

ONWARD: THE KING'S OWN CALGARY REGIMENT IN PEACE AND WAR, 1910-1960

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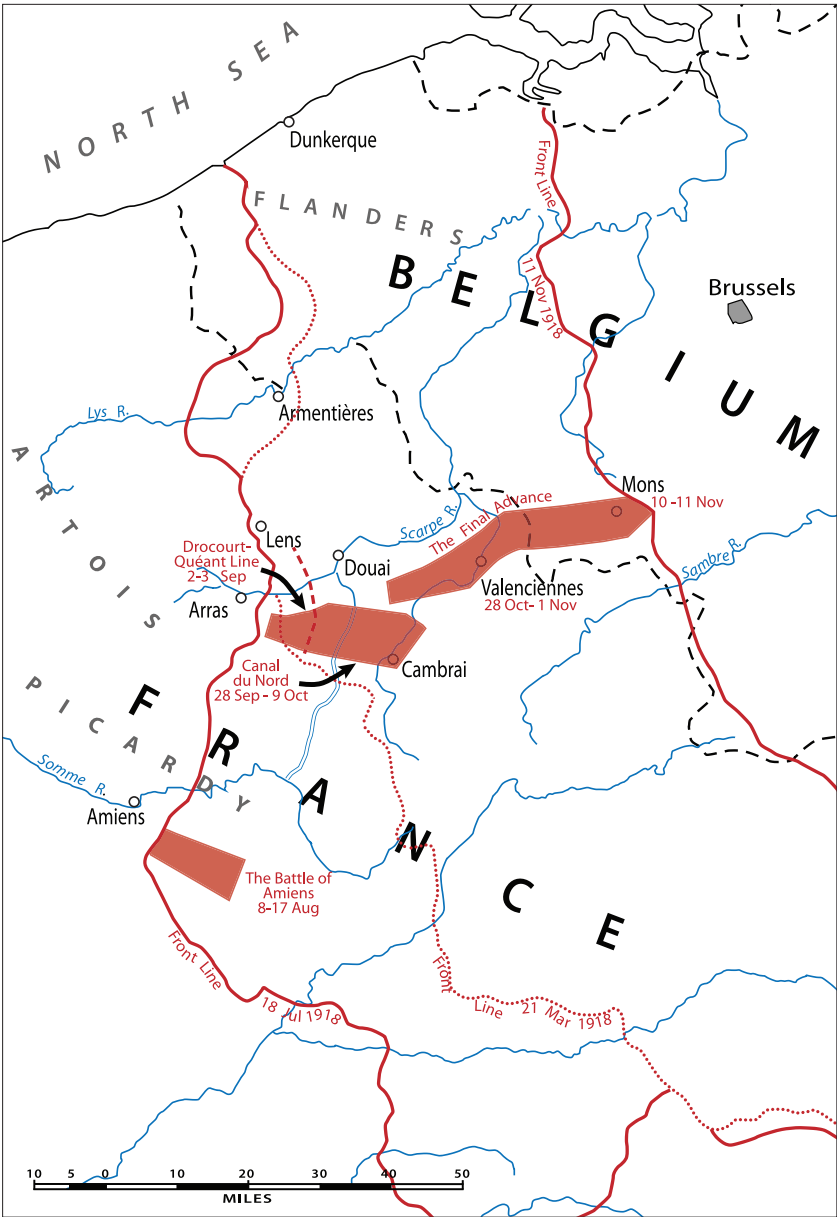
The Hundred Days and Home

Tout le monde à la bataille

On July 18, Gen. Charles Mangin's troops launched a powerful counterattack on the German salient between Soissons and Reims, ground only recently seized by the Germans. Achieving complete surprise, the French and American troops won a stunning victory. For Marshall Ferdinand Foch, the Allied Supreme Commander, Soissons confirmed that the German Army, despite its stunning spring advances, was dangerously overextended and vulnerable. Now was the time to launch a succession of short, sharp offensives aimed at strategically vital objectives the German Army would have to defend, continually bleeding its manpower until, with any luck, it would collapse.¹ It was in these operations that the Canadian Corps and 50th Battalion would play a central role.

