Between Fact and Fiction: The 26th Battalion, the “Crater Fight,” and the “Myth of the War Experience”

Curt Mainville
Abstract: In October 1915, during only their second tour of the front line, New Brunswick’s 26th Battalion conducted a reconnaissance-in-force upon a recently detonated German mine in front of their firing trench. The “crater fight,” as it has come to be known, resulted in twenty-one dead and thirty-six wounded but was portrayed as a success. But how much of what was printed in local newspapers was true? Official reports and personal accounts were engaging, idealistic and emotive. They were also highly exaggerated. This was the genesis of the “myth of the war experience”—a marriage of both fact and fiction that reflected multiple (and sometimes conflicting) points of view and satisfied competing personal, military, social and political interests.

At one point, under cover of smoke, a party of thirty men, under Major W.R. Brown, of the 26th Battalion ... left our trench to examine a crater close to the German Parapet, where the enemy was thought to be carrying on some work. An enemy bombardment was in progress, and heavy rifle and machine gun fire was opened on the party. Major Brown was wounded in the advance, but continued to direct operations. The crater was entered by a few men under Lieutenants Fairweather and McPhee and rendered untenable to the enemy. The crater was then evacuated.

—Daily Telegraph, 18 October 1915

“Brilliant Exploit of Thirty Men from the Fighting 26th,” St. John Standard, 18 October 1915, 1. The same report was printed in all of the province’s six dailies and reprinted in part in many of New Brunswick’s regional weeklies.

© Canadian Military History 2020
The report of the Canadian Eye-Witness—one of the few officially sanctioned sources of wartime information from the Western Front—came as a pleasant surprise to New Brunswick readers. It was the first mention of the province’s 26th Battalion since that unit’s arrival at the front in late September 1915. It also prompted Sir Sam Hughes, Canada’s audacious Minister of Militia and Defence, to comment that New Brunswick’s battalion had “greatly distinguished themselves.” But what exactly happened at this crater and why was it significant? This brief illustration, hastily prepared by Sir Max Aitken and his propaganda team at the Canadian War Records Office from official reports of the 5th Brigade and the 2nd Canadian Division, was notoriously short on detail. However, this did not prevent the province’s newspapers from promoting the “crater fight,” as it has come to be known, as a momentous event in both the battalion’s and the province’s history.

The ‘real’ story of the crater fight was only brought to light in early November, three weeks after the attack, when numerous letters were published by local newspapers. Military censors managed to obscure some of the more salient details, such as the location of the attack. Nonetheless, many of these stories offered a vivid if not contradictory account of what actually happened on 13 October. Historical inaccuracies aside, these first-hand accounts were often reprinted in multiple newspapers around the province, feeding an insatiable public desire for news of the battalion’s baptism of fire and incubating a sense of pride and purpose for the battalion. But just how much of this story was true? Was the crater fight, as Captain the Reverend E.B. Hooper claimed, “the first great toll of New Brunswick blood for king and country ... a baptism of blood” or was it closer

2 “The 26th Battalion Won its Spurs: New Brunswick Battalion Wins Glory on Battlefield by a Gallant Charge Against German Position, Which was Destroyed,” Daily Gleaner (Fredericton), 18 October 1915, 5.
to what Lieutenant C.M. Lawson described to his mother—a “very small affair” that “has been horribly exaggerated”?3

In truth, the crater fight was all of these things—a marriage of both fact and fiction that reflected multiple (and sometimes conflicting) points of view and satisfied competing personal, military, social and political interests. Much was at stake, even as early as 1915: if the Second Battle of Ypres only months earlier illustrated the lengths to which all of these forces would go to shape a unifying Canadian narrative, then the crater fight demonstrates just how much the official record and personal correspondence could be used to promote an equally compelling regional mythology to the First World War. Courage, self-sacrifice and success on the battlefield: these qualities were the embodiment of the “myth of the war experience” and necessary ingredients in the elevation of a relatively minor event to a provincial sensation.4

THE BATTALION

The 26th Battalion was New Brunswick’s preeminent First World War unit, but it was not the first battalion raised in that

3 Captain (Reverend) E.B. Hooper, 17 October 1915, “‘He that is not with us is against us,’ Chaplain’s Call to Men from the Front,” Daily Telegraph (Saint John), 2 November 1915, 3; and Lieutenant C.M. Lawson to Mrs. Lawson, 21 November 1915, Lawson, JI – F105b – 3, Jessie I. Lawson Fonds, New Brunswick Museum. Lawson, who was killed in action six weeks after the crater fight, was a harsh critic of battlefield reporting. In this final letter to his mother, he made his feelings unmistakably clear: “You talk about my writing to the newspaper or a letter for publication. Well in the first place that is absolutely forbidden, and besides when one reads the drivel that is published you never want to see anything of your own in print. Really some of the stories about that very small affair at the crater are ridiculous. Certainly the battalion gained credit there, but it has been horribly exaggerated. I am enclosing a clipping from the “Telegraph” about the 25th [likely “Two St. John Homes Mourn Dead in War,” Daily Telegraph and the Sun, 25 October 1915, 10] which is the greatest balderdash. Really it discusts [sic] one, and a few fools who write this trash home throw discredit on the whole.”

4 Jonathan F. Vance, Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), 142. Vance was not the first to speak of the “myth of the war experience;” he was, however, one of the first to contextualise it from a Canadian perspective.
province. That honour goes to the 12th Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force’s first contingent. The 12th Battalion—more a Maritime unit than a singularly New Brunswick effort—found no difficulty in recruiting to strength when the call was made in August 1914. However, as other units were forwarded to the front with the 1st Division, the 12th was relegated to reserve status in England where it served as a training depot for the reinforcement of frontline battalions. The subsequent formation of the 26th Battalion in October 1914, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel (Lt-Col) James Lupton McAvity, carried the hope that it would serve at the front as a distinct provincial unit.

