A Canadian Conscript Goes to War – August 1918
Old Myths Re-examined

Patrick Dennis

Private Hilaire Dennis finished his “rum ration” and prepared to “go over the top” for the fourth time in three days. Wet from the previous night’s heavy rainfall, exhausted from lack of sleep due to enemy artillery bombardment and nearly three days of sustained combat, and nervous about the upcoming battle, Dennis savoured the rum, said his final prayers and moved into position. “Zero hour” arrived and Dennis soon found himself in an old German trench about 300 yards east of the Sensée River adjacent to the Arras-Cambrai road. This was his fifth “battle” in the past two weeks. It was also his last.

In most respects Dennis was an ordinary Canadian infantry soldier whose training and preparation was not dissimilar to that of some 350,000 Canadians who had preceded him into battle. But Dennis’ story was different from that of most of his comrades. He was not a volunteer, but had been drafted into the Canadian army under the provisions of the Military Service Act (MSA) of 1917. Secondly, as a draftee of French-Canadian heritage he was subject to a variety of systemic prejudices from an army that was largely composed of English-speaking volunteers. And third, he was a US citizen by birth. But by August 1918 this 23-year-old former streetcar conductor was a combat veteran in the 18th Battalion. Moreover, for the Canadian Corps, amidst the epic struggle and record casualties of August 1918, he and thousands of other conscripts were rapidly becoming one of the crucial elements which held this formation together as a strong and effective fighting force.

Private Dennis’ eight-month journey to the front is both fascinating and instructive in what it reveals about the conscription process. It dispels a number of myths about the precise role that conscripts played in the final Canadian offensives of the war, better known as “the last hundred days.” In this context, while some historians have ignored the crucial role of conscripts altogether, the prevailing view of others has been that conscripts arrived too late and in insufficient numbers to make a significant difference in the outcome of the hundred days campaign. However, this study confirms more recent scholarship on the subject, which strongly suggests that conscripts in fact “arrived just in time to let the Corps fight its most extraordinary actions and garner its greatest successes of the war.”

Finally, while history richly records the political dynamics that gave birth to Canadian conscription, the passage of conscripts like Dennis from the peaceful streets of Canada to the war-torn fields of France and Belgium remains obscured. This article attempts to breach the fog that has long enshrouded the story of the ordinary Canadian conscripts’ journey from “slackers” and “shirkers” to warriors and heroes.

August 1914 to December 1917

In 1910, Sir Wilfrid Laurier declared that “When Britain is at war, Canada is at war...there is no distinction.” At the start of the war in August 1914, living in Windsor, Ontario, did not join the crowds rushing to enlist. He was an American and America was not yet at war. Born of French-Canadian parents in Bristol, Rhode Island on 28 February 1895, Dennis moved to Canada at an early age with his family where they settled in a small French-speaking community in southwestern Ontario – Pointe-aux-Roches, in Essex County. Raised on a nearby farm, his parents died while he was yet a teenager.
after which he sought employment in the border cities of Windsor and Detroit. He found work as a streetcar conductor with the American-owned Sandwich, Windsor and Amherstburg Railway.

As the war dragged on, the clamour for new recruits continued to increase. Though of fighting age, Dennis resisted the call to arms, reflecting a growing consensus against the war shared by French-speaking Canadians throughout Ontario. Meanwhile, as casualties on the Western Front steadily grew, the national enthusiasm for enlistment abated, not only in Canada but throughout the Empire. Nevertheless, Canadian Prime Minister Robert Borden announced that effective 1 January 1916, the government intended to put 500,000 men in uniform, doubling the size of the Canadian army.°

Over the next year the Canadian army would steadily grow to become a robust four-division corps, whose victory at Vimy Ridge in April 1917 would confirm its reputation as one of the premier fighting formations in the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). But with this battlefield triumph emerged two cold realities. By the second half of 1916 there was a significant decline in the number of young men volunteering for service on the Western Front. This factor, combined with the large losses being suffered in combat, underscored the fundamental truth that without an increase in the rates of enlistment, the Canadian Corps would soon be attrited out of existence. In April 1917 the Corps suffered 10,602 casualties at Vimy while only adding 4,492 volunteers. This ratio of wastage to recruitment led Borden to the difficult decision that conscription was necessary to sustain the corps. Dennis’ fate was all but sealed.

Returning to Canada in the middle of May 1917 from a tour of Vimy Ridge, and having just participated in the first Imperial War Conference in London, Prime Minister Borden announced to the House of Commons that, since it appeared that “The voluntary system will not yield further substantial results,” it was necessary to propose a programme of “compulsory military enlistment.” Subsequently, on 11 June Borden’s government introduced a Military Service Bill which would make all males (British subjects) between 18 and 60 liable to serve. The initial objective was to raise 100,000 men. On 29 August 1917, the Military Service Act (MSA) became law.

Events affecting the conscription process then began to move quickly. On 13 October, “a Royal Proclamation called on all men in Class One [young men, either unmarried or childless widowers, between the ages of 20 and 34] to register. But by 10 November, the deadline for registration and claims for exemption, only 21,568 had reported for service, while a remarkable 310,376 (93.7 percent) had applied for exemption.” This result was predictable given the broad grounds for redress identified in the act. Local tribunals had the power to declare individuals exempt

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Hilaire Dennis was an American by birth who grew up near Windsor, Ontario. Before being conscripted in early 1918 he worked as a streetcar conductor with the American-owned Sandwich, Windsor and Amherstburg Railway.
or non-exempt. In fact, in reviewing this crucial portion of the act, it is a wonder that every registrant was not declared exempt.

Dennis was caught up in this process. He presented himself for his mandatory medical examination on 10 October, three days before the royal proclamation was issued. Taller than average (5 feet, 10½ inches), Dennis was found to be in good health and ready for service.

