

CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM

“Reticent as the Sphinx as to his
own Valour”

The War Experience of Lieutenant Samuel
Honey, VC, DCM, MM

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Abstract: Lieutenant Samuel Honey, VC, DCM, MM served in the Canadian Corps from 1916 to his death on 30 September 1918 during the Hundred Days campaign. Based on Honey’s letters and correspondence, this article offers a new perspective into his wartime experiences, the challenge of leadership, and his own insight into his role as a hero.

Le lieutenant Samuel Honey, VC, DCM, M.M. a servi dans le Corps canadien de 1916 à sa mort le 30 septembre 1918 pendant la campagne des Cent Jours. Inspiré des lettres et de la correspondance du lieutenant Honey, cet article apporte un nouveau regard sur ses expériences en temps de guerre, la difficulté de diriger et sa propre vision de son rôle de héros.

“WHEN ALL IS SAID AND DONE, what I did didn’t amount to much but our party was lucky,” wrote Sergeant Samuel Lewis Honey to his mother Metta on 17 March 1917. He was sharing his thoughts—perhaps nonchalantly, perhaps with humility—about the circumstance that led to his receiving the Military Medal while fighting in France during the First World War. While we might expect a century later that most soldiers would be ecstatic to receive such an award, Honey only casually discussed it in his letters home, stating that “I think the rest of the party deserved recognition as



Samuel Honey's Medal Set with Victoria Cross on left. [CWM 19750393]

much as I did.”¹ Lew, as he liked to be called, was probably correct in that the men of his section in the 78th Battalion had also performed bravely on the battlefield, but his remarks provide some insight into his casual ways and light-hearted take on his recognition for gallantry on the Western Front.

Honey would go on to receive the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his determined leadership during the Battle of Vimy Ridge, and a posthumous Victoria Cross for his actions during the Hundred Days campaign, making him one of the most decorated Canadian soldiers of the war. As only one of ninety-nine Canadians to ever receive the Victoria Cross, the British Empire's most prestigious gallantry award, Honey was a recognised hero.² Yet the Victoria Cross citation and the brief biographies of him fail to provide insight into this complex young man. No one could have predicted that the prewar teacher would be thrust into immortality as a Victoria Cross recipient at the cost of his

¹ Samuel Honey, 17 March 1917, Military History Research Centre [MHRC], 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, Canadian War Museum [CWM].

² It should be noted that the number of Victoria Crosses awarded to Canadians is sometimes cited as 99 or 96, and possibly other figures, depending on the criteria used to determine who is considered a Canadian, especially those Canadians who received awards while serving in other British formations. We have relied on the listing at the Department of Veterans Affairs, <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/medals-decorations/canadian-victoria-cross-recipients>.

promising life. The Canadian War Museum holds Honey's wartime letters and they offer a new perspective into his wartime service, the challenge of leadership, and his own insight into his role as a hero.

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Samuel Honey was born on 9 February 1894 in Conn, Ontario to George Edward and Metta Honey. His father was a Methodist reverend, which required the family to move around Ontario as George was transferred to different ministries. After attending several schools, Honey graduated with junior matriculation from the Princeton Continuation School in July 1910, the equivalent of grade 10. As a sign of his potential as a teacher, he received permission to instruct upon graduation. Honey took a job at a school on the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ontario, teaching there at age sixteen. The skills that he acquired as an instructor would prove to be useful to Honey when he enlisted with the Canadian Expeditionary Force, and he later wrote that barking orders, cajoling men, and instructing soldiers who ranged from the brilliant to the moronic, from the laconic to the enthusiastic, was "very similar to that I taught in the school."³

From 1911 to 1914, Honey taught at several schools and graduated from high school, taking another teaching job to pay for tuition at Victoria College at the University of Toronto, where he planned to study the Liberal Arts.⁴ Canada's entry into the war in August 1914 disrupted his plans. He watched as his friends and other young men went off to war. A classroom was not the place for him. At the age of twenty-one, the 5-ft, 5-inch Samuel Honey, who gave his profession as school teacher, enlisted in Walkerton, Ontario on 22 January 1915.

Upon enlisting with the Canadian Expeditionary Force, Private Honey was attached to the 34th Battalion, which had been raised in Guelph, Ontario, drawing recruits from the city and the surrounding area. Lew's prewar teaching may have been flagged by the battalion's officers and he was soon made an acting sergeant. He was also articulate and well spoken, did not smoke and seems

³ Samuel Honey, 12 November 1915, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

⁴ On his schooling, see Ontario, Department of Education, *Annals of Valour* (Toronto: A.T. Wilgress, 1919), 145-6.



Portrait of Sergeant Samuel Honey in 1916. [CWM 19950008-001]

to have been respectful. He would prove a good sergeant, and later an efficient officer.

From enlistment, there was the adventure of embarking upon something quite unique. Lew brightly discussed in his letters home the new training, drill, marching, and digging. Throughout his time in uniform, Honey documented his experiences, usually writing two letters a week to his family. In early October 1915 the battalion moved from Ontario to Quebec via train, allowing Lew to take in the “splendid” countryside.⁵ He had not travelled far from his rural community during his relatively short life.

⁵ Samuel Honey, 30 October 1915, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

From Quebec City, the 34th Battalion set off in October 1915, crossing the Atlantic on S.S. *California*, a troopship that carried about 1,900 soldiers. Honey described it as “a most favorable one” despite suffering from seasickness that “was bad enough to prevent my eating anything.”⁶ As the troopship crossed the Atlantic, through the sea lanes where German U-boats hunted, the arrival off the English coast brought a new realisation. In a 2 November 1915 letter written to his family, Honey stated that “as soon as it began to get dark we began to realize that we were really getting into a realm where there was war. All lights were darkened. There was a peculiar suppressed excitement in the crowd of dark figures that swarmed upon the deck.”⁷ The ongoing threat of Zeppelin attacks had led to black-out conditions and this stark reality was a sharp reminder to the Canadians that they were moving into a war zone.