It took considerably more effort to bring the 26th Battalion up to wartime strength. Public perception was wary that New Brunswick’s effort might once again be dismissed by military officials. Recruiting was dulled by the province’s limited access to young, urban, British-born males—a paradigm that has come to define the typical First World War soldier and who could be found in abundance in Ontario and the Canadian West. Through the adoption of recruiting meetings and more active methods to reach potential recruits in

5 S. Douglas MacGowan, Mac Heckbert and Byron E. O’Leary provide a detailed account of the 26th Battalion, including the famed crater fight, in their New Brunswick’s Fighting 26th: a history of the 26th New Brunswick Battalion, C.E.F., 1914-1919 (Saint John, NB: Neptune Publishing Co., 1995), 43-50. J. Brent Wilson’s A Family of Brothers (Fredericton, NB: Goose Lane, 2019) builds upon this earlier work by adding personal accounts, statistics and images that were not previously available to MacGowan, Heckbert and O’Leary. Neither account delves deeply into the controversies and contradictions that followed the crater fight.

6 The wartime impression that Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) enlistees tended to be young, urban, British-born males was supported by immediate post-war statistical analysis. This distinct pattern or paradigm has been refined by modern historians, including Robert Brown and Donald Loveridge’s inclusion of an economic element to the equation and geographer Chris Sharpe’s groundbreaking analysis of regional CEF enlistment, but remains largely unchallenged. Only recently have historians attempted to measure and explain the impact of individual elements within this pattern. The author’s own work reinforces the paradigm but simultaneously exposes a number of noteworthy variations and exceptions. See Short History of the First Canadian Division, December 1928, RG 24, Vol. 1810, GAQ 2-1, Library and Archives Canada [LAC]; Robert Brown and Donald Loveridge, “Unrequited Faith Recruiting the CEF 1914-1918,” Canadian Military History 24, 1 (Winter/Spring 2015), 61-87; C.A. Sharpe, “Enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1918: A Regional Analysis,” Journal of Canadian Studies 18, 4 (Winter 1983-1984), 15-29; and Curt Mainville, “The Middlemore Boys: Immigration, Settlement, and Great War Volunteerism in New Brunswick,” Acadiensis 42, 2 (Summer/Autumn, 2013), 51-74.
rural communities outside of the province’s urban centres, the 26th achieved its mandate by late fall of 1914.

The mobilisation of the 26th Battalion in Saint John was not without its challenges. Morale among the soldiers and population was generally high; discipline, however, was uneven. Desertions were common. Soldiers, when not training, had much free time to themselves. Evenings were a test to military and civilian police, who were often overwhelmed in the presence of large groups of drunken, sometimes unruly soldiers. Fights broke out. So followed acts of vandalism and rioting. More than a few public calls were made for the removal of the battalion from the city. The eventual departure of the 26th for England in June 1915 was greeted with a genuine chorus of cheers for New Brunswick’s battalion and considerable relief.7

Following four months of additional training at Salisbury Plain, the 26th Battalion was sent to Western Flanders on 15 September 1915. Only months after the Second Battle of Ypres introduced poison gas to the modern battlefield, British and German forces were

7 Wilson, A Family of Brothers, 23-37.
now firmly entrenched into defensive positions that made wholesale attack difficult. The 5th Canadian Brigade inherited ground formerly held by the British 83rd Brigade in the Ypres Salient. Within the brigade, the 26th Battalion occupied interchangeable trenches with the 22nd Battalion—six days in, six days out—overlooking the town of Wytschaete, or “Whitesheets” as the British called it, only a mile away. The battalion covered approximately 700 yards of frontage along K and L lines. Ahead of them lay no man’s land, a narrow corridor between combatants that ranged from as little as 60 yards to approximately 200 yards at its widest. Beyond that was the 3rd Bavarian Division. The 26th Battalion took the line for the first time on 28 September with little incident. Their second tour would prove considerably more exciting.

8 War Diaries, 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade [C.I.B.], September 1915, Appendix B, Operational Order No. 6, 27 September 1915, RG 9 III-D-3, Vol. 4883, Part 2, File 246, LAC.
THE CRATER FIGHT

On 8 October 1915, three German mines were detonated along the Canadian line at Wytschaete. The first explosion occurred at 9:30 a.m. near Vandamme Farm opposite trench position “K1,” between the 22nd and 25th Battalions. Two more mines were blown between 5:30 and 6:00 p.m. further down the line at positions “H4” and “G1,” creating sizable craters in front of and behind trenches occupied by the 28th Battalion. The crater at K1 was the largest, measuring 150 feet long by 45 feet wide and 30 feet in depth, but caused little damage. Situated approximately 45 yards from the Canadian firing trench, the crater was in the centre of no man’s land and posed many questions for command: was the crater the result of a mine explosion that fell short of its intended target or was it meant to serve as a firing base for German forces as divisional headquarters suspected?

That question was put to the 26th Battalion when they took over K and L lines from the 22nd Battalion on 9 October. Over successive evenings, as fatigue parties hastily constructed a sap from K1 towards the crater, patrols were sent into no man’s land to survey German activities inside the crater. The first, led by Lieutenant (Lt) C.D. Knowlton, was detailed on the evening of the 11th. He was authorised to attack the crater if his patrol held the advantage—500 sandbags and a small working party were held at the ready to construct a defensive position if needed—but an ominous development at the crater favoured caution over courage:

Our party, which consisted of 2 officers and 15 men, as per Genl [General] Watson’s orders, found the crater guarded by 3 sentries who were behind an earth work almost 6’ high. There was considerable difficulty in getting near. It was found that the top of the crater had been boarded in and it was on these boards that sentries were standing.