Events on the Western Front highlighted the need for reinforcements. The Canadian assaults on Hill 70 and Lens (15-25 August) cost the Corps some 9,198 casualties. Next came the mud of Passchendaele Ridge (26 October-14 November) where the Corps lost another 15,654 casualties. Still, the 1917 federal election held in December, essentially a referendum on conscription, offered the 20,000 plus conscripts who had “reported for service” one last chance to avoid serving overseas. However, English-speaking Canada firmly supported the measure as the pro-conscription Unionist Party scored a landslide victory (and a 70 seat majority).

Almost immediately after the election, the MSA men from Essex County were ordered to report to the 1st Depot Battalion, in London, Ontario. Accordingly, on 8 January 1918, Hilaire Dennis and his younger first cousin Leo Dennis were enrolled in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Surprisingly, only “1500 francophones” across Canada were reported to have formed part of this initial MSA cadre, but whether or not Franco-Ontarians like Dennis were included in this tally is unknown.

The military was given formal guidance to treat MSA men the same as earlier volunteers but the recruiting system made a sharp distinction right at the outset. Recruits did not sign the usual two-page “Attestation Paper” on enrollment but rather completed a different one-page document titled “Particulars of Recruit Drafted Under the Military Service Act, 1917.” These particulars were generally similar to those of volunteers – both were referred to as “recruits,” but for MSA men, they also included a “Military Service Act letter and number,” a label of dubious value, but did not include a declaration of allegiance to the Crown like its predecessor document. Perhaps most importantly, the regimental numbers assigned to the majority of MSA men were in a new and different seven-digit series starting with a “3” or a “4,” which inevitably drew attention to their status as “conscripts.”

As Dennis moved through the process of being inducted into the army prior to departure for England on 31 January 1918, it is possible that he experienced what Desmond Morton refers to as a “mixed welcome to the ranks.”

On 4 February 1918, Private Dennis, along with 1,607 other recruits, embarked for England aboard HMT Grampian. After a slow but uneventful passage, Dennis and his fellow draftees disembarked at Liverpool on 16 February. From there it was a 300-kilometre journey south by rail to Bramshott Camp, a major training base for the CEF which in March housed nearly 17,000 soldiers.

The next day, Dennis was taken on strength by the 4th Reserve Battalion. His first two weeks were spent in medical quarantine before he commenced what was supposed to be a 14-week course in basic infantry skills. The syllabus, however, was revised to a nine-week program in “view of the severe fighting... going on in the Western Front and the heavy demands...for reinforcements.”

On 22 April, the 4th Reserve Battalion moved to Witley Camp, 16 kilometres to the northeast. On that day, Major-General Francis Howard, Inspector of Infantry in the United Kingdom, noted that drafts were “now being sent overseas with 9 weeks’ training....This is of
course unavoidable, but it puts an end to Platoon Training.” He added further, that “With only 9 weeks to train men in, it is impossible to train Lewis Gunners for elementary anti-aircraft work...” General Howard understood the crucial importance of the Lewis Gun in the battles that lay ahead. He might also have been thinking that citizen soldiers on an accelerated weapons training programme in fact needed as much time as possible to master what was an entirely new language. But clearly the need to compress the training schedule in order to push reinforcements out to the Front earlier was a source of major concern.

When not studying the intricacies of the Lewis Gun, Dennis would have had some free time. While on leave, Dennis had his portrait taken, dressed in the uniform of an American soldier. While there is no record explaining this choice of attire, the fact that he was an American citizen and yet a soldier in the CEF seems to suggest it was a deliberate irony.

In early May, as the February drafts completed their basic combat training and prepared for deployment to the front, Dennis, as he wrote home on 12 May to his Uncle Frank and Aunt Eliza was much disappointed Friday night when my unit left for France and I was left behind...I was all ready...when the Captain came up to me and said I had to stay for the next draft...I am left nearly all alone... all the rest were boys from Windsor...we had been together since we left. Believe me it broke my heart to see them go.

It is clear that Dennis, like most soldiers who have lived and trained together so closely for months had bonded with his mates and was horrified to see them leave without him. Dennis continued the letter by discussing his training:

Private Dennis photographed in the uniform of an American soldier while on leave in England.
I am qualified for a machine gunner and Bomber, and believe me Uncle if they ever give me a chance at those wild Germans I will cut them down like hay... I am a good bayonet fighter... I don't think that I will be afraid to use the cold steel because I can use it.

After offering everything he owns to his Uncle “because I may drop off over here,” Dennis concluded his letter with an age-old fatalistic soldier’s lament:

You know my life is not worth ten cents in the Army and I know it. If I die in this war I will die game because I don’t care if I die now. It used to worry me quite a bit you know. I used to worry about all those things at home and war over here but now I have to cut all this out and I don’t care what becomes of me... But if I should lay down my life for the honour of my country I ask one thing of you, that I get a few spirituelle (sic) for my poor soul... as I said before, I am ready as many other Canadian lads did to make the supreme sacrifice for my people and country.

The draft on 10 May that Private Dennis missed was a large one – 913 other ranks (ORs), 72 of whom went to the 18th Battalion where Dennis would soon be sent. Among the group of Dennis’ comrades who had departed before him was Private George Henry Allsop, a conscript from Woodstock, Ontario, who had joined in London, Ontario just days before Dennis. It is likely that Private Allsop, serving with the 18th Battalion, was the first Canadian conscript to be killed in action when he fell in battle near Neuville-Vitasse on 10 June 1918 – a full two months before it is generally thought that Canadian conscripts first saw action.

France June-August 1918

On 1 June, Dennis, part of a draft of 310 soldiers, finally proceeded overseas, by rail and ship to Boulogne and thence to the Canadian Infantry Base Depot at Étaples, France. Arriving the next day, Dennis must have been struck by the sheer enormity of the war effort, especially on seeing this sprawling complex of military facilities. Étaples, the largest camp ever created by the British, housed about 100,000 people. Here, Dennis and his comrades were immediately swept up in a tough two-week battle indoctrination course – common for all newly-arrived infantry soldiers. The proximity of the war was brought home to the new arrivals when the Germans staged an air raid on the camp two days later.