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Upon disembarkation at Devonport, England, the 34th Battalion was given a short leave in London before being ordered to Bramshott Camp in Hampshire, England. Lew was thrilled to be on English soil. He wrote home about the hilly scenery, quaint clothing and English accents, as well as the swarms of children asking for Canadian coins, buttons and souvenir badges. He also saw the seedier side of soldiering, with many of his comrades drinking too much and getting into trouble. After a few months in country, he wrote home: “Now I’m no less patriotic than when I enlisted and I have never for one moment regretted the spot that I took last January. But I know a good deal more now than I did then. I’m a lot wiser than I was a year ago.”⁸

At Bramshott Camp, the 34th Battalion underwent more intense training for trench warfare on the Western Front.⁹ As a sergeant,

⁶ Samuel Honey, 30 October 1915, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

⁷ Samuel Honey, 2 November 1915, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

⁸ Samuel Honey, 4 January 1916, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

⁹ For training, see Bill Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps, 1914–1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); and William F. Stewart, *The Embattled General: Sir Richard Turner and the First World War* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015).

Honey was sent on several courses where he was instructed, as he wrote, in “machine gun, musketry, physical training, bayonet fighting, and bomb-throwing.”¹⁰ Lew was already a fit young man, but the courses hardened him to the coming rigours. He put on weight—as all soldiers did—and was up to 149 lbs by the end of 1915.¹¹ After completing the course, Lew was transferred to Aldershot where he served as a physical fitness instructor for new recruits.

Sergeant Honey wanted to get into the fight, and his training role gnawed at him as he saw more and more men that he trained go to the Western Front. In February 1916, the 34th was broken up, with a draft of 800 soldiers sent to several units to reinforce them. He was left behind, being too important in the training system. Lew wrote home about his feeling of shirking his duty: “I was certainly down in the dumps about the boys leaving me behind, but it is as you say, there must be a place for me here or I should have gone too.”¹² In April, his parents’ consoling words had lost their effect, and he wrote forlornly that he felt isolated “in Bramshott forever,” while in another letter, as two close chums went to France, he lamented, “I realized then more than I ever did before just how much harder it is to stay behind than it is to go to the front.”¹³ Why he felt this desire to go was complex, but he had enlisted to serve in the war effort, and front-line service trumped a safe position in England. Honey likely let it be known to his superiors that he wanted to get to the front, and he certainly did not want to be one of those shrieking sergeants hounding men to kill the imaginary Hun in mock bayonet battles without ever having seen action.

In late July 1916, Honey was transferred to the 78th Battalion. Raised in Winnipeg, the 78th Battalion had gone overseas in May 1916, and was looking to fill out its complement. As an experienced sergeant, Honey was welcomed. The 78th served as part of the 12th Infantry Brigade of the 4th Canadian Division, and went to France in mid-August 1916. Lew’s enthusiasm was unmistakable and in one

¹⁰ Samuel Honey, 12 November 1915, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

¹¹ On weight and health, see Nic Clarke, John Cranfield, and Kris Inwood, “Fighting Fit? Diet, Disease, and Disability in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914–18,” *War & Society* 33, 2 (May 2014): 80–97.

¹² Samuel Honey, 19 March 1916, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

¹³ Samuel Honey, 27 April 1916 and 5 April 1916, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.



Corps commander Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie addressing the 78th Battalion in April 1919. [CWM 19940001-256]

of his last letters from England, he was anxious to serve at the front and begin “doing my bit as I expected to when I enlisted” more than a year earlier.¹⁴

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The British forces under Sir Douglas Haig, the commander in chief of the British Expeditionary Force, had sought to break the Germans on the Somme. After two years of static warfare, the many armies had faced off along the Western Front with little success in driving through the deep trenches to the green fields beyond. To the south, the Germans and French had been attacking each other since February 1916 at Verdun. Hurricane bombardments had bled each side white, and the desperate French commanders were pressuring Haig to launch his Somme offensive. Drawing together a mass of guns, the British shelled the Germans lines mercilessly,

¹⁴ Samuel Honey, 7 August 1916, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

but the enemy had prepared deep dugouts in the chalky soil. While thousands of Germans were killed or wounded, they were ready when the British forces came over the top on 1 July 1916. The machine guns cut them down with industrial fury; by end of the day, some 57,000 were killed and wounded.¹⁵

The Canadians had been lucky to avoid the Somme, although the Newfoundland Regiment that was serving in the 29th British Division had been torn apart at Beaumont Hamel. The Canadians were recovering from their own bloodletting, having fought for two weeks in early June at Mount Sorrel, where they had suffered around 8,000 casualties.¹⁶ But as the fighting bogged down on the Somme in July and August with few gains and monumental losses, the three divisions of the Canadian Corps under command of British general Sir Julian Byng moved to the front. The 4th Division did not join them, remaining in the Ypres sector to learn how to survive and fight in a less deadly environment.

Honey wrote of his first tour into the front-line trenches on 31 August 1916. The destruction of the Ypres front was shocking, with its countless craters, rows of rusty barbed wire and unburied corpses in a zone of destruction, and then the largely untouched farmers' fields that could be glimpsed from high points in the trenches. The unit war diary noted on 28 August that "reports show Battn gaining valuable information under instruction of 57th Bgde."¹⁷ Experienced British soldiers were sharing hard-won lessons and the Canadians were instructed in some of the tricks to survival. High on the list of warnings was to be wary of snipers. As Lew wrote his parents, "needless to say, I considered discretion the better part of valour and kept my head very low the whole time." But there was a fascination with the shattered landscape, and the newly-arrived sergeant took his turn in looking through the trench periscopes that gazed into No Man's Land. "There wasn't much to be seen except a tangle of barbed wire and a parapet of sand bags beyond which stretched an ordinary landscape of green fields and houses." And yet it was a lively

¹⁵ For the Somme, see William Philpott, *War of Attrition: Fighting the First World War* (New York: Overlook Press, 2014).