The actual location of the crater is difficult to pinpoint. Divisional references place the K1 crater at map co-ordinates N.18.c.5.1. Brigade locates it closer to N.24.a.7.9, approximately 140 yards away and inside German lines. Contemporary maps of the area show a crater at N.24.a.5.9, between the two references. This fits the description that the crater was centered midway between the Canadian and German lines.

War Diaries, 2nd Canadian Division, October 1915, Appendix 25, Daily Intelligence Summary No. 17, 9 October 1915, RG 9 III-D-3, Vol. 4842, File 99, “LAC. See also, in the same war diaries, Appendix 36, Daily Intelligence Summary No. 17, 12 October 1915: “There is apparently a determination on the part of the enemy to extend the crater opposite K1 laterally along our line and to make of this the nucleus of a new fire trench. Preventive action is being taken.”
View of the front lines from J Trench (map reference point v), looking north northwest to southeast. [Source images © IWM Q41949 - Q41957.]
The Wytschaete front photographed from Vierstraat. [Source images © IWM Q37893 - Q37899.]
The Wytschaete front photographed from Desine Farm. [Source images © IWM Q37594 - Q37600.]
Working parties (estimate 12 men altogether) could be heard humming, singing & talking. Five explosions were heard at ends of crater—apparently extending it along in front. By the time our party could get to the position and get particulars it was very late and the party could only get back to our trenches at 2 a.m. It was too late to deliver an attack [unreadable] this place. [unreadable] appear to have a good [unreadable] they could always reinforce their garrison—whereas we have to cross open ground. The difficulties of taking and holding this crater are very great at present. Mining from this side or bombarding with H.E. [high explosives] seems only successful way of handling the situation.11

Lt-Col McAvity’s follow-up report to 5th Brigade Headquarters recommended an attack-in-force to displace the Germans in the K1 crater. “The enemy appears to have made it bomb-proof,” he advised Brigadier-General David Watson. “I am of the opinion that only a very strong attack could possibly carry this place without the assistance of mining or heavy artillery fire.” Both the Canadians and the Germans appeared to be sapping towards the crater simultaneously. If the Germans already held the position, McAvity pointed out, then they would hold a distinct tactical advantage over the Canadians: “the Germans can very easily reinforce a garrison in the crater or they can very easily withdraw one, whereas, for us to do either, necessitates crossing open ground and pierce the roof of the crater. Our men would therefore be very easily bombed out from the German lines.”12

General Watson, upon inspecting the crater, approved an attack for the evening of the 12th. A small party, consisting of twelve men, would approach the crater from the front to remove the sentries; simultaneously, two larger parties of twenty men each would envelop and bombard the crater from each flank. Meanwhile, two parties of twenty-five men each would wait in the newly constructed sap and in reserve to press the attack as required. McAvity understood the

importance of fire support and advised Major (Maj) Walter R. Brown, whose “A” Company would lead the attack, to position the battalion’s six machine guns where they would be most advantageous. He also cautioned Brown against overplaying the attack: “You are not to attempt to storm the crater unless you are satisfied that enough damage has been done by the bombardment to warrant.” For reasons that are unclear—but may be related to an impending “demonstration” by the British Second Army—the midnight attack was called off.

That demonstration, a feint by Second Army to distract German forces as the British massed on Loos, was scheduled for the afternoon of 13 October. It consisted of a ninety minute artillery barrage followed by the deployment of smoke to obscure the battlefield. Machine gun and “shrapnel fire” was encouraged “to make the enemy believe that an assault is intended.” Within the 2nd Canadian Division, only the 26th Battalion had orders to enter no man’s land. The plan of attack on the crater was based primarily on that proposed for the evening of the 12th, with several modifications: firstly, one hundred men from “B” Company were to be placed at the battalion strong point to render assistance to “A” Company; secondly, the flanking party of bombers was to be reduced from two parties of twenty to a total of thirty men—the “picked thirty”; and lastly, the fifty men held in reserve were not to wait for the crater to be secured, but would “rush forward and fortify the crater and hold same at all costs.”

This final point suggests that the attack may have evolved from a simple reconnaissance-in-force. It implies, at least in the mind of Lt-Col McAvity, that the crater held significant tactical importance, enough to warrant the commitment of two untested companies on a risky daylight attack. Not all of his officers were convinced that the plan would succeed: “The day we picked to do it was perhaps the

---

12th Battalion, Operations, Field Message, O.C., 12 October 1915, RG 9 III, Vol. 4122, Folder 4, File 1, LAC.
14th Battalion, Operations, Field Message, O.C., 12 October 1915, RG 9 III, Vol. 4122, Folder 4, File 1, LAC.
War Diaries, 2nd Canadian Division, October 1915, Appendix 30, Canadian Corps No. G 583 to 2nd Canadian Division, 11 October 1915, RG 9 III-D-3, Vol. 4842, File 99, LAC.
worst we could have chosen,” explained Maj Brown to a Saint John reporter after the fact. “The reason being that ... the enemy always expects a general charge after a severe artillery bombardment.”

McAvity, despite losing the element of surprise, was confident in his plan and issued supplementary orders to each of his company commanders: officers should be prepared to press any advantage to take ground; adequate supplies of ammunition should be ready to replenish all machine gunners and bombers; entrenching tools should be handy in the event they are needed; and every soldier should be provisioned for a protracted engagement.

