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Pursuit to Valenciennes 1918: The Fate of Soldiers at the Point of Capture

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Abstract: This article tracks the Canadian Corps' pursuit of the retreating German army in the last weeks of the First World War. As French hamlets, villages and towns were liberated, the war-weary troops—nursing grudges after almost four years of war—encountered civilians who had endured poor and sometimes brutal treatment under the yoke of the cruel invader. During the Battle of Valenciennes hundreds of German soldiers were killed; the vast majority perished under immense artillery barrages. But a number who survived the onslaught of shells and bullets succumbed to Canadians' rifles while or after surrendering. Motives are identified that drove frontline soldiers to kill surrendering opponents on the battlefield. This article contends that one strong motive for killing surrendering soldiers in the heat of battle was revenge for the untold civilian suffering in previously enemy-occupied territory.

Allied armies engaged in back-to-back coalition victories from July to November 1918. On 18 July 1918, during the Second Battle of the Marne, four French armies launched a successful counterstroke to the German offensive of 15 July. By nightfall the Allies had completely outmanoeuvered the German armies and driven them back over 4 miles (7 km).[1] General Erich Ludendorff's fifth and last major 1918 operation *Marneschutz-Reims,* or *Friedenssturm* (Peace Offensive), was a total failure. In his 24 July memorandum, Generalissimo Ferdinand Foch wrote, "The moment has come to abandon the general defensive attitude … and to pass to the

[1] David Zabecki, *The German 1918 Offensives: A case study in the operation level of war* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 259-68; and Michael Neiberg, *The Second Battle of the Marne* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 120-28.

offensive."[2] The Allies seized the strategic initiative. The tenacious German armies would continue the fight, now on the defensive, along the fluctuating front during a relentless forced withdrawal. Although the tide of war had turned, there remained the final Allied pursuit of the retreating German armies on the Western Front.

Throughout the Hundred Days campaign (8 August–11 November 1918) fortified German defences were ruptured as the Allies engaged in semi-mobile warfare, employing all-arms assault tactics supported by an effective logistics infrastructure. The German army on the Western Front was overwhelmed and defeated in the field.[3]

During the Canadian Corps' final set-piece attack in Valenciennes on 1-2 November hundreds of German soldiers succumbed to the immense artillery and machine gun barrages and close-quarters fighting.[4] However, some were slain after having discarded their weapons even though killing prisoners was morally wrong and was forbidden according to the 1907 Hague Convention, Article 23 (c), Section II Hostilities.[5]

This article examines the killing of potential prisoners at the point of capture based on the ordeals and experiences of battle-hardened Canadian soldiers. It traces the Canadian Corps' pursuit of the German army east of Cambrai to Valenciennes in the war's last two months. The frontline soldier had accrued scores to settle, after suffering the loss of comrades and surviving treacherous acts during trench warfare. As well, the Canadian soldier had heard stories and rumours about fellow soldiers' mistreatment and murder. Prisoner killing was not only due to this revenge and retaliation, but was also a consequence of indiscipline, fear or military expediency during combat.[6] This article contends that, in addition to these motives,

[2] Ferdinand Foch, *The Memoirs of Marshal Foch,* trans. Bentley Mott (London: William Heinemann, 1931), 427.

[3] For a Canadian perspective see Shane Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire: The Canadian Corps in the Last 100 Days of the Great War* (St. Catharines, ON: Vanwell Publishing, 2004); and J.L. Granatstein, *The Greatest Victory: Canada's One Hundred Days, 1918* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[4] War Diary [WD], 10th Infantry Brigade, November 1918, Appendix C, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4903, File 312, Library and Archives Canada [LAC].

[5] James B. Scott ed., *The Hague Conventions and Declarations of 1899 and 1907* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1915), 116.

[6] There were also psychological triggers leading to prisoner killings such as the dehumanisation of the enemy. This topic is covered elsewhere. See Paul Hodges, "The British Infantry and Atrocities on the Western Front, 1914-1918" (PhD Dissertation, Birkbeck College, University of London, 2006), 200-10.

The first German prisoner crossing the Canal de l'Escaut, Valenciennes. November, 1918. [Library and Archives Canada item ID no. 3403211]

the Canadians exacted revenge on surrendering German soldiers at Valenciennes after witnessing the wretched state of residents and refugees found in the newly Canadian-liberated territory of northeastern France.

LEADERSHIP AND DISCIPLINE

Culpable soldiers defied the established rules of war when they killed prisoners and potential prisoners: an "overt act of indiscipline."[7] This unlawful killing sometimes occurred due to war weariness (a sense of fatalism, a fed-up attitude in emotionally exhausted soldiers)[8] or the breakdown in military authority leading to an escalation

[7] Jordan Chase, "Unwilling to Continue, Ordered to Advance" (MA Thesis, University of Calgary, 2013), 99.
[8] Chase, "Unwilling to Continue, Ordered to Advance," 139.

in indiscipline.[9] Jack Granatstein asserts a collapse of discipline occurred at all levels of the Canadian Corps.[10]

Undoubtedly "disobedience and leadership are profoundly and intimately linked."[11] The quality of leadership influenced the lower ranks' decision to wholeheartedly follow orders. In fact, weakness in leadership caused erosion in discipline, which led to punishment.[12] Disciplinary problems arose when soldiers were led by inexperienced, unproven or over-zealous officers who had little regard for the rank-and-files' wellbeing. Leaders who inspired confidence and afforded the men respect and dignity were, in turn, trusted and respected. Their impartial disciplinary actions encouraged obedience and paternalistic officers took an active role in their subordinates' welfare. Lieutenant (Lieut.) Herbert Hammond, while serving briefly with the 47th Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) observed that the unit's commander lacked paternalism and "man-management skills," which unfortunately gave rise to indiscipline.[13] Officers and men were two separate and exclusive groups in the military hierarchy. A gulf existed between these groups no matter how sincerely the officer acted as a surrogate father to his subordinates.[14] Indeed, there was an immense gulf between these groups throughout the British army.[15]

Insubordination and indiscipline were manifestations of war weariness, which was widespread in the Hundred Days. Insubordination—a confrontation with a superior—could mean

[9] Jordan Chase, "'For Weariness Cannot but Fill our Men after so long a Period of Hardship and Endurance:' War Weariness in the Canadian Corps in the First World War" (PhD Dissertation, University of Western Ontario, 2019), 303.

[10] Granatstein, *The Greatest Victory*, 153. He does not specify what were senior officers' disciplinary infractions.

[11] Craig Leslie Mantle, "Loyal Mutineers: An Examination of the Connection between Leadership and Disobedience in the Canadian Army since 1885," in *The Unwilling and the Reluctant: Theoretical Perspectives on Disobedience in the Military*, ed. Craig L. Mantle (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2006), 69.

[12] David Campbell, "Military Discipline, Punishment, and Leadership in the First World War: The Case of the 2nd Canadian Division," in *The Apathetic and the Defiant: Case Studies of Canadian Mutiny and Disobedience, 1812 to 1919*, ed. Craig L. Mantle (Kingston and Toronto: Canadian Defence Agency Press and the Dundurn Group, 2007), 302.

[13] Gary Sheffield, "Officer-Man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the British Army, 1902-22" (PhD Dissertation, King's College London, 1994), 325.

[14] Isabella Losinger, "Officer-Man Relations in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919" (MA Thesis, Carleton University, 1990), 63, 262.

[15] J.G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 53.

rebuffed orders, refusal to parade and back talk. Minor acts of military indiscipline included shirked duty, absence, theft, looting, drunkenness and resisting arrest. In July 1918, Canadian Corps Commander Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie wrote that sixty-one of the 374 General Field Courts Martial held for 1st Canadian Division soldiers that year were for looting, house-breaking, being out of bounds and hampering military police.[16]

In Quiévrechain, a French border town, a stretcher bearer learned of nine murdered civilians. He hunted down trapped Germans and, unrestrained, executed them as they surrendered. Caught in a no man's land between legal and illegal acts of war, he blurred the distinction between killing and murder. He felt vindicated because "he wasn't killing prisoners, he was killing Germans."[17] The junior officers and NCOs, if they witnessed or were informed of this, did not intervene. These officers, at the end of the chain of command, demonstrated a failure of leadership for not overseeing their men's daily discipline and averting unsanctioned behaviour. So too had the unit commander, accountable for maintaining discipline, for not enforcing proper military conduct and immediately remedying any breaches of strict military discipline.

TREACHERY AND ATROCITIES DURING TRENCH WARFARE

Historians have studied extensively the fate of those surrendering in the First World War and other major wars, describing various circumstances that furnished soldiers' rationale for prisoner killing. Both hot-blooded (spontaneously committed mainly at the moment of capitulation) and cold-blooded (callously carried out after surrender primarily out of the combat zone) prisoner killings occurring during

[16] Craig Gibson, *Behind the Front: British Soldiers and French Civilians, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 363.
[17] "The Last Push," Chapter 15, Disc 3, *Flanders' Fields: Canadian Voices From WW1*, directed by J. Frank Willis (CBC Audio, 2006), DVD.

and after battle have been analysed.[18] One assessment of British soldiers' writings discloses that seventy of the eighty-two random incidents of prisoner-killing researched were hot-blooded killings, sixty-seven of which were at the point of capture.[19]

Quarter (exemption from death) could be denied while fighting without restraint in the cauldron of war. During close-range combat a soldier had no more than a fifty-fifty chance of being granted quarter.[20] When commenting on prisoner killing Desmond Morton explained, "once soldiers have screwed up their emotions to kill, it is easier to continue than to stop. It is a time of acute mental disability."[21] A soldier's life was in jeopardy when attempting to surrender, the most dangerous risk in combat. In the savagery of face-to-face combat, the killing impulse was not easily anesthetised. Violence could not necessarily be sundered from capture.

