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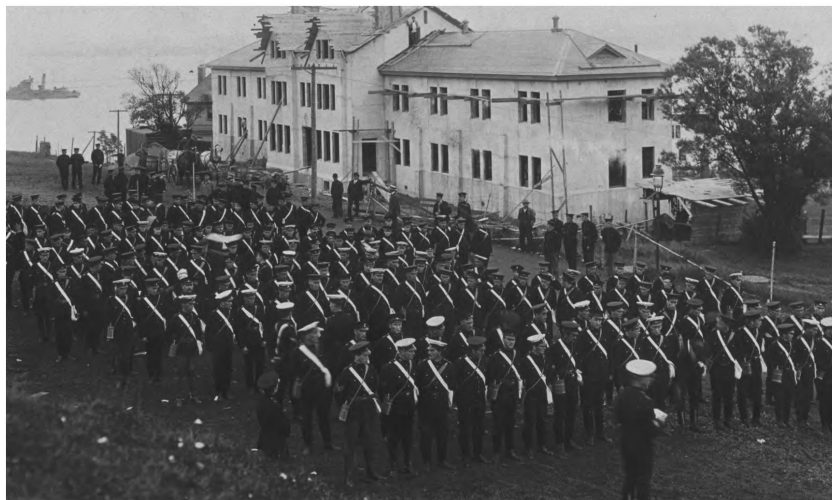
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# New Brunswick's Artillery Goes to War, 1914-1915

LEE WINDSOR &  
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*Abstract: This case study of artillery units from New Brunswick examines the role of the Militia in Canada's mobilisation for the First World War, from August 1914 through the Second Battle of Ypres in April-May 1915, the Canadian forces' first major combat. It shows that the Militia artillery in the province provided a strong basis, in organisation and in the considerable number of serving and former members, for both emergency home defence measures and raising units for overseas service. The piece also demonstrates the strong provincial identity of the gunners. The largest unit, the 3rd Regiment of Saint John, made a determined effort to raise "New Brunswick" units for overseas service, and succeeded because of its ability promptly to provide capable personnel in fully sufficient numbers.*

NEW BRUNSWICK'S MILITIA artillery units played a significant but little-known role in the First World War for home defence and in recruiting and training personnel for overseas service. Published work on Canada's military effort of 1914-18 has rightly given priority to the overseas corps and particularly to the infantry. Treatment of the corps artillery has been less extensive, and there has been little work on the units of the Militia in Canada—the nation's traditional military force. The present article shows how peacetime organisation enabled New Brunswick's artillery units to make an early contribution—notably at the Second Battle of Ypres, the Canadian division's first



The 3rd Regiment's "Foreign Service Battery" assembling on Partridge Island for departure to Valcartier, August 1914. [Heritage Resources, Saint John]

major battle—in circumstances that had only been faintly glimpsed before the outbreak of war.

This account supports other challenges to the view that Canada's mobilisation was a chaotic improvisation. Yet, at the time, New Brunswick's gunners protested that their best people were being scattered to fill gaps in the whole range of artillery units, thus denying recognition afforded other provinces by the concentration of their people in units that represented particular cities and regions. Those protests bore fruit. The expansion of the British and Canadian artillery in response to the battles of early 1915 brought a prominent place at the front for distinctly "New Brunswick" units that were recruited throughout the province and organised and trained at Saint John.

By 1914 the Canadian Artillery was organised in two branches on the model of Britain's Royal Artillery. The Canadian Garrison Artillery was responsible for heavy mobile guns (generally 4.7-inch and larger) and for fortress armament, principally the defended ports of Halifax, Quebec City, and Esquimalt, BC. The Canadian Field Artillery was equipped with lighter mobile guns for service in field forces. In New Brunswick, the 3rd Regiment, Canadian Garrison Artillery at Saint John traced its history back to 1793 when the first citizen-gunners came out to garrison the shore batteries that protected that port during the French Revolutionary War. After

1904–5 when the Canadian government followed British practice and concentrated coastal defences at major naval ports—Halifax on the East Coast—the regiment switched from training on fixed coastal guns to mobile armament. On mobilisation it was to move to Halifax, and crew the mobile guns that were based at the citadel in the centre of the city, ready to move rapidly with infantry and cavalry to resist enemy landing forces.

The regiment was not only deeply rooted in Saint John, but had strong connections through its serving and many former members throughout the province. Lieutenant-Colonel Beverley R. Armstrong, the commanding officer, was a leading lawyer and businessman in Saint John. A veteran of the South African War, he had lost his right leg as a result of injuries suffered in combat. Such was Armstrong's drive and network of contacts that, even while continuing in command throughout the war, he also became a senior staff officer with responsibility first for the recruiting, and then for the ocean transport, of overseas contingents from Halifax.

New Brunswick's other artillery unit, the 4th Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery, came into existence in 1905. The brigade brought together the 10th (Woodstock) and 12th (Newcastle) batteries—both of which dated to the 1860s—with a newly authorised unit, the 19th Battery at Moncton. The new unit took shape only in 1907 when Major Samuel Boyd Anderson assumed command. A native of Port Elgin, New Brunswick, he was a school teacher and principal who in his late thirties took up a new career as an insurance broker. Anderson joined the local militia infantry regiment in 1893 when he was only seventeen years old and had served continuously while rising through the ranks. Under his leadership the new battery became the most active unit in the brigade.

On 29 July 1914 Britain dispatched the “precautionary” war telegram to all parts of the British Empire, and its dominions and colonies began partial mobilisation of forces to secure strategic centres, especially on the seacoasts. On Canada's east coast, militia detachments came out to supplement the permanent fortress garrisons at Halifax and Quebec City. Mobilisation stepped into higher gear on 3 August in response to a report from Heart's Content, Newfoundland that two German cruisers had been sighted. Maritime Provinces Command, known after 1911 as the 6th Division with headquarters

at Halifax under Major-General R.W. Rutherford, took the threat seriously, and within hours full mobilisation was underway.<sup>1</sup>

Rutherford and his staff, however, had to change the plans on the fly. Based on the worst-case scenario of war with the United States, the plans concentrated defences at Halifax, the major British imperial naval and military base in the northwestern Atlantic. The Americans would have to seize the Nova Scotian capital in a major assault if they were to isolate Canada from British military assistance upon which the defence of the Dominion would ultimately depend. By contrast, the greatest danger from Germany was hit-and-run long-range bombardments of any and all coastal towns by fast and elusive German cruisers. The goal would be to terrorise the commercial shippers and thus interfere with the ocean trade upon which Britain's economy and war-making potential depended.<sup>2</sup>

Saint John, the most important commercial port on the East Coast, was a logical target for such a terror campaign. The 6th Division cancelled the 3rd Regiment's deployment to Halifax, and instead ordered the unit to raise a single active service battery of six officers and 113 other ranks to crew four 4.7-inch mobile guns that were being rushed to Saint John from Ontario, for a coast defence role. The local press reported the mobilisation on 4 August. "One battery will be mobilised and Major F.C. Magee will be in command," reported *The Saint John Globe*. "There are some big 4.7-inch guns expected to arrive today from Petawawa for the local corps."<sup>3</sup> The next morning, 5 August, the 3rd Regiment's newly organised "composite" battery assembled for drill.<sup>4</sup> That same day the *Globe* printed a report from Portland, Maine that early in the morning shots were heard off the coast. A further report from New York added "Eight cruisers—three

<sup>1</sup> Brian Tennyson and Roger Sarty, *Guardian of the Gulf: Sydney, Cape Breton, and the Atlantic Wars, 1785-1991* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 113-4.

<sup>2</sup> "Canada. Halifax Defence Scheme. Revised April 1914," table D (ii) "Distribution of Garrison and Armament at the War Stage," seen at National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ) Library, c 1981.

<sup>3</sup> *Saint John Globe*, 4 August 1914, 9. The account in this and the other articles from this newspaper cited below is confirmed by the short daily telegraphed reports by OC 6th Division to Ottawa in File HQC 95 pt 4, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG 24, Box 1198, and the regimental orders, 4-5 August 1914, "Regimental Orders 10 June 1898-31 March 1916," New Brunswick Museum, 3rd "New Brunswick" Regiment, Canadian Garrison Artillery collection.

<sup>4</sup> *Saint John Globe*, 5 August 1914, 5.

German, three British and two French are hovering somewhere off this coast. ... The firing may have marked the first engagement...<sup>5</sup>

The guns from Petawawa arrived on 5 August and on 6 August were moved out to Partridge Island. The *Globe* was reassuring about the effectiveness of the new defences: “The company of artillery men ... are the older men in the service who have seen much drill at Petawawa. Using the same guns that were used on drill, the gunners will be able to give a splendid account of themselves if called upon by the events of the great war.”<sup>6</sup>

The detailed coverage of the defence preparations in the press, the result of the government not yet imposing effective censorship, had the good effect of reassuring the population. So did the frantic naval preparations to meet the looming threat. Royal Navy cruisers rushed from the West Indies to Halifax, and others then came from Great Britain. Although it became clear that the German warships were not in northern waters—the alarmist reports had all been false—a half-dozen cruisers remained on station at Halifax. Forty percent or more of Britain’s overseas trade passed close by Nova Scotia and Newfoundland en route across the Atlantic, and a large number of fast German merchant ships had taken refuge in United States ports. While the navy established a watch off of US ports, the gunners on Partridge Island stood poised to defend Saint John.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, the 4.7-inch battery defending Saint John was a sham, and the gunners knew it. The wheeled carriages of the guns could not be levered about readily enough to track and engage a moving ship. A proper coast gun sat on a perfectly balanced carriage on a heavy steel pivot set in concrete so the gun could swing rapidly and precisely on a wide arc. As the battery commander complained early in 1915: “I find myself ... with orders to fire on a hostile vessel and with such material on hand that the result would be to aggravate the situation rather than better it.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 August 1914, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Michael L. Hadley and Roger Sarty, *Tin-Pots and Pirate Ships: German Naval Forces and German Sea Raiders 1880-1918* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991), chap. 4.