The bombardment commenced at 2:00 p.m., as scheduled, concentrating on Petit Bois to the immediate south and east of the K1 crater. At 3:30, smoke bombs were thrown over the Canadian parapets at intervals of one bomb for every two and a half feet of frontage. Canadian mortar and machine gun fire was soon matched by German light and heavy artillery. The experience was intense, if not erratic. “At times the earth fairly rocked under one’s feet,” described Lt H.W. Ferguson of the battlefield around him, “especially when those ‘coal boxes’ landed, throwing immense pillars of black smoke and earth into the air for sixty to a hundred feet, digging immense holes in the earth wherever they landed.”

“I tell you it was wild,” wrote Private (Pte) Fred Breau to his father. “It’s as bad as I want to see it. I saw men flying up in the air.” Sergeant (Sgt) W.B. Graham was charged with transporting high explosive bombs to the soldiers of “A” Company in the front line: “The German shells were exploding all around, with rifle fire, machine Guns, and everything a human can invest. I was never so relieved in my life as when we landed our load at the proper place.”

---


19 26th Battalion, Operations, Memo, O.C., 26th Battalion to All Coy. Commanders, Machine Gun & Bombing Officer, 13 October 1915, RG 9 III, Vol. 4122, Folder 4, File 1, LAC.


At 4:00 p.m., Maj Brown led elements of “A” Company into no man’s land and received a gunshot wound to his foot almost as soon as he left the trenches. He kept moving. The two bombing parties advanced first, manoeuvring left and right of the crater. The reconnaissance party, under Lt C.E. Fairweather, with a detachment of four engineers under the direction of Lt M.N. McPhee, departed next and moved directly to the crater. The whole of the battlefield remained obscured by dense smoke from the Canadian line. According to Lt-Col McAvity’s official report to Brigade headquarters, the attacking party was enfiladed from both sides of the German line by machine gun and rifle fire but reached the crater relatively unmolested. The flanking parties found the crater occupied by German bombers who were driven back to their own firing line through a communication trench that had been constructed between the two positions. The reconnaissance party found no defensive works of any kind in the crater and, seeing no value in holding the crater, began their withdrawal to Canadian lines under heavy enemy bombardment. No sooner had the crater been evacuated then a mine was detonated inside the basin. At this point, the smoke screen began to dissipate. More smoke was produced, but for several minutes the attacking party was fully exposed to German fire. In the tense minutes that followed, as casualties mounted, several men followed Lt F.B. Winter’s call for volunteers to extricate the wounded.

Lt McPhee’s report of the crater fight offers additional details: he noted that the size and depth of the crater was significantly smaller than had originally been assessed—fifty feet in diameter as opposed to one hundred and fifty feet long. While he makes no mention of a communication trench running between the crater and German lines, he confirmed that there was no tunnel linking the two positions—“I had gun cotton in my sap head to move up and blow in any tunnels we might find there. There was no tunnel and no sap.” McPhee’s most important observation concerned the lack of a German defensive perimeter inside the crater. “After we were in the crater for a couple of minutes,” he continued, “the Germans started throwing in hand grenades. They fell right in the crater. I do not know if there was an officer of the 26th there or not, but I ordered all of the men out of the

crater. We lined up on our side of the crater. There was no object in holding it. It was nothing but a death trap.”

Any idea of holding the crater “at all costs” was abandoned when it was realised that the crater held no tactical value and that any defence of the crater would have been costly owing to its proximity to the German firing line. Lt McPhee made no mention of having detected a German mine in his report; nonetheless, his order to retreat could not have been timelier. “Our engineer officer yelled out ‘about turn: it’s mined,’” wrote Lt Ferguson, “and two thirds of our fellows got out before it blew up.” An anonymous observer recounted the same story: “owing to the presence of mind of the engineer officer with our party we might have lost more men than we did. This officer gave the order (so I was told) to about turn and get out of the crater.” The Germans detonated their improvised mine

only minutes too late. Pte William McKay says that he was the last to retreat: “I was the last one to come out of the crater, and I just got out in time, when it went up in smoke.”

In both after-action reports, the critical moment in the attack was not the assault upon the crater itself—that appears to have been executed according to plan—but the withdrawal to Canadian lines. Intermittent smoke exposed retreating soldiers to enemy fire; consequently, the bulk of casualties among the attacking party appear to have been rendered between the crater and the sap leading out from K1. Lt McPhee reports having seen ten dead and wounded upon his return to the line. Privates Maurice McPhee and Robert Knowles lay lifeless on the edge of the crater. Pte Roy Brady, shot through the arm within feet of the German firing trench, was buried by a shell explosion and had to be dug out by his friend, Pte Will Reid. Pte McKay says that he tried to rescue Pte Robert Keenan, “but they played the machine gun on me and liquid gas, and my clothes were afire four or five times, so I had to go back, crawling on my stomach.”

Casualties as a result of the crater fight were high, but were not limited to the bombing and reconnaissance parties. At 5:20 p.m., German heavy artillery bombarded the Canadian line in retaliation for the “demonstration,” resulting in considerable damage to the front line and communication trenches. Machine gun officer Lt A.D. Carter suffered shrapnel wounds to his hip and thigh. Lance-Corporal R.F. Peacock was standing in the doorway of Maj Brown’s dug-out describing how lucky he was to be alive when a shell landed directly behind him, killing him instantly. “Had it not been for the fact that he was standing there,” confessed Brown, “the shell would most certainly have killed me.” In total, the 26th Battalion lost twenty-one men killed and thirty-six wounded, equivalent to one-half of a company. These numbers do not include those men who were only slightly wounded and remained at duty and those, like Pte Breau—who suffered a ruptured ear drum from an artillery blast—who reported their injuries well after the battle.

