



The Military History Society of Manitoba
134 Marion St. Winnipeg, MB R2H 0T1
www.mhsm.ca

June 2014

Editor's Message – Warren Otto

This newsletter is getting out much later than I anticipated for which I apologise. I won't take up too much time here because this issue is packed with interesting reading by David Grebstad, Ralph McLean and Bruce Tascona. Thank you for your contributions.

I will draw your attention to two items. Approximately ten days ago I received an inquiry from the Winnipeg Free Press looking for First World War memorabilia for a project they are working on. I will also draw your attention to the three Valour Road (Pine Street) VCs to appear at the Manitoba Museum 6 August – 14 November. Further details on both are below.

It is also membership renewal time. You will find the membership form at the end of this newsletter. Fees remain Individual: \$10 Canadian per year, Family: \$15 Canadian per year and Institutional: \$20 Canadian per year.

Wishing you all the best for the summer.

Report of the President – Bruce Tascona

The Annual General Meeting has come and gone on April 30, 2013. The Executive remains the same for another year.

This past winter saw some of the same challenges as the previous year. The Library continues to be developed and the Archives will still be the focus for the upcoming year. 2014 is turning out to be a year of commemoration:

70th Anniversary of D-Day Exhibit—Major Donations received at Legion House Museum
Two major donations were received from Mr. Winston Anders and Mrs. J Petrow. Mr. Anders donated two complete uniforms pertaining to the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion along with a drop panier and weapons.

Mrs Jeanette Petrow (member of the Norwood/St Boniface Legion Branch) donated her brother-in-law's medals and personal effects - Private M Petrow 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion. He was killed in action - jumped into Normandy with the Battalion and was later killed in 1945. He was also "Mentioned in Despatches".

Both of these donations will make this an exceptional exhibit for the upcoming 70th Anniversary of D-Day. It is almost complete will be ready for June 6, 2014. It should be

noted that the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion was organized and raised in Manitoba. The first jump school was organized at Camp Shilo in 1943.

Please watch for details because the year 2014 is the centennial year of the beginning of the Great War. The MHSM has been asked to participate in several events this year - by providing exhibits at the Austin Agricultural Museum 4 Day event. (July 2014). They also have been asked to participate in a Heritage Day at the Manitoba World War One Museum (August 2014).

In October 2014 the MHSM will again participate at the Camp Hughes Heritage Day.

The Road the Great War 1-3 May 2014 – Warren Otto

The Society, along with the Military Support Office and Summer Session at the University of Manitoba co-hosted a weekend symposium to commemorate the start of the Great War. Approximately 31 participants attended the event to listen as guest speakers shared their expertise of First World War issues. Dr. Martha Hanna of the University of Colorado at Boulder opened the event on 1 May with a book reading at McNally Robinson of *Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War*.

On 2 May Professor Terry Copp of Wilfrid Laurier University addressed *The Road to the Great War*, which touched on the reason for the start of the war and Canada's early response.

On 3 May everyone gathered for the day at the Norwood Hotel for the concluding day, Terry Copp continued his presentation from the previous evening, while Martha Hanna addressed her latest research on the motivations for married men who joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Dr. Monique Dumontet of the University of Manitoba examined narratives written between 1917 and 1939. The final presentation of the day was delivered by Captain Gordon Crossley who took participants through a sample day on the Western Front.

We hope to see more events such as this as we move through the next five years. The society would like to thank McNally Robinson for hosting Martha Hanna's presentation, the Norwood Legion for hosting Terry Copp's presentation and a very special thank you to Pam Darling for providing refreshments everyone enjoyed at the informal welcome gathering after Terry's session.



Terry Copp and MHSM President Bruce Tascona



Monique Dumontet

French Army Roots in Manitoba - Bruce Tascona

Recently the Manitoba World War One Museum acquired a French Army “Bleu Horizon Tunic and Coat” of the First World War. The tunic was found at a flea market type of shop east of Portage la Prairie. Where and how did these two artefacts find their way to this side of the ocean?



What I discovered was that there were significant numbers of volunteers of French origin who left their homesteads in Manitoba to join the French Army. In fact whole communities were settled in the 1890's who arrived directly from France, not Quebec as one would presume. Like British immigrants who arrived prior to the First War these French immigrants were regarded as Reservists of the French Army.

In our research we discovered there are two significant war memorials located in Manitoba dedicated to the Poilus of Manitoba who went back to rejoin their Units. In St. Boniface on the grounds of the Basilica is a monument of the Poilus—the bronze tablets indicate over 500 volunteers from Manitoba that went back to France of which many did not return.



St. Boniface War Memorial

The St. Claude War Memorial has a centre piece of Marshall Foch as well as a Canadian Statue and a Poilus. The originals who went over in 1914 and 1915 rejoined their Regiments. The younger villagers born in Canada after 1896 appear to have joined units of the CEF. There is no distinction on these monument's bronze tablets indicate whether the fallen were CEF or French Army. They reflect the somber memory of their fallen.



St. Claude War Memorial in rural Manitoba

In the St. Boniface Cemetery are a few Veterans Affairs Canada headstones with names of some of those who survived the Great War that add further proof of the legacy of these French army veterans.



The mystery of acquiring a French Army Uniform can now be explained with enough provenances to justify having this type of uniform on exhibit in the Manitoba World War One Museum. They are part of the Manitoban experience in the Great war 1914-19.