Military recruits were indoctrinated into an "extremely violent battlefield culture."[22] The combatant's predisposition (temperament, conditioning techniques of training and recent battlefield experience) was a crucial factor when deciding to grant mercy.[23] According to veteran Stephen Graham, "[t]he real driving power [to do what was required] lay in brutal thought and word and act."[24] A number of these sanctioned killers became indifferent to taking a life regardless of the situation. These seasoned fighters—trained to kill, paid to kill—could

[18] Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1998), 367-94; Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Tim Cook, "The Politics of Surrender: Canadian Soldiers and the Killing of Prisoners in the Great War," *The Journal of Military History,* 70, 3 (July, 2006); *How Fighting Ends: A History of Surrender*, ed. Holger Afflerbach and Hew Strachan (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012; reprint 2014); and Dale Blair, *No Quarter: Unlawful Killing and Surrender in the Australian War Experience 1915-18* (Port Adelaide, Australia: Ginninderra Press, 2015).

[19] Hodges, "The British Infantry and Atrocities on the Western Front, 1914-1918," 120.

[20] Richard Holmes, *Acts of War: The Behaviour of Men in Battle* (London: Cassell Military, 2004), 382. Holmes does not cite any evidence for this statistic.

[21] Randy Boswell, "When surrender was met with a bayonet blade," *The Ottawa Citizen*, 22 September 2006, A3.

[22] Niall Ferguson, "Prisoner Taking and Prisoner Killing in the Age of Total War," *War in History* 11, 2 (April 2004): 149.

[23] Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2009), 189.

[24] Stephen Graham, *A Private in the Guards* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1919), 213.

be merciless to a defeated enemy no longer with any means of defence. On 8 May 1915 during the German assault in the Ypres Salient, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry trenches at Bellewaerde Ridge had been mostly obliterated. Private (Pte.) Frederick Cox raised his hands in surrender as ordered by his German captor, who then deliberately put his rifle muzzle against Cox's palm and fired. Cox died of blood poisoning two week later while in captivity.[25] While waiting to attack the German front line at Givenchy on 15 June 1915, Pte. George Bell, 1st Battalion proclaimed, "We are no longer human. Kill! Kill!! Kill!!! that is our only instinct. With bayonet, bomb, trench knife and even with bare hands we kill."[26]

Some assailants under severe stress, adrenaline pumping and "half mad with excitement,"[27] committed prisoner killings at the moment of capture. The cornered enemy was killed out of hand, particularly if there was any resistance or hesitancy. Imagine the confusion on a chaotic battleground: some defenders immediately thrust their hands up in voluntary capitulation, while nearby others fought doggedly to the end. Veteran Victor Wheeler observed that in the white heat of battle "action is the soldier's instinctive reflex. There is … no time for weighing Justice in the scales of Humanity. There is only time for action, be it good or evil."[28] Veteran Ernst Jünger declared a soldier's blood was up after overrunning a well-defended trench; his killing impulse forbade the taking of prisoners.[29]

On the opening day of the Battle of Amiens a Royal Artillery officer discovered a trench full of dead Germans; Canadians had bayoneted them. He explained that it was not feasible to apprehend prisoners in a frontline trench.[30] They could not spare the manpower to secure prisoners during an attack. Although some German captives were killed throughout the conflict, this offence was not committed indiscriminately as some historians claim. Indeed, the

[25] George Pearson, *The Escape of a Princess Pat* (Toronto: McClelland, Goodchild & Stewart, 1918), 42-3.
[26] George V. Bell, Back to Blighty, MG30 E113, File 1, 47, LAC.
[27] Guy Chapman, *A Passionate Prodigality* (New York: Fawcett World Library, 1967), 80.
[28] Victor Wheeler, *The 50th Battalion in No Man's Land* (Edmonton: Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, 1980), 337.
[29] Ernst Jünger, *The Storm of Steel* (New York: Zimmermann & Zimmermann, 1985), 263-63.
[30] Gordon Brook-Shepherd, *November 1918: The Last Act of the Great War* (London: Collins, 1981), 60.

lack of corroborating evidence (often inconclusive) taints prisoner-killing stories with an apocryphal quality. Evidently, "such behaviour was episodic, not routine; opportunist, not systematic."[31] Stories could be misinterpreted. While serving in the trenches in the Ypres Salient in May 1916, Pte. Sidney Hampson recounted that 10th Battalion soldiers erected a large sign notifying the Germans that the Canadians did not take any prisoners. This dire warning was no doubt meant to halt trench raiding in the sector where the opposing trenches were only forty yards apart.[32] 21st Battalion Sergeant (Sgt.) William Doolan declared he never witnessed any prisoner atrocities although he heard about them. Doolan claimed that, in his outfit, they never went out of their way to be kind or cruel to prisoners.[33]

Emotion-based motives for prisoner killing were grief with its attendant anger, empowerment and, the most intense, revenge, which transformed into rage.[34] From the war's onset, German atrocities (the killing of a non-combatant) had infuriated Allied soldiers. Upon learning about the 7 May 1915 sinking of the *Lusitania*, George Ormsby serving in the 15th Battalion felt that few prisoners would be taken. He vowed retaliation stating that he joined the machine gun section to "mow down the brutes."[35] During the Battle of Passchendaele, Canadian stretcher parties were annihilated on the Gravenstafel road while evacuating wounded. According to 42nd Battalion soldiers, "It was then we swore that Fritz would, some day, pay, and pay dearly for his treachery. They would then learn what Canadian revenge meant."[36] Accrued grievances sparked quick bayonet work in September 1916 at Courcelette, where prisoner killings flourished as recorded by 2nd Canadian Division commander

[31] Alan Kramer, "Surrender of Soldiers in World War I," in *How Fighting Ends,* 277; and Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 64.
[32] Sidney Hampson, May 12, 1916 letter, Canadian Letters and Images Project (CLIP), accessed April 9, 2022, https://www.canadianletters.ca/.
[33] W.P. Doolan, CBC Flanders' Fields, RG41 B-III-1, Volume 10, LAC.
[34] Hodges, "The British Infantry and Atrocities on the Western Front, 1914-1918," 190; and Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*, 171.
[35] Martha Hanna, *Anxious Days and Tearful Nights: Canadian War Wives during the Great War* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2020), 36; and Tim Cook, "'My Whole Heart and Soul is in this War': The Letters and War Service of Sergeant G.L. Ormsby," *Canadian Military History*, 15, 1 (2006): 54.
[36] William Breckenridge, *From Vimy Ridge to Mons: A Historical Narrative* (self-published, 1919), 99.

Major-General (Maj.-Gen.) Richard Turner.[37] On 18 November that year, the 4th Canadian Division attacked Desire Trench taking 625 prisoners, after which German Sergeant Walter accused a Canadian officer of killing a captured German officer and an infantryman from the 120th Reserve Infantry.[38] Undeniably this vengeance at the sharp end was pervasive in the trenches.[39]

Lyn Macdonald implies that an order issued from British General Headquarters (GHQ) days before the Battle of the Somme directed British soldiers to give no quarter and take no prisoners. She claims the Prisoner of War (POW) cages were sparsely populated in the first ten weeks of the battle. The unequivocal order's third paragraph stated:

> It is the duty of all ranks to continue to use their weapons against the enemy's fighting troops, unless and until it is beyond all doubt that those have not only ceased all resistance but that, whether through having voluntarily thrown down their weapons or otherwise, they have definitely and finally abandoned all hope and intention of resisting further. In the case of apparent surrender, it lies with the enemy to prove his intention beyond the possibility of misunderstanding, before the surrender can be accepted as genuine.[40]

Macdonald's view concerning what troops believed this order meant has since been challenged pointing out that, although ambiguous, there was no intended encouragement to give no quarter. GHQ would have been mindful of Article 23 (d) of the Hague Convention—reprinted in the Field Service Pocket Book (1914), which was issued to British army officers—stating it was forbidden to declare no quarter will be given.[41]

In May 1917, Kaiser Wilhelm II instructed troops in Belgium to take no British prisoners. Seventeen years earlier when addressing his

[37] William Stewart, *The Canadians on the Somme, 1916: The Neglected Campaign* (Solihull, England: Helion & Company, 2017), 128.
[38] August Gallinger, *The Countercharge: The Matter of War-criminals from the German Side*, (Munich: Sueddeutsche Monatshefte, 1922), 48.
[39] Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare 1914-1918: The Live and Let Live System* (London: Pan Books, 2000), 207-08.
[40] Lyn Macdonald, *Somme* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 288-89.
[41] *Field Service Pocket Book* (London: HMSO, 1914; reprint, Devon, UK: David & Charles, 1971), 230.

troops who were leaving to suppress the Boxer Rebellion, the Kaiser had ordered: "No quarter will be given! Prisoners will not be taken!"[42]

