“He was my best subaltern”
The life and death of Lieutenant Herrick S. Duggan, 70th Field Company, Royal Engineers

Nic Clarke

At 0400 hours on 21 October 1915, 24-year-old First Lieutenant Herrick “Heck” Stevenson Duggan died of wounds in Béthune, France. One of the 61,000 causalities suffered by the British Army during its failed Loos offensive (25 September to 19 October 1915), Herrick differed from the vast majority of the dead and wounded because he was Canadian, not British.

Based primarily on correspondence between Herrick Duggan and his family during the years 1913-15, this article explores Duggan’s life and experiences leading up to, and during, the Great War. In doing so it examines how the “war to end all wars” impacted one Canadian and his family, as well as exploring the nature of British society during the early years of the war. Indeed, Duggan’s letters are a valuable source for understanding the social and military aspects of the Great War. Duggan was a candid and observant writer who held little back. He was not afraid to tender criticism and concern about the Allied war effort and objectives – not to mention government figures – when he felt it was necessary to do so. Furthermore, he was often quite open with his own feelings and emotions with regard to the position in which he found himself.

Herrick Duggan was born in Montréal in 1891. He was the eldest son of noted Canadian engineer, yacht designer, and champion yachtsman George “Skipper” Herrick Duggan (1862-1946) and Mildred Scarth Duggan (née Stevenson) (1867-1939). A member of Canada’s elite, Herrick received his initial education at the exclusive St. Alban’s School in Brockville, Ontario and later spent a year in Switzerland before commencing an engineering degree at McGill University in 1907. During the summer months Herrick worked on engineering projects across Canada, including extensions to Nova Scotia’s Sydney and Louisburg Railway and mine development in Hillcrest, Alberta. He also indulged in his love of yachting. A skilled sailor like his father, Herrick not only raced competitively, but also designed his own yachts and would often critique his father’s designs.

In 1912 Herrick Duggan graduated from McGill University. He was hired shortly after by the Lachine-based Dominion Bridge Company (DBC), where his father held the position of general manager. Herrick worked at DBC until October 1913, when, thanks to his father’s numerous business and social contacts in Europe, he was able to gain short-term employment at Machinen Fabrik, Augsburg-Nuremberg (MAN) in Mainz, Germany. He took this position, it seems, for two reasons. One, to gain experience of German engineering practices, and two, to perfect his German-language skills. Two years later, the language skills Herrick developed would be put to good use on the western front. One night, disoriented in the darkness, Herrick accidentally walked into German lines. When challenged by a sentry, the young Montréaler replied in German, causing the guard to pause long enough to allow Herrick to throw a grenade.
and make his escape with, to use his own words, “sparks fairly streaming out of my heels.”

Herrick enjoyed his time in Germany, especially his time outdoors. An avid skier and hiker, he made good use of the mountains around Mainz to keep fit. But he also suffered from culture shock at times and was not above stereotyping his German hosts as effete, fat, and humourless beer drinkers. Indeed, Herrick was stunned by the frequency with which his German hosts drank beer. In one letter to his father in early 1914 he noted his doctor’s advice against drinking German beer was “mighty hard to follow…in fact often not far from impossible.”

Herrick’s boss at MAN, for example, gave him an extra day off during Mainz’s carnival so that he might experience it in its entirety. In fact, Herrick seemed to have had a large amount of respect for the German people and encouraged his brother, who was also an engineer, to consider coming to Germany to “have a look at things.” Herrick also asked his father to consider hiring a German engineer he worked with at MAN.

Herrick’s general respect for the German people did not seem to be tarnished by the outbreak of war in 1914. Nor did the early reports of alleged German atrocities in Belgium seem to sway his opinion. Rather, the Russian Empire – a British ally – was the focus of Herrick’s dislike during the early months of the war, as he believed its expansionist tendencies can see the point of a joke in time but a German never can.”

