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FEATURE

# Montreal and the Battle of Ypres 1915

One Hundred Years

ROMAN JARYMOWYCZ

*Abstract: The Second Battle of Ypres (22–25 April 1915) was the Canadian Army's first action in the Great War and, arguably, its greatest battle, setting the tenor, style and esprit de corps that would carry it through to 1918. Notorious for the first use of poison gas, the bloody defensive contest actually savaged the 1st Canadian Division via conventional weapons - in forty-eight hours, 6,035 soldiers—one in every three—became casualties. The battle rocked Canada and had a particularly devastating effect on Montreal.*

THE SECOND BATTLE of Ypres was fought 100 years ago, 22–25 April 1915. It was the Canadian Army's first battle in the Great War and, arguably, its greatest. The battle “created” the Canadian Army; it set the tenor, the style and the *esprit de corps* that would carry it through Passchendaele, the Somme, and into the brilliant but bloody Hundred Days.

It was a defeat. A glorious defeat some might say; an execrable awakening to war would be another interpretation. In forty-eight hours, 6,035 Canadians—one man in every three—became casualties, of whom more than 2,000 died. Ypres is notorious for the first use of poison gas, which punished much of the 1st Canadian Division; but it was shrapnel, high explosives, and hand-to-hand combat with German troops that caused the most



The 5th Royal Scots, Officers' Mess, July 1914, destined for greatness. Maj (Maj Gen, The Hon) Frederick Oscar Warren Loomis is seated front row, third from the right. Front row extreme left Maj V Buchanan; extreme right, Maj EC Norsworthy; last row, second from right, Captain Hew Clark-Kennedy. These and ten others would join Lt Col Loomis as the 13th Bn CEF and fight at Ypres, representing Montreal Scots and Canada. [Black Watch Archives]

casualties. Doomed to dwell in the shadow of Vimy Ridge, the titanic clash at Ypres was in fact the more imperative of the two. The battle rocked Canada and particularly shattered Montreal. The First Canadian Infantry Division was cobbled together by the Minister of Militia and Defence, Sir Sam Hughes. It comprised a careful melange of western, central, and eastern battalions, grouped to suggest pan-Canadian fellowship; a grouping which worked, by the way. It was brigaded into four enthusiastic though woefully inexperienced formations.<sup>1</sup> They were armed with privately purchased American Colt machine guns and a Canadian battle arm, the Ross Rifle. Though accurate, the Ross was prone to stoppages, and quickly

<sup>1</sup> Colonel A. Fortescue Duguid, *The Official History of The Canadian Forces in The Great War* (Ottawa, 1938), 50–51. Hereafter, Duguid. Technically, 13th and 14th Battalions CEF were mobilised at Valcartier. McGill provided 3059 grads, undergrads, and past students: 1743 officers of 23,000 in CEF (over 7 percent). Units: Number Three (McGill) General Hospital (first CEF unit in France), 7th (McGill), and 10th (McGill) Siege Batteries. McGill connected with the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI) via six McGill University Companies that reinforced the Regiment. Also, 148th Battalion CEF to which the McGill COTC contributed over 100 officers and men.

acquired a terrible reputation which followed it forever. Two famous city regiments won their spurs in this battle. The newly formed 14th Battalion Canadian Expeditionary Force (The Royal Montreal Regiment) was from Westmount, above and below the tracks. The 13th Battalion Canadian Expeditionary Force (The 5th Royal Scots - Highlanders) was a powerful, already-famous regiment patronised by Montreal's Scottish industrial barons who ran Canada in those days.

The first Canadian Victoria Cross was won at Ypres. Archival records show the first Distinguished Service Order (DSO) and the first Military Cross (MC) were also won in Ypres, all remarkably, by Montreal's 5th Royal Scots. This battle so savaged the 5th that reinforcements and replacements, who knew little of the Bleury Street Armoury, began to refer to their battalion by their then-unofficial moniker "the Black Watch"—a title they would officially assume in 1935.