¹⁶ G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914–1919: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War*. Introduction by Mark Humphries (1962; reprint, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 154.

¹⁷ War Diary, 78th Battalion, 28 August 1916, digitised, RG 9-III-D-3, Library and Archives Canada [LAC].

and memorable experience and, as Lew wrote, “I sat tight behind a parapet of sandbags and listened to shells whistling over head and bursting all around us. ... Several times bits of shrapnel dropped into the trench beside us – too hot to handle with impunity.”¹⁸

A few days later, Lew was back in the trenches, wallowing in mud as heavy rain drenched the front. The war diary notes a dribble of casualties to shrapnel and gun-shot wounds—with six wounded and one killed from the 13th to the 20th of September—but Lew was more interested in telling his parents of a humorous experience when one of the sentries mistook evening mist for a gas attack.¹⁹ Only two weeks before the 78th had undergone extensive training with the PH Helmet. It looked like a chemically treated sack placed over the head and tucked into the shirt collar to protect against poisonous fumes, and when the hoods were tested in a hut filled with tear gas, Lew described it as similar to inhaling many onions, “making your eyes water.”²⁰ In the line, under difficult conditions, the sentries were jumpy and, he remarked, “We had a bit of an alarm last night but it didn’t amount to anything. The wind was in the enemy’s favor and somebody mistook the mist in the late evening for gas.” After donning their nearly-blinding PH Helmets, soldiers opened fire and artillery laid down a supporting bombardment, all of which, Lew noted, “gave Fritzzy a lively half-hour. Of course, we turned out, but there was nothing done for us except that we lost half our night’s sleep.”²¹

The 78th moved south to the Somme area in the second week of October as part of the final drive on that grim front, and immediately the casualties became more significant. On 14 October, as two companies moved into the forward line, the unit had nine killed and twenty-five wounded.²² The shattered landscape and unending shellfire was shocking. This was very different warfare than holding the relatively quiet trenches in the Ypres Salient.

¹⁸ Samuel Honey, 31 August 1916, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

¹⁹ War Diary, 78th Battalion, 13-20 September 1916, digitised, RG 9-III-D-3, LAC.

²⁰ Samuel Honey, 18 August 1916, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

²¹ Samuel Honey, 9 September 1916, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

²² War Diary, 78th Battalion, 14 October 1916, digitised, RG 9-III-D-3, LAC.



78th Battalion men leaving YMCA dugout near the front line. [CWM 19920085-838]

The Canadian Corps had delivered a victory on the Somme at Courcellette on 15 September 1916, striking across No Man's Land with the aid of tanks and a creeping barrage, but after that the fighting had been slow and costly. Both sides attacked and counterattacked. When the Canadians had time to prepare for their assaults, especially in softening up the enemy trenches with shellfire, they were able to grind forward, such as on the 26th of September, but two rushed attacks against Regina Trench on the 1st and 8th of October were costly slaughters.²³

The 4th Division was involved in the final November battles, but the 78th did not take part in any of the major operations. It held the line, suffered through the cold weather and mud, and lost men. On 20 November 1916 the war diary read, "casualties fairly heavy," with twenty killed and wounded in the last tour before it

²³ See William F. Stewart, *Canadians on the Somme, 1916: The Neglected Campaign* (Solihull: Helion & Company, 2017).

was relieved on the 27th.²⁴ Lew wrote few letters during this time, but he provided a glimpse into the war-fighting. “I thought I’d seen something of soldiering since I enlisted nearly two years ago, but lately I’ve been convinced that I don’t know anything about it, at least until now.”²⁵ He made little mention of the carnage and horror, but his experience was likely similar to that of Lieutenant Stewart Scott of the 78th Battalion, who recounted of the battlefield: “We didn’t like what we saw. Battalions commanded by subalterns, we got a very bad impression of what might have been going on.”²⁶ Instead, Lew focused on things his parents might imagine. “I’ve been up to my knees and more in water and mud, -- and this mud is mud; mud like I was used to when I was teaching on the reserve... I’ve hugged the parapet when Fritz’s ‘whiz-bangs’ and 5.9’s were coming over.” Two of Lew’s close friends died on the Somme, adding to the more than 24,000 Canadians who were killed or wounded there. As Lew wrote mournfully, “I’ve seen some of our best lads called to their last long rest.”²⁷

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Even if Honey did not have much to say about the horror of the Somme, his letters home were an important way to stay in contact with his family. In fact, other than the field service postcards, they were the only way. Throughout his time serving overseas, Honey consistently wrote letters to his mother and father, asking questions and providing answers to their queries.²⁸ “You can hardly realize what an event the first Canadian mail is to the battalion,” he gushed

²⁴ War Diary, 78th Battalion, 20 November 1916 and 27 November 1916, digitised, RG 9-III-D-3, LAC.

²⁵ Samuel Honey, 5 November 1916, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

²⁶ Scott Stewart, *In Flanders’ Fields*, transcripts, interview 1, page 5, 78th Battalion, CBC, RG 41-B-III-1, LAC.

²⁷ Samuel Honey, 5 November 1916, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

²⁸ It is important to note that Honey wrote letters to other family members and friends but for the purpose of this article, only the letters written to his parents were analysed.

at one point.²⁹ In another letter he described the importance of staying in touch with those at home.

