

Je ne me souviens pas: Pensioned Veterans from French Canada's 22nd Battalion

Serge Marc Durflinger

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



Part of the [Canadian History Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), and the [Social History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Durflinger, Serge Marc "Je ne me souviens pas: Pensioned Veterans from French Canada's 22nd Battalion." *Canadian Military History* 32, 1 ()

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

Je ne me souviens pas

Pensioned Veterans from French Canada's 22nd Battalion

SERGE MARC DURFLINGER

Abstract: An examination of the pension files of men having served in the 22nd Battalion (canadien-français), the Canadian Corps' only French-speaking line battalion, situates veterans into a specific ethno-linguistic and, more generally, socio-economic context. This article seeks to illuminate some of the many personal crises that could, and commonly did, afflict veterans, their families and their survivors. It demonstrates that beyond the devastation of serious physical or psychological wounding, many of Canada's returned men, perhaps far more than we imagined, suffered persistent ill health, financial distress and family estrangement. Almost without exception, the sixty 22nd Battalion case files examined for this article revealed wounded or ill veterans' poverty, despair, and their struggle to survive from month to month.

This review offers a detailed and representative cross-section of the postwar lives and pension experiences of veterans having served together and who frequently came from the same cities or regions. While no two battalions shared identical compositions and war experiences, there were broad commonalities between many of them having seen front-line service for about the same period. The findings from the 22nd Battalion veterans' files likely would be similar to the experiences of men from many other battalions, and to those of their survivors.

IN CANADA, we know something of our exalted war dead but very little about our wounded, sick and simply burned-out veterans. Examining the voluminous government files treating Canada's First World War veterans, or their surviving families, in receipt of a disability pension greatly helps us understand the postwar histories

of tens of thousands of these men and women. But the files make for sad reading. Almost without exception, case after case examined for this article revealed wounded or ill veterans' poverty, despair, and their struggle to survive from month to month. Canada's pension legislation barely compensated for the men's loss of earning power and only provided for dependent family members' subsistence. Frequently, even this was not enough for them to adequately maintain themselves and many were obliged to live in undignified circumstances.

Despite some comparatively progressive pension legislation, Canada was not always a "fit country for heroes to live in," as Britain's prime minister, David Lloyd George, famously said in 1918 that his country would be. This article seeks to illuminate some of the many personal crises that could, and commonly did, afflict veterans, their families and their survivors. It demonstrates that beyond the devastation of serious physical or psychological wounding, many of Canada's returned men, perhaps far more than we imagined, suffered persistent ill health, financial distress and family estrangement.

With heavy Canadian casualties beginning in 1915 and a steady stream of wounded men returning to the country, Ottawa established the Military Hospitals Commission to rehabilitate and retrain soldiers disabled to some degree and restore to them the means of earning a living. The sheer number of soldiers who would return to only a semblance of their former selves upon discharge required Ottawa to legislate a form of compensation to help them recover basic financial security. The modern pension system was born.

By 1916, the Board of Pension Commissioners (BPC) oversaw the provision of pensions to Canada's disabled veterans commensurate with the severity of their impairment, ranging from 5 to 100 per cent, and the anticipated impact of their infirmity on their abilities to find employment. The idea was to allow veterans to earn some salary that, combined with their pensions, would equate to at least the income of a labourer, with the effect that disabled soldiers would often remain among Canada's poorest citizens. That year, a fully disabled soldier obtained \$480 annually, an amount lessened in proportion to a man's disablement. If the Board judged a man to be 20 per cent disabled, he obtained \$96. It was not overly generous. Soldiers' widows were automatically awarded 80 per cent of the full amount although this was withdrawn if they remarried. Children netted \$6 each for pensioned families. Recognising the inadequacy of the earlier pension tables and that high inflation took a toll on

those living on a fixed income, in 1918 Ottawa raised the maximum amount to \$600 and in 1920 to \$900. Ex-servicemen deemed to have aggravated a pre-existing medical condition while serving, and those for whom a medical condition emerged in the postwar period that was considered attributable to wartime service, were also eligible for pensions. By 1920, 177,000 Canadians were supported with military pensions. In 1933, 77,000 veterans received pensions and no doubt many more needed one.¹

Methodologically, this article's battalion-level review of veterans' pension files offers a detailed and representative cross-section of the postwar lives and pension experiences of veterans having served together and who frequently came from the same cities or regions. While no two battalions shared identical compositions and war experiences, there were broad commonalities between many of them having seen front-line service for about the same period of time. Even a sampling of the files from a single battalion provides insight into the many and varied postwar personal and familial circumstances undoubtedly common to veterans from other units.

An examination of the pension files of men having served in the 22nd Battalion (canadien-français), the Canadian Corps' only French-speaking line battalion, provides an opportunity to situate veterans into a specific ethno-linguistic and, more generally, socio-economic context. The findings likely would be similar to the experiences of men from many other battalions. This also applies to the many surviving spouses, children and parents of soldiers either killed overseas or who died later from causes deemed attributable to wartime service. The story of the 22nd Battalion has been told elsewhere² and only the briefest historical context need detain us here. The unit was authorised in October 1914 and for the next several months recruited throughout Quebec, especially in Montreal and Quebec City. On 20 May 1915, it sailed from Halifax 1,189 strong and served at the front in the 5th Brigade, 2nd Canadian Division. At least 91 per cent of this initial group were French Canadians,

¹ The story is fully told in Desmond Morton and Glenn Wright, *Winning the Second Battle: Canadian Veterans and the Return to Civilian Life 1915-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 10, 46-56, and 155-56.