The 13th Battalion Canadian Expeditionary Force (Black Watch), commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel (later Major General) Frederick Oscar Warren Loomis, arrived south of Ypres on 18 April aboard London buses, still painted red and carrying advertisements. The Royal Highlanders of Canada (RHC) deployed within the salient on 21 April 1915, occupying the extreme left of the division, whose front extended over 4,000 yards. They took over an area previously held by the 14th (Royal Montreal) Battalion. On their right was the 15th Battalion (Toronto's 48th Highlanders) and further east, two battalions of Brigadier General Arthur Currie's 2nd Brigade. Their own 3rd Brigade headquarters under Brigadier General Turner was three miles to the southwest. The remaining brigade was in army reserve behind the divisional headquarters, some five miles to the rear behind the Ypres Canal. The battalion's left, part of the contiguous line of trenches, was held by the French Army, a brigade from the 45th Algerian Division with four battalions: The African Light Infantry, 2nd *Zouaves*, and the 1st and 2nd Battalions *Tirailleurs* (referred to as "Turcos" by the British, a nickname from the Crimean War). These troops were to suffer the full effects of the gas attack.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Black Watch Archives (BWA) 005, Captain JG Ross, "The 13th Canadian Battalion in the Second Battle of Ypres" 13/7/15, 4. Hereafter, Ross. See: RC Fetherstonhaugh, *The 13th Battalion, Royal Highlanders of Canada* (Montreal, 1925), 33.



Lieutenant-Colonel Loomis commanded twenty-seven officers and 946 men. Battalion headquarters was in the village of St. Julien, almost two miles behind the front line. Loomis deployed the battalion three companies up: Number One left (Major Rykert McCuaig), Number Two centre (Captain Robert Jamieson) and Number Four right (Captain Hew Clark-Kennedy); he maintained a small battalion reserve in St. Julien under Major Victor Buchanan. This included an engineer section, one machine gun detachment, and half of Number Three Company, led by Captain Thomas Morrissey, a twenty-four-year-old Maritimer, an engineer, and Royal Military College graduate. The platoons were commanded by Lieutenant Clarence McCuaig, at twenty-two the youngest of the three McCuaig brothers and a bond salesman in the family brokerage, and Lieutenant Stuart Molson, a young banker from a well-known Montreal brewing family. Of the six Molson cousins and brothers who served (all but one were in the Black Watch), Stuart seemed to love the regiment most and had wanted to serve since he was a child. Loomis's second in command, Major Edward Cuthbert Norsworthy, was a thirty-five-year-old broker and heir to his family's firm. He had spent fifteen years in the 5th RHC, holding every position except commandant. Norsworthy was given the remainder of Number Three Company and positioned directly behind McCuaig's and Jamieson's companies as the supports.<sup>3</sup>

The trenches had changed little from the chaos of the first Ypres battle: an early Flanders sausage grinder which quickly put paid to all previous doctrines and tactics—from *Attaque à outrance* to the use of cavalry corps as a breakthrough force. The battle effectively destroyed the last of the British Expeditionary Force's "Old Contemptibles" and a chunk of British and German trained reserves, including young inexperienced just-mobilised formations. The Prussian staff called it *die Kindermord bei Ypern* (The Ypres massacre of innocents).

<sup>3</sup> BWA. 13 Battalion CEF Parade states for January, February, March and April 1915 averaged 969 ORs. Effective strength for 15 April: 30 officers (including QM/Med) + 946 ORs; 18 April: 30 + 980 ORs. "Fighting strength" at Ypres front line (less B Echelon) circa 22 April is accepted as 950. BW UPM, Box 3, "Field Returns Book, 13th Battalion CEF 1915." Molsons in RHC. *13th Battalion RHC*: Captain Francis Stuart Molson (brother to John Henry and Bert, cousin to Herbert Molson); Major John Henry Molson. *42nd Battalion RHC*: Lieutenant-Colonel Herbert Molson MC; Major Walter Molson (brother to Percy and Herbert); Captain William Hobart Molson MC. Captain Percival Molson MC was an officer in the PPCLI.



*The Landing of the First Canadian Division at St. Nazaire, 1915* by Edgar Bundy, ARA. The painting portrays the 13th Battalion CEF (Black Watch) arriving in France led by the Pipes and Drums behind Pipe Major David Manson. Lt Colonel (Maj Gen) Frederick Loomis DSO, leans on an ashplant, watching his battalion. The painting combines historical exactness in portraiture with a Turner-esque vagueness - the smoke-clouds surrounding the steamship SS *Novian*. [Canadian War Museum Beaverbrook Collection of War Art 19710261-0110]

The trenches were the same and previous occupants, the 14th Battalion Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), had not managed to improve them. The division Commander Royal Engineers (CRE) sent an officer to report on the condition of the front line. The trenches were seldom more than two feet deep, and the water table made any digging result in water and mud:

