The Battle of Passchendaele: The Experiences of Lieutenant Tom Rutherford, 4th Battalion, Canadian Mounted Rifles

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Introduction
by Jason Adair

For a man who experienced many battles, 26 October 1917 was a pivotal day for Lieutenant Tom Rutherford. Destined to have a long and distinguished career, his experience that day, in many ways, would shape his military character and strengthen his resolve in defeating the German enemy.

Lieutenant Tom Rutherford, from Owen Sound, Ontario, was a platoon commander in “D” Company of the 4th Battalion, Canadian Mounted Rifles. Rutherford joined the 31st Grey Regiment in 1912, was a member of the 147th Grey Battalion and later the 8th Reserve Battalion, joining the 4th CMR in April 1917.

The year 1917 brought a series of successes for the Canadian Corps beginning with Vimy Ridge in April and ending with Hill 70 in August. In general, these victories seemed to be the product of unprecedented planning and preparation that would become the hallmark of Canadian operations during the war. Using careful staff planning as the template for success, the Canadians prepared for the attack on Passchendaele. From the beginning of the planning process, it was evident that this proven template of meticulous preparation would be difficult to apply. General Currie was concerned about the condition of the battlefield, which had seen the wettest summer in 30 years and three years of continuous shellfire. This had greatly altered the water table causing a morass of mud. In fact, nearly half of the battlefield was covered in water. These conditions created problems in attack preparations including the inability to access ample artillery support and the sheer difficulty of moving other needed supplies to forward areas. Furthermore, German defenders had increased the depth of their defences trading the trench for the pillbox and also used a series of positions in forward areas designed to break up attacks before assaulting forces could overwhelm the main defensive area. Despite these conditions and their resultant problems the Canadian Corps was poised for attack.

The Canadian Corps attacks in the late fall of 1917 toward the Belgian village of Passchendaele represented the last phase of the British attempt to break out of the Ypres Salient and seize the German-held channel ports. The overall offensive commenced 31 July 1917 and included British, French, New Zealand, Australian and Canadian troops. It was marred by unachievable objectives and deplorable terrain conditions.

Until October 1917, the Canadian role in the offensive was limited but as the British faltered the Canadian Corps was reassigned to the British 2nd Army and given the task of capturing the village of Passchendaele. Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie was not impressed at the prospect of committing his Corps to an offensive that had lost its momentum and seemed of little value to the improvement of the strategic situation. Nevertheless, as early as

Opposite: A lone Canadian soldier walks across the desolation of the Passchendaele battlefield, November 1917.
13 October preparations began for an operation that sought to give indirect assistance to the pending French attack in Champagne, to keep the enemy occupied during preparations for the planned attack at Cambrai, and to adopt a suitable defensive posture for the winter atop the 165-foot high Passchendaele ridge.\(^5\)

The Canadian Corps attacked at 0540 hours on 26 October. The assault was preceded by four days of artillery bombardment. The Canadians attacked along a two-division front divided by the Ravebeek swamp. The 3rd Canadian Division was on the left with the 8th Brigade deploying a single battalion, the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles (4th CMR), and the 9th Brigade deploying two battalions, the 43rd and the 58th. The 4th Canadian Division was on the right and was more constrained in terms of frontage. This meant it could only use one battalion, the 46th, in the initial assault. Although the Canadian Corps did not succeed in achieving all of its objectives, the British High Command were pleased and determined that the Canadian gains would enhance the effectiveness of future attacks. The Canadians suffered 2,481 casualties between 26 and 28 October. With only seven battalions of six hundred men involved in the attack, the casualties were extremely high.\(^6\)

One of the seven battalions attacking on 26 October was the 4th CMR, from Central Ontario. It was on the extreme left of the Canadian Corps front and was given the unenviable task of attacking through a bog to the intermediate objective of Wolf Copse and on to the final objective of the Woodland Plantation, a distance of 600 metres along a two company frontage (“C” Company left, “B” Company right). October 26th was described as the “bloodiest day in the battalion’s history” but one that would also see a young soldier inspire his battalion through a single-handed assault on a German pillbox. For this courageous act, Private Tom Holmes, from Owen Sound, was awarded the Victoria Cross.

What follows is Rutherford’s recollection of the Battle of Passchendaele. Written in the late 1920s, this account provides detailed insights into the battle through the eyes of a young officer and highlights the challenges facing the Canadian infantryman at Passchendaele.
Just my own personal experience and observations. No one saw the whole Battle and most records written by those who were not there have distorted it in many ways. For instance, few who have read accounts of the Battle would believe that there were only two pillboxes each on the 4th CMR front and on that of the 43rd Battalion. There was, however, a machine-gun post in a trench on our left Company front. I can vouch for this as I was back and went over the ground carefully twice, once about eight days after the Battle and once in February 1918 just before we left for home. Quite a few of the men in the left sector Companies went forward of the objective and, finding nothing, came back and dug in on the objective; in doing so they had to take out a machine-gun position opposite and to the left of the pillbox close to the centre of our Battalion front. I, for instance, saw nothing of the recorded incident of the truce to pick up wounded.

After the Hill 70 offensive north of Lens in July and August 1917, the Canadian Corps was pulled out of the front line into the back areas to practice going over the tapes, as was done before Vimy, for an Offensive that was to take place on the Merrycourt front south of Lens to complement the successful Hill 70 show to the north, and thus leave the important coal mines and city in a salient that could be pinched off later. All of a sudden, after we had practised for a couple of weeks, plans were changed and the entire Corps was moved north into billets in the flat open country around Poperinge, west of Ypres.