I've just finished re-reading your letters of March 15th to April 5th inclusive - about eight in all, no doubt you have an idea, but I don't think you'll ever really know just how much those letters from home mean to me. Army life is so different from the life a fellow has been used to. Those letters make me forget for a minute that I'm so far away from home, right in the middle of the most tremendous mine-up that has ever turned this old world upside down. They bring back old times and half, or altogether forgotten incidents and are as good as a spring tonic.³⁰

Like most soldiers separated from home and family, Honey's letters were crucial in providing a means to cope with the strain of service.

Most of Honey's letters to his mother and father contain little information about his war experiences, following closely the strong censorship rules. Others did not, but Honey certainly felt constrained in what he could write, and so letters often outlined the daily routine in and out of the line, discussed the food that he enjoyed or despised, sports competitions that were held behind the front lines, and all the encounters with civilians or chums in other units, but little about the fighting experience. There were also few accounts of his inner turmoil and tension. Nonetheless, he sent home letters at regular intervals to keep his parents informed but also to show that he was still alive. As he cautioned, "You mustn't feel anxious if I don't get more than one letter a week away, because there are times when its [sic] pretty hard to get ink, paper or opportunity."³¹ While Lew could offer caustic comments or even complaints, and several warnings to his brother, George, not to enlist in the infantry (who ignored the advice), his missives from "Somewhere in France" chose to downplay the heroics and horror of front-line service. But it was not entirely absent from

²⁹ Samuel Honey, 29 November 1915, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

³⁰ Samuel Honey, 1 May 1917, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

³¹ Samuel Honey, 28 September 1916, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

his letters. In the aftermath of the Somme, he observed sadly to his parents, “As for my pals, I’m afraid they are thinning out.”³²

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At the end of 1916, the battered 4th Division joined the Canadian Corps on the Vimy front. Byng’s corps was situated to the west of Vimy Ridge, the hulking 7 km position that was held by the Germans. Throughout the Allied forces, the British, French, Canadians and others tried to process the lessons of the Somme, with the high command aware it needed to implement major changes in the attack doctrine if victory was ever to be achieved.³³ Higher concentrations of artillery support were crucial to clear barbed wire and to smash enemy defences; the infantry needed more firepower; command had to be decentralised, with junior officers given more authority to lead from the front; and there had to be better all-arms coordination.

On this new front, the 78th returned to the cycle of moving in and out of the trenches, holding them against possible raids, patrolling No Man’s Land and steadily losing men to shellfire and snipers. It was a cold winter and so most of the infantry units at the front ordered soldiers to expand trenches, digging and insulating dugouts, and shoring up crumbling parapets. Early in the year, Honey had a self-described “bomb-proof” position away from the firing line, although he expressed sorrow for his comrades lost in static warfare and occasionally those who “went over the top” in raids and were killed in action.³⁴ He ached to be tested in battle and must have let it be known that he wanted more front-line experience.

“There’s a little piece of news that I suppose you have the right to know, and even if I didn’t tell you would probably find out somewhere else,” wrote a relaxed Lew on 17 March 1917 to his parents. He noted that he was awarded the Military Medal for his actions during a trench raid. “I’m receiving the military medal. I won’t say that I don’t know what it’s for but I will say that I think the rest of the party deserved

³² Samuel Honey, 22 January 1917, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

³³ For these reforms, see Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War, Volume II: 1917–1918* (Toronto: Viking, 2008).

³⁴ Samuel Honey, 5 January 1917 and 15 February 1917, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.



German prisoner captured by the 78th Battalion during a night raid in early 1918. [CWM 19930013-898]

recognition as much as I did.”³⁵ As part of the Canadian Corps’ desire to gather intelligence on the enemy, win control of No Man’s Land, hone tactics and attrite the enemy’s morale, the Canadians had been systematically attacking the enemy lines through a series of minor operations.³⁶ From January 1917, this reign of terror slowly beat back the Germans, who by March were wary of even leaving their trenches.

Honey’s raid had taken place on 22 February 1917 in support of a larger operation by the 38th Battalion on the right flank. Advancing through muck and slime, with an uncharacteristic warm period dissolving much of the front, the two battalions had taken the war to the Germans behind a heavy artillery barrage. The raid had been unleashed just as it went dark, with about thirty of the 78th Battalion men, divided into two parties, converging on the enemy trenches to bomb them with grenades.³⁷ The battalion described it

³⁵ Samuel Honey, 17 March 1917, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

³⁶ For raiding, see Colin Garnett, “Butcher and Bolt: Canadian Trench Raiding during the Great War” (MA Thesis, Carleton University, 2011).

³⁷ War Diary, 78th Battalion, Operation Order No. 52, appendices, digitised, RG 9-III-D-3, LAC.

as a “complete success” with only eight men slightly wounded.³⁸ The raiders were only in the enemy trenches for ten minutes, from 5:37 p.m. to 5:47 p.m., but it had been a harsh, butchering affair. The war diarist noted that “no prisoners were taken as our men were out to kill Bosche.”³⁹

“When all is said and done, what I did didn’t amount to much but our party was lucky,” wrote Lew of the raid, and he did not provide his parents with further details surrounding his actions.⁴⁰ But Honey’s official citation noted his key role in the raid: “He did most excellent work in clearing an enemy’s communication trench and establishing a block in spite of heavy opposition. He personally covered the withdrawal of his own and another squad under a very heavy grenade fire.”⁴¹ Honey had been a part of a similar raid only three nights earlier—which had resulted, the war diary claimed, in “many dugouts bombed” and a massive explosion created by a mobile charge. The assault had cost nine killed and fifteen wounded. “Some day, perhaps, I’ll tell you what it feels like to go ‘over the top’ as the boys say,” wrote Lew, “but I haven’t time at present.”⁴²

Honey was among five other raiders recommended for an award—an officer and four privates—and it took until 26 April for the announcement to be published in the *London Gazette*. Two weeks before that, the Canadians had surged up the cratered slopes of Vimy Ridge. The Allied artillery had pounded the German defences relentlessly, throwing hundreds of thousands of shells, but the Germans were dug in and fought with resilience.