Numerous corpses were lying on the surface or buried at a very shallow depth making it impossible for us at many places to excavate at all. There is also human excreta littered all over the place. ... very little could be done in the way of filling sand bags or building dugouts as the parapets were built above ground, the lower parts being partly built up of bodies.<sup>4</sup>

The twenty-second of April began tranquilly; it was bright and sunny with a gentle breeze blowing from the northeast. In late morning, the Algerian's front, including McCuaig's Company, was

<sup>4</sup> Duguid. Captain TC Irving, OC 2nd Field Engineer Company, CE for CRE 1st Canadian Division, 21 April 1915 "Report on Condition of Trenches"; Apx 354. A row of *chevaux de frise* was recommended for the entire front "with the least possible delay."



Portrait of Lieutenant-Colonel (Major-General) Frederick Loomis, DSO [Black Watch Archives]

subjected to steady artillery fire. The adjutant noted: “No warning was given, except for a general note in orders that gas *might* be used. About 5 PM the general activity increased and a greenish cloud slowly swept towards the Turco Lines ... their flimsy parapets blown to pieces, this unknown horror was too much for them. Those who could, tried to escape ... but the poor fellows fell in windrows on the open grass behind their trenches.”<sup>5</sup> The 1st Battalion *Tirailleurs*, alongside the 13th, were not completely overcome by the gas and for a time remained in their trenches. After a brief pause to allow the gas to dissipate, the Germans launched the main attack. The Algerians fled. “Major McCuaig rallied these French troops and placed them back in their trenches ... he held them together by putting one platoon of his own company with them.”<sup>6</sup> The advanced platoon was led by Captain Herbert Walker, vibrant and innovative, remembered at his university as one of the founders of the *McGill Daily*: “The coolness of the platoon was wonderful contrast to the excitement and hubbub of

<sup>5</sup> BWA 005 Pers. Col DR McCuaig DSO (then Major) interview 22 April 1933.

<sup>6</sup> RG 9 V 4772 Lt Col FOW Loomis to 3rd CIB. “Recommendations for Honors,” 9 July 1915.



these wretched Algerians, and we stemmed the tide of Boschés until the company could make dispositions to save the flank of the Regiment.”<sup>7</sup>

Behind McCuaig, Norsworthy’s supports were thoroughly shelled. He was out of telephone contact with Loomis, and the only means of communicating was by runner. A report from the firing line advised him that the French had broken and were in wild retreat. Norsworthy realised that his was the only force on a 2,000 yard open flank stretching to St. Julien. Sometime after 6:00 p.m., he advanced his platoons toward the Poelcapelle Road and lined the ditch on the northwest side facing the advancing Germans as they followed up the fleeing Turcos. Peppered by small-arms fire, Norsworthy walked up and down his impromptu flank guard exhorting the men to “keep down; keep at it.” The strikingly handsome Captain Guy Drummond was his second-in-command, already famous and fabulously wealthy—while Loomis’s battalion included eighteen bona fide millionaires, Drummond was practically a billionaire. He spoke fluent French and did all in his power to stay retreating Algerians. “The last thing that I saw Captain Drummond doing was trying to rally these Turcos. He tried to lead them to battle, but they were too nervous. [He] walked up and down the road, cheering and jollying us up, and speaking to each one of us.”<sup>8</sup> It was nigh on surreal; swarms of *Tirailleurs*, eyes burning, foaming at the mouth, hotly pursued by Pikelhaube’d Germans confronting the *crème de la crème* of Montreal’s Square Mile. The conspicuous Drummond and Norsworthy made tempting targets, both over six-foot tall. Norsworthy yelled “Come on men, remember we are Canadians...”<sup>9</sup> which would have sounded fatuous from others, but was characteristic of the man. It was a vigorous defence, but courage and grit were not enough; the supports were soon overwhelmed, and both Major Norsworthy and Captain Drummond were killed.

<sup>7</sup> BWA 005 File Major HF Walker; extract letter dated 6 May 1915.

<sup>8</sup> J Castell Hopkins, *A Canadian Family in The Great War*. Printed privately 1921, 63. Despite the rout, there were instances of Algerian troops standing firm: “the Turcos rendered valuable assistance.” Perhaps 200 helped the 13th throughout 22 April. Montreal units, with French speaking officers, had more success. See Duguid, Nicholson, Fetherstonhaugh and, BWA 005 Pitblado file; extract letter from Captain Drummond’s batman, Pte Horner circa June 1915.