On our arrival here we learned that we were shortly to go in to relieve the Anzacs (the name given to the Australian-New Zealand Corps) who, with the British, had been struggling to expand the Ypres salient farther to the east. I well remember the day our Company Commander, Captain Bill Muirhead, and the other Company Commanders were taken up to look over the place where the Regiment was to attack and what he told us, when he came back, of the conditions we would be up against. He was a good and brave Officer, but was far from pleased with the prospect of taking his Company into the morass he had seen which was protected by several German concrete pillboxes instead of underground dugouts such as we had been accustomed to seeing farther south in the chalk soils of Vimy and Hill 70.

The day that we were to leave soon arrived. We took a train as far as Ypres, where we detrained and marched through the battered, uninhabited city with its one-time beautiful Cathedral and Cloth Hall. The Germans, probably seeing our movement from the air, were shelling the city with naval guns which had a very long range. However, we had no casualties that I remember. Just at dusk we arrived in the St. Jean area. Some, I recall, went into a tunnel but most of the Battalion were in tents which kept us out the rain but were no protection when the German planes came over at night and pulled their tailboards, showering the area with pineapple bombs.

On October 23 we moved forward to a bit of Lieutenant Tom Rutherford, photographed in early 1916, wearing the insignia of the 147th Grey Battalion. This battalion was broken up to reinforce battalions already in France.
higher ground called Abraham Heights where we spent the night in such dry shell-holes as we could find; late the next day, the 24th, we moved forward to the position from which we were to attack on the 26th. As we were leaving Abraham Heights to go up to our jumping-off trench we lost two Officers, Lieutenant Jack Campbell and Captain Johnny Woods, both killed with the same shell. They were both outstanding Officers whom the Battalion could ill afford to lose. Because what little there was in the way of a track was being shelled, we were well spread out; some Platoons got lost and didn't get in until late the following morning.

The trench we occupied was hardly worthy of the name – just a broken down ditch with up to six inches of water in parts of it. However, on the 25th the sun came out and it was a reasonably warm day. We were able to dry our wet clothes, and those of us who were to lead the operations at the 0540 zero hour the next morning had a chance to get our Orders and look over the ground in front of us which we were to cross next morning. We were each given a small sketch-map of our own area which had little on it except our position, our objective, and the boundaries between the 4th CMR and the Battalions on our right and left, together with the inter-Company boundary. The 4th CMR were on the left of the Corps, with, I think, the Artist Rifles of the British Naval Division on our left, and the 43rd Canadian Infantry Battalion on our right.

The Battalion front was only a little over a quarter-of-a-mile wide and little more from our jumping-off trench to our objective, and practically level but rising slightly towards our objective. It was divided down the centre into two Company fronts; on the right “D” Company with “A” Company in support, and on the left “C” Company was in front with “B” Company in support. One Platoon of each of the front Companies was to patrol the front up to the barrage line from 12 o’clock until just before zero hour, by which time they were to be well forward close to the barrage line in packets of sections. My Platoon had this job on the right Company front, and Jaffray Eaton’s Platoon from “C” Company had the same job on the left.

During the afternoon of the 25th the weather was clear and sunny, and I spent a lot of time going from one end of our Company front to the other with a pair of binoculars in an effort to familiarize myself with the ground ahead. The right flank
of our Company was in a little wood relatively much smaller than the Wolf Copse as it is called on the sketch-map in the 4th CMR History. It was elm trees about a foot through and, at that time of year, bare of leaves. In the centre of this wood and on the enemy side stood the ruins of a small house, just one wall about three or four feet high. It was called “Wolf Farm.” Beyond Wolf Farm and on the edge of the wood was what appeared to be an enemy pillbox covered on top and in front with broken bricks, apparently from Wolf Farm as the loose bricks had been gathered up around that area. Beyond this and about 300 yards to the right (well over on the 43rd Battalion front) and on the end of a small spur that dominated the whole area, was another very obvious pillbox. Farther back but still well over on the 43rd front and about in line with our given objective, was what appeared to be another pillbox, also covered in front and on top with what appeared to be broken bricks. Beyond that, the ground apparently fell away somewhat as I could not see it except over on the right where it was higher. However, I could see the tops of the trees in what was marked on our sketch-map as “Woodland Plantation.”

On the left of the Company front there was a row of trees about 50 yards in front of our position, planted along what apparently had been a farm road going from Wollemolen over to Wolf Farm; the ground here was very low, with large shell-holes full of water with some areas completely flooded. Right on our boundary with “C” Company and about 200 yards from our trench was another pillbox on somewhat higher ground than where I was standing. On this flank I met my long-time friend who had just joined the Battalion – Jaffray Eaton (the only son of a widowed mother) who had been Second-in-Command of our Grey County Battalion and had reverted from Major to get to France. His task on the left forward Company front was the same as mine on the right; that is to say, to patrol the Company front after midnight to make sure that no enemy was lurking close by and then to deploy his sections close to the barrage line just before zero hour.
From where we stood we could see his Company front and although we could not detect any pillboxes we definitely suspected that some were there. So we agreed that I would come to the left flank with one of my sections and endeavour to get to the pillbox that appeared to be about on the line which divided the Company fronts, as there seemed to be less water on my side than on his although both were badly flooded. We agreed to meet on that flank just before zero hour to exchange any further information we had gathered.