On 17 June, Dennis and 1,085 other Canadian soldiers saw a welcome end to Étaples, when they were transferred 30 kilometres inland to the Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp (CCRC) at Aubin-St. Vaast. The primary purpose of this camp was to hold reinforcements in readiness – about “100 per infantry battalion and ten per cent of other arms,” until orders were received to proceed to the front. The secondary purpose was to teach reinforcements the fundamentals of how the Corps operated, including the latest changes in tactics and “training in open warfare.” This approach was entirely different from the British, who by this point in the war were sending conscripts “direct from UK training camps to the front.” Fortunately for Dennis, he would now have eight weeks to complete preparations for the front. Later, with his training complete and the Canadian Corps engaged in an historic offensive to the southeast, word finally arrived that the time for training was at an end.

The Battle of Amiens 8-20 August 1918

A half century ago, J.F.C. Fuller described the Battle of Amiens,
1918 as one of the “decisive battles of the Western World.” In the event, the Canadian Corps, playing its role as the “shock army of the British Empire,” along with the fierce and redoubtable Australian Corps on its left flank, and the French 31st Corps on its right, secured for General Sir Henry Rawlinson (4th British Army), one of the greatest Allied victories of the War up to that point.

The Canadian Corps continued to engage in significant combat at Amiens even after 11 August. While the offensive had indeed slowed dramatically, it had not ground to a complete halt. This fact, coupled with the harsh reality of over 9,000 casualties between 8 and 11 August meant that the Canadian Corps was yet again in need of immediate and substantial reinforcements. Previously, those reinforcements had been drawn from a pool of “volunteers” that by now had nearly dried up. Currie, however, did have available a rapidly growing pool of conscripts which had factored heavily into his strategy for the Battle of Amiens, and which would ultimately provide him the necessary manpower for extended offensive operations. This reserve of manpower was a luxury not available to any other Allied corps or army (with the exception of the rapidly building American armies to the south). In fact, many conscripts had already made it to the Front and many of these had fallen with their volunteer comrades during the first days of battle at Amiens. Moreover, since the overall allied commander, Field Marshal Foch, was still determined to press forward with the Amiens offensive, it was to this group of conscripts in ready reserve that Currie turned to next.

In Spearhead to Victory, Dan Dancocks advanced the view that by 11 August, “the Amiens offensive had just about run its course,” a more accurate assessment of the battle than either Nicholson’s “end of the battle” characterization or Schreiber’s declaration that “The battle of Amiens...had staggered to a close.” The account in the British official history that “During the eight days which followed the 11th of August, no important action took place on the front of the British Army or of the French First and Third Armies on its right,” is equally inaccurate.

The Allies’ broad objectives had still not been achieved – “namely, the reduction of the entire salient created by the successful German offensive on March 21 and following days.” Currie issued a “special order of the day” on 13 August declaring that “The first stage of the Battle of Amiens is...history.” His implication was that the next stage of this battle was yet to be fought. This new phase of the offensive was to be a “set piece attack to take place on August 15 or 16 and...was to be carried out in conjunction with the French and the Australian Corps.”
This attack was eventually cancelled but the fighting would continue at Amiens for another eight days, resulting in significant casualties.

For Dennis and his fellow reinforcements, the Battle of Amiens began on 12 August with a 90 kilometre journey to the front. The 18th Battalion had been involved in the fighting on the first day of the Battle of Amiens and had sustained 30 killed and 120 wounded and had received some 56 ORs as replacements late on 8 August. Now, coming out of divisional reserve, the battalion moved back into the line, establishing its headquarters at Fouquescourt. Shortly after 0400 hours on 13 August, the 18th Battalion was reinforced by two officers (Lieutenants Gerrard and Cole) and 100 ORs, including Dennis. The 4th Brigade war diary reported that...

...strong reconnoitering and defensive patrols were pushed out during the night [of the 13th]. The enemy appeared very nervous and continually swept NO MAN’S LAND with Machine Guns. Our forward positions and rear area were moderately shelled during the day, chiefly by 8.9s from a long range.

On 14 August 4th Brigade received an operation order calling for the resumption “of the offensive on a date and at an hour to be notified later.” Subsequently the brigade directed that “Strong patrols” be sent out in order to “work up old communication trenches until resistance was met.” These patrols not only encountered “resistance,” but were also able to determine that “the enemy was still holding his line.” Shortly thereafter, the “operation was postponed indefinitely,” and early the next morning 4th Brigade moved back into support. Meanwhile, two companies each from the 18th and 20th Battalions were placed at the disposal of the 19th Battalion for a major “push” the next day, in what would apparently be an attempt to dislodge enemy forces from the village of Fransart (about two kilometres to the east). By now however, as Currie had feared, the Germans were deploying new troops to oppose his men, including the “Alpine Corps...one of the enemy’s elite assault Divisions.” Clearly, the Battle of Amiens had not yet ended.

Second Canadian Division received word that it would be relieved on the night of 16/17 August. But first it faced a tough battle that would see large elements of 4th and 5th Brigades attack the villages of Hallu and Fransart, in cooperation with a 1st Canadian Division attack on its right. The Canadian attack was to be conducted in conjunction with an advance towards Roye by the 31st French Corps.

The attack began at 1630 hours following a 20-minute artillery barrage. The Germans responded with intense machine gun fire that forced one Lewis Gun section led by veteran Lance Corporal Barnes of the 19th Battalion “to crawl to take the German front line.” Later, Barnes would grimly note, that “Three or four of our platoon got shot through the top of the head near me but we had to keep going.” The 19th Battalion had run into “stout resistance” and had “to fight for every foot of ground.” The 18th Battalion, tasked with protecting the right flank of the 19th Battalion, cleared the southern portion of Fransart before one of its platoons captured Posen Trench by 2015 hours. The battle cost the battalion 21 casualties and the unit was relieved the next morning.