On the 4th Division’s front, the 78th were ordered into the desperate battle for Hill 145, the high point of the ridge. Prussian defenders held it in strength and the 78th was one of the first-wave units to advance into the teeth of the enemy guns. Emerging from underground tunnels at zero hour, 5:30 a.m., the 78th fought all day,

³⁸ War Diary, 78th Battalion, 22 February 1917, digitised, RG 9-III-D-3, LAC.

³⁹ War Diary, 78th Battalion, 22 February 1917, digitised, RG 9-III-D-3, LAC.

⁴⁰ Samuel Honey, 17 March 1917, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

⁴¹ Citation in Fred Gaffen, “Honey, Samuel Lewis,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 14 (Toronto and Quebec City: University of Toronto/Université Laval, 1998), accessed 4 May 2020, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/honey_samuel_lewis_14E.html; and *London Gazette*, no. 30036, 26 April 1917.

⁴² For the raid on 18-19 February 1917, see the War Diary. For Honey’s comments, see Samuel Honey, 17 March 1917, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

advancing behind the creeping barrage, but suffering heavily from a wicked enemy cross-fire from resilient defenders. The 78th faced a particularly difficult fight about three hours into the operation when they were driving to their final objective. A German counterattacking force of some 200 struck hard, hurling the lead units back, although the enemy was ultimately driven off at a heavy cost by concentrated Lewis machine-gun fire.⁴³

Sergeant Honey was in the thick of the fight, and after his platoon commander was wounded early in the assault, he rallied his comrades and, in the words of a fellow officer, he led “his men forward in the face of terrific fire.”⁴⁴ Honey encouraged the survivors, kept up their spirits, and ordered them to prepare their defences for enemy counterattacks. He was lucky to survive, especially as the Canadians lost 10,602 killed, wounded and missing over a four-day period.⁴⁵ His battalion suffered 60 per cent casualties: a staggering 507 killed, wounded, or listed missing with almost all the officers who had gone forward into battle lost.⁴⁶ In the aftermath of victory, Lew wrote to his parents, although in the guarded manner of a man who had seen things of which he could not speak: “I shall not tell you anything about what happened except that I came through the thickest of it unscratched. Perhaps, at some future time, I may be able to tell of some of the things I saw and how I felt, but not now.”⁴⁷

With so many casualties to the unit, and Honey’s proven leadership skills, he was recommended for a commission from the ranks to become an officer. He wore the Military Medal ribbon for bravery, but his actions at Vimy also saw him awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM), one of the Empire’s highest awards for recognising gallantry, ranking only below the Victoria Cross. A fellow officer wrote of Honey:

⁴³ War Diary, 78th Battalion, Report of Operations, 16 April 1917, digitised, RG 9-III-D-3, LAC; and Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919*, 261.

⁴⁴ “Award of Distinguished Conduct Medal,” *London Gazette*, no. 30234, 16 August 1917.

⁴⁵ See Tim Cook, *Vimy: The Battle and the Legend* (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2017).

⁴⁶ War Diary, 78th Battalion, Report of Operations, 16 April 1917, digitised, RG 9-III-D-3, LAC.

⁴⁷ Samuel Honey, 18 April 1917, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

He was one of the very few N.C.O.'s left after the memorable attack on April 9th, 1917, and by his coolness he was able to organize the [survivors] and consolidate the hard-won positions. He seemed to have a great store of strength and did wonderful work...Lew had a great faith. He realized the dangers quite fully and went on just the same.⁴⁸

Honey was further described as a “good example to others not fortunate enough to have such faith and strong will.”⁴⁹ Of course, true to form, Lew was more bashful in discussing his exploits. Lew wrote to his parents that he “was rather surprised when the news reached me that I had won it... I guess I’m a pretty lucky boy.”⁵⁰ It was not luck, as he had certainly earned it, but the awarding of medals involved some chance—that the action was witnessed by an officer, that anyone was left to write up the citation, and that it passed through the higher authorities without some modification, downgrade or denial.⁵¹

Honey had been at the front since August 1916 and he now enjoyed a rotation to England in April 1917, where he underwent officer training at Bexhill-On-Sea. As a battle-hardened veteran and a natural leader, Honey had little trouble mastering the qualities of man-management required by officers as well as specialist training in reconnaissance, gas warfare and machine guns.⁵² There was also generous leave for these officers-in-training. He took time to seek out his comrades in hospitals recovering from their wounds. “It was certainly good to see them again,” he wrote home, anxious to reconnect with mates and comrades from his extended regimental family.

Honey also received his Military Medal and DCM. He wore the ribbons on his uniform, but he did not know what to do with the medals. He considered mailing them home, but he worried a German U-boat might sink the ship, a widespread fear among soldiers when mail was interrupted. “If it weren’t for the fact that it might find a

⁴⁸ Ontario, Department of Education, *Annals of Valour*, 148.

⁴⁹ Ontario, Department of Education, *Annals of Valour*, 148.

⁵⁰ Samuel Honey, June 26 1917, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

⁵¹ See Hugh Halliday, *Valour Reconsidered: Inquiries into the Victoria Cross and other awards for Extreme Bravery* (Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, 2006).