I then went back to the centre of our Company front and gave Captain Muirhead the information I had. Lieutenant Arthur Deacon and Lieutenant “Dinty” Moore were with him. The Headquarters was a projection cut in the side of the trench and covered with some old boards, the ceiling was only about four feet high. The sun was shining and it was a chance to get dry (except for wet feet) so I went out and stood with my back to the side of the trench and talked for a couple of hours to one of my men – Robson by name – who happened to be from Owen Sound. There had been no shelling all morning but all at once a Wooly Bear burst in the air in a direct line with where we were standing, making the typical little cloud of black smoke. Within half-a-minute there was another one right over our heads, and a piece of shrapnel went in behind Robson’s gas respirator and his chest and grazed his ribs. He bled rather badly and also coughed up blood, but a volunteer stretcher party soon had him on the way to "Crown Prince’s Farm," which was a large pillbox that served as Battalion Headquarters and a Dressing Station. These were the only shells that day. I guess the Germans were also enjoying the bright sunshine.

Then night closed in and with a couple of hunks of bread in my stomach but no water, I lay down and slept, to be wakened at midnight to do my patrol of the area in front of the trench, accompanied by two of my own men. We spent most of the time at Wolf Farm as we could stand on the floor and look out over the low wall which still stood. Funnily enough, I was told after the battle that when the Company went past in the morning two German soldiers came out of the cellar; one shot at Lieutenant Moore, wounding him in the head. They must have been lying low in there while we stood on the floor above them. The rest of my Platoon had been assigned to their...
forward positions the afternoon before and would take them up just before zero hour so that they might move close under the barrage.

About half an hour before zero hour I returned with my patrol to Company Headquarters to get another hunk of bread and to fill our water bottles as we expected the water would have arrived by then. But no water had come. The Battalion went over without any—“Water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink.” Having been crawling around in unspeakable filth for much of the past four hours, when handed a loaf of bread I reached forward and wrenched a piece off with my teeth so as not to foul the rest of it. Right there I was read a lecture on manners—and a serious one, too—by Lieutenant Arthur Deacon, a Bank Manager from Stratford and 20 years older than I. I resented it at the time because had he known what I had been crawling over during the night, I think he would have realized that my approach was the more sanitary. However, before many hours had passed I was to find out that underneath his formal manner lay the heart of one of the bravest men I have ever known.

About 0500 hours I went back with a section of four men to the left of the Company front where I had arranged to meet Jaffray Eaton. It was almost time to move out into our forward positions so, having confirmed what we had decided the day before, we shook hands and each, with our little sections of four men, went his separate way. We were no sooner there than a flash of light in the semi-darkness behind told us that our shells were coming, so we laid low in shell-holes lest any fall short. The first rounds came in almost a straight line right in front of us, but the second rounds were not so good and many fell short as the guns had very little platform in the mud a mile behind. I think probably it was one of these that got Jaffray Eaton as I found his bones when I visited Passchendaele 16 months later before we left Belgium to come home to Canada. Someone had apparently covered him up with earth where he fell and put up a little picket cross about a foot high, but the rains had washed his skull clean and while I could find no identity disk I knew it was Jaffray by his teeth which were quite distinctive. I believe there were many more killed the same way that morning.

When the barrage lifted we went forward in a drizzle of rain, and in the grey dawn of a Flanders morning we were soon up to our knees in water and tangled in wire which was underneath the water and fastened to the row of trees I mentioned earlier. Apparently Captain Muirhead could see me from the trench and sent a messenger to tell me I must get on. By this time I had disentangled
myself from the wire but hadn’t gotten through it and backed up, looking for a better place to get ahead. I spied a tree which a shell had hit about four feet from the ground; it had fallen towards us, still clinging to the stump with bent slivers. I had by now lost three of my four men; only my runner, Tommy Brooks, was with me. I climbed onto the sloping tree trunk and ran up it. Looking down I saw nothing but water. Judging that it wouldn’t be too deep I jumped and, of course, fell and was completely under water as it was, I would say, almost three feet deep. I got up and struggled towards the other side, hearing Tommy land in the water behind me.

With all my equipment and probably 50 pounds of water soaked into my clothing, haversack and gas respirator, I was unable to climb out. Under my tunic I was wearing a heavy khaki sweater that I bought in Owen Sound before I left home, so while still in the water I transferred my Mills bomb from my right jacket-pocket to the right pocket of my sweater and my revolver ammunition to my left sweater-pocket, took my revolver out of its holster which was attached to the equipment but also to a lanyard around my neck, unbuckled my equipment belt and unbuttoned my tunic. I then let the whole lot – map case, respirator, wire cutters, entrenching tool and all – slide back into the water. So with my revolver in hand and the bomb in my sweater-pocket I was able to crawl out, soaking wet. I looked back to give Tommy Brooks a hand, but all I could see was his fair hair floating in bloody water. I headed for the pillbox ahead, catching up to a Sergeant from “C” Company who was heading for the same place.