Combat would continue across the newly-established front line for another 48 hours before “active operations by the Canadian Corps east of Amiens” were brought to an end. This eight-day “lull” for the Canadian Corps was not uneventful. Indeed, the 3rd Division assaults alone at Damery and Parvillers are considered some of their toughest engagements of the war, distinguished by the award of two Victoria Crosses. A clear measure of the intensity of combat from 12 to 20 August, is the approximately 2,748 casualties suffered by the Canadian Corps, more than were lost on the second day of the battle of Amiens, and still more than were lost by the 1st Canadian Division at the Battle of Festubert in 1915. The net result of these losses was a requirement for additional reinforcements, thus leading to the arrival of more conscripts and an
accelerated transformation of the Corps.

Private Dennis and his fellow conscripts had survived their introduction to battle. Bloody and battered they had endured high explosives, gas shells, machine gun fire, attacks by German aircraft, mortars, grenades and other assorted weapons during the furious assault on a reinforced position and in the fierce trench fighting that followed. By the evening of 16 August, they too had joined the legions of combat veterans before them. No longer “shirkers,” “slackers” or even “conscripts,” they were simply ordinary Canadian infantry soldiers.

The following week, still recovering from the shock of his first combat, Dennis hastily penned the following thoughts to his aunt and uncle:

just a few lines to let you know that I am still Living. I am on rest for a few days and... Lucky to be able to give you some news tonight because I have been through something most awful in the last few days back, and the experience tells on my face quite a lot, and I know that it is through the good prayers of everyone at home that I have been so well protected from the awful claws of this machine of destruction over here ...

I must tell you that I received that Last Box you sent me... and everything was O.K. and was very glad of all the things you sent because tobacco like we get in Canada we can not get it here, and uncle when we go up to the front Line with a good shot of rum and a mouthful of good Canadian tobacco, I figure myself to be a real soldier and feel no fear.

The Battle of the Scarpe
26-28 August 1918

On the night of 25 August, only five days removed from Amiens and with only three days “rest,” 4th Brigade again moved into the front line. Marching 10 kilometres east from Berneville, the 18th Battalion found itself in the Telegraph Hill area, just east of Arras and directly along the south side of the Arras-Cambrai road. Here the Battalion waited along with the rest of the Canadian Corps for what Currie would later describe as “the hardest battle in its history.”

In order to achieve some measure of surprise, Currie launched this attack at 0300 hours on 26 August with 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions positioned south and north of the Arras-Cambrai Road. The offensive began with an “intense” five minute artillery barrage. The 18th Battalion “jumped off from Tilloy Trench” in support of 21st Battalion. The Brigade’s overall objective this first day was to capture “Chapel Hill, the enemy’s main line of resistance west of Guemappe.” By 0630 hours, 4th Brigade had captured its objective, and 90 minutes later the 18th Battalion had cleared both its primary and secondary objectives. For Dennis, this was his second trip “over the top” in ten days. He described this assault in a letter home:
One night we made an advance in pitch dark about two o’clock in the morning and it was raining heavy, and there I saw one of the prettiest sights of my Life, one who is weld [sic] to my memory forever. We were crossing two mountains which were about a mile apart. We were on one and the enemy on the other one, and there the heavy guns were roaring something awful and the sky was red with fire through the rain. There was fire splashing through the sky and fire rolling on the mountain in front of us...[and] when we reached the other mountain...I certainly did see some sight in the dark. We had to walk through dead Bodys [sic] all over. And then I was wild. I was right after blood. Uncle it is funny how a man changes when he gets in a scrap like that. We always get a drink of rum before we start anything and then we can go through fire or do anything. But after the battle is over one often wonders how he got through it without being killed.56

Given the early success of this initial 3000 metre advance, the battalion was ordered to capture the village of Guémappe, a further 2500 metres to the east. Due to delays in what the battalion would describe as “inadequate” artillery support, this attack was postponed until 1600 hours when the battalion went “over the top,” for the second time that day, this time as the lead battalion. Despite fierce resistance, this advance succeeded as well. By the end of the day, the battalion had “captured the ruined town” and had established a line 3000 metres beyond it. Follow up raids would continue well into the night with mixed success. But the mood at higher headquarters was almost euphoric and Currie was moved to issue the following special order:
I desire to congratulate all concerned on the magnificent success achieved this day. It has paved the way for greater success tomorrow. Keep constantly in mind Stonewall Jackson’s motto “press forward.”

Thus marked the end of an extraordinary day of combat, during which elements of the 18th Battalion were engaged during the entire 24 hour period, and helped to secure nearly 6000 metres of ground. This success came at a relatively light cost of 10 killed and 15 wounded. Consequently, the 18th was tasked to lead the next day’s assault.

Currie envisioned that 2nd and 3rd Divisions would continue to advance astride the Arras-Cambrai road on 27 August. Currie expected 2nd Division to reach its first objective, the Sensée River some 3000 metres to the east, then press forward to Cagnicourt, another 5000 metres farther east to achieve its secondary objective. This ambitious plan would prove to be too much for the Canadians.

After a night of heavy rain, the 18th Battalion began its attack towards Vis-en-Artois at 1000 hours “under a rolling artillery barrage lifting 100 yards every four minutes.” The enemy counter-barrage started seven minutes later. The brigade war diary recorded that the troops showed “splendid spirits [as they] gained their first objective, the Sensée River, very successfully, taking many prisoners and causing the enemy severe casualties.”

Dennis elaborated:

We took a big bunch of prisoners one morning and I thought it was good for a little lot of Canadians to take so many great Big husky Germans. They were coming to us with their hands up by the hundreds and some of them were crying like Babys [sic], and I’ll tell you they should rather see old man Satan himself than see a bunch of Canadians facing them with cold steel.