Lettres des Tranchées, Book Review - Bruce

Tascona

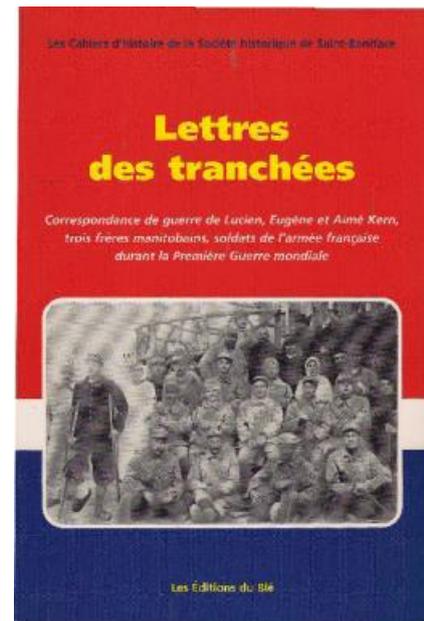
ISBN # 9782921347563

Les Editions du ble

Published 2007

<http://ble.recf.ca>

An account of three brothers who left St. Leon Manitoba in August 1914 to join the French Army—over three hundred letters were sent home to their mother and sisters—as well as some very descriptive letters that were published in the local provincial French Newspaper “La Liberte”. What struck the reviewer about this book was that little or no censorship was practiced by the French Army—unlike what is found in many letters in the Canadian Army. The Kern Brothers (Alsatian origin) were very motivated with revenge after the defeat 1870.



The original letters are found in the archives of St. Boniface Historical Society. The descriptions of trench warfare are almost poetic. The prime letter writer had a sense of history and wrote to ensure his life experiences were known to his friends and family. One brother was presumed missing and declared dead, the prime writer was wounded twice and was sent home to St. Leon Manitoba, while the third brother never returned to Canada. The prime letter writer Lucien Kern is buried in St. Leon—he died in 1920 of the Spanish Flu.

Today he rests in the cemetery of St. Leon—two ceramic plaques were added after this work was published in 2007.



Manitoba Museum to display war medals of Valour Road soldiers

Three decorated First World War veterans from Winnipeg’s West End will have their medals displayed in the Manitoba Museum this summer.

Corporal Leo Clarke, Sgt-Major Frederick William Hall and Lt. Robert Shankland were all awarded the Victoria Cross medal for their bravery and service nearly a century ago.



The medals will be on display in the foyer of Alloway Hall at the Manitoba Museum starting Aug. 6, a hundred years from when a state of war had been declared against Germany, and wrapping up Nov. 14 to coincide with Remembrance Week.

HMCS The Pas (K168) – Caribou Hide Souvenir – Ralph McLean

My usual collecting interest is with the Canadian Army Veterinary Corps. However from time to time I seek to procure items for my local home town Royal Canadian Legion. One day in November 2013, I simply typed “The Pas” into eBay to see what was available. Usually it is the odd postcard here and there, most of them I had already purchased for the local museum years ago, but nothing has ever popped up of significant interest to me in the last 10 years, but yet you can’t find it if you don’t look once in a while. Well I nearly fell out of my chair when I found an eBay listing describing “Town of The Pas beadwork crest on original caribou hide” and presented to:

**To Lieut. Commander E. G. Old, R.C.N.R.
H.M.C.S. “The Pas”
From the citizens of The Pas, Manitoba
The bead work on the Caribou skin was done by
Indians of Northern Manitoba**

I placed my bid immediately and waited like a kid counting down days before Christmas for the auction to end. I was the high bidder a week later! I couldn’t believe my luck! Strangely the item was located in the United Kingdom, but judging by the other listings the seller had, he was a collector on Indian artifacts. He knew nothing of its origin or how it came to be in the United Kingdom where he procured the item many years ago.

HMCS The Pas was a Flower-class corvette that served with the Royal Canadian Navy during the Second World War. She served primarily as an ocean escort in the Battle of the Atlantic and as a training ship. She was named for The Pas, Manitoba.

Flower-class corvettes like The Pas serving with the Royal Canadian Navy during the Second World War were different from earlier and more traditional sail-driven corvettes. The "corvette" designation was created by the French in for classes of small warships; the Royal Navy borrowed the term for a period but discontinued its use in 1877. During the hurried

preparations for war in the late 1930s, Winston Churchill reactivated the corvette class, needing a name for smaller ships used in an escort capacity, in this case based on a whaling ship design. The generic name "flower" was used to designate the class of these ships, which – in the Royal Navy – were named after flowering plants.

Corvettes commissioned by the Royal Canadian Navy during the Second World War were named after communities for the most part, to better represent the people who took part in building them. This idea was put forth by Admiral Percy W. Nelles. Sponsors were commonly associated with the community for which the ship was named. Royal Navy corvettes were designed as open sea escorts, while Canadian corvettes were developed for coastal auxiliary roles which were exemplified by their minesweeping gear. Eventually the Canadian corvettes would be modified to allow them to perform better on the open seas.

HMCS The Pas was ordered 1 February 1940 as part of the 1939–1940 Flower-class building program. She was laid down 7 January 1941 by Collingwood Shipyards Ltd. at Collingwood and launched 16 August 1941. She was commissioned into the RCN 21 October 1941 at Montreal, Quebec.

After arriving at Halifax for deployment, HMCS The Pas was initially assigned to Halifax Force as a local escort. In March 1942 she joined the Western Local Escort Force (WLEF). She remained with them until June when she was reassigned to the Halifax Tanker Escort Force, a unit that escorted oil tankers along the North American coast after the U-boat threat expanded there. In September 1942 she was placed under United States command as an escort for convoys between New York and Guantanamo.