The barrage had just lifted. We saw no Germans around nor were we shot at. It was one of those pillboxes with a shallow trench close behind it running out to both left and right, with a wooden lean-to covering the trench to keep out the rain. The Sergeant – Sergeant Nicholas of “C” Company

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– had his bomb ready in his hand and I motioned to him to go in first. We both jumped into the shallow trench and underneath the board cover until we came to the opening, where he threw the bomb in. Almost instantly, and before the bomb had gone off, a big wild-eyed German without weapons jumped out between us and, in his fright, turned on me under the low roof; he grabbed me by the head and started twisting it. I had my revolver in his chest but he didn’t let go and I was beginning to black out. Having seen other Germans coming out and following Nicholas out the other side I pulled on him and in falling on top of me, he pushed me back to the opening. So here was a sweater-clad figure backing out from the lean-to to the pillbox, with a dead German partly on top of him. Just then an excited man arriving with some others from “C” Company, was loading his rifle so he brought the butt down on my head, but as the German had pushed the rim of my steel hat up on edge I was none the worse.

We were now up even with the other pillbox on our front which was, I would say, 300 yards to our right. Brandishing my revolver and pointing to it I yelled, “Come on,” and started towards it, never looking back. In travelling so light and being able to run on the drier ground turned up by our barrage, I made good time. When I arrived at, say, 50 feet from the pillbox, I saw that it had already been taken. Our men were not only in it but also huddled around the back and side of it, with a number apparently dead or wounded lying behind and at the side of it. Looking beyond it towards the 43rd front I could see the pillbox on Bellevue Spur, with Germans standing up behind it and firing with rifles at the 43rd – who were Kilties – as they tried to stumble forward through the mud. It was a terrible slaughter and I would say that almost every shot got its man. When there weren’t enough Highlanders in sight – some going forward and some running back – the Germans turned their rifles (I don’t remember a machine gun firing) on our men around the captured pillbox which I later learned had been taken by Tommy Holmes, VC.

I saw my Company Commander and some of my own Platoon and decided that as long as there were enough of the 43rd in sight to keep the Germans busy, a few men could get up past them to the pillbox behind, which was still under our barrage, and so get at the men behind the big pillbox on the spur from the rear. Although neither pillbox was on our front, it looked like the only way for others to get forward and there was no time to lose as the barrage, which seemed to be keeping the Germans in the pillbox, would soon be lifting. Archie Smith, one of my own Platoon, was at my side and, waving my revolver, I pointed towards the pillbox beyond and to the left of the one that was doing all the killing, and yelled, “Come on.”

As we had to pass within 150 yards of the pillbox on the spur, Archie and I never stopped running because our only chance was to get by it unnoticed and get to the other one just as soon as the barrage lifted. I had no sensation of being shot at directly up to this time and it is not difficult to tell when you have a bullet pass close to your ear. Since leaving the water-hole and our first pillbox I had been able to keep on my feet and to keep running, only stopping this once to size up the situation and make up my mind as to what I must do. Just as Archie and I got to about 50

Private T.W. Holmes of the 4th Battalion, Canadian Mounted Rifles, was awarded a Victoria Cross for his role in knocking out a German pill box on 26 October 1917.
feet from the pillbox we were after, Archie spurted forward and, dropping on his knee, raised his rifle, pointing it at the corner of the pillbox but before he could shoot, his rifle fell from his hand and he slumped to the ground. I looked up but could see no one.

In case someone was waiting around the corner, I fired two shots which ricocheted off the corner to scare whoever had fired. When I rounded the corner no one was there (he must have been about 50 feet farther on in the sunken road which was our final objective for the day) so I reached for the bomb in my sweater-pocket. With my right hand having transferred my revolver to my left, I had made the mistake of not straightening the pin. It took some little time to straighten it, during which time I could have been shot, and, in the meantime, someone appeared beside me in a trench coat. Without looking up I handed him my revolver still on its lanyard around my neck, pulled the pin and threw the bomb in. Then I said, “Is that thing ever going off” – four seconds is a long time under such circumstances. I reached for my revolver and just as the man handed it back he was shot through the lower forearm. It was Lieutenant Arthur Deacon (the one who had read me the lecture on etiquette before dawn that morning). Why the same German hadn’t got me when I hesitated to draw the pin, I will never know. He was very close, but I couldn’t see him.

Then, the Germans – 16 of them (one wounded and one dead were left inside) – came tumbling out with their hands up. Something, probably one of our shells because the barrage had just passed, hit the top of the pillbox and sent a shower of bricks in all directions. I told Deacon, who was bleeding badly and had the bone sticking out of his arm, to take the prisoners “already running in that direction with their hands up” back because I had another job to do. He started out behind them.

Then I started out to the left to see if I could find some men for a covering party, and to get another bomb and a rifle to try to take the big pillbox on the 43rd front from behind. In doing this I was shot at twice, probably by the same man who got Archie Smith and Deacon, so I dropped to the ground and from then on I rolled from shell-hole to shell-hole towards a Canadian steel hat I could see sticking out of a shell-hole. It was a Corporal whom I did not recognize but told him
to see if he could find some more men and meet me behind the pillbox I had just taken, but I never saw him again. I then discarded my own steel hat as I realized it was a give-away when hiding in a shell-hole; of course my face – like the rest of me – was plastered with mud.