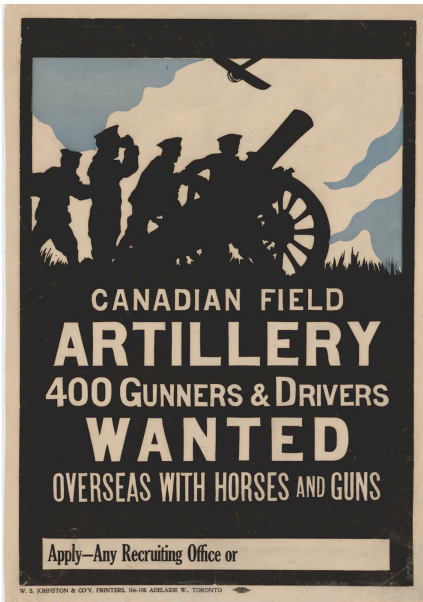
<sup>8</sup> This and the following paragraphs reproduces material quoted in General Staff, “Memorandum on the Defence of St. John, N.B.,” 19 October 1936, File HQS 12 pt 5, LAC, RG 24, Box 2269; on Gwatkin and the formation of policy see Roger Sarty, “Silent Sentry: A Military and Political History of Canadian Coast Defence, 1860-1945” (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1983), 257-83, 296-305.

None of this came as a surprise to General W.G. Gwatkin, the highly competent British officer who served as chief of the general staff in Ottawa. Gwatkin had agreed to send the 4.7-inch guns to Partridge Island during the panic in early August 1914 to “soothe the citizens of St. John.” But he resisted all new calls from coastal and border towns for defences. It was an uphill struggle as Minister of Militia and Defence Colonel Sam Hughes, although no less keen than Gwatkin to make the largest possible effort overseas, was also extremely sensitive to political pressure. In the case of Partridge Island, Gwatkin privately wrote that, “If it rested with me I would withdraw the 4.7” guns, as I believe their presence at St. John to be unnecessary from a military point of view. But they were mounted for other than military purposes, and I am powerless.”<sup>9</sup>

In fact, many of the members of the regiment who came out for active service on Partridge Island had little interest in standing watch for German sea raiders. They had joined the Composite Battery in the hopes of a chance for service overseas, and soon there was good news. On 14 August regimental orders announced that authority had been received to raise a “Foreign Service Battery” that would form part of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Major Frank Magee took charge of the new unit, and was replaced as commander of the Composite Battery by Major W.H. “Harry” Harrison. Four of the six other officers who had come out with Composite Battery also transferred to the overseas unit, and were replaced by four officers from the regiment.<sup>10</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Armstrong’s regimental staff attended to recruiting, both for the overseas unit and replacements for the men who transferred from the Composite Battery. The recruiting efforts were vigorous and wide-ranging, with an officer coming from the directorate of artillery in Ottawa to help the regiment. Sergeant-Major E.M. “Ned” Slader recalled a recruiting mission with Captain Ralph Hayes to Minto, some 160 kilometres from Saint John. “We brought back a mixed bag, mostly Belgians and Russians. All proved good soldiers. I recall particularly Christopher Rudic, a Cossack. He

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in “Memorandum on the Defence of St. John, N.B.,” 19 October 1936.

<sup>10</sup> Regimental orders, 14 August 1914; “Pay-List of the Officers of the Composite Battery....,” August 1914, August 1914–February 1915 file, LAC, RG 9IIA9, Box 928.



Canadian Field Artillery recruiting poster.  
[War Records Survey Posters / Library and  
Archives Canada. R1185-67-0-E, Box A152]

had been a Cavalry Sergeant in the Russo-Japanese War, a superb horseman and later in the war Colonel Penhale's groom."<sup>11</sup>

By the end of August the overseas battery, composed of five officers and 254 other ranks, was ready to leave. It included Lieutenants William "Bill" Vassie, Lawrence Kelly, and Ralph Hayes, a number of long-time noncommissioned members of the regiment like Ned Slader, Charlie Cunard, Ed Puddy, A.E. Locket, Jim Stackhouse, Jack Edwards, and Alfred Dodge, and a few new volunteers. The battery marched to Union Station in Saint John on 28 August, led by Major Magee through a crowd of well-wishers. Grey skies threatened rain, but they could not dampen the public's enthusiasm. Slader remembered "Crowds cheering, flags flying, the Artillery Band directed by Bandmaster Charlie Williams playing *Our Director* march. I admit I was somewhat exhilarated."<sup>12</sup> Pouring rain greeted the train with the Saint John Battery aboard as it slid to a halt in Moncton to load the 19th Field Battery led by Major S. Boyd Anderson and Sergeant-Major Ernie Whitebone. The Moncton

<sup>11</sup> E.M. Slader, *From the Victorian Era to the Space Age: Collections of the New Brunswick Historical Society* (Saint John: Lingley Printing Company, 1973), 52.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-55.



gunners brought along a Westmoreland County black bear cub named "Lee," apparently not the only unit travelling with such a mascot.<sup>13</sup>

Rain fell hard all the way to Valcartier, Quebec, where the first contingent was mustering under canvas and the new camp rose around them. In the earliest days of Sam Hughes' Valcartier camp, shelter was scarce and food even more so. Stories of camp confusion, shortage and deprivation are legion. Less well known and perhaps more remarkable is how quickly militia trained officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs), along with the Permanent Force personnel, pulled things together. Saint John's Regimental Quartermaster Sergeant Charlie Cunard, a South African War veteran, scrounged bedding and ground sheets. The 3rd Regiment's Lieutenant Cyrus Inches was waiting in Valcartier for the New Brunswickers to arrive. Inches had arrived early to link up with their new commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel John Penhale from Sherbrooke, Quebec. A Permanent Force regimental sergeant-major (RSM) was appointed too: Jim Slade. "A veteran of the Northwest Rebellion and the South African War, a warrant officer of long standing in the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery, he was an expert in what is known in the army as 'Man Management'." Shelter and rations were sorted quickly so that organisation of the divisional artillery and training could commence.<sup>14</sup>

If the misery of Valcartier was not enough, the men of the 3rd Regiment's Overseas Battery soon learned that their skills at long range gunnery were not required. Instead, Major Magee and most of his men were remustered as Number 4 Section, 1st Canadian Division Ammunition Column alongside other sections from Charlottetown and Montreal. Their "armament" was now the General Service Wagon and their mission was to haul shells to feed the division's hungry guns. Major Anderson's 19th Moncton Battery disappeared, too. It was combined with a section from Sydney, Nova Scotia's 17th Battery to form 6th Field Battery, equipped with six modern 18-pounder field guns. The new 6th Field Battery joined batteries from Montreal and Sherbrooke, Quebec to form 2nd Canadian Field Brigade. The Montreal field gunners were led by a young Major Andrew McNaughton.

<sup>13</sup> "Mascots of Moncton Battery are Talk of Battery Lines," *Moncton Times*, 4 September 1914, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Slader, *From the Victorian Era to the Space Age*, 56-67 (p. 57 quoted).

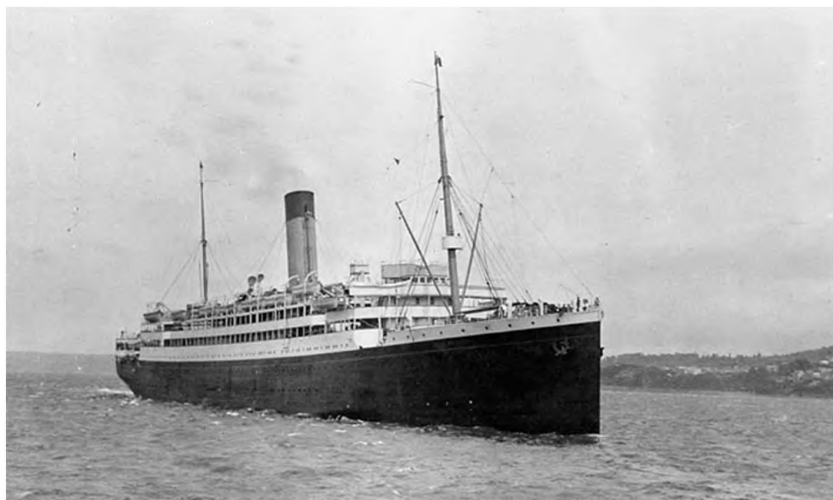
The 2nd Field Brigade's structure was not to last, but its eastern Canadian flavour would. And Saint John gunners gradually assumed an increasingly prominent role in Canada's heavy artillery. That started in late September 1914 when Major Magee was transferred to command 1st Canadian Heavy Battery. The "1st Heavies" served four modern breech-loading 60-pounder heavy field guns making them the most powerful artillery unit in the Canadian Division. The battery was initially assembled from the Montreal Heavy Brigade, but was liberally reinforced by the 3rd New Brunswick Regiment officers and men who followed Magee, bringing their 4.7-inch heavy gun experience with them. The partnership was the first of many links forged between New Brunswick and Montreal gunners.<sup>15</sup>

Barely thirty days after arriving at Valcartier Camp the first contingent was equipped and organised into all the necessary parts required for 1st Canadian Division and ready for their passage to Great Britain. The artillerymen and their horses with wagons, guns, ammunition, and other equipment marched to the Quebec City docks late in September to load aboard the ss *Megantic* and the ss *Montezuma*. "The men, who expected to sleep in hammocks, are in the L and third-class staterooms, much better accommodation than most of them had ever enjoyed before."<sup>16</sup> Regimental Sergeant-Major Slade and Sergeant-Major Slader had a state room all to themselves "provided with luxurious beds complete with silken covers and electric heaters to be turned on and off at our pleasure,"<sup>17</sup> in stark contrast to the conditions they were soon to encounter. They set sail down the St. Lawrence River on 1 October. Two days later they joined the convoy carrying the whole Canadian force in the Gaspé Basin and set out into the open Atlantic. With them went virtually all of Canada's modern equipment. The fact that 1st Division was mobilised, equipped, and dispatched so quickly challenges conventional wisdom that Canada entered the war ill-prepared. More training in England

<sup>15</sup> Valerie Teed, ed., *Uncle Cy's War: The First World War Letters of Major Cyrus F. Inches* (Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions, 2009), 21-22; Slader, *From the Victorian Era to the Space Age*, 60.