But the brigade war diary records that “strong resistance was met with [and], the enemy Machine Gun fire was intense.” Subsequently, “any attempt to advance against the enemy’s strongly organized system of trenches...caused severe casualties.” As a result the brigade was forced to establish its line in a...
series of shell holes west of the Sensée River (rather than east of it), although the 18th Battalion was still able to force a small bridgehead over the stream at the Arras-Cambrai road.63 Subsequent attempts to advance beyond the village of Vis-en-Artois were met with deadly and “withering enemy fire.”64 This attack proved to be very costly. Major McIntosh, the acting CO was wounded, Lieutenant Spence, O.C. “A” Coy, “was shot and killed by a German sniper, and Lieutenant Gerrard, who had arrived at the front only two weeks earlier with the draft of reinforcements that included Dennis, suffered severe wounds from shell fire. Overall the 18th Battalion suffered a staggering 21 killed and 150 wounded.65

After nearly 48 hours of continuous combat, the 2nd and 3rd Divisions were ready for relief. Currie had originally intended to replace them with 1st Canadian and 4th British Divisions. However, the British unit “was unable to reach the battle position in time” and Currie felt it “was undesirable at this stage to employ a fresh Division alongside a Division which had already been engaged.”66 Therefore, he ordered the tired 2nd and 3rd Divisions to resume their attack on 28 August.

In retrospect, a persuasive argument can be made that this was the worst decision Currie would make during the “Hundred Days.” The 4th and 5th Brigades had suffered severe losses during the previous two days and were essentially a spent force.

The first objective on 28 August, the third day of the assault, was the Fresnes-Rouvroy line, a formidable German line of defence about 1000 metres east of the bridgehead at Vis-en-Artois. The capture of this system of trenches was deemed to be “vital to [the] success of future operations.”67 The secondary objective for 2nd Division was again the village of Cagnicourt, yet another ambitious 4000 metre advance which, if successful, would require 4th and 5th Brigades to pierce the vaunted Drocourt-Quéant line. It was not to be. Most Canadian advances failed to gain their objectives that day.

For Dennis, this was indeed a fateful day, both for him and for his comrades who would go over the top for the fifth time in 15 days. Dennis and his comrades advanced slowly up a gradual rise, directly into the teeth of a well positioned and determined enemy. The 4th Brigade war diary recorded that against a “strong belt of wire…our men [were] held up again and again” in their attempts to force their way forward and were met with “severe” machine gun fire from [the] front and both flanks, which caused many casualties.”68 The 18th Battalion war diary describes the grim results:

Heavy casualties were suffered in the advance to the slope of the Sensée River…Capt Mackedie was shot through the head and instantly killed while rushing a German gun post; Lieut. Cole [who had arrived at the front only two weeks before], shot through the eye, was afterwards found dead. Major Graham and Lts. Lawrance [sic], Donaldson and Krug were wounded. Under terrific fire the Battalion was compelled to temporarily withdraw ….”69

The battle would last well into the evening. By 2100 hours 4th Brigade held “a line of posts about 300 yards S.E. of the [Sensée] River”70 – a small gain for the casualties suffered. Currie would note in his diary that “losses were quite heavy today,”71 a steep price for what, at the end of this horrific day, turned out to be a holding action. The 18th Battalion lost 21 soldiers killed in action and two others later died of wounds. Among these deaths were four conscripts: Privates Allison, Claus, Jenkins and McDonald. In addition to the dead, the 18th Battalion suffered nearly 300 wounded, among them, Private Dennis. His letter home vividly captured his near death experience:

Dear Uncle and Aunt…I figure myself very lucky to be able to write to you today because the day that I got hit there was quite a
few of our Western Ont. boys who went down and will remain down forever… On Aug 28/18 the day was dull. It had rain [sic] nearly all night the night before and the day followed with close showers. At 12.30 p.m. we got orders to charge the enemy. It was not a very pleasant job you know after passing an awful night in the rain and under shell fire, which was bad enough to drive a man crazy. So after getting the order to go ahead out of the trench we went over the top in straight line for the German Line, and when we got within a thousand yards from their lines what an awful reception we got. Fritz open up [sic] with his machine gun and it was just like a hail storm forced by a hundred mile an hour wind. I was lucky that there was only one bullet that went through me because I was hit in different places through my clothes, and I notice after taking my coat off to dress my wounds that a bullet had cut my clothes right across my shoulders. It was about one p.m. o’clock when I got hit and I drop in a big shell hole, and there I had to stay until nine p.m. before I could get out for help. I was certainly an awful sight after rolling myself in my own blood for all that time. I thought for a while that everything was done for me because the Battle was going on all the time that I was in that hole. So I offered prayers to holy Mary… and I went back through more danger but I managed to reach safety. That night, 2nd Division was relieved by 1st Division just after midnight while 4th British Division finally relieved 3rd Canadian Division to the north. In three days of hard fighting, these two departing divisions had suffered 5,801 casualties. In the week that followed, their replacements would successfully assault the Drocourt-Quéant Line at a cost of another 5,622 casualties. This was further proof that the tired Canadians of the 2nd and 3rd Divisions had indeed faced an impossible task on 28 August.

The Canadian Corps had lost 11,423 during the Battle of the Scarpe, but it had not been crippled. Quite simply, as one historian has said, “Canadians could afford it because they had conscription.”

Dennis had been shot from behind and seriously wounded by a German machine gun bullet on 28 August. Late in the day he began a long and painful road to recovery. His journey started with treatment at a Regimental Aid Post (RAP) behind Vis-en-Artois and a temporary Advance Dressing Station (ADS) in the ruins of a nearby factory. Dennis stated that he “was hit from the rear right, below the left kidney and the bullet made it through the big hip bone,” and exited through the upper pelvic area. The wound was clean, but he had lost a lot of blood. For Dennis, the war was over.