28 Private William McKay to Robert McKay, “Twelve-Year-Old Pleads to Go to Front as Bugler,” 6.
29 Kenneth Linton to Mrs. Amenia Linton, 16 October 1915, “If more men come we will put on finishing touches,” Daily Telegraph, 3 November 1915, 3.
There was much to account for in the immediate aftermath of the crater fight. In a secondary report from Lt-Col McAvity to 5th Brigade Headquarters, the officer commanding 26th Battalion attempted to explain the apparent discrepancies between his reports prior to and in consequence of the attack of the crater. McAvity referenced the earlier reconnaissance conducted by Lt Knowlton: “Reports which were sent in to us and forwarded on to the effect that the top of the crater was boarded in and sentries were stationed behind an earth parapet can now be accounted for by the fact that sounds as men on boards would of course come from their parties passing up and down the communication trench which led into the crater. The sentries apparently stood on the near edge of the crater looking out over the earth which had been thrown up all around.” As for the unanticipated mine detonation, McAvity added that “[i]t would appear that the Germans had expected an attempt to be made on this place as they had a mine underneath it which they sprung, fortunately for us, some seconds too late.”

Lt-Col McAvity also wished to draw attention to the actions of Sgt W.C. Ryer who, in addition to having recovered two wounded men from the battlefield, claimed to have killed eleven of the enemy during the engagement. McAvity’s commendation, registered with Brigadier-General Watson the day after the crater fight, is brief but trenchant: “Sergeant Ryer, under a very heavy cross-fire from machine guns and rifles, carried a mortally wounded comrade, Sergeant Cotter, until the latter expired, when he left him and returned to the crater and with the help of Private F.L. Daley, brought in another wounded man, Private D. Winchester.”

Major-General R.E.W. Turner, VC, commanding the 2nd Canadian Division, saw tremendous value in the demonstration executed by the British 2nd Army: “It helps materially in encouraging the offensive spirit in all ranks and showed them how

---

easily the enemy can be upset." He was similarly impressed with the reconnaissance performed by the 26th Battalion, in spite of the casualties. Lt-Col McAvity made no further comment or observation concerning the crater fight. He may have been satisfied with the days’ events, but his main concerns following the operation were the need to repair his trenches, the continued extension of the sap head from the Canadian lines to the K1 crater and the recovery of bodies from no man’s land.

Owing to the excitement of the afternoon’s attack and the enemy’s agitation, the 26th Battalion was unable to retrieve their dead on the evening of 13 October. Obscured by fog, recovery parties set out under cover of darkness the following night. It was assumed, after the retreat, that all of the wounded had been recovered and that only the dead lay in no man’s land. That was not the case. Pte William Ramsay, one of the party that attacked the crater, was determined to return to no man’s land to retrieve the dead:

I later went out to the listening post and borrowed a pair of field glasses; and when I looked through them I saw the dead scattered about the field, that is between the firing lines. I heard some one groaning, and I came back and reported it to Sergeant Wilson. He thought that I was crazy.

I returned and reported that some one was living near the crater. The crater is only fifteen yards away from the German trenches. Sergeant Wilson came up that night and asked me if I was game enough to go out, and I told him that I certainly was. We went out together and the first fellow we ran across was Bobby Keenan. We rolled him over. He was dead, so we crept by two or three more and went clean out to the crater; and right on the edge of the crater lay [Pte M.E.] McPhee and Bobby Knowles. I rolled McPhee over. He was dead.

---

32 War Diaries, 2nd Canadian Division, October 1915, Appendix 41, 2nd Canadian Division to Canadian Corps, No. G [unreadable], 15 October 1915, Vol. 4842, File 99, LAC.
I felt Bobby Knowles’ hand, and it was all covered with mud, and I thought that he was dead too. But I felt around until I got the back of his neck, and I gave him a roll over and he gave a groan. The Germans immediately opened fire on us, so I got Sergeant Wilson’s jackknife and cut all the equipment off him. I got him on my back and crept in with him, Sergeant Wilson steadying him on my back.

When we got in with him there were two fellows, Corporal Knight and Charlie McQuaid, who came out and met us for we certainly were played out. So we took Bobby in Sergeant Wilson’s hut and rubbed him down with some rum and got him around first rate. Sergeant Wilson and I then went out and fetched in Bobby Keenan’s body. A relief party then came out and brought in the rest of the dead.\(^\text{35}\)

Knowles succumbed to his wounds the following day.

By the time the 26th Battalion left the line on the evening of 15 October, only Sgt Cotter’s body remained unaccounted for. Rumours circulated that he may have been taken prisoner; however, as witnesses to his death stepped forward, this notion was quickly discredited. According to Captain A. McMillan, “He lay nearest of all to the German lines, and we think the enemy brought him in to get information as to the force who attacked.”\(^\text{36}\) For the survivors of the crater fight, it was time to reflect, to record their impressions of the battle and to rest. More fighting was ahead.

THE “MYTH OF THE WAR EXPERIENCE”

The crater fight was the 26th Battalion’s baptism of fire and, by all accounts, they performed well: their attack was co-ordinated; their reconnaissance was effective; and, while their retreat was problematic, the engagement of supporting troops—the engineers, machine gunners, smoke bombers and stretcher-bearers—helped save many lives. Yet, in spite of the positive outcome, the crater fight was a relatively minor event. It was narrow in both scale and duration


Within weeks of the crater fight, dozens of first-hand accounts—most complimentary, some contradictory—were published in New Brunswick's newspapers. [St. John Globe, 3 November 1915, p. 3]

and its outcome offered limited tactical advantage. It may very well have been the first trench raid of its kind within the Canadian Corps, predating the Canadian raid at Petite Douve in November 1915, but its lack of sophistication and the fact that it was conducted in broad daylight with a large number of casualties ensured that it would not be held up as a model of minor operations.37