<sup>16</sup> Cyrus Inches letter 27 September 1914 in Teed, *Uncle Cy's War*, 23.

<sup>17</sup> Slader, 60.



SS *Megantic*. [Library and Archives Canada PA 021506]

lay ahead, but nothing could have prepared them for the rigours of war that awaited them.<sup>18</sup>

The convoy arrived at Plymouth after eleven days at sea, and then the troops encamped on West Down North, in the British Army's field training area on the Salisbury Plain. Lieutenant Cyrus Inches became the next 3rd New Brunswick Regiment officer to be transferred to Major Magee's 1st Heavy Battery. Here was a further recognition that the skills acquired in the pre-war coastal defence and fortress roles—long-range, indirect fire—were equally valuable for the heavy artillery in the field. Magee and Inches served together in the militia and Inches wrote home that he was glad for the assignment. "I think I can work in better with Frank than any other—he appreciates my capacities and incapacities better."<sup>19</sup> Both officers were destined to accomplish great things before the war was over. That autumn, 1st Heavy Battery's New Brunswick flavour increased as more experienced Saint John gunners transferred in. Among them was Gunner Frank Hall, assigned as Inches' batman. Those officers and

<sup>18</sup> For more on the debate over early war Canadian preparedness see Andrew Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers: 1st Canadian Division at War 1914–15* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); James Wood, *Militia Myths, Ideas of the Canadian Citizen Soldier, 1896–1921* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Cyrus Inches letter 26 October 1914 in Teed, *Uncle Cy's War*, 36.

men formed the nucleus that later grew and led the Canadian Corps Heavy Artillery.

Those developments lay far off in the future. First, the gunners faced an unusually wet fall and winter on the Salisbury Plain. The rain began days after their arrival. By 2 November it had rained for ten days straight. Lieutenant Inches wrote home that the locals warned that all “indications were not for better weather.” Wet days carried through to December when Gunner John Bovard wrote home to Moncton to report, “there hasn’t been 12 hours of fine weather day or night since we have been here. I was on guard duty last night and it rained as hard as I’ve ever seen it rain ... the water was about 3 inches deep in the guard tent. Imagine sleeping in that with nothing but blankets over you.” Sergeant Noah Steeves wrote his sister that packages from home helped fend off the unending dampness. “The Daughters of the Empire at Moncton sent socks, sleeping caps, housewives (darning kits) handkerchiefs, and I got my share of them.”<sup>20</sup>

During that miserable winter the Moncton gunners received orders to re-establish their own battery. The whole 2nd Field Brigade re-organised from three six-gun batteries to four four-gun batteries to conform to the new British standard designed to spread the limited number of field guns evenly across the rapidly expanding army. The 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery nevertheless retained all its guns and gunners. New British divisions included thirty-six field guns in nine batteries, while the Canadians kept fifty-two guns now spread across thirteen batteries.<sup>21</sup> One of the “new” batteries was the 8th, formerly the 19th, Moncton Battery under their old battery commander, Major Boyd Anderson. It was under this new number they would make history. In those days, “Anderson’s Battery” was a happy lot, still holding onto their mascot “Lee.” Gunner George McMullen wrote home that “the bear is as fat as a pig. We have him in a tent in a box and he wanders around all day.”<sup>22</sup> Conditions on Salisbury Plain made it difficult to train. Thankfully, by January 1915, Magee’s 1st Heavy Battery, Ned Slader’s Number 4 Section

<sup>20</sup> Cyrus Inches letter, 2 November 1914 in Teed, *Uncle Cy’s War*, 38; “Letter home from Gnr T. J. Bovard,” *Moncton Times*, 1 December 1914, 7; 15 December 1914, “Letter from Sgt. N. Steeves,” *ibid.*, 15 December 1915, 6.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Farndale, *History of the Royal Regiment of Artillery: The Western Front, 1914–1918* (Woolwich, UK: The Royal Artillery Institution, 1986) 82–86.

<sup>22</sup> “Letter from George McMullen,” *Moncton Times*, 9 December 1914, 7.

of the Divisional Ammunition Column, and Anderson's 8th Battery moved into billets in nearby villages. Leave passes became available to London and other nearby destinations thereby improving morale.<sup>23</sup>

## THE SECOND CONTINGENT, AND OTHER NEW COMMITMENTS

By early 1915 more New Brunswick gunners were on their way to Salisbury Plain. Before 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery completed its training in England, it was already clear that the war would last some time. Canada responded by assembling a second division for service overseas. New Brunswickers not able to secure posts in the first contingent were now asked for three more units. The 3rd New Brunswick Regiment recruited the Headquarters and 1st Section of 2nd Canadian Divisional Ammunition Column under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel W.H. "Harry" Harrison. The total strength of the 2nd Divisional Ammunition Column was 852 all ranks. Of these, some 158 are shown on the sailing list as having been recruited at Saint John and Fredericton, of which about seventy show previous service with the 3rd Regiment, including eleven of the nineteen officers.<sup>24</sup> Twenty of the 217 officers and men of the 2nd Canadian Heavy Battery, primarily a Charlottetown unit, were New Brunswick gunners. Meanwhile, militia field battery depots in Fredericton, Moncton, Woodstock, and Chatham recruited for 23rd and 24th Field Batteries which included officers and men from all over the Maritimes. Among others, the 3rd New Brunswick Regiment contributed the experienced Battery Sergeant-Major Holly Patchell to stiffen the force.

Mobilisation of men for the second contingent left the Composite Battery on Partridge Island, now under the command of Captain J.E. Sayre, seriously under strength. Of the seventy-nine gunners on the island at the end of January 1915, thirty-one had joined just that month.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the demands on the regiment had just begun. Early

<sup>23</sup> Slader, *From the Victorian Era to the Space Age*, 64.

<sup>24</sup> H.C. Clark, *Extracts from the War Diary and Official Records of the Second Canadian Divisional Ammunition Column* (Saint John, NB: J and A McMillan, 1921), 5–9; "2nd Divisional Ammunition Column. Nominal Roll...Embarkation..." available at <http://eco.canadiana.ca>; Composite Battery Daily Orders, 10 December 1914, August 1914–February 1915 file, LAC, RG 9 IIF9, Box 928.

<sup>25</sup> Pay-list Composite Battery other ranks for January 1915, *ibid*.

in March, 6th Division in Halifax directed the 3rd Regiment and the PEI Heavy Brigade each to provide a detachment of seventy-five personnel for duty in the Halifax forts. The garrison was proving too small to keep the coastal batteries adequately crewed for what would now apparently be a long war. Rear-Admiral R.S. Phipps Hornby, commander of the Royal Navy cruisers operating from Halifax, would not consider a reduction in the defences; the existing level was essential to the security of his warships. Regimental orders announcing the organisation of the detachment required all other ranks not already on duty on Partridge Island or enlisted in the new CEF contingent to report to the island or the armouries within forty-eight hours. The orders applied the whip, which certainly reflected the urgent need for reinforcements at Halifax, and might also have shown awareness that personnel did not relish the prospect of prolonged, unglamorous home service.

All NCO's and men who receive notices and do not report as above will be considered as having no objection to going on active service in home defence and will be called out. Of those that report, those making no objection will be called out first and the balance of the required number will be made up first from the single men and those from the married men who will suffer least financially.<sup>26</sup>

A detachment comprised of Captain Lawrence T. Allen, Lieutenant H.A. Bruce, Lieutenant Herb A. West and seventy-two other ranks left Saint John by train to Halifax on 16 March 1915, and immediately on their arrival took up duties in the coastal defence batteries. A second detachment, Lieutenant Colin MacKay and fifteen gunners, entrained for Halifax on 20 March. They joined a new unit, Number 6 Company, Royal Canadian Garrison Artillery (RCGA), created in response to a request from the British government for a garrison to protect Port Casties, St. Lucia in the Windward Islands of the Caribbean. By early 1915 it seemed clear that the role of Regimental Headquarters and the Composite Battery stuck on Partridge Island was to recruit and train gunners for others to employ.

<sup>26</sup> Regimental orders, 8 March 1915.

## TO FRANCE

During that bleak winter on Salisbury Plain, batteries and ammunition columns practiced gun drill in the field for attack and defence as well as methods for staging ammunition supplies for a sustained action. All ammunition column members—men and horses—trained to serve the guns, as they were to be ready quickly to replace and casualties in the batteries. Battery commanders and staff practiced telephone and other forms of communication with brigade headquarters and with forward observation officers (FOOs). Royal Artillery instructors emphasized selection and preparation of covered and concealed firing positions and ammunition dumps as well as hitching up guns and wagons in darkness for crash moves in and out of positions. These lessons of the South African War were reinforced by experience in France which proved that guns must be dug in and dispersed in depth behind the front line infantry and connected to observers at the front with clear lines of vision and good communications to the guns behind them.<sup>27</sup> Training in England culminated in January 1915 with live practice firing from covered positions and correcting fire based on reports from forward observers.<sup>28</sup> According to the *Moncton Times*, Anderson's 8th Battery "made the highest record of any Canadian battery or any of the batteries of Kitchener's army."<sup>29</sup>

New Brunswick's first three artillery units depended entirely on horses to move guns and wagons. Officers and men alike therefore invested considerable time caring for horses, saddlery and vehicles after a day of dragging all through the mud. When the units moved into billets in January 1915, the animals could finally be stabled and sheltered from the cold steady barrage of rain. Most horses were brought all the way from Canada, but those of 1st Heavy Battery proved too light to haul the 60-pounder guns, each weighing some five-and-a-half tons. Most were replaced with draught teams, although a few Canadian horses stayed within the battery to haul ammunition wagons and for other tasks.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Farndale, *History of the Royal Regiment of Artillery*, 51.