Despite such comments Herrick was not inherently anti-German. In fact, after venting to his brother about all the things he did not like about Germans – including their poor skiing style – Herrick noted, “when you make fair allowance for different manners and way of thinking they [the Germans] were not bad crowd as a whole.” He also acknowledged that he had been treated very well, especially at his place of employment. Herrick’s boss at MAN, for example, gave him an extra day off during Mainz’s carnival so that he might experience it in its entirety. In fact, Herrick seemed to have had a large amount of respect for the German people and encouraged his brother, who was also an engineer, to consider coming to Germany to “have a look at things.”

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threatened all European nations. Labelling public calls to dismember Germany once it was defeated “foolish,” Herrick argued that a militarily powerful, united Germany was essential to long-term peace in Europe because its existence stopped “the old game of Central European squabbles,” and it acted as a barrier against further Russian westward expansion. While Herrick’s opinion of the German army may have changed after the publication of the Bryce Report in May 1915, there is no evidence to indicate that his views about the importance of a strong Germany for the stability of Europe changed. Nor is there any evidence to suggest that his opinion of the Russians got any better.

Herrick had left Germany in early June 1914 and returned to Canada where he was once again employed by DBC. When war broke out in August he volunteered for service in the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry, only to be rejected because his medical examiners deemed him to have a weak heart. Refusing to accept the doctor’s diagnosis he tried to enlist three more times before DBC sent him to London, England in September as its representative in war contract negotiations with the British government.

Soon after arriving in England, Herrick advised his mother, Mildred, against sending his younger sister Margaret (Peg) to boarding school on England’s east coast. Noting the large number of British troops in the area, Herrick told his mother he felt that it would be better to “keep Peg [at home] for a while,” because “I don’t believe a girls’ school is well placed near moving troops.” The close proximity of large numbers of Tommies to his sister’s school was not, however, Herrick’s only motivation for advising his mother to keep Margaret at home. He was equally concerned about what might happen to Peg if the war should go badly, especially in light of what he believed was the British public’s “undercurrent of cocksureness” about the war. Directly following his comments about the “precarious” position of Margaret’s school vis-à-vis British troops he stated:

If the people here were more awake to what the war is I would feel easier but from the way in which they have accepted the sinking of the three cruisers I am not at all sure there would not be a bad panic in the event of a bad reverse...what form a panic would take of course one cannot guess but I think you’d better keep Peg with you, or at least delay your decision a month or two till the Germans have been forced enough on the defensive to attempt a fleet action.

By October 1914 the majority of the people with whom Herrick came in contact had come to realise that British forces would not be celebrating Christmas sipping schnapps on Berlin’s Tiergartenstrasse. A letter written by Herrick to his mother on 13 October noted that at least some of the public’s rose-tinted view of the war had begun to dissipate, but also hinted at the lack of faith some people had in the ability of the “Russian steamroller” to defeat the Germans:

We were getting more and more hopeful reports and rosy rumours everyday but in the last week most of us have settled down to take a sane reasonable view of it.

As far as military resources go Germany evidently has the upper hand at present and people here are a little skeptical as to what the Russians can do...From the military point of view i.e. the War Office, the Germans will take two to three years to beat and I think this is the point of view we all must take though I personally do not believe it.

As sane and reasonable as many Britons might have become with regard to the military realities by mid-October, many were still infected with strong doses of war hysteria and Germanophobia. In response to his mother’s request for information regarding Prince Louis of Battenberg, Herrick observed that the German-born First Sea Lord had been forced from office “by an overdeveloped spy mania.” He continued in the same vein later in the letter by noting that one of the most popular topics of debate in London newspapers was “whether one is a traitor or not by continuing to drink Rhine wine.” Concerned that his mother might not believe him, and perhaps indicating his disbelief that some individuals considered the enjoyment of the fruits of Teutonic viticulture as traitorous, Herrick further added: “this...is absolutely true, there are four letters in [the] Westminster Gazette tonight.”

If Herrick was shocked by some Britons’ reactions to the consumption of German wines, he was equally stunned by their reactions to the issuing of the first war loan in November 1914. Noting that most people saw the war loan as “one of the finest investments in years” rather than a “touch on their pockets,” Herrick gloomily
commented, “by and large I don’t think England as a whole has begun to realize yet what the war means.”