After working up following her refit, HMCS The Pas returned to WLEF and in June 1943 was assigned to escort group W-4. She was badly damaged in a collision with SS Medina, a merchant ship, in the western Atlantic on 21 July 1943, resulting in three deaths, Petty Officers Herbert Draper and James Farnsworth and Engine Room Artificer Robert Patterson (all three named on the Halifax Memorial to the Missing). She did not return to service until the end of 1943. Upon her return she was assigned to WLEF again. In April 1944 she became a member of escort group W-3. She remained a member of that group until September 1944. In September 1944, The Pas departed for the shipyard, returning in November 1944. After workups she joined HMCS Cornwallis as a training ship in Halifax. She remained in this capacity until the end of the war. The Pas was paid off 24 July 1945 at Sorel, Quebec. She was sold for scrap and broken up at Hamilton, Ontario in 1946.

Commands listed for HMCS The Pas (K 168)

- 1) T/Lt.Cdr. Albert Robert Ernrest Coleman, RCNR - 3 October 1941 - 28 October 1941
- 2) T/A/Lt.Cdr. Ernest George Old, RCNR - 29 October 1941 - 19 January 1943
- 3) T/Lt.Cdr. John Hubert Smith MacDonal, RCNR - 20 January 1943 - 26 January 1943
- 4) T/A/Lt.Cdr. Ernest George Old, RCNR - 27 January 1943 - 14 April 1944
- 5) T/Lt. Roy Howard Sylvester, RCNVR - 15 April 1944 - 9 October 1944
- 6) T/Lt. John Hamilton Ewart, RCNVR - 10 October 1944 - 24 July 1945
- 7) T/Lt. C. L. Mofford, RCNVR is also listed as having served May – June 1945 but unconfirmed.

Of the seven commands of HMCS The Pas, E. G. Old held two of them and for the longest period. Ernest George Old's file has not been ordered through archives yet, but interest

searches have turned up nothing on him. The caribou skin has since been framed and will be presented to the RCL Branch #19 The Pas this summer. It is finally going home, 70 plus years later.



The Pas – Caribous Hide Souvenir



HMCS 'The Pas'

From the Winnipeg Free Press

With the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War looming closer the Winnipeg Free Press is still looking for any memorabilia Manitobans may have. When we first put the call out last month we didn't know what — if anything — was on peoples' walls or shelves, in closets or basements, or stored in safety deposit boxes.

Thankfully, we have found Winnipeggers and Manitobans do have many items from the war which wouldn't be called the First World War until the outbreak of the Second World War 21 years after the guns fell silent.

We're still looking for letters, uniforms or medals, or any other artifact picked up and brought back from the front which will help us create a series of stories commemorating the war later this year.

Email the Free Press at firstwar@freepress.mb.ca

Prairie Thunder Over Flanders' Fields: The Story of the 5TH Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery During the Great War - Major David W. Grebstad

In many ways, the Great War was a defining moment in Canadian history, particularly in regards to the evolution of the Canadian national identity. Much of that identity was forged by, and remains present in, the heritage of Canadian army regiments. The Canadian Army employs the regimental system in its structure, and while the Great War mobilization plan employed by the government under Minister of Militia and Defence Sam Hughes may have bastardized that system, much of the Canadian regimental identity emerged from that epic conflict. Proud Western Canadian regiments such as the Fort Garry Horse and the Royal Winnipeg Rifles either survived the battalion-based mobilization plan or were born of it.¹ They remain active today as symbols of Western Canada's proud military past.

The artillery units of the Canadian Army have not been as kindly treated by history. Lamentably, the heritage of the brigades and batteries of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery has too often gone unsung.² Whereas infantry and cavalry units, in the main, could be readily identified with a geographic locale, for example the 27th "City of Winnipeg" Battalion, Canadian field artillery brigades were often cobbled together from disparate batteries, and then consigned to historical obscurity upon demobilization. Perhaps this is because the exploits of the artillery are found to be, as Eminent Canadian Army historian Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson observed "less spectacular than that of some other arms, particularly the infantry."³ The aim of this paper is to attempt to remedy this in the case of a single field artillery brigade with links to Western Canada, and Manitoba in particular. What follows is a short review of the Great War history of the 5th Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery (CFA).

The Boys of the 5th Brigade

Just lads from the farms and boys from the cities... Not meant to be soldiers we lay in the trenches... We'd face the fighting with a smile - or so we said... If only we had known what danger lay ahead.- Bryan Adams, "Remembrance Day."

Who were the Western Canadian boys that made up the 5th Brigade? At the outbreak of the war, Canada's original contribution to the imperial war effort was a single division. Ignoring painfully assembled mobilization plans, Sam Hughes decided to create the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) out of completely new units, comprised of recruitment quotas provided by existing Militia regiments.⁴ In modern parlance, the force generation was to be conducted by the longstanding Militia regiments, while the force employment was to be conducted by an ad hoc CEF. To the disappointment of the Western Canadian regiments, the Militia divisions of Eastern Canada would generate

the majority of the personnel for the CEF when the 1st Canadian Division was mobilized.⁵ The first contingent assembled at Valcartier, Quebec to train and mesh as a division, and then shipped out to the front via the United Kingdom. As the 1st Canadian Division arrived in France, the Canadian Government offered a second division for service – an offer that was readily accepted by the War Office in London. Shortly thereafter, the order went out to Western Canadian regiments to begin recruiting for the 2nd Canadian Division. The division was to have a full complement of divisional support troops such as engineers and artillery. On 4 November 1914 the Militia Council authorized the recruiting of the 2nd Canadian Divisional Artillery.⁶

The 5th Brigade, CFA was the first artillery brigade to be recruited in Western Canada for overseas service. It was grouped with its sister brigades, the 4th, 6th and, 7th Brigades, CFA, to form the 2nd Canadian Divisional Artillery.⁷ For the remainder of the war, 5th Brigade and the remainder of the 2nd Canadian Divisional Artillery would support the 2nd Canadian Division.