⁵² For officers, see Desmond Morton, *When Your Number’s Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House of Canada Ltd., 1993.)



Seated image of Lieutenant Samuel Honey in early 1918. [CWM 19910109-908]

resting place at the bottom of the ocean I would send it home, but for a time at any rate, I had better keep it myself. Perhaps later on I'll be able to send it."⁵³ He found a safe spot in England, possibly with

⁵³ Samuel Honey, 29 July 1917, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

friends, who would care for the medals and return them to him or to his family should he not survive.

Lieutenant Honey rejoined the 78th Battalion in mid-October 1917, shortly before the Passchendaele campaign. When he returned to the 78th Battalion many of the familiar faces were gone—buried in shallow graves, healing in hospitals, many too traumatised or mutilated to ever return to the front. But there were some old hands—even a few Indigenous soldiers that he had taught on the reserve—and they greeted him warmly.⁵⁴

Lieutenant Samuel Honey fought through the sludge of Passchendaele and survived another battle, even as 16,000 of his countrymen were killed and maimed in the misery of the bog.⁵⁵ The 78th Battalion lost 378 men over a three-day period in the second major set-piece battle on 30 October 1917, many to the new insidious mustard gas that burned and blinded, as well as to Canadian artillery and mortars firing short into their sludgy slit trenches and corpse-filled shell craters where the “Poor Bloody Infantry” took refuge.⁵⁶ Honey wrote little to his parents of the battle. Perhaps he felt like F.G. Thompson, who also served in the 78th Battalion, and who recounted, “you could see no purpose in what was being done.”⁵⁷

Honey’s letters to his parents continued to lightly skip over the trauma of war—the shelling and snipers, the rats and lice, the monotonous food and hard living. Even after the Germans attacked on 21 March 1918, in their offensive to force the British and French to sue for peace before the Americans arrived to the battle front in full strength, Honey focused more in his letters on things that were relatable to his parents. He talked about the importance of sports behind the lines, as well as his own ignorance of the strategic war effort; for instance, he noted in one April letter that “There isn’t much in the way of news these days because all we know we get from the papers.”⁵⁸ And yet he was a survivor, even as he must have felt the

⁵⁴ Samuel Honey, 14 October 1917, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

⁵⁵ For the Passchendaele campaign, see Daniel Dancocks, *Legacy of Valour: The Canadians at Passchendaele* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1986).

⁵⁶ War Diary, 78th Battalion, Report Covering Operations, 29 October to 2 November 1917, digitised, RG 9-III-D-3, LAC.

⁵⁷ F.G. Thompson, *In Flanders’ Fields*, transcripts, interview 2, page 13, 78th Battalion, CBC, RG 41-B-III-1, LAC.

⁵⁸ Samuel Honey, 24 April 1918, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

spectre of uncertainty. Too many friends had been killed or maimed to not consider that there was likely a bullet with one's name on it. Moreover, anyone who served as long as Honey, in this case sixteen months, even with breaks, began to break down under the unending stress and lack of sleep. In one letter, Lew referenced the relentless nature of the war: "I'll be ancient before I know it."⁵⁹ He was only 24.

~

The Canadian Corps spent the summer out of the line and training for open warfare involving combined-arms tactics.⁶⁰ While the Allies did not think the war would end in 1918, there was a hope that the ongoing naval blockade of Germany, the bloodletting on the many fighting fronts, and the arrival of the Americans might bring victory the next year. But a series of limited attacks against the Germans in July seemed to suggest that their terrible losses since March—at over 800,000—had led to deep rot. It was time to strike. The Canadians would be a part of the spearhead attack at the Battle of Amiens on 8 August 1918, along with Australian, British and French soldiers.

Honey missed the fighting at Amiens, writing to his parents, "You see, there is a certain percentage of specially trained men, NCO's and officers who are left out of every show and I happen to be one of those detailed to stay back."⁶¹ The 78th had been a part of the large-scale offensive that had driven the enemy back, but there were no triumphs without a heavy cost. The 78th lost fifteen officers and 269 other ranks killed, wounded and missing.⁶² His letters to his parents carry some guilt at having avoided the battle, and yet he, like many in the Corps, were enthused by the victory at Amiens, which had seen the Germans driven back 20 km, while 200 artillery pieces, over a 1,000 machine guns, and 9,000 prisoners were captured.⁶³

⁵⁹ Samuel Honey, 9 February 1918, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

⁶⁰ For open warfare training, see J.L. Granatstein, *The Greatest Victory: Canada's One Hundred Days, 1918* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁶¹ Samuel Honey, 11 August 1918, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

⁶² War Diary, 78th Battalion, appendices, Tabulated Statement of Exact Casualties, 7/8 to 13/14 August 1918, digitised, RG 9-III-D-3, LAC.

⁶³ Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919*, 419.

Sept. 26th

Dear Mother & Father,-
 Your letters of Sept
 5th and 9 reached me safely
 to-night and I've only
 time to acknowledge their
 receipt and to tell you
 again how much - how
 very much the home
 letters always mean to
 me. I meant to write
 you a good long letter
 this afternoon, but
 circumstances have
 interfered and I must
 postpone it a couple of
 days.