Occasionally the jingoistic press in newspapers, inundated with propaganda, circulated tales of German atrocities. Possibly the most famous was that of a crucified Canadian soldier in the Ypres Salient in 1915. This powerful myth was finally proven false after the war.[43] Some, but not all soldiers were sceptical of such stories. In March 1917 the Canadian Press Association choose the Toronto *Globe's* Stewart Lyon as its first official European press correspondent. Lyon, known for his patriotism, emphasised "Hun barbarism."[44] An undocumented atrocity account appeared after the Battle of Hill 70 in August 1917. A Toronto newspaper on 10 November named ten men from the 87th Battalion whose bodies, it was reported, were discovered with their throats cut, after they had been captured and killed at Lens. In fact, five of them were reported missing on 14 August after the Germans had heavily shelled the forward and rear areas of the 87th Battalion's sector west of Lens. The other five were reported missing on 15 August, after the 87th mounted offensive patrols on the southwestern outskirts of Lens. Three of the missing, one a prisoner with a fatal gun shot wound, died and were buried. The other seven—whose bodies were never found—are commemorated on the ramparts of the Vimy Memorial.[45]

[42] Jonathan Boff, *Haig's Enemy: Crown Prince Rupprecht and Germany's War on the Western Front* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 267; and John Lewis-Stempel, *The War Behind the Wire: The Life, Death and Glory of British Prisoners of War 1914-18* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2014), 308.

[43] However, in 2002 Iain Overton discovered a letter from a British army nurse who named Sergeant Harry Band as the victim. Band, serving in the 15th Battalion, went missing in action on 24 April 1915. See Nathan Greenfield, *Baptism of Fire: The Second Battle of Ypres and the Forging of Canada, April 1915* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 190.

[44] Jeff Keshen, "All the News That Was Fit to Print: Ernest J. Chambers and Information Control in Canada, 1914-19," *Canadian Historical Review* 73, 3 (1992): 324.

[45] Jonathan Vance, *A Township at War* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2018), 175; WD, 11th Infantry Brigade, August 1917, RG9 III-D3, Volume 4904, File 316, LAC; and Canadian Great War Project, Newspaper Extract for Private Stephen Duckhouse.

The Germans frequently attempted *ruses de guerre.*[46] At Passchendaele, a party of Germans with bandaged heads—feigning wounds—had gestured to Canadian troops for assistance, but then opened fire.[47] The Australian official historian, Charles Bean recorded an incident near Passchendaele in September 1917: as a group of Germans was surrendering, one of them killed an Australian soldier. For this "vilest treachery" all the prisoners were bayonetted. Bean endorsed this lethal reprisal because "such incidents are inevitable in the heat of battle."[48] On 30 March 1918, as part of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade's assault on Moreuil Wood near Amiens, William Ferguson of the Royal Canadian Dragoons recounted, "I know when we were going through Moreuil Wood there was [*sic*] German prisoners laying [*sic*] there dead. We just shot them in the back anyway because we had some of our fellows bumped off, you know; they'd possum and they kicked off a couple of our fellows."[49] Fear, palpable on the front line, had motivated some Canadians to act impulsively in committing hot-blooded killings when anticipating treacherous acts during surrender.[50] Fear drove others to perpetrate cold-blooded executions when outnumbered by prisoners who might overpower them during escort to POW cages.

[46] Deadly acts of subterfuge were repeated in the Second World War when German soldiers pretending to surrender, threw grenades or ambushed and gunned-down Canadian soldiers whose comrades then sought revenge. Canadian soldiers carried out reprisal killings after learning Canadian prisoners had been executed by 12th SS Panzer Division soldiers. See Tim Cook, *Fight to the Finish: Canadians in the Second World War 1944-1945* (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2015), 159.

[47] WD, 49th Battalion, November 1917, Appendix A, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4940, File 440, LAC.

[48] C.E.W. Bean, *The Australian Imperial Force in France 1917,* Vol. 4, 13th Edition (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1943), 772.

[49] "The German Drive," Chapter 13, Disc 3*, Flanders' Fields: Canadian Voices From WW1*, directed by J. Frank Willis (CBC Audio, 2006), DVD.

[50] During the South African War, Canadian mounted infantry in the Strathcona's Horse allegedly hanged Boers who shot at British soldiers who had gone forward to take their surrender. They were reprimanded. See Chris Madsen, "Between Law and Inhumanity: Canadian Troops and British Responses to Guerrilla Warfare in the South African War," *in Inventing Collateral Damage: Civilian Casualties, War, and Empire*, ed. Stephen Rockel and Rick Halpern (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2009), 152.

THE PURSUIT

The craving for retaliation fostered throughout static trench warfare was further inflamed during the period of manoeuvre and set-piece attacks during the Hundred Days. For the first time in the war, Canadian soldiers liberated civilian-inhabited cities, towns and villages that had spent years under oppressive German occupation. Already bitter over killed and maimed pals, some callous battle-tempered warriors were eager to settle accounts, hoping to add more names to German Rolls of Honour. They would seek further payback as they tracked the fleeing enemy eastward, prepared to avenge non-combatant victims of war.

Frontline soldiers developed coping strategies to endure the chaos and brutality of war. Some adopted a stoic attitude, took a fatalistic approach to war, or relied on alcohol. Others adhered to a simple faith or religion, had strong family ties or maintained a sense of humour.[51] These schemes were indispensable when dealing with the death or mutilation of a comrade or devoted officer to whom they felt a fierce sense of accountability. The coping mechanisms were similarly employed when grappling with reactions to the civilians' shocking stories of oppression, starvation, shelling and atrocities.

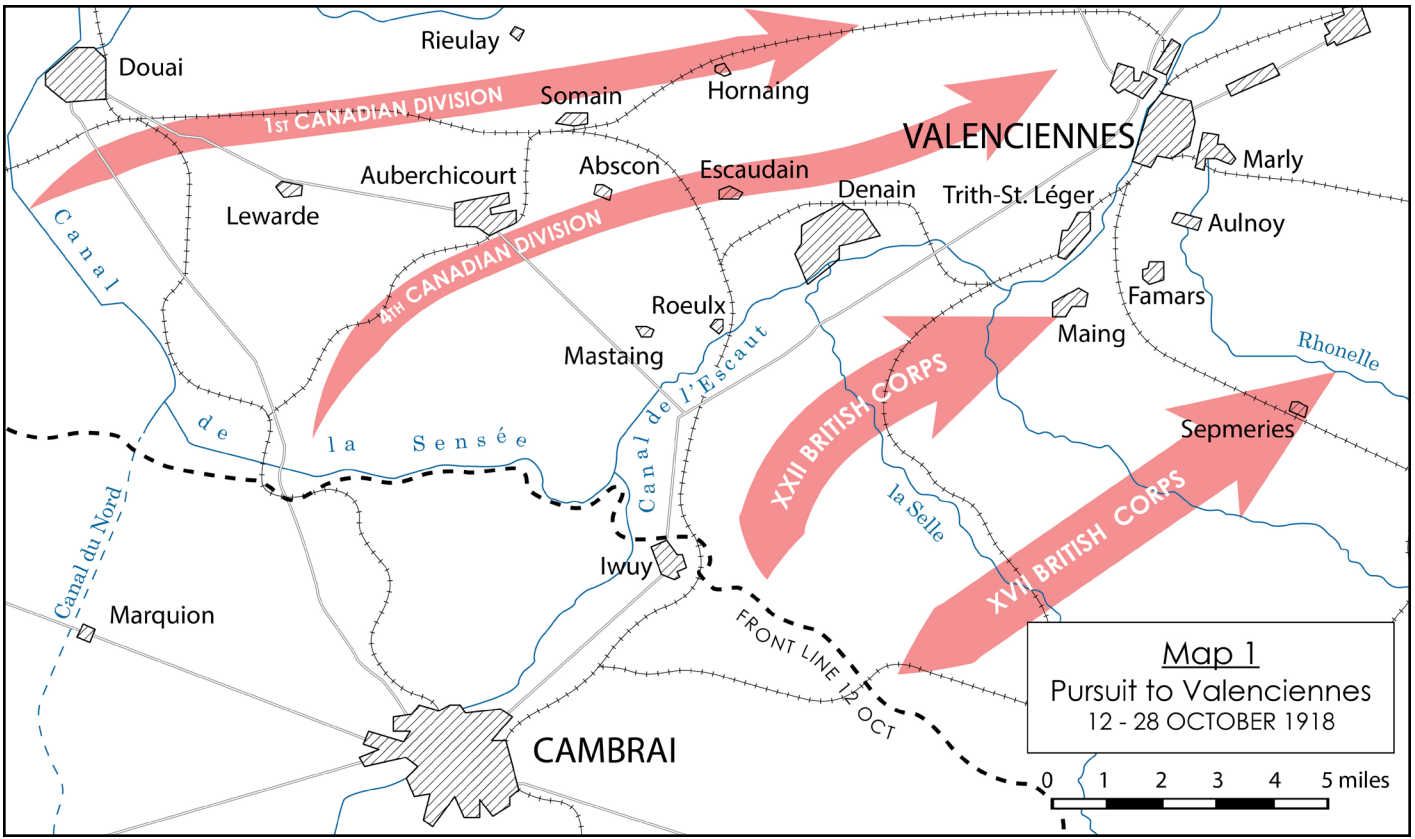
In September 1918, after capturing Récourt (northwest of Marquion), the 50th Battalion discovered forty emaciated French women, sealed in a cave, who had been forced to do manual labour and perform degrading acts. One young woman, injured by shell fire, had not received any medical assistance. This appalling scene left a "never-healing scar on many a young soldier's memory!"[52]

At the start of the advance (12 to 17 October), the 1st Canadian Division's Field Artillery batteries fired daily test barrages over the Canal de la Sensée while the troops engaged in aggressive patrols and raids in mopping-up operations.[53] These activities aided in determining their opponents' strength and initial moment of disengagement.