As the decision to send the 2nd Canadian Division was taken in the fall, and Valcartier lacked sufficient winter quarters for an entire division's worth of soldiers, the units and formations of the division were authorized to conduct decentralized training at their points of muster. The four western batteries of the 5th Brigade: the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th Batteries, were ordered to assemble in Winnipeg. These four batteries gave the 5th Brigade its western ambience. All four were created specifically for the CEF, but each was recruited from an existing independent Militia battery of Western Canada.⁸

The 17th and 19th Batteries were recruited from the 13th (Winnipeg) Independent Field Battery, the oldest artillery battery in Western Canada. It was first authorized on 13 October, 1871 in Militia General Order number 22 as "a Field Battery of Artillery at Winnipeg".⁹ The Winnipeg Field Battery has a storied history.¹⁰ It was dispatched to Rat Portage (now called Kenora, Ontario) like a private army of the Province of Manitoba during the border dispute with Ontario in 1883¹¹: it participated in the North West Rebellion in 1885; and it provided a gun section for 'C' Battery as part of the Brigade Division, Royal Canadian Artillery in the Boer War.¹² At the outbreak of the Great War, although disappointed that most of the recruits for the 1st Division were coming from Eastern Canada, the 13th (Winnipeg) Independent Field Battery nonetheless provided a quota of 50 men for the 1st Canadian Divisional Artillery.¹³ For the 2nd Division, the battery provided enough men for both the 17th and 19th Batteries, as well as the Brigade Ammunition Column.¹⁴ Additionally, the man who had commanded the Winnipeg Field Battery since 1900, Lieutenant-Colonel Ducharme, became the 5th Brigade's First Commanding Officer.¹⁵

The 18th Battery was recruited from the 26th Independent Field Battery in Regina, Saskatchewan.¹⁶ The 26th Battery was the youngest of the three independent batteries, created only in 1912. Further west, the 20th Battery was recruited from the 25th Independent Field Battery in Lethbridge, Alberta, with some recruits coming from Edmonton and Calgary as well.¹⁷ Created in 1908, Lethbridge was chosen as the site of the new battery by none other than the indefatigable Sam Steele, the first commander of Militia District 13 (Alberta and the territory of Mackenzie), who concluded that the area would have no shortage of good horses and good cowboys and was therefore the perfect locale from which to recruit gunners.¹⁸

Training in Canada

The first step was to allow the disparate batteries to gel as a unit. 5th Brigade, less 20th Battery which trained in Lethbridge, assembled in Winnipeg and was initially quartered at McFadden Barracks, on the corner of Sherbrooke and Portage, where Lions Manor stands today.¹⁹ The quarters were particularly tight, and unsuited for holding the number of soldiers belonging to the brigade. Consequently, the brigade moved to the Exhibition Grounds where there was far more billeting room and, more importantly, sufficient stabling and space for mounted training. The 5th Brigade was particularly meticulous about selecting its horses and it was said that it had the finest mounts of any artillery unit in the CEF. The horses were selected from over 10,000 remounts and the 5th Brigade went to great ends to follow a strict colour scheme – using different coloured horses for each battery to help differentiate them.²⁰ The magnificent black mounts that were employed by the 19th Battery earned it the nickname “The Black Battery.” The brigade followed this practice until rising horse casualties during combat made it impractical.²¹ The war horses that served the guns were to suffer greatly on the fields of France and Belgium.

The brigade trained at the Exhibition Grounds for only a few months, and by early June moved to Camp Sewell to complete pre-deployment training. Camp Sewell was established in 1910 on Crown and Hudson Bay Company land north - west of Carberry as a training ground for local Militia units.²² The camp was renamed Camp Hughes after the Minister of Militia and Defence in September 1915.²³ It remained a training ground well past the end of the Great War, until the training site was moved fifteen miles south - west to Camp (later Canadian Forces Base) Shilo, in 1933.²⁴

In June, Lieutenant-Colonel Carruthers took over command of the brigade from Lieutenant-Colonel Ducharme, and later that month the 5th Brigade was joined by the last of its four batteries when Alberta’s 20th Battery arrived in camp. For the remainder of the summer, the brigade went through an intensive period of training, focussing on mounted manoeuvres. The primary gun of British and Commonwealth field artillery was the 18-pounder, so named due to the weight of its projectile. Almost all of Canada’s complement of 18-pounder guns was in use by the artillery of the 1st Canadian Division. Consequently, the 5th Brigade was forced to train on obsolete 12-pounder cannon.²⁵ By August the brigade was ready for deployment overseas. Before the camp could be christened in honour of the mercurial minister, the brigade mounted Canadian Pacific

Railway cars and headed east for Halifax on 5 August, arriving there four days later. The next day the brigade loaded on the RMS Metagama and sailed for the United Kingdom. One can only surmise the other - worldly feelings experienced by the young prairie boys as they were tossed about the waves in cramped quarters, enduring a monotonous shipboard life with the constant threat of German U-boat attack. Fortunately, the crossing was uneventful and on 18 August over 500 of Western Canada’s finest sons stepped off their vessel onto the pier at Plymouth.