² See Joseph Chaballe, *Histoire du 22e Bataillon canadien-français 1914-1919* (Ottawa: L'amicale du 22e, 1952); and Jean-Pierre Gagnon, *Le 22e Bataillon (canadien-français): Étude socio-militaire* (Ottawa et Quebec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval et le Ministère de la Défense nationale, 1986).

4 per cent were Franco-Americans of Quebec origin, 2.5 per cent were French or Belgian, 1 per cent were born in the British Isles, and the remaining 1.5 per cent were from various other countries.³ The 22nd entered the line in September 1915 and participated in all the Canadian Corps' main battles from that point on. Nearly 5,600 men served in the battalion during the war, of whom 3,549 became casualties (63 per cent), more than 1,100 of them fatal. These losses were similar to other Canadian battalions having entered the line in 1915. The 22nd remained a French-speaking unit throughout the war and, when it was demobilised in May 1919 in Quebec City to great popular acclaim, only five officers and sixty-seven men from the original 1,189 were present.⁴

The pension files of men whose names appear on the original embarkation roll are the object of this study and none were considered of men joining the battalion at a later date. The original embarkation nominal roll of 1,189 men was cross-referenced with the pension files—a process that yielded 540 cases, or 45 per cent.⁵ I randomly examined sixty of 540 files (11.11 per cent) that ranged from thirty pages to more than 500 in length. What follows is a representative sampling of these files, with a few illuminating case studies serving as exemplars of the common hardships experienced by returned men and their families. Unsurprisingly, in addition to revealing ordinary families trying to get by with small pensions, this work offers glimpses of family strife, alcoholism, attempted fraud and suicide. In 1986, historian Jean-Pierre Gagnon wrote of the 22nd Battalion's veterans: "The available material does not allow us to examine the men's fate upon their return to Canada."⁶ This article seeks to help correct this historiographical gap.

³ The percentages were calculated using the statistics in Chaballe, *Histoire du 22e Bataillon canadien-français*, 35.

⁴ See Gagnon, *Le 22e Bataillon*, 384-85 and *La Presse* (Montreal), 17 May 1919.

⁵ Canadian Expeditionary Force, 22nd Battalion, Nominal Roll of Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers and Men, Library and Archives Canada [LAC].

⁶ Gagnon, *Le 22e Bataillon*, 385. (Author's translation here and throughout). A recent quantitative study has explored the postwar earnings of a representative sampling of non-pensioned French-speaking Quebec veterans. Only thirty were from the 22nd Battalion and perhaps none were from the unit's original embarkation roll. See Carl Bouchard and Michael Huberman, "Les anciens combattants canadien-français de la Première Guerre mondiale et leur réintégration professionnelle," *Histoire sociale/Social History*, 53, 109 (2020): 545-68.

Only tentative trends can be discerned from this study. It does not employ a scientific or fully quantitative approach, but rather seeks to illuminate the ways in which the Board of Pension Commissioners and its successor organisations and departments evaluated pension claims submitted by a discrete set of veterans. There were essentially three types of files: those of the veterans themselves, those of their families applying for a dependant's pension and a combination of these two. For example, some files begin with a veteran's successful application for a pension and, if he later died, they end with the surviving dependant's application. The files include a stunning number of forms, reports and correspondence diligently examining, explaining, fact-checking and recapitulating the particulars of each case in order to determine the validity of a pension claim. Most applications were successful, though very frequently claimants expressed the need for more generous pensions. The documents remain enormously revealing in both form and content.

In the early years of the pension process, very few forms were available in French and the 22nd Battalion's numerous unilingual veterans and their families normally received English replies to correspondence or applications submitted in French. The unilingual mother of a soldier killed in action wrote (in French) to the BPC: "Please send me this form in French, as I won't have to ask my neighbour to translate it."⁷ But things improved in the 1920s with translated forms and BPC communications written in original English translated for the benefit of recipients, while French-language correspondence from veterans or their family members was translated for the English-speaking administrators of the pension claims.

There is no evidence in any of the cases examined that language was ever an obvious determining factor in the allocation of pensions. Still, many of the BPC's home 'visitors' sent to investigate 22nd Battalion pensioners' family situations felt it important to remark on the level of English proficiency of those whom they had visited. The underlying message seemed to equate the inability to communicate in English with a lessened social standing. Similarly, one English-speaking BPC visitor to the parents of Private (Pte.) Eugène Gervais (b. 1877), who was killed in action in 1917, interviewed various neighbours and acquaintances to determine the extent of financial support that he

⁷ Adrien Amesse, 8402, reel 65, Veterans Affairs Canada [VAC] pension files, Laurier Military History Archive [LMHA].

had provided his parents prior to enlistment. In her report, Rachel R. Ross drew particular attention to an English-speaking neighbour with two sons overseas, whom Ross clearly believed to be a more reliable source of information than French-speaking neighbours.⁸ It was never made clear in any of the files whether the almost always English-speaking home visitors in Montreal and Quebec City conducted their business in French or English, although some of them were clearly bilingual. The full reports were always prepared in English, but sometimes the relevant forms were completed in French.