[51] For a discussion on British and German coping strategies, see Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 85-107, Appendix 1.

[52] Wheeler, *The 50th Battalion in No Man's Land*, 339-40.

[53] G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada: The History of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery Volume 1 1534-1919* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967), 363-64; and Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Army,* 118.


Douai
Rieulay
Somain
Hornaing
1ST CANADIAN DIVISION
VALENCIENNES
Marly
Auberchicourt
Abscon
Escaudain
Denain
Trith-St. Léger
Aulnoy
Lewarde
Canal de la Sensée
4TH CANADIAN DIVISION
Roeulx
Mastaing
Famars
Maing
Rhonelle
Canal de l'Escaut
XXII BRITISH CORPS
Sepmeries
la Selle
XVII BRITISH CORPS
Canal du Nord
Iwuy
Marquion
FRONT LINE 12 OCT
CAMBRAI
Map 1
Pursuit to Valenciennes
12 - 28 OCTOBER 1918
0 1 2 3 4 5 miles

There was no "tit-for-tat" shelling on 17 October, as the Germans had commenced a large-scale withdrawal to the Hermann Line where they entrenched at the Canal de l'Escaut.[54] The Canadians pursued the enemy until the evening of 23 October where the corps front stabilised along the canal—a 18,000-yard (16.5 km) water-barrier front extending from Trith-St. Léger on the western tow-path of the canal (4th Canadian Division sector) north to Condé (3rd Canadian Division sector).[55]

There would be no slacking in the chase to the canal. Armoured cars, Canadian Light Horse cavalry squadrons, machine gun batteries, 6-inch trench mortar units and cyclist companies were attached to the infantry formations as pursuit troops. During the daily tracking, they were to keep in touch with the enemy, harassing and accelerating their retirement.[56] From mid-October onwards pockets of stiff resistance hindered the Canadian Corps' advance. The Germans' fall-back tactics included abandoning held positions during the night and entrenching themselves in positions difficult to shell, with stiffened opposition from machine gun posts and snipers before extracting themselves again.[57]

The Canadians encountered premeditated devastation comparable to the scorched earth policy enacted during the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line in March 1917. At that time Ernst Jünger believed, "War means the destruction of the enemy without scruple and by any means."[58] This systematic wanton havoc slowed the Canadians' progress. They faced a wasteland of cratered crossroads, mined railway crossings and bridge abutments, chopped telegraph poles, wrecked bridges, smashed mining machinery, poisoned wells and manipulated canal water levels. At one road crossing a time-fused detonator had blown a minenwerfer bomb buried four feet

[54] Arthur Bick, *The Diary of an Artillery Officer: The 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery on the Western Front*, ed. Peter Bick (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2011), 172-73.

[55] Andrew McNaughton, "The Capture of Valenciennes: A Study in Co-ordination," *Canadian Defence Quarterly* 10, 3 (April 1933): 279.

[56] Arthur Currie, *Canadian Corps Operations During the Year 1918* (Ottawa: Department of Militia and Defence, 1918), 73; and Ted Glenn, *Riding Into Battle: Canadian Cyclists in the Great War* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2018), 107-17.

[57] Narrative of Operations of the 11th Canadian Infantry Brigade, RG9 III-D-2, Volume 4797, File 84, LAC.

[58] Jünger, *The Storm of Steel*, 126-27.

below the pave stones, producing four craters.[59] The entire Douai-Valenciennes Railway was dynamited.[60] Frustrating holdups occurred when, for instance, mammoth amounts of manure from German horse transport had to be removed from roadways.[61] Canadian engineers were tasked with overhauling a logistical infrastructure wrecked by shell and sabotage.[62]

The German military implemented various types of booby-traps, the arming of which was a risky business—the remains of Germans who had been preparing a booby-trap were found in a gallery under a road.[63] Silent long-delay-action fuses (glass tubes filled with corrosive liquid, which ate away a wire), were embedded in high explosive (HE) shells. These were primed for one, two, twenty-four or seventy-two hours; set to destroy guns, battery positions, dug-outs, depots and abandoned ammunition dumps. Improvised explosive devices were hidden in furnished dug-outs, coal dumps and behind doors. Primed hand grenades beneath helmets awaited souvenir-hunting soldiers. Mines fired electrically from a distance were hidden on bridges and in billets. Delay-action mines, a few with 1,000-lb charges, exploded under railway tracks, in railway centres and in abandoned villages. Mines in Cambrai and Roisel were timed for sixteen days and forty-seven days respectively.[64] One such mine timed for thirty to thirty-five days blew up in Caudry (east of Cambrai) inflicting many casualties.[65] Percussion booby-traps were found in the 46th Battalion area: trench mortar shells buried in the ground with a board laid on top of the fuse. Some German prisoners were rounded up to remove these land mines.[66] Other prisoners were compelled to sample water from captured wells.

[59] Currie, *Canadian Corps Operations During the Year 1918*, 73; and WD, 4th Brigade, CE, October 1918, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4992, File 647, LAC.
[60] Hugh Urquhart, *The History of the 16th Battalion (The Canadian Scottish) Canadian Expeditionary Force in the Great War 1914-1919* (Toronto: The MacMillan Company, 1932), 319.
[61] WD, 3rd Canadian Divisional Train, October 1918, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 5020, File 769, LAC.
[62] Michael Ryan, "Supplying the Materiel Battle: Combined Logistics in the Canadian Corps, 1915-1918" (MA Thesis, Carleton University, 2005), 128.
[63] WD, 3rd Canadian Tunnelling Company, October 1918, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 5003, File 686, LAC.
[64] Amendments to S.S. 163, RG9 III-C-5, Volume 4426, Folder 3, File 6, LAC.
[65] Blair Ripley, "Delayed Action Mines as Affecting the Railways on the British Western Front," *Canadian Railway and Marine World*, October (1919): 521-22.
[66] WD, 4th Brigade, CE, September 1918, LAC.

Owing to the continuous advance, time-consuming supply transportation from distant railheads hindered the British Expeditionary Force's progress more than the Germans' fighting withdrawal.[67] Nevertheless, the Canadian Corps' average pace of uninterrupted advance was 2.8 miles (4.5 km) per day throughout the period 17 to 24 October as the front was pushed eastward.[68] On Saturday 19 October, the Canadians liberated some forty towns and villages. By this time Lewarde, Somain, Abscon, Mastaing, Roeulx, Escaudain, Hornaing and Denain were free.[69] The people greeted the Canadians with embraces and cheering. An old man hugged Kenneth Foster, a twenty-one-year-old serving in the 2nd Battalion, in true French style. Foster recalled, "first one side and then the other. It so happened that said Frenchman was wearing an elegant beard, also, he was chewing tobacco and the juice thereof flowed freely down his facial adornment."[70] For the medical staff, the appearance of liberated civilians signified a defining moment that victory was in sight.[71]

The weary Canadian infantry—with their pent-up hostilities and grudges—were further enraged by the aftermath of German atrocities in the towns and villages during their pursuit. The occupation forces had "endangered civilian life through harsh restrictions, the repression of non-compliant behaviour, the imposition of a massive military presence … material exploitation, and the dismantling of 'native' institutions."[72] Nonetheless, most German soldiers billeted in the French homes were civil lodgers. The organised authority, not the individual soldier, had imposed its tyranny on the inhabitants.

[67] Ian Brown, "Feeding Victory: The Logistic Imperative Behind the Hundred Days," in *1918: Defining Victory*, ed. Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey (Canberra, Australia: Army Unit History, 1999), 146.
[68] Currie, *Canadian Corps Operations During the Year 1918*, 83.
[69] *Report of the Ministry: Overseas Military Forces of Canada 1918* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1919), 174.
[70] Kenneth W. Foster Memoir, CLIP, accessed April 9, 2022, https://www.canadianletters.ca/.
[71] Heather Moran, "Stretcher Bearers and Surgeons: Canadian Front-Line Medicine during the First World War, 1914-1918" (PhD Dissertation, University of Western Ontario, 2008), 246.
[72] Sophie de Schaepdrijver, "Populations under occupation," in *The Cambridge History of the First World War,* Vol. III: *Civil Society*, ed. Jay Winter (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 243.