Training in England

The brigade disembarked at Plymouth and then made their way to Otterpool Army Camp situated in Kent in the South-East of England. Here they would spend much of their time before heading to the front lines. A review of the 5th Brigade’s War Diary shows that the time spent in Otterpool followed a cyclical pattern of life – dismounted drills, mounted drills, horses exercised, church parade, half holiday, repeat. As cyclical as the programme was, it was also progressive. The War Diary describes a gradual increase in the pace and flavour of the training, even though the brigade still did not have its full complement of 18-pounder

guns. On 1 September the brigade welcomed another Commanding Officer, the third of its young life, when Lieutenant-Colonel Dodds took command.

The monotony of repetitive training was broken by tragedy. 5th Brigade suffered its first casualties from enemy action before it even crossed the English Channel. On 13 October the 5th Brigade became the target of what was referred to as the “Theatreland Raid” when a fleet of five Zeppelin airships attacked Southern England. Of the five airships, one got lost over the North Sea and three others bombed targets in London’s theatre district.²⁶ The last of the five airships, L-14 commanded by Kaptain Alois Bocker, drifted off course and found itself over Otterpool. At 9:05 PM the alarm was received from the 8th (Howitzer) Brigade, encamped near the 5th Brigade, of an approaching airship. “Lights Out” was ordered but a number of bombs were dropped around 5th Brigade and the formations near it. Four bombs struck 5th Brigade – one landing outside the lines, a second in the North-West corner of the camp, the third in the horse lines of the headquarters staff and the fourth in the 17th Battery lines. All bombs exploded, each leaving a twelve foot hole that was five feet deep. An anonymous first-hand account related that:

Only a few seconds elapsed, then a blinding flash and a frightful roar sounded just behind our stables, 300 yards away. In quick succession four more followed. I stood about 120 yards from where the bomb fell. I heard it sing as it fell through the air. I will never describe the scene. It was terrible. Then we heard the hum of engines, and all that was left to see were five pillars of black smoke standing ghostlike in the yellow fog.²⁷

One Non-Commissioned Officer and twelve men were killed and six other men were wounded, one of whom died two days later in hospital. Additionally, sixteen horses were killed, and three wounded.²⁸ The 5th Brigade had become one of the first victims of a revolution in military affairs that emerged during the Great War – strategic bombing.

A month later the brigade moved from Otterpool to Napier Barracks in Folkestone on the English coast, not far from Dover. The move to Folkestone was executed flawlessly, however the Medical Officer was disgusted to find the barracks the brigade were occupying to be in a “filthy condition.”²⁹ A week later, six 18-pounder guns were received by the brigade thus completing its complement of sixteen 18-pounder guns.³⁰

At mid-December the brigade received orders to proceed to Larkhill, on Salisbury Plain, to conduct advanced training. Surely the men of the brigade could sense their time to cross the channel was drawing near. The 2nd Canadian Division had crossed the channel in September, 1915 with only the 4th Brigade, CFA in support. Due to the lack of 18-pounder guns the 5th Brigade had been forced to delay their departure. Now that the 5th Brigade had received its full complement of guns and was prepared for one last surge of training, most of the Western Canadian gunners must have suspected the time for deployment was nigh. The training in Larkhill went exceptionally well. The Inspector, Royal Horse and Field Artillery, Brigadier-General B.F. Drake, stated that the 2nd Divisional Artillery was “the best Divisional Artillery [he had] seen on Salisbury Plain” that year.³¹ Of the 5th Brigade he observed that “Lieut-Colonel Dodds is a very good Brigade Commander. The batteries move and drill well, and are well horsed. I was particularly struck with the horses of the 19th Battery commanded by Lieut-Colonel Carruthers. The Battery Commanders are all satisfactory.”³² The professionalism of these officers was soon to be tested in the crucible of combat.

To France

The 5th Brigade crossed the channel in the third week of January, 1916, disembarking at Havre on 20 January. The brigade spent the next ten days familiarizing itself with its surroundings and getting all of its gear organized. On 30 January it received its first orders to proceed into combat by relieving the 2nd Brigade, CFA. This was accomplished on 5 February and the next day the brigade fired its first rounds in anger. The War Diary recorded that “Infantry at trenches C1 and C2 called for artillery fire at 10 AM and 20th Battery fired 50 rounds shrapnel and [High Explosive] at ONTARIO FARM [the code name of a target].”³³ Fifteen months had passed since the Militia Council had authorized the creation of the 2nd Divisional Artillery and finally the 5th Brigade was in the fight. It was a fight that was to go on for another thirty-three months before peace would return to Europe.

During those thirty-three months, the 5th Brigade took part in a large number of actions. While its War Diary entries in England reflect the monotony of constant training, the entries after February 1916 reflect the constant stress of combat in an eerily detached manner. Simple, almost clinical entries such as this of 14 September: “17th Battery position heavily shelled with 5.9-inch, 2 casualties” belies the confusion, terror and anxiety that must have accompanied the event.

The actions in which the brigade participated are too numerous to fully investigate here. Suffice to say 5th Brigade was involved in every action of the 2nd Canadian Division and most of those of the Canadian Corps until the end of the war. To understand the hardships and challenges that the men of the 5th Brigade had to endure, the Battle of the Somme and the assault on Vimy Ridge serve as excellent examples.