The pension files examined show that the men enlisting in the 22nd Battalion in 1914-15 were almost always drawn from among Montreal's (especially) or Quebec City's lower socio-economic classes. Given the poor economic conditions at this time, they might have been generally under-employed or working for low wages prior to the war. It is hardly surprising, then, that many of the battalion's wounded veterans from the original embarkation group would need pensions to survive. As was common of the men who enlisted in other battalions raised during the war's opening months, a discernable number of pension applicants from the 22nd had been discharged as overaged (being in their late forties and even fifties) and/or unhealthy and should never have been enlisted in the first place.⁹ Even considering the times, the men of the 22nd were small of stature with most pensioners studied here being 5'6" or shorter and rarely weighing more than 150 pounds, and generally far less.¹⁰ Most of the files reveal the crush of poverty and the desperation, anguish and loss of dignity associated with being disabled to some degree, perhaps jobless and certainly moneyless.

Following sustained periods of ill health, early mortality was common. Most of those French-Canadian pensioners examined in

⁸ Eugène Gervais, 14571, reel 63, VAC pension files, LMHA.

⁹ For an explanation of Canadian age and fitness requirements upon enlistment see Nic Clarke, *Unwanted Warriors: Rejected Volunteers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015). In 1916, one military estimate claimed that up to 20 per cent of Canadian soldiers in Britain were overage. See Morton and Wright, *Winning the Second Battle*, 25.

¹⁰ The men's height and weight were similar for French Canadians on active service generally. See Bouchard and Huberman, "Les anciens combattants canadien-français de la Première Guerre mondiale et leur réintégration professionnelle," 560.

this study died in their forties and fifties or younger.¹¹ The scourge of tuberculosis, which generally was not attributable to wartime service, accounted for quite a few deaths as did pneumonia, cardio-pulmonary failure and syphilis. In 1916, ex-private Joseph DeBlois (b. 1891) from Quebec City suffered head wounds and lost an arm for which he was fitted with a prosthetic. He was pensioned at the full disability rate at that time of \$40 a month but died in 1921 at the age of thirty from tuberculosis. The disease was not attributable to his military service and his wife received no further allowances. The file was closed.¹² Had DeBlois been killed in action, or succumbed from his wounds, his spouse would have been entitled to 80 per cent of his pension.

Ex-lance-corporal Marc Wells (b. 1894), originally from Chicoutimi but resident in Montreal, served thirty-eight months at the front and suffered shrapnel wounds in addition to being a gas casualty. He was designated at 15 per cent disabled for which he received \$7.50 monthly. By 1938, the unmarried Wells suffered from chronic ill health and had developed a drinking problem.¹³ In fact, that year a BPC physician reported that he was “alcoholically befogged” at the very moment of his physical examination pursuant to his application for a War Veterans Allowance (WVA). This Act, legislated in 1930, was available to needy veterans over sixty years old notwithstanding their state of health but, below sixty, the veteran had to be shown to be impoverished *and* unable to work. His application was denied; Wells needed to straighten out his life and find employment. It seemed churlish. He was falling apart, complaining of stomach problems, raw nerves, arm pain, a regular cough, heart trouble and dental problems. He spent three months in Montreal’s St. Luc Hospital. Unable to find work, his June 1939 re-application for the WVA listed his means of earning a living as selling shoelaces on the street (without a license) and begging (“mendicant”). Finally, his application was successful and he obtained the standard WVA amount of \$20 monthly. Not long after this he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, perhaps validating some of his earlier health complaints. In 1942, he received a supplemental

¹¹ For more context on veteran mortality, see Jonathan Scotland, “A Generation Curtailed: The Lifespans of Canada’s Pensioned Veterans of the Great War,” *Canadian Military History* 32, 1 (2023).

¹² Joseph DeBlois, 3694, reel 786, VAC pension files, LMHA.

¹³ For more on veterans’ alcohol abuse, see Jonathan Vance, “‘When wartime friends meet’: Great War Veteran Culture and the (Ab)Use of Alcohol,” *Canadian Military History* 32, 1 (2023).

allowance of \$5, with which he bought clothing. In June of that year, a home inspection revealed that he lived in a single room costing \$8 monthly and had no other income but his \$25 pension. He spent most of his days sitting in nearby Viger Square, simply awaiting the inevitable. He died in October 1943 at the age of fifty, his death deemed not attributable to wartime service.¹⁴

Sometimes pension authorities refused veterans the benefit of the doubt, even in obviously needy cases. Ex-private Ulric Roy (b. 1898) of Montreal had been gassed during the war and, in 1928, sought a pension for persistent bronchitis and recurring chest pain. But there was no evidence that his ailments were related to his war service. More than a decade later, in 1939, the destitute veteran petitioned for the WVA. His first wife had died in 1930 and in 1938 he had had a child with his second. A home investigator from the Canadian Pension Commission (CPC)—since 1933 the successor organisation to the BPC—reported that he lived with his wife and one-year-old child in a four-room flat paying \$12 rent and that he was “unemployable.” There was no bank account, “no money or means of any kind,” wrote the home visitor, and the family depended on the Red Cross for groceries. The veteran had worked as an upholsterer for the department stores T. Eaton Co. and James Ogilvie’s and earned \$19 a week when working full time. He was “sickly” in appearance and experienced difficulty breathing but, because the CPC doctor thought that this veteran could undertake some “light work,” his application was rejected. The 5’5” veteran was down to 117 pounds. His bronchitis was considered to have emerged following his discharge and was unattributable, as was the suspicion of tuberculosis. Although the Canadian Legion served as a dogged advocate on Roy’s behalf, and there followed a long series of appeals, hearings, and numerous medical examinations, it was all to no avail.¹⁵ His family would have to get by through some other means.