While Herrick may not have believed that it would take two or three years to beat the Germans, he did believe the British Army needed his help. “I think I must join the Army,” Herrick wrote to his mother, and one suspects the pessimistic view of the military situation he sent to her was written to justify his decision to attempt to enlist once more. Further examination of the letter indicates that it was not merely the dire circumstances in which Britain found itself that motivated Herrick to consider enlisting. There were also a number of social and personal factors that influenced his decision to volunteer for service. The most pressing of these seemed to have been the fear of being seen as a coward:

...as Canada will not take me I must look to this side [Britain]...I am practically sure of a commission in the Royal Engineers and I think I must take it...The sentiment in London is growing stronger and stronger everyday to force every able young man with no ties into the Army and one of these days if we suffer a defeat I believe it will break bounds. At present my story of being physically unfit is scarcely believed and should public sentiment break loose would not be at all. I don't much want to go - I've got a very good job and good prospects - but I think I must and I know I should never feel comfortable in the future if I did not.

Herrick, did, however, place two conditions on his enlisting: gaining a commission, noting that he would not “try and go as a private for some time yet,” and being passed fit by a doctor. Both were met. Herrick was offered a second lieutenant's commission in the Corps of Royal Engineers on 4 November 1914. An anonymous biographer opined Herrick's medical examination may have been “somewhat relaxed” as the Royal Engineers were not about to reject a volunteer who was not only a professional engineer, but who also spoke both French and German fluently. Herrick’s acceptance was also assured by two other facts overlooked by his anonymous biographer. Herrick’s membership in Canada’s social elite and his education, not to mention his family’s considerable social and economic connections in Great Britain, placed him well within the social pool from which Britain’s regular army traditionally drew its officer corps – the upper middle class and the landed gentry. Perhaps more importantly, during the first months of the war the British Army was losing junior officers at a rate that was causing considerable alarm among British military authorities. As Herrick noted to his mother, the British Army was “having a very bad time getting [replacement] officers and are practically handing out commissions on any excuse.” In other words, Herrick was as much assured a commission as a result of his social class and the crippling battlefield attrition...
amongst the British Army’s officer corps as he was because of his own skills.

Herrick had only one fear about accepting a commission in the Royal Engineers: that DBC would not accept his immediate resignation and thereby prevent him for two or three months from “going into the game.” In an attempt to stave off possible accusations of irresponsibility, disloyalty, foolishness, or a mixture of all three, Herrick further defended his enlistment to his mother in a letter he wrote on the day he was offered his commission:

I don’t want the D.B.Co. to feel I am leaving them without any consideration but you people at home probably don’t realize what a need of men there is here and that many very sane men are talking National Enrolment. Many employers are going over their lists and offering eligible employees with no ties the alternative of being fired or enlisting with their places kept open at half pay – this is not newspaper gossip, I have seen it done.

In the same letter he reiterated his opposition to Margaret being sent to school in England. Herrick directed his mother’s attention to a much more serious danger: German coastal raids. Noting that Yarmouth had been bombarded the day before and that the government was expecting another raid in the near future, Herrick cautioned his mother not to be “foolish” about sending Peg over and to heed his advice on the matter because “I am in a much better position to see what’s going on here than you are.”°² These warnings were repeated once again 16 days later when Herrick bluntly told his mother he did not like the idea of Peg being sent to England at all.°³ It would seem Herrick’s arguments succeeded as Peg was enrolled at Margaret Gascoigne’s new private school in Montréal.°⁴

Herrick was well aware of the dangers the war presented to both him and his family. During his time in London he had seen a number of wounded men and had heard of “tremendous shipments of men with broken nerves coming back.”°⁵ He was also conscious, through his social and professional connections, of the difficult position of the British army on the Western Front. In late October, after talking to a flying officer who had witnessed the Battle of Mons from the air, he informed his mother that the British and French forces had escaped catastrophe at the hands of a superior German foe through “pure luck – absolutely nothing else.”°⁶ Eleven days later he told his mother that “things are going very badly [for the British army] and the Gov’t will not tell the people. We are holding well but at a terrible loss of men & officers which we can ill afford & which might prevent us advancing unless we get more.”°⁷