From the ADS, it is likely that Dennis was moved by stretcher to a “loading post” west of Vis-en-Artois. From there he would have travelled via “motor ambulance” to No.5 Canadian Field Ambulance, the Division’s Main Dressing Station (MDS) located at Achicourt, 12 kilometres behind the front. After having his wounds dressed, he was moved again, this time by lorry from Arras to what he described as the “first Clearing Station about 30 miles behind the front line.” This transfer took Dennis to No.57 Casualty Clearing Station (CCS), located at Mingoval, which handled all seriously wounded men from 2nd Division. At the CCS Dennis underwent preliminary surgery to remove as many bullet fragments as possible and to irrigate the wound fully in order to help prevent an infection. Less than 24 hours later, Dennis was transferred, via 20 Ambulance Train, to No.4 General Hospital at Camiers, just north of Étaples – the same place he had arrived some three months earlier. During the next two weeks Dennis’
condition improved sufficiently to allow him to undertake the channel crossing, and on 14 September he was “invalided to England” aboard the Auxiliary Transport *Princess Elizabeth* and transported to Ampton Hall Hospital in Suffolk. Dennis passed through five different hospitals during the course of his recovery.

During his first two weeks in England Dennis received painful treatments which were necessary to keep his wounds from becoming infected. One week into this ordeal he wrote the following:

I don’t feel anymore pain from my wound but they had to go to work and inoculate me while I was weak and it took bad effect on me. My whole Body Brakes up in a rash twice a day and it is an awful torture. Sometimes the whole of my Body turns spotted [sic] white and Blue and my hands are just as stif [sic] as sticks. And then it goes away for hours at a time... I have been that way for four days now and hope it doesn’t Last another four days Because I feel the effect of that inoculation worst than my operation and that was Bad enough Because the Bullet hole had to Be Clean, and in order to clean it they had to cut me open about four inches on each side of the hip. But they made a very good job of it.

Dennis’ recovery was nothing less than amazing. On 15 November, he was discharged to Kinnel Park, Rhyl to await repatriation home. Although his horrible wounds would take years to fully heal, he was clearly well on his way to recovery. He spent nearly two months at Kinnel Park – by most accounts a dark and dismal place. As the war ended, Dennis was joined by tens of thousands of restless and sometimes bitter men who just wanted to go home. While there, Dennis composed one more letter home, this time in French, his mother tongue, because his Uncle Frank had always written to him in French. He told his uncle that his health has returned (“ma santé est bien rétablie”) but that he longed to return to Canada to live and to die (“retour au Canada pour y vivre [sic] et mourir”). He stated that his experience overseas had strengthened his character, and while reassuring his uncle that he has not changed physically, he added that he is much more thoughtful (“beaucoup plus penssive” [sic]). For the first time he mentioned receiving four letters from his girlfriend and added that he is really looking forward to a home cooked meal (“Ce que je désire de tout mon coeur c’est un bon repas canadien que tente [sic] Eliza si bien préparer” [sic]). After a year of keeping his French-Canadian heritage to himself, he was now attempting to reestablish those roots with the people he loved most.

Because of wounds received in combat, Dennis was able to jump the queue of soldiers waiting for repatriation and sailed for Halifax on 11 January 1919 aboard HMS *Olympic* (sister ship to the *Titanic* and the Empire’s largest troopship). After being transferred to the Auxiliary Hospital at Bury St. Edmunds and from there to the Princess Patricia Red Cross Hospital at Bexhill-on-Sea, Dennis’ terrible pain began to slowly subside and, with lots of therapy, his condition gradually improved. Two months after being wounded his letters home became more optimistic:

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I am at Princes [sic] Pat. Red Cross hospital where I am taking treatments for my hip and I am improving quite good and I don’t think I will stay a cripple... Uncle it’s wonderful what they can do with a man as Long as there is Life in him. My case was a Bad one but they got me on my pins once more I am able to walk around with the help of a cane... as I told you Before they had to operate on me twice to fix me up. It’s a good thing I had a very strong constitution Because I have seen poor fellows die with the same wound I had. Uncle if I live to be a hundred years old I will never forget the horrible sights that I have seen in france... Uncle you can’t imagine how I wish I was home to tell you all my experiences I had in three months in france. Those three months are worth all the rest of my Life.

Dennis: A Canadian Conscript Goes to War

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Arriving in Halifax on 17 January to the cheers of jubilant crowds, he and his happy comrades disembarked and boarded westbound trains. The details of his arrival in Windsor are not recorded, but three weeks later, on 10 February 1919, Dennis was discharged. His 400 days in uniform were over and he, like thousands of his fellow soldiers, was once again a civilian.

Upon his return home, Dennis rarely talked about the war. His brief but eventful time at the front had left him with a debilitating wound which caused him pain for the rest of his life, as well as untreated psychological trauma that would continue to haunt him. He was proud to have served, but like most of his fellow veterans, received no compensation or pension, only the passing thanks of a grateful nation.

In the late summer of 1919, Dennis married and began to raise a family. He did not return to his old job as a streetcar conductor. Instead, he found new and physically demanding work at the local foundry of Ford Motor Company. At the outset of the Second World War, his eldest son volunteered for the air force. His son’s first operational flying base with the Royal Air Force was at Dunsfold in Surrey – a mere 10 kilometres from his father’s camp at Witley. Dennis’ son would also be wounded, and would return to Canada a changed man, to be welcomed by a father who had known the horrors of war, and feared that his own son would not be equally lucky enough to survive.

Dennis did not live to be “a hundred years old.” One year after retiring from the Ford Motor Company he passed away suddenly from a heart attack and with him went the memories of his experiences. Nevertheless, a partial record survives and it offers a glimpse inside the collective story of 100,000 conscripts and the pivotal role that thousands of them played in the hundred days campaign.