37 See Colin Garrett, “The Art of Minor Operations: Canadian Trench Raiding, 1915-1918,” Canadian Military History 24, 1 (2015): 249-284. Garret does not mention the 26th Battalion’s crater fight, claiming instead that the 7th Battalion’s night-time raid at Petite Douve was the first trench raid of its kind. It is easy to see why the latter draws considerably more attention: it was well planned and rehearsed; it netted a number of enemy prisoners and intelligence; and it resulted in only two casualties. This was the model of minor operations that was to follow with increasing frequency and success.
It was the propaganda value of the crater fight that most interested military and political authorities. War news, crafted by the official Eye-Witness and filtered through government censors, reinforced wartime ideals and helped boost military recruitment: “it was not a huge ethical leap for reporters to provide, and their newspapers to accept, ridiculously upbeat versions of battle,” explains historian Jeff Keshen. More often than not, these reports were written in London, far from the field of battle, and based primarily upon the after-action reports of field commanders who had a direct stake in how the war was being perceived at home. Criticism of the management of the war or its human cost was generally omitted.

Historian Jonathan Vance contends that such myth-making was largely a post-war construction—“Strict adherence to historical fact was desirable,” he writes, “but only if such facts did not contradict the myth. It was the myth, not fact, that was paramount.” Yet, curiously, battlefield narratives from official sources seldom found any contradiction from the soldiers they reported upon. Letters written soon after Second Ypres and Vimy, for instance, reinforced common propaganda stereotypes of valour and righteousness while simultaneously downplaying the more salient aspects of warfare. It mattered little that some of these soldiers did not actually engage in the battle. They looked to newspaper reports and other sources, such as Max Aitken’s highly flattering Canada in Flanders series, for a better understanding of their own experiences. In essence, the

38 Jeffrey A. Keshen, Propaganda and Censorship During Canada’s Great War (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996), xiii.
40 Vance, Death So Noble, 163.
41 Ryan B. Flavelle, “The Second Battle of Ypres and 100 Years of Remembrance,” Canadian Military History 24, 1 (2015): 224; and Maarten Gerritsen, “Corps Identity: the Letters, Diaries and Memoirs of Canada’s Great War Soldiers,” (PhD dissertation, Memorial University, 2008), 166. Self-censorship served a number of purposes. Jeff Keshen notes that soldiers may have deliberately avoided entanglement with unit censors by writing upbeat letters home. Others may not have been able to adequately express their feelings, felt that no one could understand their experiences or were too masculine to overtly state their fears and frustrations. Keshen, Propaganda and Censorship, 189-190. See also Tim Cook, The Secret History of Soldiers: How Canadians Survived the Great War (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2018), 171-172.
The circular nature of wartime reporting had the effect of fusing together differing points of views, both fact and fiction, while sanitising them for public consumption.

This was the genesis of the “myth of the war experience”: as much as it unified the collective memory of soldiers still coming to terms with their experiences in the immediate post-war years as Vance contends, it was also a real-time phenomenon that amplified and satisfied varied regional interests. Ypres and Vimy aside, local battalions and figures were elevated to near-mythical status by city editors and provincial newspapers for events that would have otherwise escaped national attention. Minor engagements became *cause célèbres*—a means of dealing with the death of people whose names were known,

Editorials applauded the 26th Battalion’s crater attack and called upon its male readers to embrace the war effort by enlisting. [The Daily Telegraph and the Sun (Saint John), 18 October 1915, p. 6]
of engaging citizens with the war effort and of raising more troops for the cause. Indeed, for New Brunswick, the crater fight came to represent what Caribou Hill meant to Newfoundland.43

Editorials were quick to capitalise on the crater fight. “Last week’s operations formed practically their baptism of fire,” boasted the St. John Standard, “and a thrill of pride will go through the province this morning at the intelligence that, when the opportunity came, they did their duty in the manner expected of the men of New Brunswick.”44 Similar sentiments were expressed in the Daily Telegraph (Saint John): “[The] one point on which there is no doubt is that the men of the 26th are standing up to the test of war like veterans and are adding to the reputation established by the Princess Patricia’s and other Canadian units which have been longer under fire.”45 As the publication of casualty lists over the days and weeks that followed began to dampen public spirit, newspapers held firm: “Today, when we are called upon to count the cost,” assured the Standard, “the pride is deepened.”46

First-hand accounts of the crater fight began arriving from the front in early November. These stories were engaging, idealistic and emotive. Depictions of bravery and self-sacrifice reinforced the public impression being crafted by the province’s largest newspapers that the 26th Battalion had won for itself, and by extension the people of New Brunswick, a significant achievement. Everyone wanted to share their experience under fire, but, as Fred Breau warned his father, “[t]here was a lot of the men that were not in that fight.”47 So how much of what was written in the aftermath of the attack was accurate? Contradictions were evident from the start but, rather than undermine the credibility of the witnesses, elements of the crater fight were fused, transformed and recollected as an imperfect but accepted story.

Exaggeration was the hallmark of the Canadian effort, alternating between portrayals of bravado and self-sacrifice. “The boys behaved finely, doing their work coolly, helping comrades, laughing at their wounds and swearing at the Germans alternately,” claimed Pte Jack

Willis two days after the crater fight.48 In the calm aftermath of battle, more shocking features faded: the screams of the wounded were replaced by thundering Jack Johnsons; bullets that buzzed like bees around one’s head omitted the fact that Canadian fire routinely found friendly targets; and Canadian casualties did not suffer so much as endure, compose themselves and accept their fate with dignity. According to Lt Ferguson, “One chap with a leg shot off and two bullets through his stomach, smoked a cigarette and joked about the wooden leg he would have to get now. He died about six hours later, conscious all through.”49 Pte Frank Lockhart describes another casualty “who had his leg practically blown off. This chum talked and joked and thought he was all right. He died in the trench with a smile on his face, while talking to [Pte] Whitehead.”50 These depictions were hardly realistic, but they allowed soldiers to normalise their experiences for public consumption.