The Somme

If horses have sufficient brain-power, even they must have hoped and hoped sincerely never to see again this section of the world. - Brigade Historian, 5th Brigade CFA on leaving the Somme.

The Canadian involvement in the Battle of the Somme occurred quite late in the game. The Battle of the Somme, which has developed a certain infamy, was larger than its title suggests, and comprised several smaller battles. In this the Somme was more like a campaign begun on 1 July 1916 and ending sometime in October 1916. The Canadian Corps' entrance to the battle occurred on 30 August when they relieved the Australian-New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) near Pozieres. General Byng, the British commander of the Canadian Corps, assumed command of the sector on 3 September. The Canadian Corps' first action as part of the Battle of the Somme occurred shortly thereafter during the Battle of Flers-Courcelette on 15 September.³⁴

The 5th Brigade went into the Battle of the Somme with a slightly different organization. At the end of 1915 the Royal Artillery made a sweeping change in the organization of its field artillery in order to develop a common composition throughout the army, a reorganization adopted by the Canadian Army. Starting in January 1916 Canadian field brigades would consist of three four-gun field batteries employing 18-pounders and a single four-gun howitzer battery manning 4.5 inch howitzers.³⁵ This necessitated the shuffling of batteries and the 19th Battery – sister to the 17th Battery, born of the 13th (Winnipeg) Independent Field Battery and renowned for its beautiful horses – was transferred to the 4th Brigade, CFA while the 23rd (Howitzer) Battery joined the 5th Brigade. This change came into effect on 22 May

1916.³⁶ Happily for the 5th Brigade, batteries of the 4th Brigade were distributed to the other brigades to bolster them during the Somme operations and the 19th Battery returned to its old brigade brethren for the fight.³⁷

The 5th Brigade arrived in the area of operations over 9-10 September, relieving the 5th Brigade, Royal Field Artillery (UK).³⁸ To compound the confusion, on 11 September the Commanding Officer of the 5th Brigade, Lieutenant-Colonel Dodds, was replaced by Major Britton to allow the former to proceed to the UK for promotion and employment in a training command.³⁹ On 15 September the brigade opened fire with a creeping barrage – a tactical innovation of the First World War whereby a constant line of fire is lifted several hundred yards every few minutes coinciding, hopefully, with the rate of advance of the infantry and thus suppressing the enemy until the infantry arrives at the objective. The Battle of Flers-Courcelette, the Canadian chapter in the Somme story, represented the first time Canadian gunners had used this novel approach to warfighting.⁴⁰ From that point on, the brigade's War Diary tells the story of a constant artillery duel that lasted for months. Almost every daily entry between 15 September and 29 November begins with the words "enemy shelling heavy" although it would wax and wane from "heavy", to "normal", and to the rare but occasional, "quiet." Months of continuous artillery fire in support of raids, attacks, defensive action and as part of an artillery duel with their German counterparts were costly and exhausting. By November when the brigade was relieved the brigade historian observed that never was a relief "so absolute in every sense of the word."⁴¹ Reflecting the pride that the brigade held in its horses, a vain but courageous effort was made to clean up the mounts upon receipt of the order to be relieved.⁴² The mud was so bad, up to fourteen inches in some parts, guns of both the 20th and 23rd (Howitzer) Batteries had to be left in position and handed over to the relieving units, the 260th Brigade, Royal Field Artillery (UK).⁴³

Vimy Ridge

Five months after the 5th Brigade rode its muddy, and in some cases gun-less, caissons out of the Somme, the Western Canadian gunners would participate in what is the most celebrated feat of Canadian arms during the Great War – the assault on Vimy Ridge.

In those five months the guns of the brigade were rarely silent, exchanging rounds with the enemy on a regular basis. In March 1917 the Canadian artillery underwent yet another re-organization in an effort to conform to British doctrinal changes. Due to the high number of casualties inflicted during the Somme offensive, the British suffered a significant shortage of experienced battery commanders. Consequently, batteries were changed from four- to six-guns and the number of brigades in a divisional artillery reduced from four to three, each still comprising three 18-pounder batteries and one 4.5-inch howitzer battery. Unfortunately, the 7th Brigade drew the short straw and was removed from the order of battle of 2nd Canadian Divisional Artillery, its gun crews and equipment being distributed amongst the 4th, 5th and 6th Brigades.⁴⁴

For the 5th Brigade, the assault on Vimy started when it moved into the line near Mt. St. Eloi on 17 February. On 19 February the brigade commenced the digging of 54 gun pits and hauling 54,000 rounds of ammunition that had been dropped on the position for use in the upcoming assault.⁴⁵ The brigade started eating into that allocation two days later when it engaged trench works, an ammunition dump, dugouts and a German observation post.⁴⁶ Firing continued on a daily and nightly basis. A month from zero-day (the day the assault was scheduled to commence) the brigade moved into battery positions closer to the line of departure, near the ironically-named village of La Targette.