Ex-private Albert Vézina (b. 1895) from Quebec City served thirty-three months in France and in June 1918 suffered shrapnel wounds to his hands and legs. He recovered and no disability was recorded upon his discharge in January 1919. But in 1917, he had been treated for venereal disease. In 1923, Vézina, who spoke and understood “very little English,” according to an attending physician who felt

¹⁴ Marc Wells, 106713, reel 421, VAC pension files, LMHA.

¹⁵ Ulric Roy, (no pension number), reel 1034, VAC pension files, LMHA.

it important to say so, sought a pension on account of worsening hearing loss and recurring pain in his legs. The BPC established that his hearing loss was attributable and his disability was pegged at 4 per cent, disallowing a monthly pension (the threshold was 5 per cent) but qualifying him for a one-time gratuity of \$100.¹⁶

Vézina married in 1924 and a daughter was born in 1931. The family lived in poverty in a four-room flat for \$15 rent per month. He worked as a painter but could only get odd jobs and earned very little money. Later, he worked at a gravel pit for \$67 monthly but by 1938 he could work no more; he was a broken man and applied for a WVA. His syphilis had seriously impaired his health, and he complained of occasional paralysis in his limbs. Still, Dr. E.B. Convery, from Quebec City, insisted that there was “no physical impairment to justify [his being] permanently unemployable or incapable of maintaining himself.” (As with the home visitors, doctors retained by the BPC in Montreal and Quebec City generally were English speakers). Even though the 5’5” Vezina was forty-three years old and down to 123 pounds, a BPC investigator supported Convery’s views, and noted that although he did not “look healthy by any means,” Vézina was not unemployable. His application was declined, as he was not sixty years old and seemed to suffer from nothing attributable. The next year he applied for a pension based on his syphilitic condition, but the decision of the commissioners was easily adopted: “Date from infection of syphilis unknown. Not pensionable!”¹⁷

In December 1938, Vézina was hospitalised, appearing “pale, listless and uncommunicative.” The family survived on municipal relief of \$22 monthly, though rent consumed \$15 of it. In April 1939, a BPC home visitor noted that the family was without assets and “absolutely destitute.” He finally obtained a WVA of \$20 for himself and an equal amount for the hospital where he was being treated. He immediately left the hospital so that he might be tended to by his wife and keep the whole desperately needed \$40, an arrangement to which the WVA Board did not object. In June 1940, Vézina died of syphilis leaving his widow “penniless” with a daughter aged nine. He was buried by the Last Post Fund (LPF), a Canadian patriotic organisation ensuring that veterans dying without means would yet obtain a proper burial, complete with headstones indicating their

¹⁶ Albert Vézina, 223539, reel 890, VAC pension files, LMHA.

¹⁷ Albert Vézina, 223539, reel 890, VAC pension files, LMHA.

military service. In accordance with the legislation, Mrs. Vézina continued getting the WVA for a full year upon her husband's death but, to survive, planned to live with her parents in New Brunswick.¹⁸

Although the pension commissioners undoubtedly committed errors in judgement, no applications studied here were denied strictly due to parsimony or mean-spiritedness. The BPC had to measure claims against the existing statutes while also being responsible for the expenditure of public funds. Some veterans might have been schemers submitting fraudulent applications. In 1920 and again in 1924, ex-sergeant J. (b. 1891), from Montreal, complained of amblyopia (lazy eye) and poor vision. But this problem had been detected upon his enlistment in 1914. He also reported a condition of ill-defined "nervousness." Medical examiners determined that there was no disability and no evidence that his condition had been caused or inflamed by military service. In 1930, J. applied for a WVA complaining of pain in his legs and sides, and regularly trembling hands. The BPC physician, Dr. F.H. Mackay, who examined many 22nd Battalion veterans, negatively commented on J.'s obesity and noted intentionally for the commissioners' eyes that J.'s hand trembling "disappears immediately the observation ceases." His claim was denied.¹⁹

Ex-private E. (b. 1894), from Sherbrooke, Quebec but residing in North Bay, Ontario was wounded by shrapnel at Courcellette on 16 September 1916. He was in hospitals and convalescence centres in England until May 1917, returned to Canada, deserted, and was discharged in December 1917. In 1931, as the Great Depression worsened, he explained (in English) that he "did not write to the Board of Pensions before this because I have not been so hard up and in need of help before. I had a little bit of money but now this is all gone and I can hardly work anymore."²⁰ Perhaps he had not bothered to apply prior to this because of his desertion. But it was not easy for a male breadwinner who could no longer maintain his family to admit defeat.

¹⁸ Albert Vézina, 223539, reel 890, VAC pension files, LMHA. For the Last Post Fund, see Serge Marc Durflinger, *Lest We Forget: The Last Post Fund of Canada, 1909-1999* (Montreal: The Last Post Fund, 1999).