Herrick believed that such losses would ultimately cause the British Parliament to call for a general muster of able-bodied men. He knew that equipping and training the men answering the call, let alone caring for those they left behind, would be a difficult feat for the British government to achieve. As early as 25 September he had noted the problems the mass enlistment of men were causing the woefully unprepared British authorities and was to refer to them again in October.°⁸ Still, Herrick was in full agreement with the idea of a general muster. He pressed his mother to “[t]ry and rub into any boys who are hesitating about coming what it means – if we don’t get it finished there will be no jobs for anyone to keep, much less get in civil life.” Soon after he wrote to his brother “take a message from me to some of the D.U. [Delta Upsilon] boys whose names I see prominently in the football news that there is a bigger game going on over here that’s going to need a lot of spare men. It’s far more serious than most of you seem to think.”°⁹

Canada’s image in England worried Herrick. Commenting on one of Sam Hughes’s speeches that had been published in a London newspaper he pleaded for “somebody [to] keep him quiet,” noting that, “Canada has made a good impression but is rapidly nullifying it by a lot of hornblowing [which is] very ill received by these people… who have a full realisation of the enemy’s strength.”°¹⁰

The actions of recently arrived Canadian troops were doing little to help matters. He reported to his mother that the drunken antics of some Canadian troops on leave in London from their encampment on Salisbury Plain had left Londoners “none-too-well pleased.” The Canadians’ reputation for uncouth behaviour was to accompany them to the front, where Herrick continued to despair about it. In letters to his mother and brother from France in 1915 Herrick reported that while Canadian troops were “generally recognized as being probably the
best fighting troops here [on the western front],” everywhere they went they were cursed due to their poor discipline, lack of respect for property, and their officers’ ill manners.37

Upon obtaining his commission Herrick was sent for training at the Royal Engineers’ School of Military Engineering (SME) in Chatham, Kent. Highlighting the dire straits that the British Army was by late 1914, his training was rushed. His two months of training, which he seems to have generally enjoyed, included receiving the usual eight-week introductory officers’ course in the space of a week.38 Herrick did not, however, spend all his time at Chatham training. Taking advantage of the ease of movement and general respect that an officer’s uniform afforded him, he visited the Chatham dockyards. Here, viewing ships that had been involved in the Battle of Heligoland Bight,39 he told his mother – forgetting, it seems, the wounded men he had earlier seen in London – he saw “the first evidence of war…a good sized shot-hole in a ship’s side shows one things.”40

After Herrick completed his training in early January 1915 he moved from Chatham to Henley-on-Thames where he joined the 70th Field Company, Royal Engineers. It was here that Herrick received his first command consisting of “35 absolutely green men and a corporal.” Despite his men’s lack of experience Herrick had great faith in them, stating to his father “my men are fairly ripe & old [in comparison to other recruits] and should catch up before long.”41 His faith was not misplaced. Within two months Herrick was said to have drilled his men so well that they had become the most efficient section in the 70th Field Company.42

From Henley-on-Thames the 70th Field Company moved to Rye before proceeding to Aldershot for final training before deployment. In Rye Herrick gained first-hand experience of the equipment shortages plaguing the British forces that he had noted in his letters to his family the year before. In a candid but humorous letter to his mother he remarked that because of the shortages units often had to “pinch” what they needed. The men in his company, he continued with more than a little pride, were experts in the game of “informal acquisition” making the 70th Field Company the “best equipped company [he] had heard of yet.” He was, thanks to his men, the proud sole owner of “a complete set of tools, 30 rifles, and 9,000 rounds of ball cartridge.”43 In spite of this, the 70th Field Company continued to experience equipment shortages until it reached France.44

Herrick was sent to France in May 1915, ahead of a more senior man, as a result of his demonstrated leadership ability. In France he further developed his reputation as an exceptional officer. His commanding officer, Major T.T. Behrens, described Herrick as “my best subaltern, so keen and energetic and quick to make himself efficient.”45