Very much love to
 all.
 Lew

Letter from Lew to his parents, 26 September 1918: This is the last letter that Lew wrote to his parents. It reads: "Dear Mother and Father, Your letters of Sept 5 and 9 reached me safely to-night and I've only time to acknowledge their receipt and to tell you again how much, how very much the home letters always mean to me. I meant to write you a good long letter this afternoon, but circumstances have interfered and I must postpone it a couple of days. Very much love to all. Lew." [CWM, Samuel Honey papers, 58A 1 112.12]

At the end of August, the Canadian Corps was moved north to break the German strongpoint east of Arras. It was a crucial enemy position and the many German divisions there were to hold at any cost. From 26 August, the Canadians clawed their way forward, and the 78th Battalion fought as part of the second-phase assault to smash the Drocourt-Quéant Line on 2 September. The battalion engaged in a series of small-scale operations and roving patrols before taking

part in the major push on the 2nd. All along the front, hundreds of Canadians were torn apart, gassed, shattered, shocked and buried, and yet they broke through the enemy defences. Honey was not in the front lines, and instead was at battalion headquarters interrogating prisoners—estimated at 240—looking for actionable intelligence.⁶⁴ In the battle's aftermath, he was especially proud of the regiment and the Canadian Corps, noting that "we are giving the Hun a good taste of his own medicine these days and the Canucks are right there doing their share of it."⁶⁵

After the terrible fighting of Arras, and some 25,000 Canadian casualties since Amiens, the ranks were thin. Lieutenant Honey, kept from battle at Amiens and Arras, now knew that he would be in the next attack. Honey was again reluctant to describe his fear or anxiety, if he had them, but the relentless casualties were impossible to ignore. In guarded language, Lew wrote home that he felt his chances of coming through the battles were good, but "we never can tell when that time comes."⁶⁶ The last letter that Honey sent to his parents was written on 26 September 1918 as the Canadian Corps prepared to attack across the Canal du Nord with the ultimate goal of capturing Cambrai. It was no easy thing to write a last letter to one's parents, delivered in case he should go down, but Lew found these words: I want "to tell you again how much, --- how very much the home letters always meant to me. I meant to write you a good long letter this afternoon, but circumstances have interfered and I must postpone it a couple of days." He finished his letter: "Very much love to all."⁶⁷

In its third major set-piece battle, the Canadian Corps was ordered to capture Cambrai, the German-occupied logistics centre through which much of their men and material flowed in this sector of the front. It was fiercely defended by German divisions in hardened positions and trenches. One of the most daunting obstacles was the Canal du Nord that ran north-south along the sector, and was

⁶⁴ War Diary, 78th Battalion, Report of Scarpe Operation, 30 Aug. – 3rd Sept, 1918, digitised, RG 9-III-D-3, LAC.

⁶⁵ Samuel Honey, 4 September 1918, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

⁶⁶ Samuel Honey, 19 September 1918, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

⁶⁷ Samuel Honey, 26 September 1918, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

about 40 metres wide. It would have to be crossed, the defenders cleared on the other side, and deep advances made to ensure that the German artillery did not fire into the follow-on Canadian forces bunched in the killing zone in and around the canal. One of the key German positions was the strongpoint of Bourlon Wood, which held a commanding view over the battlefield.

The 78th Battalion was in the vanguard of the battle to crash the canal, which erupted at 5:20 a.m. on 27 September 1918. As one of the front-line formations, the 78th punched through the enemy forward defences behind a creeping barrage before striking towards Bourlon Wood. The infantry sections advanced using fire and movement tactics, with Lewis machine gunners and riflemen laying down suppressing fire, and small sections charging forward, shooting their Lee Enfields and throwing grenades. Throughout the day, there was desperate and chaotic fighting in the woods, with Canadians and Germans attacking and counterattacking; platoons were cut off, sometimes overrun, while others drove deep into the forest.

In battle on the 27th, Honey again displayed uncommon valour. In attacking the dug-in Germans, all of his fellow company officers were shot down. Honey rallied the survivors and led his men through the charred trees, pockets of poison gas, and small fires that burned in the wood. The Germans relied on machine guns to hold off the Canadians, and after one enemy gun laid waste to a group of 78th Battalion infantrymen, the advance ground to a halt. Honey told the weary survivors to dig in and protect themselves as he considered the desperate situation. A massed rush would only lead to more Canadian corpses. He dashed forward, by himself, a lone man facing a machine gun. Honey closed the distance as the Germans trained their guns on him, hoping to put him down, but he used the terrain and trees for cover. Somehow the bullets missed him. From 20 metres away, he charged the machine-gun nest. This mild-mannered twenty-four-year-old, covered in sweat and blood, shot down several Germans and captured ten prisoners. His men rose from their cover to join him, astonished he had survived. Honey continued to lead the fight, now organising a defence of the ragged line. His shot-up company repulsed not one, not two, not three, but four enemy counterattacks that night, and Honey was instrumental in coordinating the defence in the dark.

The next day, the 28th, the fighting raged on and, as his citation later noted, he inspired his men through word and action. "With

Awarded the Victoria Cross.

Lieutenant Samuel Lewis Honey, D.C.M., M.M., late
78th Battalion, Manitoba Regiment.

For bravery in action during the Bourlon Wood operations 27th September to 2nd October 1918.

On 27th September when his Company Commander and all the other officers of his Company became casualties Lieutenant Honey took command and skilfully reorganised under most severe enemy shelling and Machine-gun fire. He continued the advance with great dash and gained the objective, but finding his Company was suffering casualties from enfilade Machine-gun fire he made a personal reconnaissance and locating the Machine-gun nest he rushed it single-handed, capturing the guns and ten prisoners.

Having organised his position he repelled four enemy counter-attacks and when darkness fell he again went out himself and having located an enemy post he led out a party and captured the post of three guns by stealth. He immediately advanced his line and his new position proved of great value in the jump off the following morning.

On 29th September he led his Company against a strong enemy position with great initiative and daring and continued in the succeeding days of the battle to display the same wonderful example of leadership, and bravery. He died of wounds received during the last day of the attack by his Battalion.