¹⁹ J., 196404, reel 239, VAC pension files, LMHA.

²⁰ He was unilingual and the English-language letter was no doubt written on his behalf. E., 224376, reel 457, VAC pension files, LMHA.

A North Bay physician, Dr. A. E. Ranney, considered E. impaired in the left arm due to a shrapnel wound in his back and its ongoing associated pain. He further claimed that the veteran was a left-handed carpenter, making this disability difficult for him to earn a livelihood. But the veteran was examined in Toronto by a BPC-appointed physician who expressed surprise that, for an apparently left-handed man, he signed his name and manipulated objects with his right hand. The BPC pegged his disability at 4 per cent and paid him a one-time gratuity of \$100. For the next two years, E. sought pensions for his constant myalgia but the BPC doctors found little wrong with him, and the commissioners noted tellingly that E. had been “discharged a deserter.” His requests were denied. It is surprising that he obtained the gratuity since misconduct such as desertion rendered a man ineligible for a pension.²¹

Ex-private Ovila Gamache (b. 1878), a farm labourer from St. Jean, Quebec, never served at the front. In February 1915, he caught a terrible cold just prior to the 22nd’s departure for Amherst, Nova Scotia and since then had been unwell. He fractured his jaw while in England (circumstances not stated) and never did full duty. In April 1916, a medical board discharged him because of severe bronchitis and asthma, in addition to the fact that his slow-healing jaw fracture did not allow him to eat solid food.²²

In November 1918, he was considered a 100 per cent disabled pensioner, but this was not considered a permanent situation and, four months later, his pension was downgraded to 50 per cent, paying \$25 monthly. But he remained sick, could only speak in a whisper and was rapidly losing weight. By May 1919, he could only sleep heavily propped up and coughed all the time. He married in 1919 and by June 1922 his pension paid him \$37.50 plus \$12.50 for his spouse. A son had been born that March and a daughter would follow in May 1923; two children increased the pension allotment by \$15. Gamache died without any estate in September 1923 at age forty-four, with his daughter only four months old. The cause of death was determined rather unusually to be syncope (fainting), but the BPC had some doubts. An investigator reported that “on the date of his death he was seen in the street. There is no proof that he was intoxicated. He was

²¹ E., 224376, reel 457, VAC pension files, LMHA. See Morton and Wright, *Winning the Second Battle*, 160.

²² Ovila Gamache, 4319, reel 328, VAC pension files, LMHA.

seen going towards a field; about half an hour later ... he [was] found dead. The deceased bore a rather unsavoury reputation, was addicted to drink.” But the undertaker reported no signs of alcohol. The BPC “conceded” that syncope was the cause of death, attributable to his pensioned condition. Since he had married in 1919, subsequent to his declared ill health, his wife was ineligible for a dependant’s pension. But the children were entitled to \$54, which was halved after Mrs. Gamache remarried in December 1924. The boy’s allotment ceased when he turned sixteen and the daughter’s at seventeen.²³

The case of ex-private René Robichaud (b. 1883), a labourer from Verdun, Quebec, was especially sad. Robichaud was the family’s sole source of income on account of his father’s poor health and, after being laid off, he enlisted in April 1915, very likely to help support his parents. In October 1915, he suffered a shrapnel wound to the skull, and was returned to Canada. During a medical board hearing in January 1916, he complained of headaches, dizzy spells, growing deafness and generalised weakness and he was discharged as medically unfit. But his mental health deteriorated. In November 1921, Dr. Mackay, never quick to accept veterans’ claims of disability, reported that Robichaud was “very strong, though dull and apathetic. Mentally he is slow, somewhat retarded but shows no evidence of psychosis... No delusions or hallucinations.”²⁴ Mackay could not have been more wrong.

A visiting social services supervisor insisted that the veteran had become “unmanageable” and a threat to the safety of his parents. In September 1922, following his mother’s repeated requests, Robichaud was admitted to the Ste. Anne de Bellevue Veterans’ Hospital, west of Montreal, for observation, but remained there indefinitely for “custodial care.” In fact, he would never leave and was considered incurably insane.²⁵ The next month, Ste. Anne’s Dr. H.J. Robillard diagnosed Robichaud as suffering from “psychosis characterized by auditory and visual hallucinations and mental enfeeblement” and that “voices tell him to do certain things.” Dr. A.W. Pirie noted that Robichaud freely admitted that “sometimes the voices tell him that

²³ Ovilla Gamache, 4319, reel 328, VAC pension files, LMHA.

²⁴ René Robichaud, 90022, reel 174, VAC pension files, LMHA.