Although brutalised by the war, rendering them somewhat "impervious to the horror around them,"[73] witnessing the senseless suffering of local inhabitants weighed heavily on the liberators:

> Wounded or killed civilians seemed to have a most depressing effect on the troops. Men, on whom the sight of dead and wounded fellow soldiers apparently had little or no effect, appeared quite shocked when the victims were civilians. Violent death and wounds were somehow dignified by a uniform but when they came to those in ordinary clothes they seemed incompatible and almost horrible. The sight of a child wounded or killed by shell fire would sink a whole battalion in the depths of depression.[74]

Some comfortable billets were available in these reclaimed communities. A few gardens were still stocked with vegetables.[75] Horse carcasses lay strewn along the roadside in Lewarde; their rumps had been cut out to feed German troops or French inhabitants.[76] A trainload of Lewarde furniture, which the Germans had looted, was seized. The Germans had destroyed all the pumps and hydrants in Abscon, leaving most residents without water. A few wells were opened and tank lorries supplied water.[77] Canadian Engineer officer John Menzies wrote regarding another village where houses had been ransacked and babies' cradles had been "filthed." Aware that "there were civilians here, he [the enemy] shelled the village with gas. One of the shells hit the house I am in now, and the two little kiddies, pretty little girls, were deathly sick from the fumes."[78] The town of Auberchicourt was absolutely deserted, the citizens forced out. Germans had looted their homes, smashed furniture and wrecked the coal mines. An artilleryman was killed when he struck a chord on a

[73] Peter Farrugia, "Introduction," in *Portraits of Battle: Courage, Grief, and Strength in Canada's Great War,* ed. Peter Farrugia and Evan Habkirk (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2021), 5.
[74] Charles Henry Savage 1936 Memoir, CLIP, accessed April 9, 2022, https://www.canadianletters.ca/.
[75] WD, 102nd Battalion, October 1918, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4945, File 456, LAC.
[76] Wilfred Kerr, *Arms and the Maple Leaf: The Memoir of Wilfred Kerr, Canadian Field Artillery, 1918* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 2005), 118.
[77] WD, 4th Brigade, CE, October 1918, LAC.
[78] John Menzies, "Following Fritz, October 1918," in *Battle Lines: Eyewitness Accounts From Canada's Military History*, ed. J.L. Granatstein and Norman Hillmer (Toronto: Thomas Allen Publishers, 2010), 204.

piano wired with a hidden bomb. The disgraced enemy had earned a "foul and dirty reputation."[79]

Troops in Somain listened, "with much sentiment," to the civilians' harrowing stories such as children compelled to gather up and bury mutilated bodies.[80] Many people there had lived in flooded cellars for days until an influenza epidemic broke out.[81] The 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade (CIB) headquarters ordered that the town of Abscon's 2,300 civilians be fed.[82] The responsibility for feeding the civilian population in addition to supplying fighting troops taxed the resources of the mechanised and horse-transport systems. Veteran Will Bird sympathised with the underfed, starving inhabits of the freed villages. Without rations one day, he scrounged for food from a nearby British outfit. The cook was serving hot mulligan stew to some fifteen children, courtesy of the Tommies who had donated their dinners. Bird never asked for a helping.[83] Currie observed that many Canadian units voluntarily donated 15 per cent of their rations to the civilians.[84]

The retreating Germans continued to forage or pillage whatever they could in the campaign zone. Their commandeering system was absolute:

> He has taken away with him everything. Not a horse nor a cow, a pig nor a hen, is left in the country. In one village he has even taken the nanny-goat whose milk was keeping alive a sick child. He burned the straw he threshed. Where he could not remove grain he scattered it over the barnyard.[85]

The 10th CIB's 44th Battalion first came upon repatriated inhabitants in Mastaing. Stoves, chairs and tables had been

[79] L. McLeod Gould, *From B.C. to Baisieux*: *Being the Narrative History of the 102nd Canadian Infantry Battalion* (Victoria, BC: Thos. Cusack Presses, 1919), 115.
[80] Breckenridge, *From Vimy to Mons*, 261.
[81] CAMC Casualties, RG9 III-D-2, Volume 4810, Folder Medical, LAC.
[82] Subsistence, RG9 III-D-2, Volume 4810, Folder Civilians, LAC.
[83] Will Bird, *Thirteen Years After: The Story of the Old Front Line* (Toronto: Maclean Publishing, 1932), 165.
[84] *The Selected Papers of Sir Arthur Currie: Diaries, Letters,* and *Report to the Ministry, 1917-1933,* ed. Mark Humphries (Waterloo, ON: LCMSDS Press of Wilfred Laurier University, 2008), 126.
[85] John Livesay*, Canada's Hundred Days*: *With the Canadian Corps from Amiens to Mons, Aug. 8 - Nov. 11, 1918* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1919), 338.

smashed, mattresses ripped to shreds and every mirror shattered. An axe-wielding German had demolished a piano. Open fireplaces contained bombs. Horses stabled in living rooms left "all in filth unspeakable."[86] The troops regarded the wanton destruction as a crime against humanity. In Roeulx, the night before their deliverance from bondage, a seventy-five-year-old woman was executed for leaving a light on during the night.[87]

The 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles (CMR) battalion marched to Rieulay. The troops realised the cruelties endured under the heel of the detested enemy as the citizens informed them that the Germans had requisitioned their animals and grain. The people had received no portion for their arduous labour. Even young boys had been forced to dig trenches. The slightest rule infraction had meant imprisonment. The 4th CMRs were generous with their food in Hornaing, donating bread, bully beef, biscuits and iron rations to the people.[88] In the mining village of Escaudain, the departing Germans had dropped explosives in local mine shafts before pilfering cows and hens.[89] The 19th Battalion entered Neuville-sur-l'Escaut, where the medical officer and staff encountered vermin-infested, blind, starving and venereal-diseased souls.[90] All ranks were notified that the enemy had released infected prostitutes from venereal hospitals into the Canadian Corps-inhabited area.[91] Apparently 60,000 infected women had been released from hospital.[92]

On 19 October, 44th and 47th Battalion troops entered Denain. Some 25,000 residents and evacuees occupied the mining town, which

[86] Joseph Hayes, *The Eighty-Fifth In France and Flanders* (Halifax, NS: Royal Print & Litho, 1920), 179.
[87] WD, 50th Battalion, October 1918, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4941, File 441, LAC.
[88] Steward Bennett, *The 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles 1914-1919* (Toronto: Murray Printing, 1926), 142.
[89] Kerr, *Arms and the Maple Leaf,* 120.
[90] David Campbell, *It Can't Last Forever: The 19th Battalion and the Canadian Corps in the First World War* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2017), 468.
[91] Major G. Cline, RG9 III-C-5, Volume 4436, Folder 2, File 1, LAC.
[92] Lyndsay Rosenthal, "New Battlegrounds: Treating VD in Belgium and Germany, 1918-19," in *Canada 1919: A Nation Shaped by War*, ed. Tim Cook and J.L. Granatstein (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020), 59.

bordered the Canal de l'Escaut.[93] Its steelworks, which had employed 4,000 men, were destroyed and the mines rigged for demolition.[94] Coal mine buildings lay gutted and machinery had been hauled away or smashed.[95] Seven delay-action mines were found and removed. The retreating Germans had pummelled the town with indiscriminate shelling. There was no distinction between soldier and civilian; war was waged against both. The freed citizens, numb after four years of repression, recounted stories of cruel German military force and overbearing regulations. Denain's mayor M. Delphien had been arrested in 1916 for instructing the people not to disclose their copper.[96] Women had toiled in sandbag factories under constant threat of the lash. Sandbags destined for German trenches were also produced in industrial towns such as Tourcoing, Roubaix and Lille by people pressed into service.[97] 50th Battalion members were anxious "to deal the *Deutschlanders* the *coup de grâce*."[98]

On 30 October, the 44th Battalion drove the Germans further north of Famars. Hundreds of residents were found in an unspeakable state of misery, having been imprisoned in cellars for more than a week with practically no food.[99]

The Canadians would soon discover that Valenciennes' citizens, young and old, had also endured forced work, heavy fines, imprisonment and deportation. Their resources had been siphoned

[93] From the German Spring Offensive in March to August 1918, more than 200,000 people were evacuated from areas under threat of German incursion. See Peter Gatrell and Philippe Nivet, "Refugees and exiles," in *The Cambridge History of the First World War,* Vol. III: *Civil Society*, ed. Jay Winter (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 188.

[94] Helen McPhail, *The Long Silence: Civilian Life under the German Occupation of Northern France, 1914-1918* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 34, 216.

[95] Karl Weatherbe, *From the Rideau to the Rhine and Back: The 6th Field Company and Battalion Canadian Engineers* (Toronto: Hunter-Rose, 1928), 424.

[96] Paule Cadoret-Fouchet, *Valenciennes 1914-1918: Journal d'Andrée Ducatez* (self-published, 2017), 154. However, after the war Delphien was accused of treacherous collaboration with the Germans. See James Connolly, *The experience of occupation in the Nord, 1914-1918: Living with the enemy in First World War France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 99-100.

[97] Edgar Russenholt, *Six Thousand Canadian Men: Being the History of the 44th Battalion Canadian Infantry 1914-1919* (Winnipeg: The Forty-fourth Battalion Association, 1932), 205; and Annette Becker, "Life in an Occupied Zone: Lille, Roubaix, Tourcoing," in *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced*, ed. Hugh Cecil and Peter Liddle (London: Leo Cooper, 1996), 634.

[98] Wheeler, *The 50th Battalion* in *No Man's Land*, 362.