The German response was portrayed in less flattering terms. According to Pte Gordon Leslie, the Germans “ran and left their trenches like sheep” when bombarded.51 Another account says that “a lot of them jumped out of their trenches and tore off to the woods in fear.”52 Both reports are prejudicial and highly inflammatory. Other accounts are more conciliatory in how the Germans reacted to the British demonstration: “The Germans, beyond a doubt, were caught by surprise,” surmised Lt Ferguson, “but they quickly woke up.”53 “As the wind blew this cloud over their trench they began to rush up troops to meet the attack they felt sure we were going to deliver. Then we opened on these supports with rapid fire, machine gun and artillery fire,” added Maj W.H. Belyea.54 “The Germans lost heavily as they had brought heavy reinforcements up expecting a general

48 Jack Willis to Mrs. C.J. Willis, 15 October 1915, “Jack Willis of Sussex, Tells of Brave 26th,” Kings County Record, 12 November 1915, 1.
attack. Our artillery played on their trenches and destroyed them to the extent that when their reinforcements retired there [sīc] was exposed to our machine gun and rifle fire,” wrote Pte Elden Schwartz, in charge of one of the smoke bombing parties. These accounts reinforce the Canadian narrative. If the Germans ran away under fire, then the Canadians are portrayed as valiant; if they remained at their posts and were slaughtered, then they were simply outmanoeuvred. “I tell you they lost heavily, while our casualties were few,” continued Pte Leslie to his mother, three days after the crater fight. “[T]hey were carrying wounded out for two days,” added Sgt H.T. Spare. Battalion, brigade and divisional sources are curiously silent on the issue of how many Germans were killed on 13 October; however, specific claims range from as few as 300 men to as many as 5,000, concentrated mainly on Petit Bois. The Germans certainly sustained heavy losses, but estimates above 400 seems exceedingly high for the frontage along the K and L lines that would have been covered by the 26th Battalion. Casualties directly inflicted by “A” Company and those men in fire support would actually have been quite light, limited to those enemy soldiers manning the crater, the newly discovered communication trench linking the crater to the German front line and as far forward as the German firing trench facing the crater. Significantly higher losses were inflicted by indirect artillery fire in the lead-up to the attack. 300 to 400 dead and a ratio of four-to-one, as Lt Ferguson estimated, are the limit of credibility. Claims that upwards of ten Germans were killed for every one of the 26th Battalion, predicated on the notion that “there were thousands and thousands of the enemy waiting and watching for them,” are simply mythogenic.

It comes as no surprise, then, that other details of the attack do not hold up to scrutiny. Sgt Ryer’s assertion that he eliminated eleven enemy soldiers inside German lines, for instance, may have

57 Ian J. Campbell, ed., The Personal Diary of Lieutenant Harry Wensley Ferguson: the 26th New Brunswick Battalion (self-pub., 2007), 221-222.
been exaggerated. Several testimonials support his claim, including that of Maj Brown: “The fellow Ryer was missing. About an hour later I heard that Ryer had turned up. So I sent for him and asked him where he had been. He replied: ‘I found a nice little spot where I could do a little potting; I found that as the Germans left the trenches to throw their bombs I could see them and get a shot at them. So I just stayed there and shot at them. I managed to bowl over eleven of them.’” The smoke that obscured Ryer’s advance to the crater, however, would have made it equally difficult for him to identify specific German targets beyond his own attacking party. As Lt Ferguson attested, “The dense cloud of smoke hid everything from view excepting where here and there a swirl of air would reveal the hurrying, moving forms, while all the time the air was alive with rifle and machine gun bullets, shrapnel, shells and bombs of all descriptions.” The smoke did abate as “A” company retreated from the crater, but that hardly seems long enough for Ryer to snipe eleven Germans from an open and fixed position given all of the movement taking place in and around the crater.

Ryer’s claim to the Distinguished Conduct Medal is similarly clouded in controversy. His official citation, published in the London Gazette six weeks after the attack, makes no mention of the eleven Germans killed, concentrating solely upon his rescue of “another Serjeant, who was mortally wounded, until the latter died, when he returned to the crater and, with the assistance of another man, carried back a second man ... under a heavy crossfire from machine guns and rifles.” Sgt Ryer’s story is certainly compelling: “I found that I was alone and that the rest had gone back,” he told Maj Brown, “so I thought I would look around a little first and see if there was anybody I could take back. I found one man on the ground but he said that it was no use, that he was done for. I stayed here a few moments till he died and then I found another fellow who was not mortally wounded.” The first soldier that Ryer came upon was Sgt Frank Cotter; however, Pte William Mackay states that he was

60 Lieutenant H.W. Ferguson to Mrs. Charles Reid, n.d., “If more men come we will put on finishing touches,” Daily Telegraph, 3 November 1915, 3.
61 London Gazette, 26 November 1915, Supplement 29384, 11901.
the one who carried out Sgt Cotter: “I got him on my back with the help of another soldier, but he got shot again in the head and fell off my back dead.” This version is corroborated by Pte J.T. Oram and by the Daily Gleaner (Fredericton) in its post-war review of the 26th Battalion. Lt Ferguson appears to reconcile the two stories—it was Sgt Ryer who rescued Pte Winchester and “one of my bombers” who attempted to save Cotter—but, by this point, the competing narratives had become conflated into a single, unifying act of courage, deserving of the Victoria Cross “in any former war” if one is to believe Major-General Turner at Sgt Ryer’s medal ceremony.