<sup>28</sup> War Diary (WD) 2nd Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery (2 Cdn Fd Bde), October–December 1914, January 1915, LAC, RG 9 IID3, Box 4964.

<sup>29</sup> *Moncton Times*, 9 February 1915, 8.

<sup>30</sup> C.F. Inches, *1st Canadian Heavy Battery in France: Farwell Message to the NCOs and Men* (Liverpool: C. Tinling & Co., 1919), 23.

On 4 February 1915, days before the Canadians were set to sail for France, Germany declared a naval blockade of Great Britain, which diverted the Canadian convoy from La Havre to St. Nazaire. Rough seas threw two 1st Heavy Battery horses to the deck, breaking bones and forcing broken hearted drivers to shoot them and throw them over the side. At St. Nazaire in the Brittany peninsula they boarded trains emblazoned with the now infamous stencil “40 Hommes, 8 Chevaux” and set off on a two day journey across Normandy, the Somme and finally to Hazebrouck in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region of France, close to the Belgian border and the front line.<sup>31</sup> “To the east we could see [V]ery lights and flashes and hear the steady rumble of the guns.”<sup>32</sup>

On arrival, the entire Canadian Divisional Artillery, under command of Colonel Henry Burstall, ran through exercise rides to re-condition horses after long days of cramped travelling. Most batteries' personnel went forward to a British host unit to get a taste of the front. Anderson's 8th Battery shadowed a British 18-pounder brigade at Le Bizet on the north edge of Armentieres. While officers went forward to observation posts, gunners worked with the guns “doing the same duties and learning all possible from the experienced soldiers.” They were especially impressed by efforts to conceal gun pits from German aircraft. Frank Magee went forward with a Royal Garrison Artillery 60-pounder battery dug in behind Armentieres. The 1st Divisional Ammunition Column officers moved to Meteren on the main highway and railway link connecting Dunkirk to Armentieres to see how 4th British Division ran its ammunition supply.<sup>33</sup> While first tastes of active service alongside British units proved rewarding, it took something else to get used to local farms which served as ammunition dumps, gun positions, and homes for men and horses. Lieutenant Inches wrote “French Farmers put Godliness first and cleanliness last with a vengeance. The filth about the barnyards is nauseating.” Sergeant-Major Slader felt no better about the farm assigned as home to the New Brunswick section of the Ammunition Column. It was “filthy and stunk to high heaven.... One night in the

<sup>31</sup> WD, 1st Canadian Heavy Battery (1 CHB), February 1915, LAC, RG 9 IID3, Box 4977.

<sup>32</sup> Slader, *From the Victorian Era to the Space Age*, 71.

<sup>33</sup> WD 2 Cdn Fd Bde and 1 CHB, February 1915; WD 1st Canadian Divisional Ammunition Column (1 CDAC), February 1915, LAC, RG 9 IID3, Box 4977.



barn was sufficient time to louse up the whole outfit." So began the gunners' battle with the skin-irritating insects that lasted longer than the war with Germany.<sup>34</sup>

Canadian gunners' introduction to the Western Front coincided with preparations for a minor British offensive that demonstrated just how hard it was to master this new kind of warfare. At the end of February, 1st Canadian Division and all its guns moved a few miles south to relieve 7th British Division around Sailly-sur-la-Lys. Their new positions, facing Aubers Ridge, was just north of British and Indian divisions preparing to attack Neuve Chapelle. On 1 March, 1st Canadian Heavy Battery rolled their 60-pounders into positions vacated by two British 4.7-inch gun batteries in an orchard at Pont Vanuxeem, north of Sailly. Major Magee had the men conceal the guns among the orchard's hedges and under the branch canopy. In early 1915 the war was still too new for shells to have laid waste to everything above ground. Among the hedges and fruit trees 1st Heavy Battery signallers ran telephone lines from gun positions back to Magee's battery headquarters and forward to an observation post. The low, flat, wet country around Sailly and the River Lys made artillery observing the fall of shot difficult, but stone churches and larger buildings in Aubers, Fromelles, and le Maisnil were visible atop Aubers Ridge offering points of reference. Fromelles' church tower still stood proudly atop the German-held ridge.

The next morning, 2 March 1915, Magee's battery fired the first Canadian rounds of the Great War. It began with registration shoots, followed by counter-battery fire with 60-pounder shrapnel shells bursting over two German battery positions. They also burst shrapnel around the Fromelles church tower to force German artillery observers to take cover. Lyddite and high explosive shells with contact fuses would have been more effective but were in short supply in these early days of war. Much of what was available was being dumped at British gun pits closer to the centre of the coming storm at Neuve Chapelle.

The same day, 2 March, Moncton's 8th Battery arrived at the divisional headquarters area at Sailly with the rest of 2nd Field Brigade. There they waited for darkness to conceal their move over the River Lys and into positions at Barlette Farm just west of Fleurbaix, 2500 yards behind the British frontline trench system

<sup>34</sup> Teed, Letter 27 February 1915, 62; Slader, *From the Victorian Era to the Space Age*, 71.

facing Fromelles and le Maisnil. When daylight had gone, drivers and teams pulled 18-pounder guns and ammunition limbers quickly into positions taken over from a Royal Horse Artillery brigade. The 8th Battery formed the reserve. Major Anderson left one two-gun section on the north side of the Lys and moved the other section in depth, behind 5th, 6th and 7th Batteries at Barlette Farm. On 3 March the sun was hidden by threatening grey clouds, but once it was light enough to observe the fall of shot, the forward batteries registered on known aiming points on the enemy front, and moved horses and wagons to the rear at Saily. For the next week their trench routine consisted of firing small numbers of shrapnel rounds to burst over enemy trenches and occasionally at houses and farm buildings from which the infantry reported German snipers. Much to the field gunners' frustration if not surprise, air burst shrapnel shells had little effect on German snipers in brick houses except to make them duck, but the 18-pounder high explosive shells needed to smash buildings were in even shorter supply than for the heavies. Overall, 2nd Brigade and 1st Heavy Battery did not fire much in that week. Still, the dozen or so shells each battery fired per day tested gun sights, telephone connections to their forward observation posts, and skills at setting fuses to burst over enemy trenches. On 7 March, 1st Heavy Battery's 60-pounders finally blew down the Fromelles Church Tower. Lieutenant Inches wrote later that the tower was a known "enemy observation post which dominated the whole divisional front. ... The battery was brought into prominence almost immediately by its destruction."<sup>35</sup>

The Battle for Neuve Chapelle was set to open on the morning of 10 March 1915, when six British and Indian divisions would attack two German divisions. The Canadian mission was to convince German commanders that the attack frontage extended north to Fleurbaix and thus encourage them to disperse their artillery fire and reserve troops. At 7:30 a.m., all of 2nd Field Brigade's batteries (except the 8th, still in reserve) opened fire along with riflemen and machine-gunners from Canadian infantry battalions facing Aubers Ridge. Anderson's men had to watch as their brigade fired their biggest shoot of the war so far—437 shells. The 1st Heavy Battery shelled Aubers village itself and suspected enemy gun positions in the woods east of Fromelles, all as part of the general Canadian deception effort. The main British attack at Neuve Chapelle saw the largest

<sup>35</sup> WD 2 Cdn Fd Bde and 1 CHB, March 1915; Teed, *Uncle Cy's War*, 59.

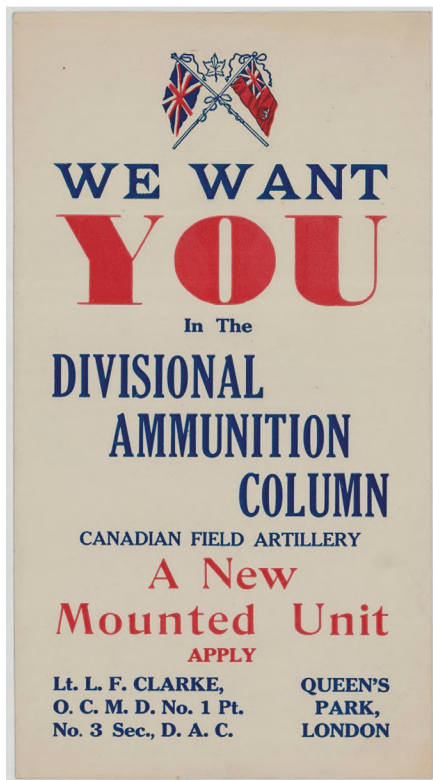
British artillery barrage of the war so far, employing sixty-six heavy guns and hundreds of 18-pounder field guns.<sup>36</sup> The principle was sound, but in reality, the number of guns and supply of ammunition available were too small to accomplish the goal.

The small Canadian diversionary barrage at Aubers nonetheless incited German artillery to retaliate commencing a seventy-two hour low-level gunnery duel. Each of three mornings Canadian batteries fired small dummy barrages of ten to fifteen rounds per gun. German guns fired similar numbers back and more, including high explosive shells fired by their very effective medium 5.9-inch howitzers. The 1st Heavy Battery answered the German field and heavy guns as best they could, but four 60-pounders and the pitiful stocks of ammunition could not begin to silence enemy guns. Each of three mornings, 2nd Field Brigade's forward observers counted fewer German kitchen wagon fires to their front as enemy infantry thinned and shifted south to seal off the initial British gains at Neuve Chapelle. While the Germans thinned their infantry, they kept their grip on Aubers Ridge with artillery fire. Magee's 60-pounders tried to prevent their movement. On 15 March they ranged in on a train loading and unloading German men and equipment at Fromelles Station, hitting three cars and the locomotive pulling them.