Conclusion

Dennis’ eight month journey from peace to war reveals much about the conscription process, and dispels a number of myths regarding the crucial role that conscripts played in the final hundred days. The argument that conscripts arrived either too late to influence the outcome of this campaign, or that they arrived in insufficient numbers to make any substantial difference in the victories that were achieved is without foundation. With respect to conscripts being “too late,” evidence suggests that conscripts started to arrive at the front and enter combat in small numbers by June 1918, and began to deploy in greater numbers by the start of the Battle of Amiens. Large numbers of conscripts joined the ranks shortly after 11 August, when the understrength infantry battalions needed to replace the 9,000 casualties suffered over the preceding few days. In fact, the arrival of these conscripts in significant numbers at this point could not have been any timelier, since the hundred days campaign was just getting started.88

The arrival of the conscripts allowed Canadian infantry battalions to remain at full strength despite the high casualties sustained in the final campaign of the war. The Canadian Corps suffered over 45,000 dead or wounded during this period – 20 per cent of all Canadian casualties during the war. As a result of these heavy losses, by the end of the second Battle of Arras, conscripts would have comprised at least 10-15 per cent of the rifle companies in every Canadian infantry battalion. Moreover, by Canal du Nord, this ratio was up to 20 per cent of the strength of the 48 infantry battalions. That number would have increased to about 25 per cent by Cambrai and continued to grow steadily.89 The contribution of conscripts to the successful execution of the hundred days campaign is unequivocal. Without conscripts there would not have been a “hundred days.” Instead, the Canadian Corps, while still victorious at Amiens, and probably at Arras, would have been crippled thereafter by the wastage. By 3 September the Corps would have required a significant reorganization and would likely have been relieved, not to wholly reemerge for perhaps another six months. But, history records otherwise, thanks in no small part to the conscripts, whose timely appearance in mid-August 1918 guaranteed what Currie referred to as “the unparalleled striking power of our battalions.”89

Notes


2. Surprisingly, neither John Swettenham in To Seize the Victory (Ottawa: Canadian War Museum, 1969), nor Shane Schreiber in Shock Army of the British Empire (St. Catharines, ON: Vanwell, 2005) mention the role of conscripts in the “hundred days” although the latter provides much detail on overall casualties but only a glimpse of the “reinforcement” issue. Desmond Morton offers conflicting views on this subject. In Canada and War: A Military and Political History (Toronto: Butterworth & Co., 1981) he wrote that “Conscripts only began reaching the Corps during the hard casualty-filled days of the advance to Mons. If the war had lasted until 1919, the MSA men would have been needed.” (p.79) But during a public lecture on “The Final 100 Days” at the 3rd Windsor Military Studies Conference on 15 February 2008, he acknowledged that the ready availability of conscripts in large numbers by mid-August 1918 had in fact prevented the Corps from being crippled by attrition in the costly battles of Amiens and Arras. For his part, Michel Gravel in Tough As Nails (Ottawa: CEF Books, 2006) argues that up to 50 per cent of conscripts were actually “volunteers recruited in the USA” (p.162). This assertion is based on his analysis of one draft of conscripts assigned to the 14th Battalion Royal Montreal Regiment (RMR) in late August 1918 and “a cursory look” at “other drafts of men from the same period.” This view, however, is fraught with a number of issues. “Volunteers” had a broader definition...
in 1918. By then America could legally draft British subjects living in the US while Canada was authorized to do the same for US citizens resident in Canada. Consequently, as many as 46,000 British subjects in the US were recruited by British Canadian Recruiting Missions in places like Boston and Detroit. However, the choice was to be drafted into the US army or to volunteer for the Canadian army. In addition, “volunteers” from New England who were recruited in Boston and given train fare to Canada, would likely have made Montreal their first stop, where no doubt the RMR would have beckoned. Hence the reason why conscript drafts for the RMR would have logically included a high number of so-called “volunteers” from the USA.