The crater fight had now taken on a life of its own: it made heroes of Maj Brown, Sgt Ryer and the “picked thirty,” it featured a popular story that New Brunswick readers could embrace as their own and it gave rise to its own poetry. It also proved to be an effective recruiting tool. As three new battalions were being announced for the province, soldiers of the 26th Battalion used the crater fight to appeal to the duty of the province’s youth: “They are having a hard time to get recruits, but if some of them saw the graveyards out here I don’t think they would be satisfied to stay at home, they would want to have revenge for our brothers who have gone before us,” proclaimed Pte Kenneth Linton to his mother. “[I]f some of the slackers in Canada were only here, to see, or could realize what we are up against, they would not be so backward in responding to the call,” echoed Pte Elden Schwartz to his pastor.
Reverend Captain Hooper, the battalion’s firebrand and popular minister, was a regular contributor to Saint John’s daily newspapers. His appeals to manhood and patriotism were already common themes in his letters home; his description of the crater fight as “sorrow gilded with pride” and his call to support those who “bring honor to themselves and their country in carrying the flag on to victory, the complete victory” merely focused the efforts of clergymen and editors at home to boost recruitment further.68 “These letters should fire the enthusiasm of the men at home and make them realize where lies the path of duty,” extolled the St. John Globe.69 “What do the young men of this city and this province think about it?” responded the Daily Telegraph. “None can fail to read of the bravery of the 26th without a feeling of keen satisfaction ... Let every man who is free to enlist read the latest story of Canadian gallantry and then take up the matter with his own conscience.”70 Such appeals, accompanied by interviews with returning veterans of the 26th Battalion, helped increase recruiting above national levels through December 1915; thereafter, as casualties mounted and the number of able-bodied men declined, volunteerism would resume its downward spiral through the last few months of the patriotic phase, the conscription era and war’s end.71

The celebration that marked the return of New Brunswick’s 26th Battalion to Saint John on 17 May 1919 was unlike anything the city had ever witnessed, but, as the St. John Globe warned its readers, “[t]he units that went away are returning, not it is true as they went.”72 The estimated 673 soldiers of the unit who marched from Union Depot to King Square were eager to be home; only 121, however, could be counted among the almost 1,200 men of the battalion that had departed the Loyalist City four years earlier. These men had

68 Captain (Reverend) E.B. Hooper, 17 October 1915, “‘He that is not with us is against us,’ Chaplain’s Call to Men from the Front,” Daily Telegraph (Saint John), 2 November 1915, 3. See also “The Fighting 26th,” Daily Telegraph, 3 November 1915, 6.
71 Curtis Mainville, Till the Boys Come Home: Life on the Home Front, Queens County, NB, 1914-1918 (Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions, 2015), Figure 1, 37.
survived the Battle of the Somme and Vimy. They witnessed Hill 70, Passchendaele, Amiens and the Scarpe. Then just when it seemed that the war would never end, they found the will to march on Cambrai on their way to Mons. But it all began with the crater fight.

At the head of the battalion marched Lt-Col W.R. Brown. He had led “A” Company into the crater; now he commanded all that remained of the 26th. Further in line marched Pte W.A. Ramsay who was among the party that had recovered the dead from the battlefield. Many names were noticeably absent from the arrival: Lt C.M. Lawson, whose private commentary brought balance and insight into the crater fight, was killed in action soon after the engagement; Pte W.H. McKay, credited but never recognised for his attempt to
rescue Sgt Cotter from the battlefield, died of a shell wound in 1917; and Lieutenant (Captain) M.N. McPhee, the engineering officer whose quick actions saved the lives of many soldiers, was later awarded the Military Cross and drowned when the Hospital Ship Lanfranc was sunk in the British Channel in 1917. Also missing from the reception were Lieutenant (Major) C.E. Fairweather, DSO, MID and Sgt W.C. Ryer, DCM. Both had been wounded and repatriated to Canada during the war.

The crater fight may have done “more to arouse St. John and New Brunswick generally to a sense of seriousness of the war than perhaps any other agency,” as newspaper editors R.W. Gould and S.K. Smith recounted in their regimental history of the 26th Battalion. Yet its military significance is limited largely to its propaganda value in uniting a province around the war effort and boosting Canadian Expeditionary Force enlistment. Official histories written in the post-war era do not mention the crater fight; historians of First World War tactics and minor operations similarly ignore the engagement opposite Vandamme Farm. Only recently have the 26th Battalion and their daylight raid merited wider attention. Like the German mine crater at K1 itself, the crater fight appears to have been consumed within the larger mythology of the First World War experience and the collective memory of its participants.

As surviving members of the 26th Battalion Overseas Club gathered each spring to celebrate the departure of the unit for England, attention invariably turned from the crater fight to the larger battles that were to follow. Published accounts of the Somme and Vimy in the province’s newspapers represented the greater proportion of how those events were interpreted in real-time and, after the war, how they would be remembered. They too are filled with contradiction. Most spared realism for self-censorship and high diction. The appetite for such stories was insatiable and, as newspaper accounts filtered back to the troops at the front, tales of courage and self-sacrifice reinforced their own interpretation of events far better than anything.


74 Wilson, *A Family of Brothers*, 264-266.
that might have provoked feelings of fear and helplessness. The crater fight may have been the first to meld fact and fiction into a single, unifying memory but it was certainly not the last for members of New Brunswick’s 26th Battalion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Captain Curt Mainville (Retired) is a 22-year veteran of the Canadian Forces and long-time historian of New Brunswick’s varied contributions to the First World War. He is the architect of the New Brunswick Great War Project, a collection of 143,000 newspaper clippings detailing the wartime experiences of an entire province from a social, military, political, economic and religious perspective. His pioneering research into CEF enlistment continues to refine and define the impact of war on society.