Belying his weak heart, numerous letters from his brother officers stressed Herrick’s personal bravery and daring. One recalled, for example, Herrick heading out on an “expedition” to a German trench and returning with enough cigars for all his mates.46 His correspondents also emphasised the excellent relationship he had with his men. On long marches Herrick habitually declined the officer’s privilege of a horse, and instead “marched with the men with a full pack and kept their spirits up.” As a result Herrick’s men “would have done anything for him.”47 And he would have done anything for them – after his section suffered its first casualty to enemy fire, Herrick stayed out in the open all night in an attempt to raise his men’s morale despite the very real risks such an act entailed.48 By late July 1915 Herrick had been made a first lieutenant.49

Herrick took his responsibilities seriously, but he found some of his duties tedious. He particularly disliked censoring his men’s letters, which he described as both boring and monotonous due to the uniformity of their subject matter – “they generally contain (a) good wishes (b) statement as to health of self (c) kind of journey (d) military reasons for secrecy and then a lot of crosses.”50 He also dreaded the task because it cut into his own letter writing time. Time, he noted, that was limited enough as it was as a result of his other, more important, duties.

Herrick’s letters from France offer a first-hand glimpse of life on the western front and his evolving views of the war. In his first months in France, during which time the 70th Field Company was mainly stationed behind the lines occupied
with support work, Herrick described his experiences in glowing terms. He told his mother that despite the heavy work load he faced, he believed that the “R.E. is quite the best show in this war [because] in general one is pretty safe, lives in a comfy billet behind the lines, has a horse to ride...[and all in all]... has a very pleasant time”51 He further opined, that the British trenches he visited were “very clean, sanitary and most comfortable”52 This view was to change when the 70th Field Company moved into the trenches later in the year.53

It was also in this correspondence that Herrick first mentioned how he found the reality of the war difficult to grasp.54 He first believed that this difficulty, in spite of the “plenty of shells and bullets about,” was due to the fact he was not directly involved in combat. Indeed, he noted “[w]e [Herrick’s section] have all religiously carried our rifles for weeks & not fired them yet.”55 However, even after actively joining in the shooting war, Herrick still found the conflict in which he was involved to be “most particular” declaring that it was “all totally different from one’s conception of war.”56 Rather than being a war of dashing exploits and exciting escapades, it was boring and mechanical:

The monotony of life is only broken by sniping here and there and the occasional shell. At evening time the aeroplane show comes on and people more or less wake up for that. Then in the morning and the evening comes what is known as ‘stand to’ when both sides stand by to repel an attack. N.B. no one ever does attack then but never mind.

Fingers must be warmed so every man, cursing Kaiser, war and Flanders, stands up and blazes away until his rifle is warm. Both sides then give a bearable imitation of a battle for half an hour then everyone goes back to bed.57

If Herrick sometimes found the war to be “unreal,” there were other instances when he found it to be very real and he was not afraid to share those realities with his family. In one undated letter written some months after arriving in France, he described the “piteous sight” of the wounded men who lay suffering between the lines out of reach of aid and comfort the day after a battle.58 In another letter he admonished his mother not to believe the braggarts who said they “like[d] shellfire [because the] suspense of lying listening to the wail of the shell and wondering where it’s going to land; for believe me one can do a great deal of wondering in two seconds, is not pleasant.”59

Still, in a postscript he stated “I think the doctors all wrong [about my weak heart]; I have never felt better in my life...”60 This was about to change.

By mid-August Herrick’s letters started to take on a vastly different tone as the strain of being in the frontlines began to take its toll, both mentally and physically. In a letter written on August 16 he told his mother that he was “very happy” but sometimes thought how he “should like to be at home” and that he feared the war would be a long one.61 While such comments might be attributed to homesickness, a characteristic that had never before been apparent in Herrick’s letters, a letter he wrote to his sister nine days later provides direct evidence that Herrick was starting to feel the strain of his position: “I very often wish I were with you all now. I’ve had three months darn hard work and I think a day’s sailing with no responsibilities would help a good deal.”62
Herrick soon began contemplating leaving the front altogether as the strain he was under started to noticeably affect his health.

The doctor has been trying to keep me in lately and I have just been wondering whether I shan't have to go back [to England] before long... because... I am very very tired..."  