²⁵ For more on veteran institutionalisation, see Heather Ellis, “‘Anxious to be restored’: Managing War Neuroses in Interwar Canada,” *Canadian Military History* 32, 1 (2023).

he is the King of England.” Psychiatrist Dr. C.A. Porteus stated that Robichaud “may very well become dangerous. I consider him unsafe to be at liberty at the present time.” But he also stated that this “mental enfeeblement [was] of long standing,” suggesting that it predated his enlistment.²⁶ There were many cases of Canadian soldiers accepted for service despite their suffering from mental illness. Some military, pension and medical authorities insisted that alcohol or syphilis were to blame for these men’s troubles, implicitly denying that errors had been made upon enlistment.²⁷

In December 1922, a board of psychiatrists at Ste. Anne de Bellevue concurred that Robichaud was suffering from dementia praecox (schizophrenia). The BPC felt that the “benefit of the doubt” should be exercised and that this pre-existing condition could have been aggravated while on service. He was rated 100 per cent disabled and his impoverished widowed father received \$55 dependant’s pension until his death in 1932. Robichaud died in 1942 of non-attributable myocarditis.²⁸

Ex-private Félix Touchette (b. 1869), father of six children, was discharged in November 1916 for being overaged at forty-seven. He had two sons serving at the front and at discharge three of his children were under eighteen years of age. One of his boys, Wilfrid, already had been killed in action. After his wife died in 1917, he was destitute. He struggled throughout the 1920s and when he applied for the WVA in 1930, he was sixty-one and had not worked for eight years. He obtained \$20 monthly. Only a few months later, Touchette applied for a pension on account of his rheumatism, poor vision and myalgia, but the BPC judged these conditions not attributable to his military service. A further review in July 1933 yielded no change in the commissioners’ ruling and, in fact, they suggested that Touchette was being less than honest. He lost a further appeal in 1937. By 1942, Touchette was seventy-four-years-old and residing in a hospice in Quebec’s Eastern Townships, paying \$15 monthly. In 1945, he died an indigent and was buried by the Last Post Fund.²⁹

²⁶ René Robichaud, 90022, reel 174, VAC pension files, LMHA. Morton and Wright note that mentally unstable men were routinely enlisted. Morton and Wright, *Winning the Second Battle*, 27.

²⁷ Morton and Wright, *Winning the Second Battle*, 27, 95-96.

²⁸ René Robichaud, 90022, reel 174, VAC Pension Files, LMHA.

²⁹ Félix F.Z. Touchette, 71411, reel 651, VAC pension files, LMHA.

One wonders why Touchette's children did not assist him. Investigator Roger Vincent recorded that "none of the people interviewed know the address of the veteran's relatives and the late veteran did not receive any news or help from them."³⁰ But some evidence of family trouble can be gleaned from his deceased son's pension file. Pte. Wilfrid Touchette was killed in April 1916 at St. Eloi. The next year the elder Touchette applied for a dependant's pension, but this was denied since it could not be established that Wilfrid's death affected his father financially. Moreover, the father had no disability and remained capable of employment. Wilfrid's file indicates that when the elder Touchette was discharged he had been separated from his wife and that none of his surviving five children remained in contact with him.³¹ The pension files show many instances of broken families, estrangement and resulting destitution.

The file of ex-lance corporal John Lance Watt (b. 1889), who had been awarded the Military Medal for his actions in battle, reveals another tragedy. Watt lived in Montreal upon his enlistment in November 1914 and was discharged in May 1917 because of a foot injury for which he was pensioned at 15 per cent paying \$7.50. In March 1921, he wrote to the BPC requesting that his pension be commuted as he hoped to return to his native Scotland, where his father lived. "With the money I will receive I will be able to go into partnership in a small way with a friend of mine in Glasgow," he wrote, "and without it I won't be able to do anything at all." The BPC responded in April that final lump-sum payments in lieu of an ongoing pension were only possible if the disability was deemed below 15 per cent. His despondency was too much. In November 1921, his landlady found the thirty-two-year-old veteran dead in his room, the coroner returning the verdict of suicide. Watt was buried by the LPF as were so many other friendless veterans.³²

Many of the men killed overseas left dependants devastated emotionally and financially. Some of the following cases demonstrate how survivors' financial hardships and burdens only worsened following the war. Although widows and children were guaranteed pensions if a man died on active service or subsequently from a cause deemed attributable to it, this was not the case for other family

³⁰ Félix F.Z. Touchette, 71411, reel 651, VAC pension files, LMHA.

³¹ Wilfrid Touchette, (no pension number), reel 651, VAC pension files, LMHA.

³² John Lance Watt, 20289, reel 46, VAC pension files, LMHA.

members, such as parents or siblings. It had to be shown that the deceased directly supported those survivors, either through the provision of pre-enlistment income or the assignment of part of his service pay to them while he served overseas (amounting to \$15-20). Wives also received a \$20 separation allowances and perhaps additional monies from the Canadian Patriotic Fund (CPF), a charity established to assist the needy families of men on active service.³³ In order to determine whether pension support was appropriate, BPC visitors carefully investigated claimants, especially reporting on their financial resources and monthly household incomes; pensions might be awarded, declined, increased or decreased accordingly.³⁴

Pte. Léonidas Joly (b. 1891), from Montreal, drowned on 17 November 1915 when the hospital ship HMHS *Anglia* struck a mine in the English Channel. An only son, Joly left his sick parents in a parlous financial state. Prior to enlisting, he had been an important contributor to family finances and during his absence the family was in the care of the Canadian Patriotic Fund, obtaining \$25 monthly. The infirm father, aged fifty-nine, was badly afflicted with rheumatism, and a home visitor found that he walked with two canes. A shoemaker by trade, by 1918 he could work very little. In applying for a dependant's pension, he stated that he did not wish to seek public help, but financial distress obliged it. The BPC visitor described Pte. Joly's mother, fifty-eight, as "deeply grieved by the loss of her son." The visitor "perused various letters the mother kept and in his opinion the deceased was exceptionally good to his parents." One daughter, twenty-nine, earned \$61 monthly and was the family's sole source of income. "This daughter has postponed her marriage owing to the circumstances in which her parents would be if she left them, and she is sacrificing her future happiness for the care of her parents." Another daughter, eighteen, was ill with heart problems and unable to contribute. There also lived with them a girl adopted in 1912 (perhaps the child of their eldest daughter). Their six-room flat cost \$16.³⁵ The ripple effects of Pte. Joly's death affected the entire family. Since Mr. Joly was inexplicably considered employable and that there was some family income, no pension was

³³ Desmond Morton, *Fight or Pay: Soldiers' Families in the Great War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), 32, 93-94.