The Battle of Neuve Chapelle ended by 15 March 1915. Only then did the 8th Field Battery come forward for their turn to range in, but by then daily ammunition quantities were used up. The Germans continued their retaliation. They aggressively pushed a 77 mm field battery into their trench line, close to new construction on a front line redoubt or strong point. In the spirit of medieval siege warfare, the 2nd Field Brigade burst shrapnel rounds over the new German redoubt to slow the work. On 16 March, the 2nd Field's 18-pounders joined their efforts with 1st Heavies to destroy the redoubt. They massed as much 60-pounder and 18-pounder shrapnel fire as was available on Germans who appeared to be rushing their work on the new positions. Frank Magee felt that the shoot "destroyed enemy gun emplacement in trench."<sup>37</sup> According to Colonel Burstall's

<sup>36</sup> G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada: The History of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery*, Volume I: 1534-1919 (Toronto and Montreal: McClelland and Stewart, 1967), 212-213.

<sup>37</sup> WD 1 CHB, 16 March 1915.

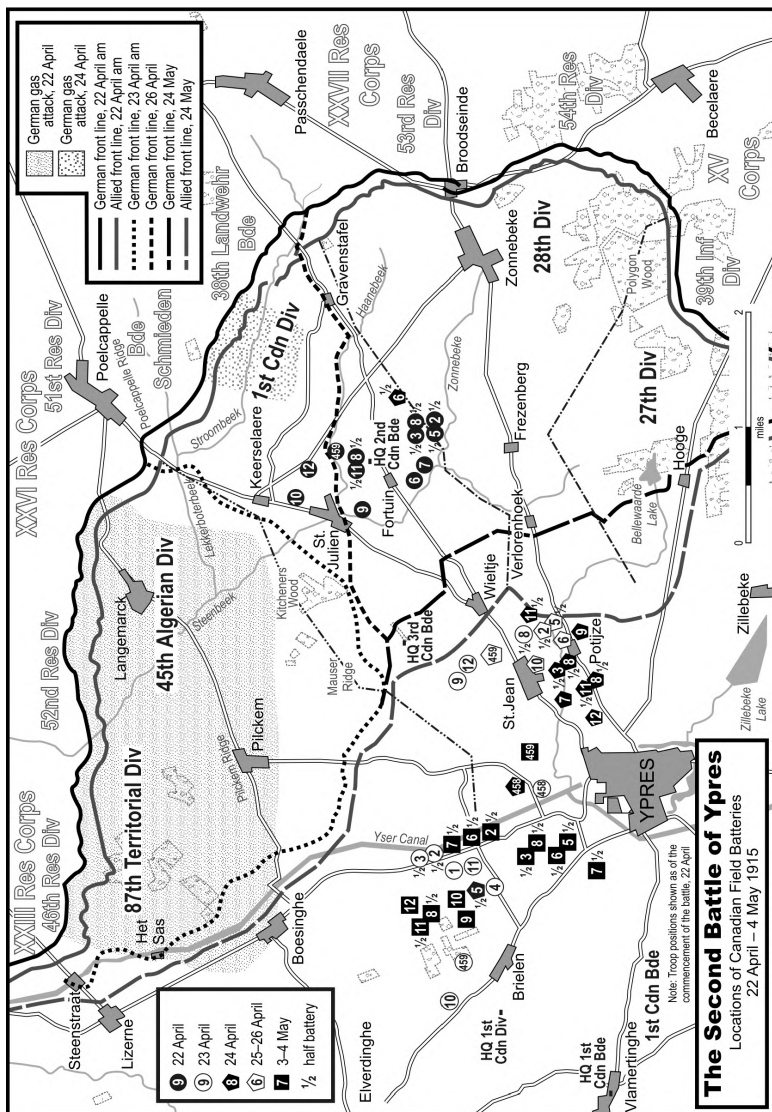


Divisional Ammunition Column recruiting poster. [War Records Survey Posters / Library and Archives Canada. R1185-67-0-E, Box A176]

headquarters, the bombardment “inflicted serious damage.”<sup>38</sup> The Germans responded to the Canadian barrage the next day with a concentration of 5.9-inch howitzer high explosive shells fired deep into the Canadian divisional rear, smashing apart houses uses as billets for Canadian infantry units. The mixture of good shooting and good luck was not enough to respond to superior German firepower. This first real taste of war cost the Canadian Divisional Artillery no losses in men or guns, but offered a glimpse of what lay ahead until the Allies deployed enough heavy artillery to match German firepower and until Allied factories could turn out more heavy guns and shells to equip them.

<sup>38</sup> WD 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery Headquarters, 17 March 1915, LAC, RG 9 IID3, Box 4958.

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## THE SECOND BATTLE OF YPRES

On 1 April 1915 all of the 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery came out of the line and into reserve behind the Aubers Ridge Front. Easter Sunday fell on 4 April that year and provided the occasion to parade all batteries in the division, including the Divisional Ammunition Column and 1st Heavy Battery. It was the last time they served directly together for nearly two years. Senior British commanders recognised the need to concentrate heavy guns at the point of main effort. The 1st Canadian Heavy Battery was thus detached from the division and pooled with what in 1915 were very limited numbers of the latest heavy and siege guns massing in the Aubers Ridge sector. When the Canadian divisional artillery received orders to head northeast to the Ypres Salient, the 1st Heavy Battery remained facing Aubers. There the British Expeditionary Force massed all available 60-pounders and newer-model medium and heavy howitzers available as part of its attack to support the French spring offensive further south in the Artois and Champagne regions. The British decision to assist the French attack was and still remains controversial. Some participants and historians criticise General Joffre's decision to attack the well dug-in German Army in early 1915 with not nearly enough heavy guns or ammunition to achieve any advantage. Others recognise that German occupation of most of the great northern coalfields around Lille and Douai along with France's most important railway network threatened the nation's survival and gave French leaders little choice but to attack German forces and begin the process of evicting the aggressor from their soil. Historian and Royal Artillery veteran Dominick Graham wrote that under such circumstances that the British and their dominions "could not stand on the defensive while her allies bled to death."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham, *Fire-Power: British Army Weapons and Theories of War 1904-1945* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982), 70 (quoted); Great Britain, Admiralty, *France: Volume IV, Ports and Communications*, Geographical Handbook Series, 70BR 503 C (London: Naval Intelligence Division, 1942), 252-260. For a discussion of the historical debate and global strategic issues of 1915 see G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919*, Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1962), 46-50; Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers*, 194-200; William Philpott, *Three Armies on the Somme: The First Battle of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 72-75.

The 1st Canadian Division and its remaining field artillery contributed to the French effort by freeing a French division manning the Ypres salient for service in the main spring offensive. The decision set the stage for the first Canadian battles of the Great War. Accounts of the now famous story of the Second Battle of Ypres are understandably dominated by infantry units from central and western Canada. Because New Brunswickers in the first contingent were mostly gunners, their story lays hidden in the shadows. What follows is the first attempt to record their experience.

The 1st Canadian Divisional Ammunition Column were the first gunners into the infamous sector on 13 April, setting up an ammunition depot and replenishment network based at Vlamertinge, two miles west of Ypres. From there they fed .303 small arms ammunition and grenades to Canada's three infantry brigades. The 2nd Field Brigade's advance party arrived on 16 April to meet their French artillery counterparts whom they were about to relieve near Wieltje, 2500 yards northeast of Ypres. The 5th and 8th Batteries followed the next day. The Moncton battery's four sub-sections prepared gun pits on the front right of the brigade area in a farm a few hundred yards south of Fortuin and shielded behind the crest of Zonnebeke Ridge—a spur off the main sandy Messines-Passchendaele Ridge that dominated the Ypres salient. The area was badly scarred in places during the First Battle for Ypres in late 1914, but not yet turned to the moonscape associated with later battles. When the sun came up on 18 April, Major Anderson's battery found two houses still standing behind German front line trenches on which they could register their fire. The next day, when German 77 mm “whizz bang” field guns shelled 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade's front line trenches in front of Gravenstaffel Ridge, the 8th Battery fired in retaliation.

Overall, those first days in the Salient were quiet—deceptively so in view of the storm building behind German lines. Such was the apparent lack of activity on 21 April that Burstall, now a brigadier, ordered practice reliefs-in-place between the 2nd and 3rd Field Brigades deployed behind the front line and 1st Brigade held in reserve at Ypres. Reliefs began by half batteries that night. The 8th Battery's Right Section relieved a section from Hamilton, Ontario's 11th Battery in the northern or left section of Canada's front near St. Julien. Anderson's 8th Battery Headquarters and Left Section were joined behind Zonnebeke Ridge by a section from 3rd “Gananoque”

Battery.<sup>40</sup> This small detail matters immensely because the storm about to break foiled the second half of the relief. For the next week, the Moncton battery remained divided, one two-gun section and battery headquarters with their parent 2nd Field Brigade and the other section with 3rd Field Brigade. The 8th Battery gunners therefore served nearly everywhere on the Second Ypres battlefield. So too did Battery Sergeant-Major Slader's New Brunswick 4th Section of the Divisional Ammunition Column. True to the artillery motto "Ubique," New Brunswick gunners were everywhere in what became known as the Second Battle of Ypres.