Alluding, whether consciously or not, to the fear that had been one of the motivating forces behind his decision to join the British Army almost a year before, Herrick further noted that his time in the trenches would "remove any stigma" that might accompany his serving in a home job.  

Herrick never made it back to England. On the evening of 18 October 1915, he and his men were ordered to support an assault on a German-held trench at Hulluch Quarries as the Battle of Loos ground to a halt. Early in the assault the infantry officer commanding the bombers (grenadiers) attacking the trench was seriously wounded and unable to continue. Rallying the bombers, Herrick took charge of the assault and the trench was captured at approximately 1930 hours, some two hours after the attack had begun. Herrick received a slight neck wound in the process. It did not seem to bother him. In fact, according to one witness, after securing the position Herrick refused the advice of his commanding officer, Major Behrens, "to go to the rear and have his wound dressed," stating that "it was only a scratch and his work was not properly finished."  

Just after midnight the Germans launched a counterattack, catching a number of British troops in the open forward of the recently-captured trench. After the initial German shelling had subsided Herrick went out to look for survivors. It was at this time he received the shrapnel wound that was to kill him. Successfully recovered from the field, Herrick was transported to the 6th Field Ambulance Hospital in Béthune. He died there two days later and was buried in Béthune’s Town Cemetery. The 70th Field Company’s after action report strongly recommended Herrick for a gallantry award in light of his deeds during the night of 18-19 October. None was ever awarded.

Herrick’s death devastated his family. Kenneth wrote to his parents from London that his elder brother had been "a wonderful [and] very exceptional fellow" who had “the brightest prospects of anybody I know of and the biggest heart in the world....[his death hit] me pretty hard..."  

On 7 November 1915 – a mere 12 days after Herrick’s death had been reported in the London Times – the owners of the German boarding house in which he had lived placed his epitaph. It reads:  

"Also in memory of Major K.L. Duggan 5th Can. Mounted Rifles 30th October 1917 Age 24"
lived during his time in Mainz – A. Kraus and K. Nicholls – wrote to his mother in London. Explaining to Mildred that they had “read of your dear son’s death in the papers.” Kraus and Nicholls expressed their great distress over the news and offered their deepest sympathies. They further stressed how much Herrick had endeared himself to everyone he had met in Mainz.69

Herrick’s German friends hoped that his younger brother Kenneth, who was serving as an officer in the 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles, would be spared.70 Unfortunately, this was not to be. On 30 October 1917, Acting Major Kenneth Locke Duggan was killed by shell fire during the Third Battle of Ypres while leading his company on an assault of German positions near the Belgian village of Bellevue. Like Herrick, Kenneth was 24 years old at the time of his death; unlike Herrick his body was never recovered.71

In July 1929, some 14 years after Herrick’s death, Mildred Duggan received a short note from E.H. Bazeley, a battlefield tour guide based in London, England. Enclosed with the note, which was little more than a salutation, was a recently taken photograph of Herrick’s grave in Béthune, which, it seems, Mrs. Duggan had hired Bazeley to take.72 A year later Herrick’s sister gave the McGill chapter of the Delta Upsilon Fraternity a stained glass window that she had commissioned in memory of her brothers and the 18 other fraternity members killed in the Great War.73 These two acts of memorialisation, one public and one private, serve to remind us of that the effects of the Great War were felt in Canada long after shot and shell had ceased to fly in Europe.
Notes

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3. This is not the first biography of Herrick Duggan. Ron Hotchkiss published a short biography of Duggan based on the same letter set utilised in this study in The Beaver in 1998. This article builds upon Hotchkiss’s work by placing Duggan’s letters within a wider context of the Great War through the use of a number of period sources as well as secondary material. Ron Hotchkiss, “One of Kitchener’s Kids,” The Beaver (February-March 1998), pp.11-19.
7. HD to Mildred Duggan (MD): 7/9/7/15, HD Fonds.
8. HD to GD 5/1/1914, HD Fonds.
9. HD to Kenneth Duggan (KD), 27/1/1914, HD Fonds.
10. HD to GD, 5/12/1913, HD Fonds.
11. HD to MD, 16/5/1915, HD Fonds.
12. Herrick’s Russophobia was shared by many Britons. Future British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, for example, told his wife in 1914 that he was “dead against carrying on a war of conquest to crush Germany for the benefit of Russia.” Likewise, many common people also expressed there fear and, indeed, hatred of Britain’s eastern ally while at the same time expressing admiration for their foe. See Niall Ferguson, The Pity of War (New York: Basic Books, 1999) pp.184-185. HD to MD, 9/11/1914, HD Fonds.
13. The Bryce Report on Alleged German Outrages, published in May 1915, examined German actions against Belgian civilians during the invasion of Belgium at the outbreak of the Great War. Though viewed today as a biased document, it served to sway international opinion, especially American attitudes, against Germany. An electronic copy of the report can be viewed at <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/bryce.htm> (accessed 29 April 2008).
14. HD to MD, 16/5/1915, HD Fonds.
27.