³⁴ Morton and Wright, *Winning the Second Battle*, 159.

³⁵ Léonidas Joly, 84345, reel 107, VAC pension files, LMHA.

awarded initially. But beginning in 1920, the BPC allotted the Joly family \$25, a sum raised and lowered in subsequent years according to which family members worked and for what wages, something closely monitored by the home visitors. Mr. Joly died in 1944 and Mrs. Joly in 1953, aged ninety.³⁶

When eighteen-year-old Pte. Rodolphe Larocque (b. 1898), from Montreal, was killed in August 1916 at St. Eloi he left behind a widowed mother, aged fifty-nine. At enlistment he was working as a plumber's helper earning a paltry \$3-6 weekly and he gave her up to \$12 monthly. Larocque had assigned his mother \$15 of his monthly pay as she was of few resources. Yet, for reasons unknown, she made no application for a dependant's pension until 1935 when she requested the Legion to investigate the matter on her behalf. She was seventy-eight and without means. Her application was successful, and she obtained a pension of \$30, increased to \$50 in 1949 at which time a visitor's report indicated that she was ninety-one, undernourished and spent \$8 monthly on medicine for a heart condition. She lived with her blind daughter and her son's family. She died the next year.³⁷ This elderly woman's life would have been easier had she obtained a pension for her teenaged son's death nearly twenty years earlier.

The case of ex-corporal Aristide Martineau (b. 1894), from Montreal, is a good example of the numerous appeals filed by family members of a pensioner having died. On discharge after having served four years overseas, Martineau complained of recurring chest pains, but a medical examination revealed no obvious cause. In 1920, he was admitted to Ste. Anne de Bellevue Veterans' Hospital with a bad cough and chest pain. In subsequent years, he suffered chronic bronchitis and frequent headaches. His 1928 and 1931 pension applications were denied. His wife predeceased him in 1930, leaving four children. In 1937, Martineau died of pneumonia, aged forty-two.³⁸

His brother, E., became legal guardian to the three remaining underage children, girls aged thirteen, twelve, and ten. A sixteen-year-old son was no longer eligible for pension support. The problem was that E. already had eight children of his own, the oldest being seventeen. He quickly applied for a pension on behalf of his nieces,

³⁶ Léonidas Joly, 84345, reel 107, VAC pension files, LMHA.

³⁷ Rodolphe Larocque, 78035, reel 122, VAC pension files, LMHA.

³⁸ Aristide Martineau, 231722, reel 510, VAC pension files, LMHA.

using the good offices of the Canadian Legion as his advocate. E. was familiar with the government pension system since in 1929 his other brother Isidore, also having served overseas in the 22nd Battalion, died of attributable causes. The two deceased men's mother received \$15. The Canadian Pension Commission denied E.'s request given its view that Corporal Martineau's death was not attributable. A second hearing yielded a medical report stating: "It would appear possible that the lung disablement . . . predisposed the man to the development of the condition which caused death." The CPC again denied the claim in the absence of conclusive evidence. In April 1939, E. wrote the CPC stating that his brother's children were orphans deserving of a pension, tellingly hastening to add that his brother "was not a conscript but rather a simple volunteer." The CPC rejected this plea for the same reasons as before.³⁹

The next month, the thorough but sympathetic home visitor, Eleanor Kearney, reported on the family's situation. Although the uncle earned the excellent salary of \$55 a week as a fur cutter, he had little money left after supporting his wife, eight children, a mother-in-law and potentially his three nieces and nephew. The deceased veteran had left an estate consisting of \$1,000 Returned Soldiers' Insurance and \$675 from the Montreal Transit Commission where he had worked. E. managed these funds for the children, two of whom lived with Isidore's widow and two with an aunt whose husband was a labourer. E. paid each household \$3 per month, per child for room and board exclusive of clothing and other expenses. Once the estate gone, Kearney wrote that they would "have to be supported by Charity," though this seems unlikely given so caring a family, with the aunts making the estate money stretch by accepting so little of it. The uncle gave the children gifts of clothing and other necessities. Kearney strongly advocated for the Martineau family and insisted that none of the relatives would be able to support the children indefinitely without "some remuneration."