[99] Russenholt, *Six Thousand Canadian Men*, 213.

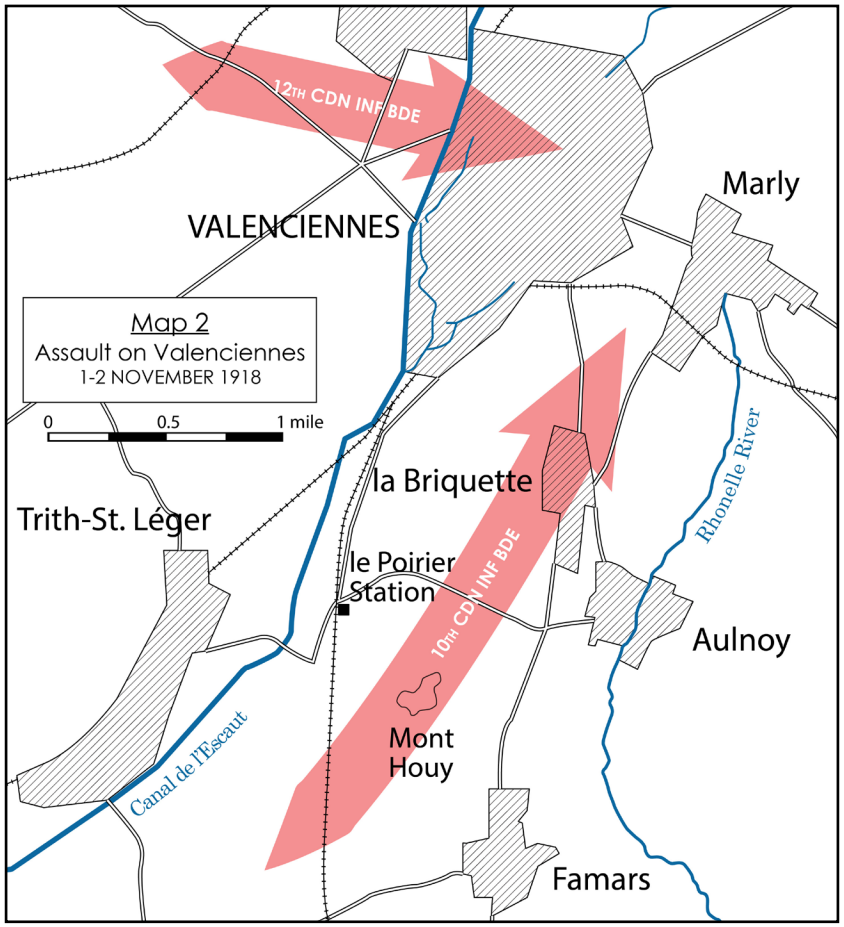
off, their factories emptied and the city's renowned linen stolen.[100] Even the German Red Cross workers who had entered Valenciennes in September 1914 had been armed with rifles, sabres and revolvers.[101]

COMBAT AND CAPITULATION

Five German divisions held the city of Valenciennes—an important railway hub bordering the Canal de l'Escaut, with 5,000 citizens and refugees. German defenders controlled the high ground 3,000 yards (2.7 km) to the south in the vicinity of Mont Houy, a wooded knoll. A set-piece operation was proposed to capture the city. The 10th CIB would initially clear Mont Houy, then advance north to the Valenciennes-Maubeuge railway on the southern border of Valenciennes and lastly secure the industrialised suburb of Marly as the brigade enveloped Valenciennes from the south.[102] The 12th CIB would establish bridgeheads over the canal.[103] Currie pointed to Mont Houy and exclaimed to Canadian Corps Heavy Artillery Brigadier-General (Brig.-Gen.) Andrew McNaughton: "The war must be nearly over now and I do not want any more fighting or casualties that can be helped."[104] (See Appendix: The Battle of Valenciennes Casualties)

The 4th Canadian Division (Maj.-Gen. David Watson), XXII Corps and XVII Corps unleashed the attack at 5:15 a.m. on Friday, 1 November from the canal southeast to Sepmeries.[105] The six Heavy Artillery and eight Field Artillery brigades' 296 guns and howitzers erupted on the 2,500-yard (2.3 km) Canadian front from the canal

[100] Georges Gromaire, *L'Occupation Allemande en France (1914-1918)*, (Paris: Payon, 1925). For an insight into those caught between the lines, see Tammy Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War, 1914-1918* (New York: University Press), 2010.
[101] Cadoret-Fouchet, *Valenciennes 1914-1918*, 58.
[102] James Edmonds, *Military Operations France and Belgium 1918 V*ol. V*: 26th September – 11th November The Advance to Victory* (Nashville, Tennessee: The Battery Press, 1993), 395; and 4th Canadian Division Report On Valenciennes Operations October 27th to November 6th, RG9 III-D-2, Volume 4797, File 84, LAC.
[103] Valenciennes Instructions No. 1 and No. 2, RG9 III-C-1, Volume 3914, Folder 46, File 9, LAC.
[104] Notes dictated by D.H.S. 18/12/25, RG24-C-6-e, Volume 1821, File GAQ-5-27, LAC.
[105] W. Hastings Anderson, "The Operations Round Valenciennes by the First Army, October-November, 1918: A Study in Co-Operation," *Canadian Defence Quarterly* 11, 3 (April 1925): 296.



to the Rhonelle River.[106] Without tank assistance, the understrength 44th Battalion attacked on the right bordering Famars beneath a canopy of steel with two companies and a mopping-up party. Their objectives were Mont Houy, La Briquette and Aulnoy. Although the enemy shelled Mont Houy with mustard gas, by 6:30 a.m. it was overrun. The Canadians and British secured Aulnoy by 7:00 a.m. Near Aulnoy, the 44th captured and evacuated machine gun and "Toc Emma" crews before they went into action. Gas jars primed for gradual leakage were found in Aulnoy's cellars where 1,400 people

[106] Andrew McNaughton, The Development of Artillery in the Great War, 12, RG24-C-6-e, Volume 1821, File GAQ-5-27, LAC.

were living. Many *Feldgraue* hiding in the houses were taken prisoner; those who held out were killed.[107]

The 44th and 46th Battalions, short of experienced frontline soldiers, recruited runners, batmen, orderly room staff, cooks and bandsmen for mopping-up parties. Fearing for their own safety and not wanting to take any chances these untrained squads may have lacked the discipline to refrain from shooting when they encountered uncooperative opponents.

The British Manual of Military Law (908 pages long) Chapter XIV, paragraph 80 stated "A commander may not put his prisoners to death because their presence retards his movements or diminishes his means of resistance by necessitating a large guard, or by reason of their consuming his supplies."[108] However, military expediency trumped mercy when prisoners were viewed as an impediment to the battle's momentum. No time whatsoever could be lost during the operation; the attackers had to keep pace behind the 205-minute-long Field Artillery creeping barrage's predetermined rate of 100 yards every 4, then 5 minutes. A moral dilemma arose: the attacking Canadians, in order to maintain the attack's tempo, could give no quarter to surrendering opponents. Otherwise, they could escort prisoners back thus jeopardising their fighting efficiency, or await an escort and risk losing the protection of the barrage and shrapnel smoke screen.

In 1902, three years after the first Hague Convention, the German General Staff issued *Kriegsbauch im Landkriege*. Prisoner killing was sanctioned: "In the case of overwhelming necessity, when other means of precaution do not exist and the existence of the prisoners becomes a danger to one's own existence." Self-preservation justified giving no quarter.[109]

Killing prisoners was sometimes viewed as a military necessity if it meant, paradoxically, saving lives. For example, while attempting to secure Regina Trench in the fall of 1916, Pte. Gilbert Caunt, 8th Battalion recalled that prisoners were sent back to the Canadian line

[107] History of the 44th Battalion, CEF, Textual Records 58C 1 34.14, Canadian War Museum; and 44th Battalion, Appendix 27, Report on Operations, RG9 III-D-2, Volume 4797, File 84, LAC.

[108] *Manual of Military Law* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 6th Edition, 1914; reprint 1917), 248.

[109] *The War Book of the German General Staff*, trans. John Morgan (New York: McBride, Nast & Company, 1915), 97.

unescorted. Not surprisingly, they recovered their guns, turned and shot the Canadian attackers in the back.[110] George Bell observed that, at times, support troops moving up to the front had thrown bombs at prisoners heading in the opposite direction.[111]

During the Battle of Amiens Corporal (Cpl.) William Kerr, 5th Battalion claimed an order of battle from 1st Canadian Division commander Maj.-Gen. Archibald Macdonell included the catchphrase "prisoners are a nuisance." This order likely issued by battalion or company headquarters, was verbally relayed from man to man and open to misinterpretation. After having taken a trench, Kerr encountered a German who had been shooting at him. Kerr's first instinct—"orders is orders"—was to shoot to kill. However, as the German emerged from the pillbox holding a flag marked with a red cross, Kerr hesitated and shot him in the leg instead.[112] The disarmed enemy had "mutated with remarkable speed from dangerous foe to vulnerable human being."[113]

Before the Battle of Amiens, Brig.-Gen. George Tuxford, 3rd CIB issued an unambiguous directive, with reference to a torpedoed Canadian hospital ship: the battle cry on 8 August was "Llandovery Castle," which "should be the last to ring in the ears of the Hun as the bayonet was driven home."[114] Cpl. Deward Barnes, 19th Battalion wrote that upon reaching the Germans' front line early on August 8, many of the defenders promptly surrendered, shouting mercy and *kamerad*. But they were shot in the back as they headed to the Canadians' line.[115] Nonetheless, there is a paucity of recorded evidence that prisoner killing was official policy mandated by the Canadian general staff. In July 1918, Currie allegedly informed 4th Brigade soldiers on parade at Hauteville that the higher command did not want any prisoners. Currie's open-air speech (during heavy showers)

[110] "The Somme," Chapter 8, Disc 2, *Flanders' Fields: Canadian Voices From WW1*, directed by J. Frank Willis (CBC Audio, 2006), DVD.