28. HD to MD, 20/11/14, HD Fonds. On 3 November 1914, Herrick’s source was well placed to provide the young Canadian with information about the battle. The RFC had flown repeated reconnaissance missions both during the engagement and the subsequent British retreat, providing the commander-in-chief of the BEF, Field Marshal Sir John French (later the First Earl of Ypres), with much needed information regarding German troop movements. In his first despatch to the Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener, French paid special attention to actions of the RFC at Mons stating that the corps’s “…skill, energy and perseverance have been beyond all praise...[it]...furnished me with the most complete and accurate information which has been of incalculable value in the conduct of the operations.” Five years later French would further stress the importance of the RFC reconnaissance to the BEF during the battle in his memoir of the first year of the war. French not only stated that the reports that the RFC provided him were of “great value,” but also that at the start of the battle he “decided to await aircraft reports from Henderson [Brigadier-General Sir David Henderson, general officer commanding, Royal Flying Corps] before making a decided plan.”

French’s praise was not overstated. Although largely untested in combat, and distrusted by many senior officers, aircraft had proved their worth by the end of the first month of hostilities. Not only did information provided by RFC scouts play an important role in the BEF escaping encirclement by the German 1st Army at Mons, but also aerial observation is credited with playing a major role in the Allied victory at the First Battle of the Marne (5-12 September 1914) and the German victory at the Battle of Tannenberg (17 August-2 September 1914). Field Marshal Sir John French, “Despatch,” Third Supplement to the London Gazette of Tuesday the 8th of September 1914, 9 September 1914, p.4; Field Marshal Viscount French of Ypres, 1914, (London: Constable, 1919), pp.43-44, 61; John H. Marrow, Jr., The Great War in the Air: Military Aviation from 1909 to 1921 (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), pp.59-87; Lee Kennett, The First Air War, 1914-1918 (New York: Free Press, 1999), pp.30-40. For accounts of the Battle of Mons see John Terraine, Mons: The retreat to victory (London: B. T. Batsford, 1960), and David Lomas, Mons 1914: Britain’s tactical triumph (Westport, Conn: Osprey, 2004). Lomas’ work is particularly valuable for its maps of the action.

33. HD to MD, 9/11/14, HD Fonds.

34. HD to MD, 25/9/14, 30/10/14, HD Fonds.

35. HD to KD, 17/1/14, HD Fonds. Both Herrick and his brother Kenneth joined the Delta Upsilon Fraternity while studying at McGill University. Herrick had become the McGill chapter’s president in his senior year and sat on the fraternity’s council of alumni after he had graduated. He also had the dubious privilege of being the first member of the fraternity to be killed in the Great War. “Delta U Killed at the Front,” HD Fonds; “Deceased Members, McGill,” spreadsheet provided by Mr. Johan Draper, Delta Upsilon McGill Alumni Executive.

36. HD to MD, 21/10/14, HD Fonds

37. HD to MD, 21/10/14 and HD to KD, 30/9/15, HD Fonds.

38. HD to KD, 4/11/14, 29/11/14, 7/12/14, 13/12/14, HD Fonds.
39. A British raid on German naval patrols off the north-west coast of Germany, the Battle of Heligoland Bight (28 August 1914) was the first naval battle of the Great War. Marder, From The Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, pp.50-54; Hough, The Great War at Sea, pp.65-68.