5. Morton, Canada and War, pp.63-63.  
8. Terry Copp, “Robert Borden, Arthur Currie and Canada’s War 1917-1918,” The McCrae House Lecture Series, 24 January 2008, Guelph, ON. The two factors driving Borden towards a bilateral decision on conscription were “wastage” and the marked “decline in recruitment.”  
12. Attestation Paper, Hilaire Dennis. On 6 April the United States had entered the war, and in May it had implemented its own draft, thus eliminating this once neutral country as a place of potential refuge for Dennis and other Americans living in Canada to avoid conscription.  
15. Nicholson, p.351 and Annex E, pp.351-553 notes a number of anomalies in the assignment of these regimental numbers. Although the majority of MSA men would have been given seven digit numbers starting with 3 or 4, many MSA men were not (e.g. the 2nd Depot Battalion, British Columbia Regiment gave out unused numbers reserved for volunteer reinforcements of west coast regiments), while some volunteers were given the “3 or 4” prefix.  
17. WD, General Staff Canadian Troops Witley, CTD Training Inspection dated 22 April 1918, T-10665, Vol 4865, RG 9, LAC.  
19. Ibid. Note: On enrolment, all privates were paid one dollar a day. Once dispatched “overseas” they received an additional ten cents a day. Perhaps this was an unintentional reference to this overseas bonus, but it is nevertheless ironic when one considers that in exchange for placing their lives on the line, Privates were doing so for a 10 cent premium.  
21. WD, General Staff Canadian Troops Witley, June 1918 and Military Records, Private Hilaire Dennis, Casualty Form – Active Service , M.F.W. 54  
22. WD, Canadian General Base Depot (Etaples), June 1918, T-10940, Vol 5048, RG 9, LAC.  
23. WD, Canadian General Base Depot (Etaples), June 1918.  
26. Malcolm Brown, Second to None: The Canadian Zepplin Bombing of the CEF (Toronto: The Dundurn Group, 2002), p.251. “By August 10th, the major Canadian attacks had come to an end replaced by smaller efforts designed to break into the trench lines of the 1916 Somme front.”  
31. WD, 18th Canadian Infantry Battalion (CEF), August 1918, T-10721, Vol 4926, RG 9, LAC.  
32. WD, 18th Battalion CEF, 13 August 1918 and Official Military Records Private Hilaire Dennis, Casualty Form – Active Service , M.F.W. 54, Entry for 13.8.18.  
33. WD, 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade (4 Bde), August 1918, T-10680, Vol 4883, RG 9, LAC.  
34. WD, 2nd Canadian Division (2nd Cdn Div), General Staff, 14 August 1918, T-1929-1930, Vol 4847, RG 9, LAC. The War Diary for 2nd Cdn Div makes it quite clear that all necessary preparations were in fact underway to resume the offensive as late as three days after the so called “lull” had commenced. Crucial to those preparations was the kind of probing and consolidation efforts that were subsequently undertaken by 4 Bde. In short, to the men of the 2nd Cdn Div, the “battle” of Amiens was not over yet; not by a long shot.  
35. WD, 4 Bde., 14 August 1918. Note: “operation” in this context refers to the renewed offensive contemplated by Foch.  
36. Ibid, 15 August 1918.
45. WD, 2nd Cdn Div, 15 August 1918.
46. Desmond Morton and J.L. Granatstein, Marching to Armageddon: Canadians and the Great War 1914-1919 (Toronto: Lester & Orphen Dennys Ltd., 1989), p.204. Note: Despite the declaration by these two distinguished historians that “On August 15 the Amiens battle ended”, the events of the following day clearly suggest otherwise.
47. Nicholson, p.419.
49. Nicholson, p.419.
50. Morton and Granatstein, p.203.
51. Personal Letters, Private Hilaire Dennis, 23 August, 1918. Note: these words were hastily written sideways on a handful of pages in a miniature bank book, which Dennis then ripped out and mailed to his family in Canada from “Somewhere in France [sic].”
52. Tim Cook, Canadian Military History, Vol. 18 [2009], Iss. 1, Art. 4
55. WD, 4 Bde, Narrative of Operation 16th August 1918, Appendix 24, 3-4.
56. Personal Letters, Private Hilaire Dennis, 21 September 1918.
58. Andrew Iarocci, “The Hundred Days: Ordinary Soldiers and the 1918 Victory Offensives,” The McCrae House Lecture Series, 24 January 2008, Guelph, Ontario. “Up until this phase of the war, the majority of men had been killed by artillery, but were now killed largely by machine gun fire.”
60. WD, 4 C.I.B., August 1918, Appendix 31, “The Advance August 28th”.
61. WD, 18th Battalion CEF, 28 August 1918.
62. WD, 2nd Cdn Div, 28 August 1918.
63. Personal Letters, Private Hilaire Dennis, 28 October 1918.
64. Personal Letters, Private Hilaire Dennis, 28 October 1918.
66. WD, 2nd Cdn Div, 27 August 1918.
68. WD, 18th Battalion CEF, 28 August 1918.
69. WD, 2nd Cdn Div, 28 August 1918.
70. WD, 2nd Cdn Div, 28 August 1918.
71. Humphries, p.111.
72. Personal Letters, Private Hilaire Dennis, 21 September 1918.
73. Andrew Iarocci, “The Hundred Days: Ordinary Soldiers and the 1918 Victory Offensives,” The McCrae House Lecture Series, 24 January 2008, Guelph, Ontario. “Up until this phase of the war, the majority of men had been killed by artillery, but were now killed largely by machine gun fire.”
76. WD, No. 5 Canadian Field Ambulance, 25th-29th August 1918, T-10915-10916, Vol 5028, Part 2, RG9, LAC.
77. Personal Letters, Private Hilaire Dennis, 28 October 1918.
78. Personal Letters, Private Hilaire Dennis, 28 October 1918.
79. Personal Letters, Private Hilaire Dennis, 28 October 1918.
80. Personal Letters, Private Hilaire Dennis, 28 October 1918.
81. WD, No. 5 Canadian Field Ambulance, 25th-29th August 1918.
82. Personal Letters, Private Hilaire Dennis, 28 October 1918.
83. Personal Letters, Private Hilaire Dennis, 28 October 1918.
84. Official Military Records, Private Hilaire Dennis, Casualty Form – Active Service, September, 1918.
85. Personal Letters, Private Hilaire Dennis, 28 October 1918.
86. Personal Letters, Private Hilaire Dennis, 21 September 1918.
87. Personal Letters, Private Hilaire Dennis, 28 October 1918.
88. Personal Letters, Private Hilaire Dennis, 28 October 1918.
89. Nicholson, Appendix C. Note: While the CEF recruited only 4,317 officers and men in December 1917, that number rose in January 1918 to 19,009 with the call up of conscripts. It then fell to 8,910 in February, and to 9,505 in March. With respect to the initial phase of the “hundred days” (Amiens to Arras 08 Aug – 03 Sep), only those conscripts recruited in the period Jan - Mar 1918 were considered here as potential participants, mainly because it would have taken about four or five months for their training and transport etc., before they could have arrived at a front line unit. Second, given recruiting trends at this point in the war, it is assumed that no more than 25 % of all recruits in this period were “volunteers” and officers. The balance was conscripts. Therefore 75 % of 37,514 is 28,135. This is probably the maximum number that could have reached France by August 1st. However, even if this number is reduced in half to some 14,000 plus, it is not inconsequential. Lieut. Gen. Currie knew in advance of Amiens that conscripts would arrive in time to support his battle plans and secondly that they would also arrive in sufficient numbers. He was correct on both counts. Moreover he could also rely on a steady stream of follow on conscripts most of whom played a significant part at the breaching of the Drocourt-Quent line, Canal du Nord, Bourlon Wood, Cambrai, and beyond.

Colonel Patrick M. Dennis (ret’d) OMM, CD (BA, University of Windsor; MA, University of Northern Colorado) is also a graduate of the NATO Defence College and the United States Joint Forces Staff College. He served abroad for over 22 years, including senior appointments in NATO, NORAD and as the Canadian Defence Attaché in Israel. In the past year he has published an historical piece on NATO AWACS that appeared in the Canadian Military Journal as well as an article on World War I battlefields in Esprit de Corps. Currently he is an adjunct professor in political science at Wilfrid Laurier University where he specializes in political-military affairs.