling a Tree in the Vosges* by Sir Alfred Munnings (1918). Oil on Canvas. [Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 19710261-0464]

timber that they knew. And so men from Eastern Canada worked with medium sized timber, and cutters from Western Canada were placed in the mountainous areas where they were used to working with cables, logging engines, and railways to move lumber from the forests to the mills for processing.<sup>24</sup>

In early 1918, some 300 Canadians of Russian descent were transferred from other fighting units to the forestry corps because of official worry that they might spread Communist ideas among the troops.<sup>25</sup> The records give no indication that these fears were founded. Another 10,000 or so prisoners, conscientious objectors, Belgian refugees, and labour battalions—including the all-Black No.

<sup>24</sup> *Report of the Ministry: Overseas Military Forces of Canada 1918*, 368.

<sup>25</sup> Nicholson, *Official History*, 500.



*Lumbermen Amongst the Pines* by Sir Alfred Munnings. Oil on Canvas. [Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 19710261-0481]

2 Construction Battalion—were attached to the forestry units for periods of time.<sup>26</sup>

The Canadian Forestry Corps, established into 101 companies, produced a staggering amount of wood for the war effort. Sir Douglas Haig wrote a laudatory dispatch stating that over the Spring of 1917 the work of the lumber units ensured that the army in France “had become practically self-supporting as far as regards timber ... From May to October, over three-quarters of a million tons of timber were supplied for use of the British Army.”<sup>27</sup> This included enough material to build 350 miles of plank roads and 1,500 miles of railways. The Canadians contributed significantly to this crucial logistical support and would continue their effective work over the winter months,

<sup>26</sup> Nicholson, *Official History*, 499; Bird and Davies, *Canadian Forestry Corps*, 9 and 33; *Report of the Ministry: Overseas Military Forces of Canada 1918*, 369-70.

<sup>27</sup> WD, Headquarters, Jura Group, Canadian Forestry Corps, 6 February 1918.





*Moving the Truck Another Yard* by Sir Alfred Munnings (1918). Oil on Canvas. [Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 19710261-0475]

proving to be even more suited than other national forestry units because of familiarity with cold-weather operations in Canada

Some of the forestry units were also tasked with construction of the airfields for the Royal Flying Corps and other air forces. Nine specially trained Canadian companies carved out more than 100 airfield sites in France and England. They cleared, drained, and levelled land for runways, and created Nissen huts, hangars, and anti-aircraft emplacements.<sup>28</sup> Later in the war, during the Hundred Days offensives, about 500 forestry soldiers were transferred to the infantry in October 1918 to bolster the worn down infantry battalions for the final battles of the war.<sup>29</sup>

There was a fierce competitive spirit between the many Canadian companies to produce the most wood, and the largest output of any

<sup>28</sup> For aviation work, see WD, No. 11 District Headquarters, Canadian Forestry Corps, Historical Record, nd.

<sup>29</sup> Nicholson, *Official History*, 500.



*Log Hauling and Loading* by Sir Alfred Munnings (1918). Oil on Canvas. [Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 19710261-0477]

company was from Jura Group, which processed 156,000ft board measure in 10 hours, while No. 20 Company produced 107,000 feet of hardwood on a single day—19 March 1918—which the war diarist claimed was a “world’s record.”<sup>30</sup> In July 1918, Lieutenant-General Richard Turner, the chief of staff in England, visited the forestry units in France and spoke of their contribution: “To win this war, it is essential that we have timber for our Railways, trenches, mines, etc.,” and he congratulated the Canadian soldier-lumberjacks on their crucial work.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the Canadians played a key role in the war effort and by November 1918, the Canadian units accounted for 70 per cent of the lumber used by the Allied armies on the Western Front. And in raw numbers it produced 813,541,560 feet of finished timber.<sup>32</sup>

Alfred Munnings enjoyed the company of the rough Canadian lumberjacks, who sang as they took down trees. He painted units

<sup>30</sup> *Report of the Ministry: Overseas Military Forces of Canada 1918*, 366; WD, Canadian Forestry Corps, France, 19 March 1918.

<sup>31</sup> WD, Headquarters, Jura Group, Canadian Forestry Corps, 7 July 1918.

<sup>32</sup> Goodman, *What A Go!*, 25.



felling the great trees in the Normandy region, in forests near Dreux, Conches and Bellême, and then moved to Jura, close to the Swiss border. He captured the axe-work by the soldier lumberjacks, log hauling by horse teams, and the saw mills in their sprawling tent camps. Munnings wrote: “These lumbermen were grand fellows. Their speech, dress, cast of countenance and expression belong to the illimitable forest spaces of Canada. They brought the spirit of the North-West into the French forests.”<sup>33</sup>

### REPUTATION FORGED

In June 1918, Alfred Munnings left the Western Front. He spent the next six months in a studio in Chelsea completing paintings of the Canadians. In October he was to be employed by the British Ministry of Information to return to the Western Front to paint British cavalry regiments, but a fall in London damaged his knee. He continued to paint and in January and February 1919, the Royal Academy of Arts exhibited 355 artworks produced through the Canadian War Memorials Fund, including 45 paintings by Munnings.

Critics and the public praised Munnings’ work at the Burlington House exhibition, and the *Canadian War Memorials Exhibition* added to his reputation as a painter of horses. The exhibition was later shown in New York, Montreal and Toronto, and Munnings received slight remuneration for the works that he eventually sold to the CWMF.

Munnings secured many commissions as a result of the Burlington House exhibition and within a few weeks of the show in London he was elected to the Royal Academy, a great honour that he attributed to his wartime work. He would go on to significant fame, widely known for his equine, sporting, and landscape paintings. The rambling prewar artist was financial secure from painting throughout the 1920s, and content in a new marriage. In 1944, Munnings was elected president of the Royal Academy and, in the same year, was knighted. On 17 July 1959, he died in his sleep, his reputation secure as one of England’s premiere painters of horses and sporting life.

Munnings described his time with the Canadians as a “wonderful experience,” a period when he could paint freely and serve the war effort. He later wrote: “The cavalry and forestry pictures brought me

<sup>33</sup> Munnings, *An Artist’s Life*, 315.



*Le Comte d'Etchegoyen* by Sir Alfred Munnings (1918). Oil on Canvas. [Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 19710261-0454]

luck.”<sup>34</sup> By that he meant that Beaverbrook’s CWMF had given him the opportunity to paint and show his work to a wide audience. More importantly, he left an evocative legacy that documented the work of the Canadian cavalry and forestry units for future generations, allowing us to visualize their service and contributions to the fighting on the Western Front.

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

**Tim Cook** is the First World War historian at the Canadian War Museum (CWM) and the author of 10 books. He curated the permanent gallery at the CWM as well as other temporary, travelling, and digital exhibitions. His books

<sup>34</sup> Munnings, *An Artist’s Life*, 318.

have won many awards, including the RBC Taylor Prize, J.W. Dafoe Prize (twice), Ottawa Book award (twice), and C.P. Stacey award for best book in military history (twice). He is a frequent commentator in the media. For his contributions to history, he has been awarded the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the Governor General's History Award for Popular Media. Tim Cook is a member of the Order of Canada.

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