40. HD to MD, 29/11/14, HD Fonds.

41. HD to GD, 17/1/14, HD Fonds.

42. W.G. Turner to MD, late October, 1915, HD Fonds.

43. HD to MD, 26/1/14, HD Fonds.

44. HD to Margaret Duggan, 1/6/15, HD Fonds.

45. T. Behrens to MD, 7/7/1915, HD Fonds.

46. Lieutenant C.S.G. Rogers to George Evans, date unknown, HD Fonds.

47. Unknown author to MD, late October 1915, and L. Meakin to MD, 31/10/15, HD Fonds.

48. Herrick told his mother he did not know why he “wasn’t hit a dozen times.” HD to MD, 20/7/15, HD Fonds.

49. HD to MD, ?/?/15, HD Fonds.

50. Agar Adamson, an officer in (and later commander of) the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry, had a similarly low opinion of his men’s letters, describing some of them as “not very creditable.” HD to Margaret Duggan 1/6/15, HD Fonds; Norm Christie, ed., The Letters of Agar Adamson 1914 to 1919: Lieutenant Colonel, Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry (Ottawa: CEF Books, 1997), p.22.

51. HD to MD, 28/6/15, HD Fonds.

52. HD to MD, 16/6/1915, HD Fonds.

53. HD to MD, 20/7/1915, HD Fonds.

54. HD to MD, 8/6/15, HD Fonds.

55. HD to MD, 20/7/1915, HD Fonds.

56. HD to Margaret Duggan, 25/8/15, HD Fonds.

57. HD to MD, 29/11/14, HD Fonds.

58. HD to MD, 26/1/14, HD Fonds.

59. HD to Margaret Duggan, 17/1/14, HD Fonds.

60. HD to Margaret Duggan, 16/6/1915, HD Fonds.

61. HD to MD, 3/8/1915, HD Fonds.


63. HD to MD, 3/8/1915, HD Fonds.

64. HD to MD, 3/8/1915, HD Fonds.


67. NNA.

68. KD to MD 22/7/10/14 and KD to GD 22/7/10/14, LAC. Kenneth L. Duggan Fonds, MG30 E304 [hereafter KD Fonds]. Both letters are only dated “Friday 1915,” but in each Kenneth states he is crossing to France the next day. An examination of Kenneth’s service record indicates he joined his unit in France on 24 October 1915. This would seem to indicate that his letters were written on the preceding Friday, which was 22 October. Duggan, Kenneth Locke [Major], LAC, CEF Personnel Files, 1914-1919. RG 150 1992-93/166 Box 2712-54.

69. A. Kraus and K. Nicholls to MD, 7/11/15, HD Fonds. Personal correspondence travelled between the populations of the antagonists with, given the circumstances, relative ease. Indeed, although direct postal communications between Germany and Britain were severed with the outbreak of war, individuals in the opposing countries could still send letters to each other via neutral countries, often the Netherlands. See Graham Mark, British Censorship of Civil Mails During World War I, 1914-1919 (Bristol: Stuart Rossiter Trust Fund, 2000), pp.55-58, 157.

70. A. Kraus and K. Nicholls to MD, 7/11/15, HD Fonds.


72. E.H. Bazeley to MD, 31/7/29, HD Fonds.

73. Depicting Saint George and the Dragon, the window was originally placed in the fraternity’s house at 26 McTavish Street (now 3434 McTavish Street the building currently houses McGill University’s Department of East Asian Studies). In 1974 the fraternity presented the window to McGill University in memory of its members killed in both World Wars. The window now situated outside the front entrance of the university’s Blackader-Lauterman Library of Architecture and Art. I am grateful to Mr. Johan Draper of Delta Upsilon McGill Alumni Executive for drawing my attention to the existence of this window.

Nic Clarke is an alumnum of the 2006 Canadian Battlefields Foundation Study Tour. He is a Ph.D candidate at the University of Ottawa where his dissertation examines the experiences of men rejected as unfit to serve by the Canadian Expeditionary Force during the Great War. He is also continuing his research on the Duggan family, and aims to produce an edited collection of Herrick’s letters in the near future.