Finally, in June the CPC relented. The commissioners were swayed by the fact that two brothers had served the colours, that Aristide served in France from September 1915 to April 1919, "a period of service in a theatre of war which is considerably over the average length...for that arm of the service (average for infantry 11.7 months)," that he had earned the Good Conduct Badge in April 1916

³⁹ Aristide Martineau, 231722, reel 510, VAC pension files, LMHA.

and had been promoted corporal in August 1918. The CPC invoked Section 21, the “meritorious clause” of the Pension Act, that provided “special consideration” for a compassionate allowance. Each eligible child obtained a pension of \$7 per month, the last expiring in 1944.⁴⁰

Sometimes the BPC put surviving wives’ perceived moral behaviour on trial.⁴¹ Those women whom the home visitors and BPC considered to be engaging in questionable behaviour were subjected to close scrutiny, sometimes resulting in the loss of a pension or at least its curtailment. Infractions included co-habitation, prostitution and other practices deemed immoral.⁴² Despite the obvious potential, perhaps likelihood, for excessive BPC policing of a woman’s private life to ensure compliance with contemporary social expectations, occasionally a widow might not have used the pension monies in the best interests of her children.

Pte. Albert Bissonnette (b. 1892) from Quebec City was killed in September 1916 at Courcelette. At first, he was declared missing but in April 1917 was formally declared dead. He left in bereavement his wife and two children, aged twelve and eight. He had been assigning his wife \$20 pay monthly. That month the BPC decided that Mrs. Bissonnette would receive a \$32 pension for herself and \$12 for both children (raised to \$25 in 1919), plus a two-month gratuity of \$88. In January 1919, the BPC’s Catherine Butler visited the widow in her three-room flat, for which the rent was \$10. The family’s pension had by this time risen to \$56. Butler commented in her report that the boy and girl looked “delicate” and “sickly,” and that Mrs. Bissonnette appeared “in a very depressed state, and crying, she says she feels so terribly lonely since her husband’s death.” On top of that she mentioned that her fourteen-year-old boy was troubled and very disruptive at school. Curiously, Mrs. Bissonnette wondered if the government could place him somewhere.⁴³

Butler smelled a rat. She had the pensioner “watched” and discovered that she was living with a thirty-six-year-old man, both before and since Bissonnette’s death. It seems that he had been the cause for the couple’s marital breakdown that had led to Bissonnette’s

⁴⁰ Aristide Martineau, 231722, reel 510, VAC pension files, LMHA.

⁴¹ See Lyndsay Rosenthal, “‘Such an immoral creature’: Widowed Women and the Board of Pension Commissioners,” *Canadian Military History* 32, 1 (2023).

⁴² Morton and Wright, *Winning the Second Battle*, 160.

⁴³ Albert Bissonnette, 11262, reel 223, VAC pension files, LMHA. No other files consulted showed a desire for a widow to rid herself of a child.

enlistment. Presumably, he had assigned most of his pay to her for the benefit of his children. “This woman is a great hypocrite,” wrote Butler, “and tries to play on one’s sympathies.” Mrs. Bissonnette had had “the nerve” to send for the suspicious Butler, who went “just for curiosity” since she was aware of her subject’s circumstances. The woman complained that she was ill and wanted an increase in her pension. At about this time, a local priest, Father Turmel, informed Butler that a party was planned at the flat for which a piano had been rented and musicians hired. Butler immediately arranged for a man from the BPC “Morality Department” to stand watch and report on the goings on. He dutifully reported that the “place was full of men and women.” The lady living above stated that the party had lasted until 4 am and mentioned that, in Butler’s words, there were soldiers “in and out at all times and any amount of drink is taken in.” Moreover, the woman and her children were never in church, the girl attended school irregularly and the boy “swears something frightfully.” The piano stayed at \$8 a month and Father Turmel thought that the children should be removed, and that Mrs. Bissonnette was “a great scandal to the neighbourhood.” Butler sympathised with the two children who had to survive “this immoral atmosphere.” Soon after, the BPC assigned the children’s combined \$25 monthly pension to a J.M. Gillespie to administer on their behalf. The whole matter became moot in June 1919 at which time Mrs. Bissonnette remarried, putting an end to her dependant’s pension.⁴⁴

During the interwar years, and especially during the Great Depression of the 1930s, many among Canada’s labouring classes were beleaguered by unemployment, underemployment and the discouragement wrought of poverty. Large numbers of veterans fell into this category, including the most economically vulnerable amongst them—disabled soldiers and their families—for whom a small pension made the difference between survival and abject destitution. As the sixty files examined demonstrated, virtually all pension applicants emanated from working-class or agricultural-labour backgrounds. We will never know why some of these French-Canadian men chose to enlist. Perhaps it was the allure of joining a battalion in which the working language was French. But one impetus common to many might have been a willingness to risk their lives to support their loved ones. The financial benefits of some combination of assigned

⁴⁴ Albert Bissonnette, 11262, reel 223, VAC pension files, LMHA.

pay, separation allowance, CPF money, or in the event of death, survivors' pensions, combined for more income than that available from the men's low-paying employment at home. Were the Canadian Expeditionary Force's poor soldiers worth more dead than alive?

The administration of the men's pension claims following their harrowing wartime service would sorely test the battalion's motto: *Je me souviens* (I remember). These representative pension files from some of the original members of French Canada's 22nd Battalion indicate the trends of ongoing poverty and postwar despair for which disability pensions could only partially compensate. The pensions were something, at least, but, in the end, they could not restore health or happiness, or return a son to his parents or a husband to his wife.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Serge Marc Durflinger is a professor in the History Department at the University of Ottawa specializing in Canadian social-military and diplomatic history.