Still rolling, I started back to a position behind the pillbox to await the men who never came. On the way I found my Company Commander just dying in a shell-hole; he smiled at me and was gone. He had a bird-cage with two carrier pigeons. The next man I was to find was Deacon who, instead of going back with the prisoners, had stopped off, almost immediately after I had sent him back, with one of his men who was hiding in a shell-hole. The man shortly afterwards had been shot through the head and was lying across Deacon whose good arm was down in the mud and the wounded arm on his chest. I rolled the man's body off him and up on the top of the shell-hole behind me to act as a background and got his bomb, put it in my pocket, and took his rifle – the muzzle of which was jammed full of earth. Thinking quickly, I took a round from the chamber, put it in the muzzle and wiggled the bullet loose and took it out, and put in a little mud to hold the cordite, then fired the round which cleared but did not burst the barrel, which often happens when a loaded round is fired through a plugged barrel.

No one had arrived to form a covering party to help me get up to the big pillbox from the rear, so I stayed where I was. I could see the Germans standing up on something and firing at the Highlanders, most of whom by now had started to move back from shell-hole to shell-hole, but very few who exposed themselves were not shot down. My first shot was at the man on the end of the pillbox next to me and, although only about 150 yards away, I missed him and he just turned around and looked. It was a cold rainy morning and by this time I had been soaking wet for at least 20 minutes and was still lying in water. I was shaking like a leaf with cold and the excitement of the battle, and was lying across Deacon. So I made a little bed in the mud for my rifle to hold it steady, and this time I brought the German down, followed by his three mates near the other end. No one came out to take their places and as I could see about six inches of the entrance to the pillbox above the intervening ground I kept on firing, hoping even if I didn’t get anyone inside, at least to keep them inside until someone came up from the front.
Shortly afterwards, Lieutenant Ray Warren and four or five "A" Company men ran past towards the pillbox we had taken; I called to them to come and get Deacon but they went on in. However, it wasn't long until Warren and another man came out and, by my shoving and their pulling, we got Deacon on his feet. They went back in where it was warm and where German food and water were available. Quite some time afterwards I saw men coming up who wore khaki trousers instead of kilts like the 43rd; soon more and more came up and went into the pillbox. At the time I did not know who they were, but they were a Company of the 52nd Battalion who were in support to the 43rd and who, when the firing that had killed about half of the attacking force had stopped, were able to approach and take the pillbox on the spur which had been responsible. I would say, for more than half of the men killed that day, both in the 43rd and in our own Battalion on the left of it. One man who is a good shot, armed with a rifle and behind a concrete block in a situation such as existed that day, is good for about two men per minute so long as they are standing up and exposed.

As soon as I was satisfied that the pillbox had indeed fallen and that Canadians were now in it, I got up and went into the pillbox with Warren, Deacon and the others. It was a grand and glorious feeling, even if my clothing and feet were still soaking wet from my "morning bath" and later lying in water for most of the morning. I found that my bomb had killed one man in the pillbox and badly wounded another. He received the best of treatment from our men. There was plenty of food and water, neither of which I had seen very much of for 48 hours.

One of the men who came into the last pillbox and whom I had to leave there, was Company Sergeant-Major Dunlop with whom I had slept in a shell-hole on "Abraham Heights" two nights earlier, lying as close as we could to keep warm. He had been shot in the stomach and thinking that officers carried morphine, pleaded with me to give him some. I never saw anyone suffer as he did. The stretcher-bearers got him out but not until after dark. Like so many others who were wounded he died the next day. He was a fine soldier.

Some time afterwards an officer and a group of men from the 52nd joined us in the pillbox, and Warren hastily scribbled a note saying that we had made contact with the 52nd on the objective, and sent it to Headquarters. However, he didn't introduce the no-rank-badges, sweater-clad drowned rat huddled in a corner to keep warm, as the man who had taken 16 prisoners out of that pillbox on their front, and who had remained outside, stopping the fire from around and over the key pillbox – for the taking of which no less than three Victoria Crosses were granted, two to the 43rd and one to the 52nd, and no doubt well earned.

My satisfaction came when General Lipsett said of our Regiment, "At Passchendaele you made the hole through which the gallant 52nd was able to pass and capture Bellevue Spur." After Passchendaele I recommended Arthur Deacon for the Military Cross, and Sergeant Nicholas for the Distinguished Conduct Medal. I was sent on a course where I was, I guess, supposed to learn how to look after my equipment and clothing in battle. Had I looked like an Officer or been laden down with equipment and gone where I did, I wouldn't be here to tell this story. It was fighting like a guerrilla that saved my life. I wasn't drunk – as the Colonel was told and, I am sure, believed. I guess I was just crazy. I went in with a three-ounce aluminum flask of rum in the hip pocket of my trousers and, in spite of the cold which was intense, in completely saturated clothes, forgot it was there until I found it the next day when I lay on it.

Well, we weren't in the pillbox very long after the 52nd boys arrived to take over when, looking through the door, I saw small groups of Germans coming down the slope on our right. This looked like preparation for a counterattack so I gathered our men together, leaving Warren with the 52nd, gathered up a bunch of German entrenching tools (small spades), moved about 200 yards to the left or to about the centre of our Company objective, and started to dig in. The ground was drier here and the soil about the color and consistency of cheese. They began to shell us a bit, and I never saw men disappear in the ground so fast. I had to stop them because the trench was too narrow to pass in and there were no bays or fire steps; these had to be put in. The Germans continued to trickle down the slope, and I sent a group out to look for a Lewis gun and pans of ammunition, and also bandoleers of ammunition from the dead. They returned with one Lewis gun and two
pans and plenty of ammunition and, with our rifles, we felt relatively safe.