Honey's Victoria Cross citation. [CWM, Samuel Honey papers, 58A 1 112.12.]

great initiative and daring, [he] continued in the succeeding days of the battle to display the same wonderful example of leadership, and bravery."⁶⁸ On the third day of battle, the 29th, with the 78th badly cut up, Honey continued to lead his decimated company forward and attacked enemy strong points.⁶⁹ One of the German regimental

⁶⁸ *London Gazette*, no. 31108, 6 January 1919.

⁶⁹ J.F.B. Livesay, *Canada's Hundred Days* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1919), 268-9.

officers, writing in the unit war diary, noted of the battle since the 27th, “we buried all our hopes for victory.”⁷⁰

And yet at the tactical level, where men killed men, the enemy was fighting hard. The 78th was frayed and shot up, and yet the push from tired soldiers continued. In the final day of battle on the 29th, Honey and his men destroyed three more machine guns, but in the frenetic combat Honey was cut down, with a machine gun’s bullets pulping his legs. Despite the agony of his crippling wounds, he refused to be carried from the front until his wounded men were first brought to the rear.⁷¹ Even as he neared death, he thought of the privates under his command.

The war diary for the 78th Battalion recorded starkly on September 30th, “Lieut Honey – DCM – MM dies of wounds in battle today.”⁷² He had succumbed to his injuries at 12 Canadian Field Ambulance, likely a result of shock from loss of blood and the terrible physical trauma.⁷³ In a letter written by Honey’s commanding officer, Major J.N. Semmens, to his family shortly after his death, he stated, “Nowhere have I seen such gallant work as this boy of yours displayed. . . . He was an example of grit and determination that was the talk of the whole command. The men idolized him, and as they bore him by me that morning there was a tenderness in their care that only strong men can show.”⁷⁴ So great was Honey’s courage and audacity that the battalion recommended him for a Victoria Cross. It was awarded posthumously on 3 January 1919.

Like some 60,000 of his comrades, Honey was buried overseas. He rests forever in Quéant Communal Cemetery British Extension. His parents never saw him again, although they treasured the letters that he had sent to them, which offered some insight into their boy who had been recognised as a war hero of the empire. Lew’s posthumous Victoria Cross, and his other medals, arrived by mail a few months after the war ended—a tangible link to the war and his sacrifice—but they must have been cold comfort to George and Metta, who

⁷⁰ Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914–1919*, 446.

⁷¹ *London Gazette*, no. 31108, 6 January 1919.

⁷² War Diary, 78th Battalion, 30 October 1918, digitised, RG 9-III-D-3, LAC.

⁷³ See his personnel file at LAC. Canadian Expeditionary Force, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 4474 – 51. His regimental number was 602174.

⁷⁴ Major J.N. Semmens to Mrs. Honey, 7 October 1918, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.

GOVERNMENT HOUSE
TORONTO.

20th March 1919.

Dear Mr. Honey:

I desire, in addition to the formal letter with which I have today sent to you the Victoria Cross, to express personally my sincere sympathy with you and Mrs. Honey in the great loss you have sustained by the death of your gallant son.

While no honours that could have been awarded to him can fill the place his death has left vacant, yet, it will, I hope somewhat mitigate your sorrow to know how exceptionally well he served his Country in her time of need and to know also that his King and Country has acknowledged his services by awarding him the highest honours that can be received by a soldier at His Majesty's hands.

The publicity that would be fitting the presentation of the Victoria Cross is, of course, dispensed with, but it is likely the press will make proper reference to its receipt by you, through the Military authorities.

Yours faithfully,

John S. Hendrie

To -
Rev. George E. Honey,
Louth and Grantham Parsonage,
R. R. No. 2,
St. Catharines, Ontario.

Letter from Government House, Toronto, to parents of Samuel Honey, accompanying the Victoria Cross sent to them in March 1919. It reads, in part, "While no honours that could have been awarded to him can fill the place his death has left vacant, yet, it will, I hope somewhat mitigate your sorrow to know how exceptionally well he served his Country in her time of need and to know also that his King and Country has acknowledged his services by awarding him the highest honours that can be received by a soldier at His Majesty's hands." [CWM, Samuel Honey papers, 58A 1 112.12.]

grieved for their boy even as they were informed he was one of the most decorated Canadian soldiers of the war.

A year before Lew's death in battle, one of his friends in uniform, Augustus Jenkins, wrote to Metta Honey. Jenkins was sending along a photograph of Lew and an account of his DCM citation.

“Lew himself is as reticent as the Sphinx as to his own valour, but I have a friend in the Record Office who gave me a few details.”⁷⁵ Indeed, Lew did not talk about his courage, valour or glory, but they were evident in the respect he commanded in the regiment and the gallantry awards he received. His family held the medals for several decades, but donated his Victoria Cross, Distinguished Conduct Medal, Military Medal and other service medals to the Canadian War Museum in 1975. There was no ceremony and little coverage in the papers. Honey had long since been buried and most of the other Canadian Great War Victoria Cross recipients had succumbed to age. But Honey’s valour lives on in his medal set, which has been on display at the new Canadian War Museum since its opening in 2005, and his voice continues to speak to us through the letters he wrote from the Western Front.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Tim Cook is a historian at the Canadian War Museum (CWM) and the author or editor of 13 books, including an edited collection with J.L. Granatstein, *Canada 1919: A Nation Shaped by War* (2020) and *The Fight for History: 75 Years of Forgetting, Remembering, and Remaking Canada’s Second World War* (2020). He is a member of the Royal Society of Canada and the Order of Canada.

Jessica Parsons graduated from Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario in 2019 with a History degree and a minor in Canadian Studies. She is currently pursuing a Master’s degree from the University of Toronto in their Masters of Museum Studies program.

⁷⁵ Augustus Jenkins to Mrs. Honey, 5 November 1917, MHRC, 19930045-004, Samuel Honey collection, CWM.