<sup>9</sup> Norsworthy and Drummond fell circa 7–7:30 p.m.; *Beck’s Weekly* “How Canadians Saved British Lines” (12 June 1915, 264n) reported Drummond “was shot through the throat and never spoke again”; this seems unlikely (Horner letter). The account also states Major Norsworthy “stabbed treacherously” by Germans after being wounded.



### **HOLDING “THE APEX OF THE LINE”**

At 8:00 p.m., the French troops finally broke: “we rallied the survivors and formed a curving line back along the road for 200 yards; the enemy were constantly trying to work up on us; this happened all night.”<sup>10</sup> Major Rykert McCuaig reacted to the brigade’s threat with cool initiative. He sent in a platoon to reinforce the troops on the left. Meanwhile, the Germans worked well around the back of them. He was too extended. The moon went down at 2:00 a.m., leaving McCuaig’s platoons pretty much blind; they had no vary lights, and only German flares and machine guns gave them any idea of enemy locations. The Germans continued to press and the Highlanders replied, hoping to disguise the weakness and inadequacy of their force: “we pumped our rifles until they were so hot we could scarcely hold them.” Walker recalled, “we lay all night [along the] road—we on one side and the Germans on the other.”<sup>11</sup> Ammunition was low and they were out of water.

### **FRED FISHER SAVES 10TH FIELD BATTERY: AFTERNOON 22 APRIL**

By late afternoon of the 22 April, the division’s left flank was wide open; nothing but Germans and retreating Tirailleurs between St. Julien and the 13th Battalion trenches—nothing, except for the four 18-pounders of Major William King’s Number Ten Battery. King, a manufacturer from Toronto, was a seasoned militia officer and a South African War veteran. As the gas clouds drifted south, King’s 18-pounders “continued firing in support of our own infantry [the Black Watch].” When retreating French troops began streaming through the battery, he requested assistance. King was instructed to fight “until the last moment.”<sup>12</sup>

At 7:00 p.m., Major King, destined to earn an MC and become brigadier general, suddenly noticed a shower of leaves falling on the battery, cut from the willows by enemy rifle fire. King spotted

<sup>10</sup> DR McCuaig Interview 1933 and, BWA 005. Brig Gen GE McCuaig, *Montreal Star*, 22 April 1933.

<sup>11</sup> BWA 005 Pers. Captain HF Walker; Correspondence, 8 May 1915, 1; Beck’s Weekly, 264. See also: Major VW Odium, cited in JL McWilliams and RJ Steel, *Gas The Battle for Ypres, 1915* (St Catharines, 1985), 72.

<sup>12</sup> RG 24 WD HQ, 3rd Canadian Artillery Bde. *Intelligence summary*. Ypres, 1915, 2.



Lance Corporal Frederick “Bud” Fisher  
VC. [Black Watch Archives]

Germans advancing in large numbers on his left. He acted with commendable *sang froid*; “reversing two of my guns I opened fire on them at about 200 yards.”<sup>13</sup> King’s action surprised the Germans; shrapnel rounds shredded their ranks, and they withdrew to cover. But as daylight waned, they advanced again; rifle fire became intense. At 8:00 p.m., King received instructions to withdraw and sent for the horses. His limber teams took heavy casualties, and many were in panic. The battery would lose thirty-eight men and seventy horses either killed or so badly wounded that they had to be destroyed.<sup>14</sup> King was becoming very anxious about his guns. It was at this time that Lance Corporal Fisher appeared on the scene with his Colt “*Emma Gee*” (Machine Gun) detachment.

<sup>13</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel W.A. Smy, *For Valour, Lance Corporal Fred Fisher, VC*. Printed privately (St Catharines, 2010), 2.

<sup>14</sup> LAC RG 9 III D3, V. 4966. WD 3rd Canadian Artillery Bde. “*Report Operations 10th Battery 22 April–6 May 1915*” Major WB King, OC. Hereafter, King. Also, “*Report Operations 3rd Arty Bde Ammunition Column – 22 April–6 May 1915*,” Captain WA McKee. The 10th Battery had four guns; 18-pounder horse drawn gun batteries were next reorganised at 6 guns, pulled by 165 horses in limbers and ammunition wagons. Effective range was 6,200 yards. See Duguid, 235 and RG24 Vol 2680; file 2/HQC4950, correspondence WB King/Duguid.