As darkness descended and before the moon came out, I began to worry about a counterattack and sent one man – Bruce Dunn of Owen Sound – back to the two rear pillboxes to get, if he could, an SOS flare so that we could call for our own artillery on our SOS line which was just in front of us. I waited quite a while but he didn’t come back so I went myself to the pillbox that Nicholas and I had taken early in the morning. There were quite a number of our men in it and I warned them of the need to keep watch in case of a counterattack in the night. There were no flares, so I told them to get some from Battalion Headquarters and bring them up to me. Warren was asleep but for some reason I couldn’t wake him, so I went back because the moon had come out from under the clouds and we could see in front of us if anyone attacked. I also brought up some more ammunition. When I went back to the pillbox I went in the same side of the lean-to that we had used in the morning and stepped right on the back of the German I had shot. He made a sound like a cough which gave me quite a start. The men had left him there and were using the entrance at the other end of the lean-to.

Some time after, I do not remember how long, a Company of the Reserve Battalion – I have forgotten which of the CMRs it was – arrived to relieve us in the front line. I sent my men back. By this time most of them, like myself, were still wet and very tired. I stayed on, keeping one man who volunteered to stay with me – a chap by the name of McArthur who once had a small sawmill in Owen Sound and who now lives in Burlington and comes to our 147th Battalion Reunions. After staying for some time, he and I went over to the pillbox that had been taken over by the 52nd to get my revolver which I had left there, taking a rifle instead. They were all in the pillbox and I warned them of the possibility of a counterattack and suggested that some should stay outside.

McArthur and I then walked over the battlefield, reaching down and touching those we saw on the ground to make sure that no wounded and unconscious were among them. We then went back to Battalion Headquarters, to which I had sent the few men I had in the trench when we were relieved. As soon as I went in, someone gave me a cigarette tin of rum and tea – mostly rum, I think, for it wasn’t more than a minute or two, they said, until I fell over on the floor sound asleep. There I lay for two hours, they said, with people tramping over me. I remember waking with a start and saying, “Where are my men?” They told me that when they reported in they had been sent back to the trench we had jumped off from in the morning. I said that I must get back to them.

I couldn’t find McArthur who had come – with me, and the Colonel said to an Officer who hadn’t been in the battle but who was standing in the corner, “You go up with Rutherford.” I knew the Officer and would have preferred to go alone; anyway, we started out and hadn’t gone far when the Hun started to shell. The first one came rather close and the Officer started to run in the other
direction. I should have let him go, but I left the track and followed him. When another shell came he went in still another direction and took to a shell-hole. I should have left him then, but I pointed my rifle at him and told him to come on with me. He came but by this time I was lost myself and decided to stay where we were until morning, when I knew I could locate the spot to which we were heading by an old sniper post in a tree in Wolf Copse. However, there was one of our own machine guns firing on fixed lines not far from us and the Officer (who has been dead for many years) decided that he was going over there. I told him to do so if he wanted to.

As soon as I could see the tree I was looking for I got up. I saw the Officer coming back. He said that the machine gun crew had a wire to Brigade HQ, and he had sent a message that we were lost and were waiting for daylight. What he actually said, as I found out much later, was that I had got him lost and threatened to shoot him unless he went where I wanted him to go. As soon as the shelling started I should have left him to his own devices and kept to the path instead of following him into the morass of shell-holes, but I felt responsible for him because the Colonel had sent him with me. But I would have managed much better by myself and avoided the Colonel's wrath, which I am told was very obvious when he got the message that his friend had sent to Brigade HQ. Anyway, as soon as the Officer joined me I pointed out where we were heading. We were soon there, where we found what little was still left of the Battalion.

That evening we were relieved and came out to some Geman pillboxes behind the Battalion Headquarters. There was one big pillbox and two smaller ones, and the ground was full of pieces of wire and dead bodies from the fighting during the previous summer. I got the men all packed into the big pillbox and one of the smaller ones; and the second-in-command of our Company – who had not been in the show but joined us as we passed Battalion Headquarters – took the other small pillbox. He had a flashlight and when we went in we could see that there was about one to two inches of water on the floor and a stretcher in one corner which he looked at and, despite the fact that he had slept the night before, said, "I guess I am the senior." He went over and lay down while I found a place where the water was shallowest. He was soon asleep but I was shivering and knew that I couldn't sleep. I got up and went over to the pillbox where I had stowed away most of the men. I felt around until I found a little crack between two of the men (all of whom were sleeping on their sides) and, wedging my shoulder between two of the sleepers, gradually

A Canadian 6-inch Howitzer at Passchendaele. The accuracy of the artillery was poor during this battle due to the wet conditions on the battlefield which caused the guns to sink into the mud as they fired repeatedly.
worked my way in and fell asleep. In the morning, probably well on to noon, not a soul had stirred. They told me that someone came to the opening and asked if anyone had seen Mr. Rutherford but no one had and we slept on. When we wakened I, being opposite the opening, had to get up first.