Preparations continued and the Corps fire plan that was devised to blast the Germans into submission kicked off about two weeks prior to the launching of the assault. The 5th Brigade War Diary captures the hard work that this entailed as the Canadian artillery unleashed an unprecedented volume of fire on the German lines. Moreover the following passage relates the terrible toll the work took on the horses of the 5th Brigade:

From zero-13 to zero day the [brigade] fired 45,320 rounds 18-pounder, and 11,003 rounds 4.5 Howitzer. A further 18,000 rounds being expended to cover the assault on zero day, and a reserve of some 12,000 kept in hand for counter attacks. This was all hauled by our own horses from dumps in vicinity Grand Servins and Camblain L'Abbe. At the same time teams were bringing up material to make pits strong enough to keep guns in action. This long haul of 9 miles each way was very hard on horseflesh and despite greatest attention all horses lost condition and many died.⁴⁷

The story of the assault on Vimy Ridge is well known and need not be repeated in detail here. Suffice to say on that cold Easter morning, twenty-thousand of Canada's sons crawled out of trenches and tunnels and launched themselves through the muck and mud of no-man's-land under the reverberating crescendo of 983 artillery pieces –twenty-four of which belonged to the 5th Brigade, CFA.⁴⁸ The attack was a success. In a matter of hours all four of Canada's divisions were on top of the ridge. The infantry soon outdistanced their supporting guns, requiring the Canadian batteries to displace forward in order to continue to provide fire support. Doing so was nearly impossible. A third of the 5th Brigade ended up stuck in the mud and many horses were lost in shell holes. A fresh snow fell the evening of 11 April and as a result twenty horses died from exposure and exhaustion.⁴⁹ Eventually the 5th Brigade got through to the new positions, and in an ironic twist, put several captured German guns to work. The 17th and 23rd (Howitzer) Batteries supplied crews to man three captured German guns: a 77-millimeter cannon, and a 4.2-inch and 5.9-inch howitzer, firing them at the retreating enemy. On 17 April the Germans finally put the 5.9-inch howitzer out of action by firing their own 8-inch heavy artillery at it, but not before the Western Gunners could fire 400 rounds of captured 5.9-inch howitzer ordnance at its previous owner.⁵⁰ The Canadian Corps consolidated on Vimy Ridge and in the process established one of the most defining moments of the evolution of the Canadian identity. The gunners of the 5th Brigade, CFA were a key element in that victory.

To the Armistice

When Canadian soldiers looked over the Douai Plain from the crest of Vimy Ridge there was still nineteen months of fighting left to come. Much blood remained to be shed before the guns would fall silent. Shortly after the victory at Vimy Ridge the 5th Brigade was handed a profound blow when a German 5.9-inch howitzer round landed square on the brigade headquarters. The Commanding Officer and the Battery Commander of 20th Battery were killed instantly.⁵¹ As paralyzing an event as this was, there was no time to pause. Major C.F. Constantine took over command of the brigade that night, and the next day the war continued as usual.

5th Brigade would continue to support the 2nd Division, but the German Army had one last offensive thrust left in it. In March 1918 the German Army launched their last great hope, a massive assault of 76 divisions against 28 British divisions, in an effort to separate the British and French forces and drive through to the North Sea.⁵² The Canadian Corps avoided the brunt of the attack, although, now under command of General Sir Arthur Currie, it would extend its line and from time to time detach a division to bolster the British.⁵³ In mid-May

1918 the Corps would move into reserve, leaving only one division in the line. A principal of employing artillery is that artillery is never held in reserve, so while the majority of the Corps went into reserve to rest, there was no rest for the 5th Brigade. From 27 March until 1 July the 2nd Canadian Divisional Artillery was tasked to support the British 6th Corps in its desperate struggle to hold the line against the German onslaught. The Corps Commander, Lieutenant-General JAL Haldane followed a policy of constant harassment of the Germans. This resulted in an incredible work schedule for the gunners of 5th Brigade who were constantly firing harassing and defensive fire missions against the Germans, thus becoming prime targets for German retaliation. So dire were the circumstances, the British detached three field artillery brigades to the 2nd Canadian Divisional Artillery – one of which was put under command of 5th Brigade to bolster its firepower.⁵⁴

The collapse of the German offensive signalled the beginning of the end.⁵⁵ The German Army had shot its bolt and failed. On 29 July General Currie informed his subordinates that the Canadian Corps would be going on the offensive. What followed has become known to history as The Last Hundred Days and represented the final offensive against the faltering German Army, with the Canadian Corps often being the tip of the spear.⁵⁶ Throughout this period the 5th Brigade continued to provide support to the 2nd Canadian Division right up to the Canadian Corps' drive to the Belgian border city of Mons in the last days of the war. In the fight for Mons, the brigade's horses suffered what, in retrospect, was an appallingly unnecessary loss. During the night of 9/10 November a marauding German aircraft bombed the 20th Battery's wagon lines. Eleven horses were killed and thirty-two wounded less than a day and a half from the end of the war.⁵⁷ The next day, the Winnipeggers of the 17th Battery would claim the honour of firing the last rounds of the war for the 2nd Divisional Artillery during a barrage in support of the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade south of Mons.⁵⁸ Twenty-four hours later, the Great War came to an end.

Conclusion

This article aims to redress the lamentable historical obscurity of Western Canada's Great War gunners by giving voice to several hundred prairie boys who served the guns on the Western Front. This is not to disparage the efforts of the infantry and cavalry regiments who are usually the focus of Great War histories; their bravery and sacrifice have earned them their place of honour in history. While the artillerymen of the 5th Brigade, CFA did not, with only few exceptions, have to live with the day to day exposure of close quarter battle, their lot was demanding in its own right. The constant threat of counter-bombardment; the endless hours of manhandling tons of ammunition over muddy, crater-filled ground; the drawn-out periods of mundane repetitive action at the gun as barrages were fired for hours at a time, all speak to the physical and mental strain these men endured. The sons of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta that rallied to the colours of the 5th Brigade, CFA served both their nation and their region well. By the end of the war, rising casualties and a centralized replacement pool diluted the homogeneity of the prairie artillery brigade, but it could not erase the Western Canadian DNA that had created it. The 5th Brigade returned to Canada in 1919, its batteries were demobilized in May of that year, and on 1 November 1920 General Order number 191 officially disbanded the 5th Brigade, CFA. The prairie thunder that had reverberated over Flanders Fields came from the guns of the 5th Brigade and heralded a new destiny for the young Dominion. The story of these prairie gunners has too long gone unnoticed and all Canadians, Western Canadians in particular, would do well to remember the service and sacrifice of the boys of the 5th Brigade, CFA.