Fisher was born in St. Catharines, but had been a Montrealer for most of his life. His number two, Private Henry Holdway, was the machine gun platoon's cook. "Bud" Fisher was hard as nails and remembered as a dynamic leader at his alma mater, Westmount Academy.<sup>15</sup> He was an exceptional athlete: a McGill football star and a favourite with the gals. Fisher was an engineering student and a member of Alpha Delta Phi fraternity before enlisting in the 5th Royal Scots in 1914.

Loomis had dispatched a relief force to King, a mix of Royal Montreal Regiment (RMR)/48th Highlanders that included Corporal Fisher's MG Detachment came. They soon came under fire; the officers and sergeants were hit, and their sections entrenched well short of the battery. The rescue lagged. Although Fisher was without instructions, he demonstrated what modern armies call mission command; he grabbed a few men from the 13th Battalion supports [Number Three Company reserve, still near St. Julien] and began to move forward. Fisher moved north astride the road, and to his surprise "came across Major King's field battery in difficulties ... the horses [had] been stampeded."<sup>16</sup> King's gunners hooked up to ammunition limbers, and started to pull the guns away by hand until horses from the echelon were brought forward.

Now under heavy fire, Fisher crawled into an isolated farmhouse which commanded the area, set up his machine gun, and began laying down precise bursts to suppress the Germans; the Colt gun was handled with the greatest skill and daring. His detachment was killed off one by one, until only Fisher and Holdway were left. They did not cease firing until King's battery retired, circa 11:00 p.m. Fisher had been reinforced by a few stalwart soldiers from the RMR: "I remember one lance corporal, Fred Fisher, of the 13th Battalion. He came down looking for eight volunteers to carry up a machine gun, so eight of

<sup>15</sup> Now Westmount High School: "All ladies, young and old, well know his name" (*Westmount Academy Bulletin*, 1912). He abandoned his studies to join 5th RHC on 16 August 1914. Smy cites "an officer of the battalion" describing Fisher as "a quiet chap, who never drank, nor swore, nor played cards, and some of the fellows may have thought he was a prig." Smy, 2 and interview, September 2010. See also, PP Hutchison, *Five Strenuous Years – The McGill Chapter of Alpha Delta Phi during The Great War* (Montreal: 1920), 35.

<sup>16</sup> Fisher to Ross; Ross, 8; When his ammunition wagon teams were killed, King received help from the 15th and 7th Battalions to carry rounds forward – 600 yards to his guns. Duguid, 236.



us stepped out.”<sup>17</sup> Still without orders, the nineteen-year-old junior noncommissioned officer (NCO) led his detachment north to the Black Watch firing line until he found his platoon officer and turned over the identity discs of the killed men. His action with 10th Battery, and his valiant efforts in the trench line, would earn him the CEF’s first Victoria Cross—the first Canadian-born man to do so.

#### **MEANWHILE, AT ST. JULIEN**

Loomis was fed scraps of reinforcements—as it was, what little was sent arrived in the nick of time. Loomis sent Major Buchanan with the reserve platoons as a *reconnaissance in force*. They reached the area where Norsworthy’s force had been annihilated, came under heavy fire, and returned to report to Loomis. When a British company appeared, Loomis again dispatched Buchanan to reinforce McCuaig. They left at midnight carrying twenty-five boxes of ammunition. Meantime, the “apex” of the Canadian line still held. But Major McCuaig’s position steadily deteriorated. The battalion defeated successive attacks and endured tormenting shelling. “The wounded could not be moved—we had not even water to give them.”<sup>18</sup> By 9:00 a.m. 23 April, the casualties were unacceptable; it was decided to abandon the western positions and retire to the ridge. Withdrawal was difficult given the open terrain and not many made that fifty yards in safety: “Nearly every man crossing the creek was potted.” German spotter aircraft flew overhead reporting targets for their artillery. The biggest fear was the “Jack Johnson,” a German 15cm shell. It was named after a popular American boxer and arrived like a freight train; its explosion blew men to pieces midst a huge sooty blast. The Germans repeatedly assaulted the Black Watch line; each time sure their artillery had eliminated the Canadians. Each foray was defeated by angry fire. Abandoning the original battalion line made tactical sense; after two days of artillery and small-arms fire, the trenches had been shot to pieces, dugouts and machine gun

<sup>17</sup> Private Palin, 14th Battalion, RMR cited in, J Frank Willis, “In Flanders Fields”; CBC Digital Archives 1964. Also, Williams/ Steel, 53–54. This may have occurred earlier. Ross recalls Fisher saying he obtained four men, who were killed on the way to the 13th lines. Ross, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Walker, 1.

positions sagged and crumpled. Nevertheless, the Germans recorded that the Canadians to the east were able to offer stubborn resistance.