I sat outside enjoying the sun. Looking over at the other small pillbox, I saw one of our boys – Barrett by name – from Owen Sound, sitting on a pile of old boards taking off his boot and socks. Just then a shell came over and exploded, having first buried itself in the mud behind him. It lifted him up but didn’t hurt him. Having seen me, he started to run towards me. When he got there I looked down at his feet; they were swollen and white except where they were gashed by the wire he had run through, and the dark unbleeding proud flesh was sticking out. It was the first pair of trench feet I had ever seen but that day, as one man after another took off his boots, I saw many more. My own feet were not too bad because my boots, which were high-laced ones, had been hurting the back tendons above the heels and I had opened them up with my knife. This, of course, let the water in but it also let it out, and this I think helped. Barrett went to the hospital and I don’t think ever came back; his feet bothered him the rest of his life.

From here we moved back to the camp near St. Jean and did working parties on the plank road which became the main artery of supply and approach to the front for the two succeeding phases of the Passchendaele Battle six days apart. Having been in the battle, I missed the rather unpleasant assignments of these working parties. On about the eighth day after our attack, the Padre – Captain Davis – announced that he was going back to the battlefield to collect what he could from the pockets of those who had been killed. The Colonel was letting him go alone and I asked if I could go with him. He rather grudgingly replied that I could, but that it wouldn’t count as a working party and that I would have to take mine when my turn came. The Padre, one of the most fearless men I have ever known, was happy to have me go with him, and we set out early one morning with full water bottles and a fruit cake from home in our pockets. It was a walk of about six miles, largely on duckboards which are two scantling side by side about two feet apart and battens about two inches apart nailed between.

We got there before noon. The Padre had made little bags from sandbags so that he could keep separate what we found on each man, and these went into two larger sandbags.

We worked the left sector first and as there was some random shelling, we went into the pillbox that Nicholas and I had taken the morning of the battle; the dead German was still near the end of the lean-to. We ate our fruit cake and had a drink from our water bottles, having first washed our hands with some of the water. When we came out the sun was shining and the buildings of Passchendaele were easily seen, and I guess we were too because it wasn’t long until the Hun started to shell us. Of course I ducked for a shellhole when I heard one coming close, but the Padre just looked at me and stood his ground until I heard one coming which, from the way he was bracketing us, should have been dead on; I threw my arms around the Padre and threw him down, luckily into a shell-hole, which saved both of us because the shell buried itself only feet away and showered us with earth when it exploded. The Padre just got up and shook himself as if nothing had happened.
After a while the Hun, probably guessing what we were doing, stopped shelling and we covered the rest of the field in peace. Most of our dead were in and around the pillbox that Tommy Holmes took by bombing the machine-gun crew which was outside and then getting another bomb and putting it in the opening in the back; most of the killing here was done from the pillbox on Bellevue Spur over on the 43rd Battalion front which commanded both fronts.

I was anxious to find Jaffray Eaton’s body as I knew, from being told, almost exactly where he was killed. Among the dead, many of whom I assume were too far forward and were caught in our own barrage, there were two small pieces of board nailed together in the shape of a cross and stuck in the ground in a shell-hole – the side of which had apparently been shoveled to cover a dead man – which we, of course, did not disturb. However, when I visited the battlefield alone 15 months later just before we left for home, I saw the little cross; the skull of the man covered up there had been washed clean by the winter and summer rains. I could not find an identity disk but, from the round, somewhat odd-shaped teeth, there was no doubt that it was my friend Jaffray, after whom I named my eldest son.

On the way back, as we were passing over Abraham Heights where, ten days earlier, we had spent the night on the way into Passchendael, the Hun started to bracket us again, one shell in front then one behind, another in front and so on. I was walking on the duckboards in front of the Padre; every time I heard one coming I would flatten out on the duckboards and, looking up, would see the Padre only pull his steel hat down on the side on which he thought the shell was going to drop. About the third time this happened I said, “Padre, you must think I am shell-shocked.”

“Oh no, Tommy,” he said, “but I don’t think you are a very good judge of distance and direction!” It is not surprising that he was killed when his throat was cut by a shell splinter at Amiens, and no wonder every man in the Battalion mourned as if he had lost an only brother. He was an Irishman from the south of Ireland; a Protestant brought up among Catholics which goes to make a tolerant man and a Christian gentleman. As he had little use for the Colonel – whose language and actions were often most insulting and ungentlemanly – the Padre spent much of his spare time with us in “D” Company, roughnecks though we were.

When we got home that night, word had come through that I was to report the next day at the First Army School at Hardilow Plage for a four-week course, while the rest of the Unit went out on rest to be reinforced and reorganized. It was a pleasant place near the Coast and on the historic field of the Cloth of Gold. The only incident of note, as far as I was concerned, was that one Sunday morning, having missed a bus in Boulogne the night before, I was up before the Commandant for my first and only time in the Army. I pleaded guilty without excuse and was given a most unconventional punishment, that of writing out in longhand ten pages of Field Service Regulations Part I. I got back to the Battalion before they went into the line again, to find many new faces in my Platoon which, in spite of considerable reorganization, was still No.15, the best Platoon in the Regiment, commonly known throughout the Unit as “The Hun Strafers.” I had taken it over from Gregory Clark, MC, when he was promoted to Captain and went to be Adjutant. A hard man to follow.

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The Battle of Passchendael – reputed to be the most bloody of the War – was, in its first and second and third phases, different from many battles, in that it was fought under extremely difficult conditions both as to weather and ground. Despite history book figures with respect to our front, our losses in killed and wounded - and there were few survivors among those seriously wounded – were at least five times that of the Germans. Of course we made up the difference in the number of prisoners taken. The ground taken – about 50 acres for each Unit – meant nothing. The Paris edition of the Daily Mail came out in the spring with a paragraph as follows: “We have again compelled the Hun to occupy the desolate waste of Passchendael.”