On the afternoon of 22 April 1915 General Alderson and Brigadier Burstall were in the gun line behind Gravenstaffel ridge when French rifle fire drew their attention north, and to "the two clouds of yellowish-green smoke each of which expanded until they blended into a single body."<sup>41</sup> This cloud of chlorine gas choked French and Algerian soldiers to death and virtually collapsed the northern rim of the Ypres salient. Then the guns started. The Germans had massed field and heavy artillery pieces of six divisions, reinforced with 147 heavy guns and howitzers in calibres up to 170 mm,<sup>42</sup> behind their front, and struck the French with crushing fire. High explosive shells caved in trenches, blew apart strong points, buried or obliterated men, and silenced French artillery batteries. The German intent to capture Ypres was part of wider plans to disrupt and block French attacks on the Western Front that might interfere with their massive offensive in Poland designed to "annihilate the offensive power of Russia for all time."<sup>43</sup> The Allies were compelled to hold Ypres at all costs. It served as "a physical and a moral bastion of resistance against German occupation of the small corner of free Belgian territory."<sup>44</sup> Ypres was a symbol to Great Britain and to Canada of the very reasons why they went to war.

The assault at Ypres opened three dramatic days in which Canadians won lasting fame at a hideous cost. Between 22 and 25 April, the 1st Canadian Division of roughly 18,000 men sustained

<sup>40</sup> Major Crerar was a Permanent Force gunner who rose to command First Canadian Army during the Second World War. WD 1 CDAC and 2 Cdn Fd Bde, 13-21 April 1915.

<sup>41</sup> Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers*, 101.

<sup>42</sup> Nicholson, *Gunners*, 223.

<sup>43</sup> Nicholson, *CEF*, 59.

<sup>44</sup> Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers*, 5.



over 6,000 casualties, 2,000 of them dead. Vastly outnumbered in men, weapons and artillery, and beset by chlorine gas, in the end Canadian willpower and skill-at-arms checked German attempts to capture Ypres and wipe out the salient. Afterwards, the British War Office announced: "The Canadians had many casualties but their gallantry and determination undoubtedly saved the situation."<sup>45</sup>

Canadian gunners are less well known for their exploits at the Second Battle of Ypres. The most famous of them are Major William King's 10th Field Battery from St. Catharines, Ontario. It found itself north of St. Julien in a sharp corner in the new front line formed after 45th Algerian Division collapsed. The St. Catharines battery fired over open sights, helping to break the German attack on the Canadian left flank. But their four guns were not the only 18-pounders in action during those desperate days. The two sections of New Brunswick's 8th Battery, separated in the disrupted relief begun on 21 April, fought in both 2nd and 3rd Field Brigade areas. These brigades were connected by field telephones to forward observation officers on Gravenstaffel Ridge, who could see well to the northeast and east, and poorly due north. At 6:00 p.m. 22 April, while the St. Catharines gunners poured fire into the advancing Germans, Lieutenant-Colonel Creelman's 2nd Field Brigade telephone exchange received calls for fire on enemy troops in the open. "All batteries opened up almost immediately." So, too, did heavy German counter-battery fire and there was a strong whiff of gas. Moncton Gunner Clyde Mollins wrote home afterwards. "In the afternoon the enemy attacked; the shells were flying all around us, shrapnel hitting the building. This kept up all afternoon and they were using those gas shells. They were awful; we were all going around with sore eyes and half-asleep. About 6:00 p.m. they broke through our lines and our infantry (Canadians) had to fight. The enemy was so close to us that enemy rifle bullets were hitting the barn we were in, and one of them got George McDougall."<sup>46</sup> McDougall was New Brunswick's first fatal gunner casualty of the Great War.

In two hours 2nd Field Brigade fired 645 shrapnel shells in response to observer calls. Their shells burst in the air, hurling lead balls down onto the closely packed ranks of German infantry.

<sup>45</sup> Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1914-1916*, Volume I (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2007), 165.

<sup>46</sup> Gunner Clyde Mollins letter home printed in the *Moncton Transcript*, 19 May 1915.

German accounts blame Canadian shellfire for stopping their attack. "A medical officer with 234th Reserve Regiment," historian Andrew Iarocci writes, "later reported that many of the casualties in his first-aid station were caused by shrapnel fire."<sup>47</sup> Sergeant Neil McKinnon wrote home to his father in Scotch Settlement New Brunswick about what he called the Battle of Langemarck "That it takes the 8th Battery of Moncton to 'do' the Germans."<sup>48</sup>

For a time only the gunners of 3rd Field Brigade, including 8th Battery's Right Section, held the new northern "front." Brigadier Burstall worried that the forward Canadian batteries might be encircled and overrun; the 2nd London Heavy Battery's four old 4.7-inch guns had already fallen into German hands. So he ordered both forward artillery brigades to hitch up and withdraw to the prepared second line of defence known as the General Headquarters (GHQ) Line. With 3rd Field Brigade's lines already burdened by Canadian and French gas victims and under heavy artillery, machine gun, and even rifle fire, the order made sense. Unfortunately it was not received by 8th Battery's Right Section serving with 3rd Field Brigade. They remained in place near St. Julien through the night. They finally got word to withdraw in the early morning hours and made it back to the new 3rd Field Brigade position at the Chateau in St. Jean.<sup>49</sup> They did so under duress. Afterwards Corporal Ainsley Hicks of Jolicure New Brunswick, was recommended for a gallantry award. "In the face of what seemed like certain death, Corporal Hicks saved a battery gun and retreated successfully."<sup>50</sup>

While Lieutenant-Colonel Creelman abandoned his most exposed gun positions, he soon had second thoughts about giving up 2nd Field Brigade's excellent firing position behind Zonnebeke Ridge 1000 yards south of St. Julien, especially so long as Canadian infantry still held trenches in front of Gravenstaffel ridge. As 2nd Brigade rode their guns back to Wieltje in a night lit by fires, flares and shell bursts, Creelman rode into Ypres to take up the matter directly with Brigadier Burstall. Meanwhile, Canadian counter-attacks at Kitchener's Wood stabilised the open northern flank. Those attacks

<sup>47</sup> Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers*, 111.

<sup>48</sup> Letter Printed in *Moncton Times*, 25 May 1915, 8.

<sup>49</sup> WD 3rd Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery (3 Cdn Fd Bde), 11th Battery Report, 22-23 April 1915, LAC, RG 9 IID3, Box 4966; Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers*, 117.

<sup>50</sup> *Moncton Times*, 7 July 1915, 1.

were supported by 3rd Field Brigade with its Moncton section before they withdrew. Reports from the northern flank helped Creelman convince Burstall that the 2nd Brigade should return to its forward positions behind Zonnebeke Ridge.<sup>51</sup> And so in the early hours of 23 April, 2nd Field Brigade limbered-up again, braved enemy shells and small arms fire, and redeployed in their old positions before dawn. Their determination helped save the day. When the sun came up, German infantry were seen massing to attack from the northeast. The 6th and 7th Batteries opened fire on the road behind the German front while 5th and 8th Batteries raked the German front line trench itself. They kept that fire up all day, disrupting German attempts to organise an assault.<sup>52</sup>

The 2nd Brigade's fire on 23 April was made possible by the 1st Divisional Ammunition Column's efforts the previous night. Orders came from Burstall's headquarters ten minutes after the initial attack stalled late on 22 April to "Send up lots of ammunition." The column pushed up 2800 shrapnel shells, 200 Lyddite high explosive rounds for 118th Royal Field Artillery Brigade's 4.5-inch howitzers, and 600,000 rounds of .303 rifle and machine gun ammunition. Supply wagons circulated all night long. Two horses were injured by shellfire and one wagon smashed.<sup>53</sup>

The main action on 23 April occurred on the northern rim where Canadian, British and French counter-attacks towards Mauser Ridge were stopped with bloody results. The problem was that Allied artillery had not enough heavy guns or high explosive shells to damage the German defenders snug in freshly dug trenches protected behind newly laid barbed wire or to respond against German long range counter-batteries.<sup>54</sup> The 8th Battery's forward observation officer, Lieutenant Harvey Tingley wrote home about his frustration. "So far as we know, no heavy artillery supported us. We could not get back at the Germans, who were pounding us, for we only had field artillery against the German heavy guns."<sup>55</sup> Others, more senior to Tingley, came to the same conclusion.

<sup>51</sup> Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers*, 116–119; Nicholson, *Gunners*, 225.

<sup>52</sup> WD 2nd Cdn Fd Bde, 23 April 1915.

<sup>53</sup> WD 1 CDAC, 22 April 1915.

<sup>54</sup> Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers*, 130–131.

<sup>55</sup> Letter printed in *Moncton Transcript*, 25 May 1915.



Heavy cannon demonstration: 60-pounder guns at Valcartier. [Library and Archives Canada R231-1028-5-E]

The worst was yet to come. Early on 24 April the winds blew a second German gas cloud directly at the apex of the Canadian front. Toronto's 15th Battalion and Winnipeg's 8th Battalion took the brunt of the gas, and a furious fifteen-minute artillery and mortar barrage that followed. Lieutenant-Colonel Louis Lipsett, of the 8th Battalion, had anticipated trouble and laid extra telephone lines between the front and 2nd Field Brigade's guns. When German infantry emerged from their trenches to follow their gas and barrage, Lipsett called down pre-registered fire from Creelman's guns. Bursting 18-pounder shrapnel shells and Winnipeg rifle fire "shredded" the German assault. The British Royal Artillery history credits 2nd Field Brigade with breaking up "attack after attack at ranges of 3500 yards." The Toronto battalion manning the exposed northeastern apex in the Canadian front was less fortunate. Before dawn, 3rd Field Brigade was ordered to begin moving back to Ypres, behind the Yser Canal, and out of range of the apex.<sup>56</sup> Fighting in two directions without artillery support while choking on gas forced 15th Battalion survivors back towards reserve positions on Gravenstaffel Ridge. The morning's events reinforced what many Canadian soldiers already knew, that successful infantry defence depended on good communications,

<sup>56</sup> Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers*, 137; Nicholson, *CEF*, 71-73.

good vantage points for forward observation officers connected by redundant communication links to strong artillery forces with ample stocks of ammunition.