The 13th spent the night digging their new position; by dawn, they managed a trench about two feet deep. One small relief was Corporal Edward Waud, commissioned in the field during the battle, who got through with machine gun ammunition, biscuits, and cheese - “but with no water, eating biscuits was like chewing sand.”<sup>19</sup> The 13th remained a bulge in the line, but still held the shoulder of the penetration—the classic defensive solution to a breakthrough.

Their persistence further annoyed the German commander, *Generaloberst* Duke Albrecht of Württemberg, already irritated by the unanticipated resistance. He ordered a second gas attack for the morning of 24 April, this time against the Canadians.<sup>20</sup> The 1st Canadian Division, specifically the 48th Highlanders, the Black Watch and the 8th Battalion CEF (Winnipeg’s “Little Black Devils”), were to be the first troops in the BEF to be *directly* attacked by gas.

## GAS

The second attack was preceded by a ten-minute barrage followed, at 4:00 a.m., by the release of chlorine gas along a 1,200-yard front. The cloud floated directly through the 48th Highlanders and partially through McCuaig’s Company; it was heavily supplemented by artillery-fired gas shells.<sup>21</sup> Damp cloths did little to thwart chlorine. Blinded, with burning throats, the Highlanders suffocated while trying to fight, because their Ross rifles jammed. The official history noted: “Almost one-third of the 5,000 troops who survived the ordeal

<sup>19</sup> Ross, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Mark Humphries & J. Maker (Eds) *Germany’s Western Front – Translations from the German Official History of The Great War, Volume II – 1915* (Wilfrid Laurier: 2010); *Der Weltkrieg* Translation, 163–164.

<sup>21</sup> Germans fired 18,000 artillery shells containing liquid Xyly Bromide tear gas on 31 January 1915 against Russians. The first chlorine gas attack by German forces took place before 2 January 1915. In the Second Battle of Ypres the Germans used both canisters and artillery fired shells: three occasions against Canadians and British troops 24 April: “90 men died from gas poisoning in the trenches or before they could be got to a dressing station; of the 207 brought to the nearest dressing stations, 46 died almost immediately and 12 after long suffering.” British Official History.

at Ypres had given an unmistakable verdict by throwing away the Ross and picking up the Lee-Enfield.”<sup>22</sup>

The fighting was fierce and bloody: “Several batteries enfiladed our improvised trench. The casualties from this were the heaviest yet as we had practically no cover. ... The German artillery opened fire on us from all directions and simply murdered us. For three hours we lay there under a perfect hell of fire.”<sup>23</sup> The last battalion machine gun was knocked out.

Toronto’s 48th took the worst of the gas, and by 6:00 p.m., both battalions were forced to withdraw, having been literally blown out of their trenches. Shrapnel killed Captain Gerald Lees; Number One Company’s second in command, Captain Ward Whitehead, was severely wounded.

At 8:30 a.m., Loomis ordered Buchanan to fall back 400 yards to Gravenstafel Ridge; he could see the artillery, who were out of ammunition and limbering up.

At the Apex, it was a bitter fight; McCuaig and his men were shot to pieces. Capt Charles Pitblado returned to carry the cruelly injured Captain Whitehead to better cover. He spotted Major McCuaig and as he went to report to him, “I got one through my leg just above the ankle and the Major one through both legs.” After the war, McCuaig praised his subaltern: “Pitblado, in spite of my protests, refused to leave me and bandaged up the wounds in my leg under a very heavy fire. He was then wounded a second time in the leg, which finished his chances of getting away.”<sup>24</sup> As they lay helpless, McCuaig was hit five more times before they were captured. The fighting withdrawal on 25 April resulted in severe losses as soldiers, officers, and NCOs were hit in rapid succession: “Men dropping around you and begging you not to leave them. Poor devils. I guess most of them were bayoneted.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Official History of the CEF, 1914–1919* (Ottawa: 1962), 156.