[111] George Bell, Back to Blighty, MG30 E113, File 2, 125, LAC.

[112] Peter Hart, *1918 A Very British Victory* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), 348-50.

[113] Malcolm Brown, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the Western Front* (London: Pan Books, 2001), 250.

[114] James McWilliams and James Steel, *Amiens: Dawn of Victory* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2001), 31.

[115] *It Made You Think of Home: The Haunting Journal of Deward Barnes, Canadian Expeditionary Force: 1916-1919*, ed. Bruce Cane (Toronto: The Dundurn Group, 2004), 228.

was possibly misinterpreted.[116] It is unlikely that Currie requested no prisoners, as they were a source of intelligence for future operations such as Amiens. Currie had demanded prisoners as the Canadians prepared for Vimy Ridge.[117]

The 46th Battalion mopped up Aulnoy and Mont Houy Wood before overtaking the 44th north of Aulnoy. Lewis guns, bombs and fixed bayonets rendered numerous German troops *hors de combat*. Every cellar was populated with German infantry and "[t]hose that offered any show of resistance were killed and the rest sent back as prisoners."[118] Undoubtedly, a few who capitulated in the heat of battle never left the cellars; this last-ditch below-ground fighting infuriated the attackers. Snipers and heavy enemy machine gun fire impeded patrols from exploiting Marly where citizens had taken refuge in the cellars. After observing hundreds of enemy dead in Valenciennes, Lieut. Ronald Holmes, 46th Battalion admitted, "We surely got ours back for almost a month of hard chasing and dirty fighting."[119]

Assailants were in a precarious situation while closing in on a cornered adversary. When approaching the armed enemy, some hesitated beyond grenade-throwing range. Major (Maj.) Henry Rose, 58th Battalion suffered a serious bomb wound to his head during an assault at Amiens. He later discovered that a German prisoner had been responsible.[120] The captor's dilemma was "to accept a surrender, with all the personal risks entailed; or to shoot the surrenderer, with the likelihood that resistance would be stiffened, thus increasing the risks to one's own side as a whole."[121] In a courtyard in Marly sixty Germans capitulated to a small 46th Battalion patrol led by Lieut. John MacLeod and Sgt. Hugh Cairns. As the prisoners were being disarmed, a German officer sensed the vulnerability of his opponents and shot Cairns through his body. Sinking to his knees, Cairns shot the officer and others who had snatched up their weapons. The

[116] Cook, "The Politics of Surrender," 655.
[117] Ian Brown, "Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie and the Canadian Corps 1917-1918: The Evolution of a Style of Command and Attack" (MA Thesis, University of Calgary, 1991), 12.
[118] 46th Canadian Infantry Battalion, Appendix 28, RG9 III-D-2, Volume 4797, File 84, LAC.
[119] *Letters from the Front: Being a Record of the Part Played by Officers of the Bank in the Great War 1914-1919* Vol. 1, ed. William Duthie and Charles Foster (Toronto: The Canadian Bank of Commerce, 1920), 304.
[120] *Letters from the Front*, 312.
[121] Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, 373.

botched surrender triggered a firefight, which ended with few of the prisoners surviving their officer's treacherous act.[122]

The 47th Battalion, to the left of the 46th, faced serious opposition beyond their initial objective, Le Poirier Station. There was relentless fighting and "enemy posts did not surrender until many had been killed with the bayonet, or shot down."[123] The 47th had to ford streams including the Vieil Escaut flowing alongside the eastern bank of the Canal de l'Escaut. Both units reached the southern outskirts of Valenciennes shortly past 9:00 a.m. The 47th captured an estimated 600 prisoners including a captain who capitulated with his entire company.[124] The war-weary captain was likely unwilling to carry on the fight, sacrificing more soldiers, and so led his men into group surrender.[125]

The 50th Battalion initially supported the 47th, with D Company attached to them for mopping-up operations—a dangerous task leaving them exposed from all directions. Street fighting was vicious and intense as the troops rushed from house to house to outflank and overwhelm German machine guns firing at close range. They detained 450 prisoners near Le Poirier Station but many who refused to surrender were "despatched without mercy."[126] The other three companies dealt with small enemy parties, which had remained undetected. Maj. James Parry temporarily in command of 50th Battalion, confessed with moral indifference, "It was impossible to avoid taking so many [prisoners] as they surrendered in batches of from 20 to 50, but some very useful killing was also achieved."[127] Once surrounded, stranded defenders, some possibly injured, gave themselves up once they realised that resistance was futile. This was "forced" surrender of soldiers whose morale was intact. Stupefied and demoralised by the dense artillery concentration, other defenders'

[122] Arthur Currie, "Introduction," in George Nasmith, *Canada's Sons and Great Britain in the Great War* (Toronto: Winston, 1919), vii-viii; and James McWilliams and James Steel, *The Suicide Battalion* (St. Catharines, ON: Vanwell Publishing, 1990), 201. Cairns' numerous acts of valour that day earned him the last of sixty-four Canadian Victoria Crosses awarded in the First World War.

[123] 47th Canadian Battalion, Appendix 29, RG9 III-D-2, Volume 4797, File 84, LAC.

[124] 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade, Narrative of Operations, RG9 III-D-2, Volume 4797, File 84, LAC.

[125] Watson, *Enduring the Great War,* 224, 228.

[126] Wheeler, *The 50th Battalion in No Man's Land*, 369.

[127] Appendix 30, Report of Operations, October 27th to November 2nd, 1918 – 50th Canadian Battalion, RG9 III-C-3, Volume 4214, Folder 2, File 3, LAC.

morale had collapsed, and they gave themselves up readily. This was "unforced" surrender of soldiers who willingly allowed themselves to be captured.[128]

Life was cheap in this hostile environment; German snipers, flamethrowers and machine gun crews fighting to the last instant were dealt with ruthlessly. A machine gunner fighting a rearguard action knew he would receive no leniency.[129] Near the Quarry west of Mont Houy, machine gun nests were rushed and guns seized. The 50th Battalion troops gave the crews no quarter.[130]

On 5 November, Royal Field Artillery signaller Ivor Hanson was billeted in a factory in Valenciennes where eviscerated German machine-gunner corpses had been laid out. Hanson surmised that they had been given no opportunity to surrender.[131] Some senior officers believed "no man in the Great War was ever killed by a bayonet unless he had his hands up first."[132] In fact, bayonets and honed entrenching tools inflicted less than one half per cent of British and German wounds.[133] The sight of a menacing cold-steel bayonet could trigger a swift surrender or retreat. In an undated sample of 212,659 British soldiers admitted to casualty clearing stations only 684 (0.32 per cent) were for bayonet wounds.[134] Most soldiers had an intense resistance to bayoneting an opponent.[135] A soldier confided to a Canadian war correspondent: "I say that I will never let a Hum live. … But when I find 'Fritzie' with no weapons in his hand, begging for mercy, I just can't stick him."[136]

[128] Alan Kramer, "Surrender of Soldiers in World War I," 265. It was also called "surrender without resistance." See Wilhelm Deist, "The Military Collapse of the German Empire: The Reality of the Stab-in-the-Back Myth," trans. E.J. Feuchtwanger, *War in History* 3, 2 (April 1996): 187.
[129] Coningsby Dawson, *Living Bayonets: A Record of the Last Push* (London: John Lane, 1919), 183.
[130] Wheeler, *The 50th Battalion* in *No Man's Land*, 368.
[131] J. Ivor Hanson and Alan Wakefield, *Plough & Scatter: The Diary-Journal of a First World War Gunner* (Newbury Park, California: Haynes Publishing, 2009), 297.
[132] Denis Winter, *Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War* (London: Penguin Books, 1978), 110.
[133] Watson, *Enduring the Great War,* 15, 32.
[134] T.J. Mitchell and G.M. Smith, *History of the Great War Based on Official Documents: Medical Services. Casualties and Medical Statistics of the Great War* (London, HMSO, 1931; reprint, Uckfield, UK: Naval & Military Press, 2010), 40.
[135] Grossman, *On Killing*, 125.
[136] Frederick McKenzie, *Through the Hindenburg Line: Crowning Days on the Western Front* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1918), 263.