At 8:30 a.m. the German attack spread across the northeastern apex of the front manned by the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade. The attack was heralded by destructive artillery fire concentrations. Medium 5.9-inch and heavy 21 cm German high explosive shells literally blew Canadian infantrymen out of their trenches or buried them alive. The Germans then stormed forward with three times the numbers of the exhausted Canadian defenders. Canadian infantry fought on with their infamous Ross Rifles, while gunners of 2nd and parts of 3rd Field Brigade turned their guns north and ripped through the German battalions attempting to storm St. Julien. The enemy assault ground to a bloody halt, at least for a time. Battery Sergeant-Major Slader remembered that no one had expected to require so much ammunition on what was supposed to be “a relatively quiet front. Thanks to good planning and tremendous exertion on the part of all concerned the supply was maintained.”<sup>57</sup> The night before the ammunition column delivered 6900 18-pounder rounds. Ammunition drivers also brought up over a million bullets and spare parts for worn guns. Most of the newly dumped ammunition was fired by 9:45 a.m. As the day wore on, 2nd Field Brigade hung on precariously, supporting the vicious battle for the commanding strongpoint known as Locality “C.” They made their few remaining shells count on the target rich front. By mid-afternoon “there appeared no sign of reinforcements or chance of getting more ammunition,”<sup>58</sup> and so beleaguered Canadian forward infantry companies withdrew to a shorter, more defensible line anchored on the village of St. Julien.

The Germans’ morning attack on 24 April caught 3rd Field Brigade in the process of pulling their guns westward behind Yser. Now they were needed up front again to stop the enemy onslaught. The 8th Battery’s Right Section, still attached to 3rd Field Brigade, had just arrived west of the Yser Canal at noon when they received counter-orders to ride back through Ypres and into the salient so they could support the beleaguered 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade. Captain Harry Crerar, 11th Battery’s second in command, had the composite 8th and 11th Battery gallop in fifty yard rushes through

<sup>57</sup> Slader, *From the Victorian Era to the Space Age*, 73.

<sup>58</sup> WD 2 Cdn Fd Bde, 24 April 1915.

Ypres as it was ripped apart by German long range heavy artillery. "Bodies of dead soldiers and civilians, dead horses and dogs, shattered buildings and ripped up roads met the eye on every side," 11th Battery reported later. "High explosive and shrapnel are bursting at erratic intervals."<sup>59</sup> The 8th Battery Driver William Curley, from Woodstock, wrote that "The city was being shelled in such a desperate shape that no living thing could stay there, but we had to advance through there to regain our old position. We started through at the dead gallop with all our horses and guns, and very few of us expected to get through alive. Only one man was lost, but half our horses were killed. I have a lovely team and thank goodness they were spared."<sup>60</sup>

The 8th Battery's Right Section made it back to a new position behind the GHQ Line near Potijze,<sup>61</sup> where Lieutenant-Colonel Creelman had re-positioned 7th Battery and the main body of Anderson's 8th Battery. They had precious few shells left, although a small convoy of three ammunition wagons reached them late in the afternoon on 24 April. It was enough to hold the Germans at point blank range at St. Julien and cover 5th and 6th Batteries' withdrawal back into 2nd Field Brigade's new position at Potijze.<sup>62</sup> As darkness fell Creelman re-organised the 2nd Field Brigade to support a pre-dawn British counter-attack around St. Julien planned for the morning of 25 April. The 2nd Brigade's log reported that, frustratingly, it was "impossible for FOOS to observe correctly" in support of the hastily planned counter-attack. Nor were there enough heavy guns or high explosive ammunition to harm the newly entrenched German defenders. The tragic result was predictable. Early that morning the British 10th Brigade was cut to ribbons by German machine gun and artillery fire.

The 2nd Field Brigade won payback after the sun came up when Creelman's forward observation officers spotted German troops massing to attack from St. Julien. At 7:00 a.m., the 2nd Field Brigade gunners pumped ten minutes of rapid fire into the German ranks. The well-observed fire stopped the German's morning attack cold. The gunners even scrounged twenty rounds of rare 18-pounder high explosive ammunition to blow apart a house sheltering a German

<sup>59</sup> WD 3 Cdn Fd Bde, 11th Battery Report, 24 April 1915.

<sup>60</sup> Letter from Driver William Curley, printed in *Fredericton Daily Gleaner*, 9 June 1915.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, WD 3 Cdn Fd Bde, 11th Battery Report, 24 April 1915.

<sup>62</sup> WD 2 Cdn Fd Bde, 24 April 1915.

machine gun. Nevertheless, the Germans reformed and pressed relentlessly south from St. Julien.<sup>63</sup> By late afternoon, when German infantry attacked out of Kitchener's Wood west of St. Julien, the 2nd Field Brigade fired everything they had at them, but ammunition supplies throughout the Ypres salient were almost gone.<sup>64</sup>

German long range heavy artillery fire on the other hand, never seemed to slacken. Gunner George Patterson of Middle Coverdale New Brunswick wrote home that, "for days and nights we were hit by shells that would tear holes in the ground six to ten feet deep and ten feet in diameter. Motion pictures give but a slight idea of the terrible work done by the war machines used in this war. On our lines the air is full of bursting shells and here and there a heavier shell striking the ground and throwing mud and splinters of steel a distance of 75 yards and I will leave it to your own mind when there are many troops moving or standing about in the open. But thank providence so far I am still alive and unhurt."<sup>65</sup> Two other members of the Moncton battery were not so lucky that day. Moncton Gunner Ira Mills wrote to his sister "I never thought I would see human flesh cut up as it was in that scrap."<sup>66</sup> That day direct hits in the 8th Battery's lines killed Gunners Fred Popow and George Talbot. Talbot was an Irish immigrant working in Moncton when the war broke out. All four of his brothers had been killed in action in 1914. There was nothing left of Popow and Talbot to bury, their names were eventually engraved on the Menin Gate in Ypres.

Long range German 150 mm and 170 mm guns penetrated deep into the Canadian base areas around Ypres and everywhere in between. The enemy had even brought up their gigantic fortress-smashing 420 mm siege guns to fire 2000-pound shells into Ypres, taking the city apart building by building. The strain of action over three intense days of firing told heavily on the Canadian guns. On the morning of 25 April, Battery Sergeant-Major Ned Slader of the ammunition column brought parts through the maelstrom to 12th Battery where two guns were knocked out and two others needed overhaul. All four guns were brought back into action that same day. Slader wrote, "I was in the saddle almost without rest or sleep for

<sup>63</sup> WD 2 Cdn Fd Bde, 25 April 1915; Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers*, 166–177.

<sup>64</sup> WD 2 Cdn Fd Bde, 25 April 1915.

<sup>65</sup> Letter printed in *Moncton Transcript*, 29 May 1915, 3.

<sup>66</sup> Letter printed in *Moncton Transcript*, 27 May 1915, 7.

nearly six days checking up with Brigade Ammunition Columns and riding up with a haversack full of small parts. It was necessary to take to the fields as the roads were being heavily shelled." Gas and enemy shelling also drove Belgian farm families westward. "All roads out of Ypres and Vlamertinghe were crowded with refugees, their former homes on fire or reduced to rubble." Vlamertinghe itself was under heavy fire when Slader left that morning but seemed quiet on his return. "I had just cleared the western end when the Germans re-opened fire. One shell struck the Church which was being used as a hospital. Right in front of the church was an old woman carrying a pack and trudging along the pavement. I looked back and a second shell burst on the road. The old woman was no more."<sup>67</sup> No place was safe in or behind the Ypres salient and at this point in the war, and there was nothing the Canadians could do about it.

The great peril abated somewhat on 26 April. The 1st Canadian Division became immediately famous in the empire for standing firm in the eye of two gas attacks at Ypres. They gave ground, but never broke and in the end they played a central role in thwarting German plans. Thus, 26 April marks the end of many Canadian accounts of the Second Battle of Ypres. That day, 1st Division's infantry battalions were mostly relieved by British troops after nearly 100 hours of continuous combat. The Canadian Divisional Artillery, however, remained in action for another full week as the Second Battle of Ypres dragged on and became more international. New Brunswick gunners supported counter-attacks by British, Indian, and French units while casualties in men and horses mounted and exhaustion and death remained ever present. From 26 April right through to 3 May, the Canadian artillery bastion around Potijze endured steady German counter-battery bombardment. By 27 April, 2nd Field Brigade was short three officers, fifty gunners, and eighty horses despite drawing men and animals from trained gunners serving in the brigade and divisional ammunition columns.<sup>68</sup>

On 29 April German heavy shells finally found their mark in the 8th Battery Left Section lines north of Potijze. Battery Sergeant-Major Noah Steeves was wounded. He wrote that evening from a field hospital about his experience. "I saw one strike fair on a gun of a another battery near us and part of the carriage flew [fifty] yards

<sup>67</sup> Slader, *From the Victorian Era to the Space Age*, 73-74.

<sup>68</sup> WD 2 Cdn Fd Bde, 27 April 1915.