<sup>23</sup> Ross, 10.

<sup>24</sup> BWA. *Ibid.*, Pitblado and McCuaig files. McCuaig was matter of fact about his last battle: “Very heavy losses were incurred in the retirement, No. 1 Company being practically annihilated. At that stage I was wounded and captured.” BW Col DR McCuaig, 1933. Lord Beaverbrook offered a more histrionic account of McCuaig awaiting capture: “he lay alone in the trench, two loaded Colt revolvers to add to his own ... ready in his hand for use ... waited to sell his life, wounded, racked with pain in an abandoned trench.” RG9 Vol 4772 “Deeds that Stir the Empire,” W.M. Aitken, 30 April 1915. Also, BWA Greenshields, Walker files.

<sup>25</sup> BWA. Private A.L. Brown, Machine Gunner 13th Battalion RHC, letter 5 May 1915.



With German infantry hot on their heels, Captain Clark-Kennedy, with Lieutenants Stanley Lindsay and William MacTier, conducted a resolute rear guard. But the new battalion position proved as hazardous, for it was quickly taken under observed fire from the Germans in occupied Canadian trenches. The brigade shifted to better cover on the reverse slope of Gravenstafel Ridge and dug in along the ditches of the main road, their left stretching past St. Julien and anchoring on Weiltze, which was in flames.

When 2nd Brigade completed its withdrawal, the Canadian front, initially five miles long, was reduced to two. St. Julien was assaulted by the German 51st Division and 2nd Reserve Ersatz Brigade from three sides, and abandoned around midnight. However, by 26 April, the German offensive lost steam—they held Gravenstafel Ridge, but the front had steadied and held—the brigade had their first meal in three days. What was left of them became the divisional reserve. Numerous individual and section duels took place during the two long nights when the 13th held the division flank unsupported by artillery, low on ammunition and without food or water. How these exhausted men, without sleep for over seventy-two hours, managed again and again to march, dig, and do battle is the stuff of regimental legend and legacy.

### THE COST

The total cost of the battle to the 13th was 483 all ranks, or forty-nine percent. The ferocity of the attack and close quarter fighting resulted in the largest number of Black Watch prisoners of the Great War: 130 were captured, of whom two were officers. Nearly half were wounded when taken prisoner.<sup>26</sup> Frederick Loomis, Rykert McCuaig and Clark-Kennedy were awarded the DSO, while MacTier and Pitblado were given the MC. Both Pitblado and McCuaig survived Ypres, but as German prisoners of war. Given the actual date and times of his action, McCuaig's DSO was the first awarded in the

<sup>26</sup> RG 24 Vol 1828 "13th Battalion"; and BW *Archival Study Great War Nominal Rolls*; 13th Battalion CEF RHC; total initial draft 1,233: 878 UK born, 267 Canadian and 88 USA. 42nd Battalion CEF RHC; total initial draft 1,292 of which 722 were UK born, 309 Canadian, 22 USA remainder Europe, Empire or illegible attestation paper. Officers and ORs killed and wounded totalled 322 from Ypres alone.

CEF—those who witnessed his conduct at Ypres felt he deserved a Victoria Cross. Pitblado's decoration was one of the first Great War MGS. Lance Corporal Frederick Fisher became Canada's, and his regiment's, first recipient of the coveted emblem of battlefield prowess, The Victoria Cross.<sup>27</sup> Fisher and most of his mates lie in an unmarked grave; their names are engraved on the Menin Gate, in Ypres. Heroes all.

A few days later, at Southampton docks, Private Alexander Leys Brown, a wounded machine gunner in the 13th RHC, recorded: "I was coming off the train there was a big crowd waiting and I was the first one off. Someone shouted "He's a Canadian," so they burst into cheers!"<sup>28</sup> Even the normally reserved Imperials took notice, indeed, embraced their colonial brethren. Recruiting posters in Glasgow and Edinburgh for Scotland's Black Watch, now proudly added, "with which is allied the 13th Canadian Battalion, RHC."