The first Canadian platoon to enter Valenciennes from the west, advancing towards the Canal. [Library and Archives Canada item ID no. 3194823]

The 72nd and 38th Battalions of Brig.-Gen. James MacBrien's 12th CIB crossed the Canal de l'Escaut using boats, rafts and footbridges. Many Germans positioned in machine-gun and rifle posts close to the canal were taken prisoner by the 72nd Battalion while the balance made a hasty withdrawal.[137] During the Battle of Canal du Nord, a six-man 72nd Battalion patrol had mopped up a village, taking 150 prisoners. The vastly outnumbered patrol was in a very dangerous predicament as some Germans escaped and returned to their weapons. But the Canadians maintained their discipline and escorted some eighty prisoners back to the 72nd Battalion lines. The rest had bolted.[138]

At 5:50 a.m. on 2 November the 54th Battalion advanced to Marly under cover of darkness without artillery support. Close-quarters

[137] Bernard McEvoy and Allan Finlay, *History of the 72nd Canadian Infantry Battalion Seaforth Highlanders of Canada* (Vancouver, BC: Cowan & Brookhouse, 1920), 163.
[138] WD, 72nd Battalion, November 1918, Appendix B, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4943, File 450, LAC; and McEvoy and Finlay, *History of the 72nd Canadian Infantry Battalion,* 146-48.

combat was fierce as enemy machine gun nests in almost every street were neutralised. By 7:10 a.m. the village was cleared.[139] Near Marly, the 102nd Battalion passed a gruesome number of enemy dead.[140] Advancing at dawn, both the 38th and 72nd Battalions captured Valenciennes at 7:50 a.m. and proceeded to the eastern outskirts.[141]

German losses were heavy—a testament to the unprecedented concentration, weight and precision of the 88,090 artillery shell deluge. Mechanised killing power, along with some 1,400 10th CIB adept troops, had inflicted 2,254 enemy casualties in the Mont Houy attack zone alone; 800 were killed and 1,454 taken prisoner.[142] Almost 900 German soldiers were killed and more than 1,700 captured by 4th Canadian Division troops. Long-range enfilading machine gun barrages plus heavy RAF bombing and strafing augmented the casualty lists.[143] McNaughton observed, "[t]he barrage and bombardment had left scarcely a square yard of ground untouched. Enemy dead were everywhere."[144] German defenders lay scattered in sunken roads, gutters, rifle pits, machine-gun pits, railway embankments, battered houses and assembly positions; the pervasive stench of cordite lingered in the air. The cannon-fire avalanche that had drenched the attack zone with HE and shrapnel—the most intense of any Canadian Corps barrage—had caused the bulk of the carnage.

CONCLUSION

Were many Germans killed while surrendering at Valenciennes? Some historians think so.[145] Certainly there was the disparity between 800 German and 104 Canadian fatalities on the 10th CIB

[139] John Bailey, *Cinquante-Quatre: Being a Short Story of the 54th Canadian Infantry Battalion By One of Them* (self-published, 1919), 31.
[140] WD, 102nd Battalion, November 1918, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4945, File 456, LAC.
[141] *Field Diary of Major-General David Watson,* Vol. 5: *April-December 1918*, in University of Calgary Digital Collections, accessed 19 July 2021, https://digitalcollections.ucalgary.ca/asset-management/2R340827G3IP.
[142] Artillery Report on Mont Houy, MG30-E100, Volume 38, File 169, LAC. Seventy-five prisoners were wounded. This does not include German wounded evacuated to their field hospitals. This low percentage of wounded suggests instances of unforced surrender.
[143] Sydney Wise, *Canadian Airmen and the First World War: The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force* Vol. 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1981), 569-70.
[144] McNaughton, "The Capture of Valenciennes," 292.
[145] Granatstein, *The Greatest Victory*, 152.

Canadian Patrol crossing the railway in Valenciennes under heavy machine gun fire, November, 1918. [Library and Archives Canada item ID no. 3522383]

front during the two-day battle. However, when the artillery's deadly effectiveness is taken into account plus the fact that more than 1,400 prisoners were escorted to Canadian POW cages, it is clear that only a fraction of surrendering soldiers was killed.

Currie did not condemn when he suspected prisoner killing as retaliatory action: "I am told the ground is simply littered with German dead. I know that it was not the intention of our fellows to take many German prisoners as, since they had lived amongst and talked to the French people here, they have become more bitter than ever against the Boche."[146] Brig.-Gen. John Ross, 10th CIB, admitted that German cruelty inflicted upon the French people fuelled his troops' yearning to avenge the citizens, stating that "the

[146] Currie's personal diaries 1914-1919, November 1st, Friday, MG30-E100, Volume 43, File 194, LAC. Nevertheless, there are few primary sources in military archives to support Currie's suspicion. See A.M.J. Hyatt, *General Sir Arthur Currie: A Military Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 122.

miserable enemy could expect and certainly received no quarter."[147] Maj.-Gen. Hastings Anderson, First Army General Staff claimed the Canadians gave little quarter after learning about German atrocities in the liberated villages.[148] Indeed, both Currie and Charles Bean were apologists for their own countrymen. The military hierarchy's repudiation of prisoner mistreatment, in particular prisoner killing, was an accepted part of life at the front. Killing potential prisoners, although prohibited and morally problematic, was part of the tragic human cost for achieving military objectives and consequently victory.

Currie and Ross tolerated their troops' unauthorised actions that would likely have led to courts-martial between 1915 and 1917. Not fulfilling their role in the administration of British military justice was a crime of tolerance.[149] Although they did not encourage unlawful killings, they understood that soldiers waged war in an atmosphere of suspicion—already on edge from German treachery and sabotage such as feigned surrenders and booby-traps. Inhumane treatment of civilians had inflamed animosity and diminished the soldiers' sense of remorse.

Victor Wheeler concisely described the dichotomy of an ordinary citizen-soldier who became a combatant instructed in military killing:

> [M]en who could be driven to momentary ruthlessness or compassionately succour the defenceless orphan … men who could be motivated to vengeful carnage yet could, under other circumstances … show mercy and extend the hand of brotherhood to the enemy.[150]

A grey area between combat and surrender—between legal and illegal killing—exits on the battlefield. During the chaos of a face-to-face assault, when is surrender to be accepted if some are discarding their weapons or gesturing capitulation, but others are still showing fight or are attempting to flee or to remain hidden? Rarely in the

[147] 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade Narrative of Operations Second Battle of Valenciennes, RG9 III-D-2, Volume 4797, File 84, LAC.
[148] Anderson, "The Operations Round Valenciennes by the First Army, October-November, 1918," 297.
[149] Brian Feltman, "Tolerance As a Crime? The British Treatment of German Prisoners of War on the Western Front, 1914-1918," *War in History*, 17, 4 (November 2010): 436.
[150] Wheeler, *The 50th Battalion in No Man's Land*, 415.

heat of battle is there a clear break between the two, permitting a safe surrender.

In the context of the final hundred days, killing confronted adversaries who were endeavouring to give themselves up was, according to Nicholson, "to a certain extent understandable."[151] In the light of their experiences in the autumn of 1918, it was not surprising that some prisoners were killed by Canadian troops. In fact, Currie no doubt regarded this unlawful killing as largely inevitable in the last months of war.[152] Even so, slaying defenseless prisoners *after* they had surrendered was always deemed criminal. Conversely, killing the enemy as they surrendered *during* battle—in circumstances of hot blood—caused less condemnation.[153]

Military indiscipline (stemming from war weariness and failures in leadership), fear, innate brutality, military expediency, ambiguous orders as well as German acts of treachery resulted in killing the surrendering enemy. Another powerful motive for prisoner killing on the Western Front was revenge. The systemic cruelty perpetrated against vulnerable civilians was the final catalyst that, in some Canadian soldiers' minds, justified killing prisoners at the point of capture; thereby quenching their thirst for revenge.

APPENDIX: THE BATTLE OF VALENCIENNES CASUALTIES

Close cooperation between infantry and artillery was essential in warfare and gun power was fully exploited to preserve attacking troops. Commencing with Vimy Ridge, all major Canadian offensives were coordinated around the artillery fire plan.[154] McNaughton was convinced that the Battle of Valenciennes epitomised Currie's policy to "pay the price of victory, so far as possible, in shells and not in the lives of men."[155] Each 10th CIB attacking soldier was supported by 1.5 tons of shells. The 144 18-pounders' shrapnel barrage produced a

[151] G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1964), 475.
[152] Chase, "Unwilling to Continue, Ordered to Advance," 100.
[153] Heather Jones, "The Enemy Disarmed: Prisoners of War and the Violence of Wartime: Britain, France and Germany, 1914-1920" (PhD Dissertation, University of Dublin, 2005), 94.
[154] Nicholson, *The Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919,* 315.
[155] McNaughton, "The Capture of Valenciennes," 279.

Table 1. 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade Casualties at Valenciennes[156]		
Battalion	**Soldiers in Action**	**Casualties 1-2 November**
44th	*200*	*89*
46th	*410*	*126*
47th	*398*	*135*
50th	*400 (est.)*	*127*
Total	**1,408**	**477**

density of one gun for every 17 yards of 10th CIB front. Nevertheless, there was a 34 per cent casualty rate in the 10th CIB. (See Table 1)

The number of 10th CIB casualties has been documented as high as 501.[157] The difference may be that casualty lists, compiled at the base, included daily casualty wires from the units, casualties picked up by other units and by Field Ambulances.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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[156] Appendices 27-30, RG9 III-D-2, Volume 4797, File 84, LAC.
[157] Artillery Report on Mont Houy, MG30-E100, Volume 38, File 169, LAC.