Canadian Artillery loading an 18-pounder gun. [Library and Archives Canada PA 022712]

and came down fifteen feet from where I stood. The crew on that gun was badly cut up, three killed outright and three wounded. The Germans are still using the famous Jack Johnson shells [5.9-inch shell emitting black smoke]. Don't ever believe any of the yarns you hear or see in the papers about Germany being short of ammunition. They have both guns and men and ammunition." The 2nd Field Brigade's war diary recorded that day that "the enemy are superior to us in heavy guns and dominate our position with aeroplanes. We have no means of locating their batteries beyond the ridge which the enemy holds."<sup>69</sup> One Jack Johnson landed three feet behind Gunner Leslie Miller of Newcastle, New Brunswick. Five separate white hot shell splinters pierced his hips and the blast sprained his back, but Miller survived. Gunners Gorden Turner of Moncton and Fred Gunn of Chatham, New Brunswick were bringing up fresh rations to the gun positions when the fire came down. The blast tore Turner's hand off. The right side of Fred Gunn's torso was torn open just below his heart. Gunn was a trained machinist and employed by Major Anderson as the battery artificer. "He was the greatest help to me, could test all the sights, buffer range drum, and kept the guns in the best condition." Boyd Anderson wrote home that the team drivers "ran out and brought Fred in and told me he was badly wounded. I

<sup>69</sup> WD 2 Cdn Fd Bde, 29 April 1915.

could not go see him as I had gone through a lot there. On his way to the dressing station he told the men not to tell his mother or father how badly he was wounded." Fred Gunn died in a field hospital the next day.<sup>70</sup> That same day, 8th Battery's Right Section on the west side of Potijze experienced its "heaviest shelling thus far." Sergeant Grant was severely wounded. Lieutenant-Colonel Creelman himself was evacuated on 29 April with a high fever after too much exposure to gas and what he later self-described as shell-shock.<sup>71</sup>

On 1 May, Canada's Divisional Artillery got word to retire behind the Yser Canal where they could disperse batteries better. Their artillery fire base at Potijze had become too exposed to German shelling from three sides. Before the move commenced word came from the forward Indian and British infantry that the Germans were massing for something. The 8th Battery gunners joined a Canadian barrage against German forward assembly areas before commencing their withdrawal over the canal by sections. The withdrawal was half complete at 3:00 a.m. early in the morning of 2 May when the Germans released another massive chlorine gas cloud. German guns pummelled the Allied trenches and the Potijze artillery position with fire where the 2nd Field Brigade still had seven guns in action, including 8th Battery's Left Section. The 2nd Field Brigade gunners opened fire on SOS targets along the front, bursting shrapnel down on the attacking enemy infantry. The weight of German shot cut telephone connections to forward observation officers with the forward infantry. Signalmen working with the forward observation officers then acted as runners to carry target information back to the gun line. Quick-thinking British infantry in support trenches waited until the wind carried the gas cloud on to them and then charged through it to re-occupy the front trench. German attackers following the gas cloud were caught between British rifle bullets and Canadian shrapnel shell bursts. French 75 mm guns added their weight from the northern flank. General Alderson reported that the "attack was repulsed with heavy [German] loss in spite of a considerable portion

<sup>70</sup> Letter of 29 April from Noah Steeves, *Moncton Times*, 27 May 1915, 7; "Newcastle Man Among the Wounded," *Fredericton Daily Gleaner*, 20 May 1915, 6; "Gnr Dunn Died of Wounds," *Daily Gleaner*, 17 May 1915, 8; Letter from Major S.B. Anderson printed in *Moncton Times*, 7 July 1915, 6; Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers*, 162.

<sup>71</sup> WD 3 Cdn Fd Bde, 11th Battery Report, 30 April 1915.

of our front having been incapacitated by gas.” Gunners from all of the forward Canadian gun sections were among the gas casualties.<sup>72</sup>

On the day of this third major German gas attack on 2 May, Lieutenant Harvey Tingley and his telephone operator, Signaller Joseph Arthur Comeau, manned 8th Battery’s observation post in a house south of the main road between St. Jean and Wieltje along the crown of St. Jean Ridge. From that commanding location they called down 8th Battery’s guns on the northern wing of the German attack and their front line trench, 350 yards away from the house. All day the German barrage rained down around them, knocking down portions of the house they occupied. Tingley wrote afterwards that “Sig Comeau and I were sitting in a room in the back of the house downstairs. We were sitting close together—so close our elbows were touching. It was about 3 o’clock in the afternoon that we were struck. A shell burst through the top of the house, demolishing the roof and carrying away a portion of the front of the house.” Tingley’s leg was smashed. Comeau, formerly on the staff of the *Moncton Times*, was hit badly in the face and later died in an English hospital.<sup>73</sup> Despite these losses, the New Brunswick gunners had done their share to stop this third German gas attack at Ypres.

On the night of 3-4 May, the Canadian Divisional Artillery completed its move to well dispersed positions on the west bank of the Yser Canal, near Brielen. Although much better spread out, Canadian batteries remained under heavy German counter-battery fire.<sup>74</sup> The 8th Battery Right Section Sergeant Al Humphrey wrote home about the day to Mrs. Fletcher Polleys, mother of Ned Polleys of Moncton. Sergeant Humphrey’s crew served their gun under heavy German shellfire all day. “At about 4:30pm, several shells came very close to our guns and one pitched about ten or fifteen feet away.” After some time Ned Polleys called out, “Boys, I’m not hit, I’m paralyzed.” “He was lifted from the gun seat and placed beside the wheel. All medical aid possible was rendered but he passed within minutes.” As Humphreys explained to Mrs. Polleys, “The whole

<sup>72</sup> WD 2 Cdn Fd Bde, 1-2 May 1915; WD 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery Headquarters, 1-3 May 1915; “Operations: 2nd Battle of Ypres (General Alderson’s Report),” File 34 pt 1, LAC, RG 9 IIC3, Box 4017 (quoted).

<sup>73</sup> “Another local boy has given life to Empire” *Moncton Transcript*, 31 May, 8; interview with Lieutenant Tingley on his repatriation home, *Moncton Times*, 27 July 1915, 5.

<sup>74</sup> WD 3 Cdn Fd Bde, 4 May 1915.



Canadian Artillery hauling an 18-pounder gun into position. [Library and Archives Canada PA 022713]

battery, both officers and men, join me in expressing to you our most sincere regrets and deepest sympathy.”<sup>75</sup> Gunner Polleys was the last New Brunswick gunner to die in the Second Battle of Ypres. New Brunswick, and indeed all Canadian gunners with 1st Division, had much to be proud of. As much as they felt the effects of wicked German counter-battery fire, their own shrapnel shells broke or blunted nearly every enemy lunge forward behind all three German gas attacks against Ypres. Later in May, a flood of letters home from the front filled Canadians in about their little army’s stand east of Ypres as well as about the losses suffered. On 25 May 1915 citizens of Moncton and all over southeastern New Brunswick gathered at Bend View Square to remember the first four members of “Anderson’s Battery” killed during the Great War in what the papers called a “Solemn and impressive service in memory of Moncton’s fallen heroes.” Eleven other members of the battery were wounded in April and at least that many more again in the first week of May. “I know where all the Moncton boys are buried,” Major Anderson wrote to the

<sup>75</sup> Letter printed in *Moncton Transcript*, 29 May 1915, 7.

*Moncton Times*, “and made a mark on the map so that anyone can locate them should anything happen to me.”<sup>76</sup>

Combat during the first part of 1915 greatly influenced the development of the British—and Canadian—artillery, and not least the contribution of New Brunswick’s gunners. In June 1915 Lieutenant-Colonel Beverley Armstrong passed up the chain of command “an offer from the Officers, NCOs and Men of the 3rd Regiment, Canadian Garrison Artillery at Saint John to raise a battery for service at the front.” The unit was in fact dismayed at the manner in which its members had been dispersed in the first and second contingents. “The 3rd Regt., C.G.A., has responded nobly to the call of the Empire in N.C.O’s and men as well as officers; 534 enrolled or former N.C.O’s and men of the Corps have already enlisted with C.E.Fs. These men have joined every branch of the service and no unit that has yet gone has been identified with our Corps.” Armstrong noted that the 3rd Regiment, with its pre-war role in moveable fortress armament of both heavy and lighter calibre guns, could organise a field or heavy artillery unit, whatever was needed.<sup>77</sup>

That summer the 3rd Regiment continued to raise drafts intended to provide reinforcements for the heavy artillery overseas, but new requirements then opened the way for the contribution most closely associated with New Brunswick. The German advantage in heavy, long-ranged artillery in the battles of 1915 helped fuel a political crisis in Britain that resulted in the creation of a Ministry of Munitions for rapid expansion in the production of artillery weapons and ammunition. A leading priority was for “siege” guns and howitzers larger than the 60-pounders of the existing heavy artillery, including 6-inch, 8-inch and 9.2-inch howitzers, which fired shells of 100, 200, and 290 pounds respectively. In response to calls from the British War Office to recruit units to crew the new big guns, the 3rd Regiment raised two batteries, the 4th and 6th, among the nine siege batteries organised by Canada in the fall of 1915 to the spring of 1916. Later in 1916 the regiment established a depot siege battery on Partridge Island that recruited and trained more than 600 personnel who went

<sup>76</sup> Letter from Major S.B. Anderson printed in *Moncton Times*, 7 July 1915, 6.

<sup>77</sup> Armstrong to AAG, 6th Division, Halifax, 21 June 1915, File 131-1-4, LAC, RG 24, Box 4555.

overseas in 1917-18 to help expand the Canadian siege artillery to twelve batteries strengthened from four to six large howitzers each.<sup>78</sup>

The 3rd Regiment's coastal defence battery continued in service on Partridge Island until the end of the war, filling an important and unexpected new role in protecting the port of Saint John against German submarines that began to make transatlantic raids in late 1916. As young recruits in the coastal battery gained experience and reached the minimum age of nineteen for overseas service, they joined the depot siege battery, which in turn assisted the coastal battery in local defence when submarines were known to operating in Canadian waters. The 3rd Regiment thus provides a striking example of how in the First World War the militia garrison artillery fulfilled its traditional role of home defence, while making a signal contribution in meeting unheralded needs on the fighting front overseas.



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<sup>78</sup> Files 1065 and 1083, LAC, RG 9 IIB9, Box 47; File 1107, *ibid*, Box 48; File 1187, *ibid.*, Box. 49; File 1253, *ibid.*, Box. 51; File 1357, *ibid.*, Box 54.

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