Prior reconnaissance and maps indicating the locations of the pillboxes were inadequate. If the Germans had been smart and got out of their pillboxes just as soon as the barrage had passed instead of staying inside too long, in some cases until we got there, there would have been as few survivors everywhere as in front of Bellevue Spur.
From the start every Officer, NCO, and man was on his own. There was no way to control such a battle under such conditions. Our guns, stuck as they were in the mud, were in no position to fire a rolling barrage. If more mortars and smoke bombs had been used, our casualties would have been less than half what they were. Our men were loaded down with equipment which restricted their speed of movement which was most essential. Fifty – yes, even half that number – of good guerrilla-trained fighting men, properly led, could have won our battle and taken as many prisoners with very little loss.

These are strange things to say now, but from what I have said here of the happenings on our own particular front I believe them to be only too true, in the light of my subsequent experience.

**Postscript**

Rutherford’s description of the battlefield and the effect that it had on the lead elements of the attacking force highlight the inability of the British and Canadian Staff to comprehend the impact that the harrowing conditions would have on the individual soldier and the achievability of designated objectives.

The actions of the lead companies prior to the battle are interesting. First, the onus for intelligence gathering appears to have been at the tactical level. Rutherford participated in a standing patrol at “Wolf Farm” in the hours preceding H-Hour but continued to seek to define the German defensive layout right up to the moment of jumping off. The platoon screens deployed by both “C” and “D” Companies along their respective frontages to the barrage line denied German occupation of no-man’s-land but gleaned little intelligence. Nevertheless, it proved successful in countering the emerging German doctrine of dispersing forces in forward areas to break up attacks. The 4th CMR history notes that unlike previous battles, “the enemy’s line of defence was not a series of uniform trenches to be taken and mopped up” but rather “isolated trenches and strongpoints dotted here and there.”

The battlefield conditions at Passchendaele also appear to have impeded the re-supply of the fighting soldiers and made the quick evacuation of serious casualties difficult. Rutherford...
noted the absence of water prior to and during the battle with irony and commented, “water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink.” He also commented on the number of seriously wounded men who died as a result of their wounds. Interestingly, historian Daniel Danocks suggests that the chances of surviving a wound were impressively good and lauds the stretcher-bearers for their efforts. This may have been attributable to the ability of slightly wounded soldiers to prevent themselves from drowning while seriously wounded men floundered in the morass. Rutherford also notes the effects of trench foot among his men after the battle. The 4th CMR War Diary highlights this problem and 29 men were evacuated after the battle for this ailment.

Rutherford suggests that 50 guerilla-trained men could have accomplished the battalion’s objectives. Prior to the war, Rutherford studied in detail the actions of the Boer farmers against the British in South Africa and thought this type of warfare had great merit. He credits the “ditching” of his cumbersome equipment and the use of a rifle early in the battle as essential to his survival and also alludes to the displeasure of the Colonel when he learned of this act. Also noteworthy is his observation that most of the casualties at Bellevue Spur were inflicted by rifle fire. His comment on the number of German casualties as being five times less than those suffered by the 4th CMR is also surprising. Although the battalion captured 200 prisoners, they suffered 291 casualties and Rutherford was the only officer in the lead companies that was left unscathed.

Rutherford continued to serve in the 4th CMR until 25 August 1918 when he was wounded by a German gas shell at Monchy-le-Preux. Returning home in 1919, he remained in the Non-Permanent Active Militia (NPAM) throughout the interwar period, commanding the Grey Regiment on two occasions and later the 22nd Infantry Brigade. During the Second World War, he commanded the Grey and Simcoe Foresters and later the 1st Armoured Brigade and the 11th Infantry Brigade. Considered too old for fighting command, he was put in charge of the Canadian Armoured Corps Reinforcement Units in England until the end of the war. Upon his return to Canada in 1946 he worked for the Department of Veteran’s Affairs as Director General Rehabilitation under Lieutenant-General Tommy Burns. He lost a number of friends at Passchendaele and returned to the battlefield three times before his death in 1975.

Notes

5. Ibid.
7. Nicholson, p.317. As early as June 1917, General Ludendorf recommended the deployment of the “Forefield.” The first orders reflecting this doctrine were issued 7 October 1917 by the 4th German Army.
9. Ibid., p.129.
10. Ibid., p.126.
11. 4th CMR War Diary, The 8th Trench Mortar Battery (brigade resource) was on 30 minutes notice to move but was not called upon during the battle.
13. 4th CMR War Diary. The effects of trench foot stuck with Rutherford and he became a stickler in ensuring officers inspected their men’s feet. As the Commander of the 1st Armoured Brigade in England in 1942, he inspected the socks of every member of the brigade (much to the chagrin of the soldiers). Author telephone interview with Bruce Rutherford, 10 April 2004.
15. 4th CMR War Diary. The Operation Order for the attack stipulated that all men were to carry full fighting kit which included 220 rounds of ammunition, 1 Mills bomb, 1 aeroplane flare, 2 iron rations, 24 hours rations and 1 filled water bottle in addition to webbing, haversack, wire-cutters and entrenching tool.
16. 4th CMR War Diary.

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