#### **AFTERSHOCK IN MONTREAL**

The aftershock of Ypres hit Montreal with devastating results. Newspapers published photographs and eyewitness reports for the two weeks following the battle. The *Montreal Star* and *Gazette* featured daily montages of the killed. Most regularly featured were officers of the 13th Battalion. A poignant photograph entitled "All That Is Left Of Them!" was published in *The Star* showing Loomis surrounded by his officers directly after Ypres—not his original twenty-seven but the seven that remained not killed and unwounded. There is a remote, uncompromising look in their eyes. Closure was important for the soldiers' families, but difficult, if not impossible, after Ypres. The initial front was far behind the new German lines; the bodies of the battalion lay shredded and scattered in a vast shell-scarred plain of mucky ditches and shattered trenches.

<sup>27</sup> Battalion's MGs included 3 guns from RMR with BW crews. Fisher was the first Canadian VC, the first officer's VC was also won at Ypres and again by a member of the Machine Guns: Lt Edward Bellew, 7th Battalion, on 24 April. A splendid life-sized oil portrait of Fred Fisher VC was presented to Westmount Academy (now Westmount High School, on St. Catherine Street west) by his mother after the war. In 2012, the portrait was generously presented to the BW Museum and unveiled at the 150th Regimental Anniversary by Governor General David Johnston.

<sup>28</sup> Brown, *ibid.*



Captain Guy Melfort Drummond. [Black Watch Archives]

Captain Ward Whitehead's family was particularly ravaged by uncertainty. His father received three telegrams saying his son was "missing"; city newspapers, based on official reports, also pronounced him wounded and missing, which offered a straw of hope that the entire family clung to. Whitehead searched for witnesses and even acquired legal affidavits from soldiers invalided back to Montreal. He received ambiguous reports that Ward had been rescued by Pitblado, but the young captain was a prisoner of war in a German hospital. Whitehead beseeched the Red Cross for information; finally, he used business contacts via New York, Switzerland and at last, Germany, to get verification.

Just as he was notified Captain Pitblado had been found and a letter would be arranged, a small brown envelope arrived marked "No. 4 Field Hospital, Hadfield Ward, Bed 6." It was from Private W.E. Jones, 3rd Company, 13th Battalion CEF and contained a straightforward but stark account: "on Saturday, April 24 ... Captain Whitehead was the third man from me during the attack—he had



his face blown off.”<sup>29</sup> The Whitehead family portfolio comes to a staggered halt with this letter. His mother had begun to needle-point a large sunflower with golden strand and the word “Ward” in the center. It was placed unfinished over the letter from Private Jones with the threaded needle affixed to the envelope. The Norsworthy and Drummond family were just as anxious. Edward Norsworthy’s father sent several cables to George Cantlie, John Carson, and Sam Hughes pleading his son’s body be returned to Canada. The phrases “bear all expenses” and “cost not a factor” were repeated, but in vain. Norsworthy’s and Drummond’s presumed remains would not be recovered until well after the war.

Long after the war, Parliament considered the creation of a grand monument to commemorate the nation’s sacrifice. It was originally supposed to be built on the site of Hill 62, Gravenstafel Ridge near Ypres, but it was finally decided that “Vimy would be a more suitable point.”

The Canadian nation said to have been born at Vimy, but the battle of Ypres, to cite Prime Minister Mackenzie King’s description, was also “one of earth’s altars.”



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Roman Jarymowycz** is a military historian and teacher. Austrian by birth, he served in the Canadian Militia and commanded The Royal Canadian Hussars. He has lectured at RMC and the Canadian Forces Staff College. His most recent book is *The Official History of the Black Watch, Royal Highland Regiment of Canada*, due to be published this year. Jarymowycz is currently working on the history of The Royal Montreal Cavalry and *The Official History of the Royal Canadian Hussars*. He lives in Beaconsfield, QC with his ever-patient wife and is besotted with two energetic granddaughters

<sup>29</sup> BWA MS 001. Whitehead. Mrs E.H. Ewing (letter extract via H Walker): “Last night, quite unexpectedly, Lt Clarence McCuaig arrived ... He tells me that Major McCuaig, Ward Whitehead and young Pitblado were all together when Ward Whitehead fell. The Canadians were retiring at the time, but Pitblado rushed back and picked up Whitehead, and when last seen was struggling along with Whitehead on his back.” See also: BWA. Whitehead, Jones correspondence. Letter, Private Alf Cartwright 4 June 1915: “Men dropping by the scores. This is where Ward got it. He got half his face blown off and another officer was bandaging it up ... I don’t know if Ward was made a prisoner or if they killed him.”