End Notes

- 1 The Canadian Expeditionary Force was based on numbered battalions that, in many cases, ignored the regimental history of the units that provided the recruits.
- 2 During the First World War artillery brigades were unit-sized organizations akin to infantry battalions. Batteries were sub-units of brigades. Today, artillery brigades are known as artillery regiments. The term battery has remained in use.
- 3 Colonel G.W. L. Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada: The History of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery Volume 1, 1534-1919* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Limited, 1967), 389.
- 4 Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War: Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919*, (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1962), 14. A mobilization plan was drawn up that would have sent Canadian Militia regiments overseas as homogenous units. The Minister of Militia Sam Hughes, a Militiaman himself, overruled the mobilization plan and used one of his own devising.
- 5 Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada...*, 193.
- 6 *Ibid*, 236.
- 7 *Ibid*, 236.
- 8 While most Militia batteries of Eastern Canada had been brigaded years before, the three Militia batteries that provided the men for the 5th Brigade were left as independent batteries, lacking a brigade headquarters to command, train or administer them.
- 9 "Militia General Orders (22)" in *The Canada Gazette*, dated 14 October 1871.
- 10 The Winnipeg Field Battery still exists as a Primary Reserve battery – the 13th Battery – in Portage la Prairie. It is currently one of the sub-units of 26th Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery that is headquartered in Brandon.
- 11 Winnipeg Police Service Website, "The Rat Portage War" last accessed 25 July 2013, <http://winnipeg.ca/police/history/story13.stm>.
- 12 Government of Canada, *Canadians in Khaki, South Africa 1899-1900*, (Montreal: Herald Publishing, 1900), 80-83.
- 13 Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada...*, 238.
- 14 The Brigade Ammunition Column was akin to what a modern artillery regiment would term a Headquarters and Services Battery, responsible for the resupply of the field batteries.
- 15 Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada...*, 238.
- 16 Library and Archives Canada, "Guide to Sources Relating to Units of the Canadian Expeditionary Force: Artillery", last accessed 25 July 2013, <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/005/f2/005-1142.29.001-e.pdf>, 34.
- 17 *Ibid*, 36.
- 18 *Ibid*, 179, 238.
- 19 War Diary (WD), 15 January 1915. This same location was also known as the Deaf and Dumb Institute.
- 20 Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada...*, 238.
- 21 *Ibid*, 238.
- 22 Military History Society of Manitoba, "Camp Hughes," last accessed 21 July 2013, http://www.mhsm.ca/Joomla/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=52&Itemid=63,
- 23 *Ibid*.
- 24 *Ibid*.
- 25 Nicholson, *Official History...*, 110.
- 26 Sean Chase, "Zeppelins Raided Otterpool Camp one crisp fall night." *Daily Observer*, 5 November, 2009.
- 27 *Ibid*.
- 28 WD, 13 October 1915.
- 29 WD, 18 November 1915.
- 30 WD, 24 November 1915.
- 31 War Diary, 2nd Canadian Divisional Artillery, Annex to January 1916.
- 32 *Ibid*.
- 33 WD, 6 February, 1916.
- 34 Nicholson, *Official History...*, 166-167.
- 35 Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada...*, 251.
- 36 WD, 22 May 1916.
- 37 WD, 2nd Canadian Divisional Artillery Operation Order, No. 67 dated 8 September 1916.
- 38 WD, 9-10 September 1916.
- 39 WD, 11 September 1916.
- 40 Nicholson, *Official History...*, 167.
- 41 Nicholson, *Gunners of Canada...*, 272.
- 42 *Ibid*, 272.
- 43 WD, 26 November 1916.
- 44 Nicholson, *Gunners of Canada...*, 276.
- 45 WD, 19 February 1917.
- 46 WD, 21 February 1917.
- 47 WD 8 April, 1917.
- 48 Pierre Berton, *Vimy* (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2001), 14-15.
- 49 WD, 11 April 1917.
- 50 WD, 17 April 1917.
- 51 Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada...*, 289.
- 52 *Ibid*, 324.
- 53 *Ibid*, 330.
- 54 *Ibid*, 330.
- 55 *Ibid*, 335.
- 56 John Keegan, *The First World War*, (London: Hutchinson, 1998), 410.
- 57 WD, 9 November 1918.
- 58 Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada...*, 371.

About the Author

Major David W. Grebstad is a serving artillery officer currently employed in the 4th Canadian Division Headquarters in Toronto, ON. He was born in Dryden, ON and is a graduate of the University of Manitoba (BA, History '96), the University of New Brunswick (MA, History, '12) and Royal Military College of Canada (MDS, '13) as well as the Canadian Army Command and Staff College and the Canadian Forces College – Joint Command and Staff Program. He lives with his wife, Colleen, and their two energetic dogs in Etobicoke, ON.



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