Setting the Table for Amiens

As the fierce struggle around Soissons entered its third day, far to the north Lt.-Gen. Currie was confidentially briefed on immediate plans for his forces. Only on July 29 did he inform his senior subordinates that the Corps would immediately shift south to participate in "a *real* big show," as an excited Maj.-Gen. Watson noted in his diary that evening.² Commencing on August 8, General Henry Rawlinson's Fourth Army would attack east and southeast of Amiens (a crucial logistical hub for the entire BEF) in the general direction of Roye, driving the Germans back from the vital Paris–Amiens railway line. From north to south, Rawlinson would deploy the British III Corps, the Australian Corps and the Canadian Corps, with Gén. Debeney's French First Army protecting the latter's southern flank. The other troops were already in the area, but the challenge would be shifting Currie's more than 100,000-strong force and its arms and supplies undetected from Arras to their assembly area immediately southwest of Amiens—some 75 kms—without alerting the enemy. While the logistical challenges were resolved, various wireless and other deceptions persuaded German Army intelligence that the Canadians had stayed put. Secrecy



MAP 4:
Canadian Operations in France and Belgium, 1918.

ensured surprise, reduced casualties, and heightened prospects of success, but there were risks. As one Canadian brigadier later fumed, battalion and company commanders hardly had time to look at their maps.³

After Currie's army reached the general area west of Amiens, the various units began marching—always at night—to assembly points behind the front-line positions they would take over from the Australians. Fortunately much of the area was treed, enabling men and machines to remain under cover during the daytime. Moving up munitions and artillery was more difficult, the few roads getting hopelessly congested with horse-drawn and motorized transport. The RAF generally swept the skies clear of German reconnaissance aircraft, while low-flying planes tried to drown out the din made by over 500 tanks.⁴ Having no chance to register their pieces, gunners would rely on firing off-the-map. As usual, the British provided much of the field and the bulk of the heavy artillery for the Dominion corps as well as their own. Some 2,000 guns of all calibres had been allocated to either barrage work or counter-battery fire. In the event, Currie's men did not take over their attacking positions until the night of August 7–8, only a few hours before zero hour, scheduled for 0400. Successful completion of the preparatory phase for a major battle in barely a week was an extraordinary accomplishment by staffs who worked under stringent time constraints and oppressive secrecy. The outcome now rested with the courage and skill of the infantry.⁵

The 50th Moves Up

The transfer of the 50th Battalion into position commenced on August 1 and took a week, some of it by bus and train, but much by night marches that disrupted their sleep, leaving them “a very tired battalion.”⁶ During the days, the men checked their weapons and other gear, honed their bayonets, and generally completed the timeless rituals of soldiers preparing for action. After a few days, Page visited each company in turn, reminding them all in the most general way about the “possibility of active operations in the near future.”⁷ On the morning of August 5 most of the 50th's transport, which had come by road the entire way, rejoined the battalion. Another night march took them south of Amiens to Pissy. Private Charles Oke remembered the ruined villages they passed though that night, the constant and ominous rumbling of artillery fire to the east, and the searchlight beams magically dancing above Amiens—the latter entrancing his comrades. They were served their breakfast at 0100 and told to “have a good rest until noon,” as welcome an order as they could have heard.⁸

Early in the afternoon of August 6, Brig. Hayter and his chief of staff, Lt.-Col. Édouard Panet, were finally able to brief the dozen battalion commanders on the forthcoming attack and their specific assignments.⁹ But secrecy still

precluded Page from sharing what he knew with any of his officers.¹⁰ One final overnight route march took them to Dury,¹¹ only a few kilometres south of Amiens. Page spent the early afternoon reconnoitring their assembly area. Upon returning, he was at last able to reveal to his men that the attack would commence around dawn the next morning, and outline their specific roles. Charles Oke particularly remembered the colonel reminding them that much was expected of the Canadians, and that while the 4th Division would be in support to start, “[we all] would be expected to do our full share before the battle is over.”¹² Around 2100, after a brief delay to let another battalion pass, the 50th headed off for their assembly positions immediately north of Gentelles Wood. Unlike the other nights, the pace was modest, so as not to wear everyone out. The routes were crowded with long processions of men silent save for the rhythmic sounds of their loose gear and boots on the gravel. The columns frequently had to give way to horse teams pulling supply wagons and field artillery, and of course for the tanks, their roaring engines and clanking tracks all but drowning out the snorting and whinnying—and the teamsters’ cursing. “All ranks very cheery,” the war diary recorded, though one wonders whether cheery was the most appropriate descriptor.¹³ By 0230 the battalion was in place, most just sprawling on the wet grass. Page had ensured the field kitchens were brought forward so his men could at least have a mug of hot tea.

The Sound of the Guns

Promptly at zero hour, the 45-minute hurricane bombardment erupted, deafening, murderous—and to the Canadian infantry huddled in shallow pits, reassuring. Soon, in the dim light of dawn, the visibility further reduced by a thick ground fog, they could see swarms of scout (fighter) and spotting planes speeding toward the enemy lines. At 0630, an hour after the 11th and 12th Brigades had set off, the 50th Battalion began to move, crossing the Luce at midday. After pausing east of Hangard, they reached Peronne Wood by late afternoon, where they dug in for the night. They had not suffered a single casualty, but the baking summer heat and shortage of drinking water had taken quite a toll.¹⁴

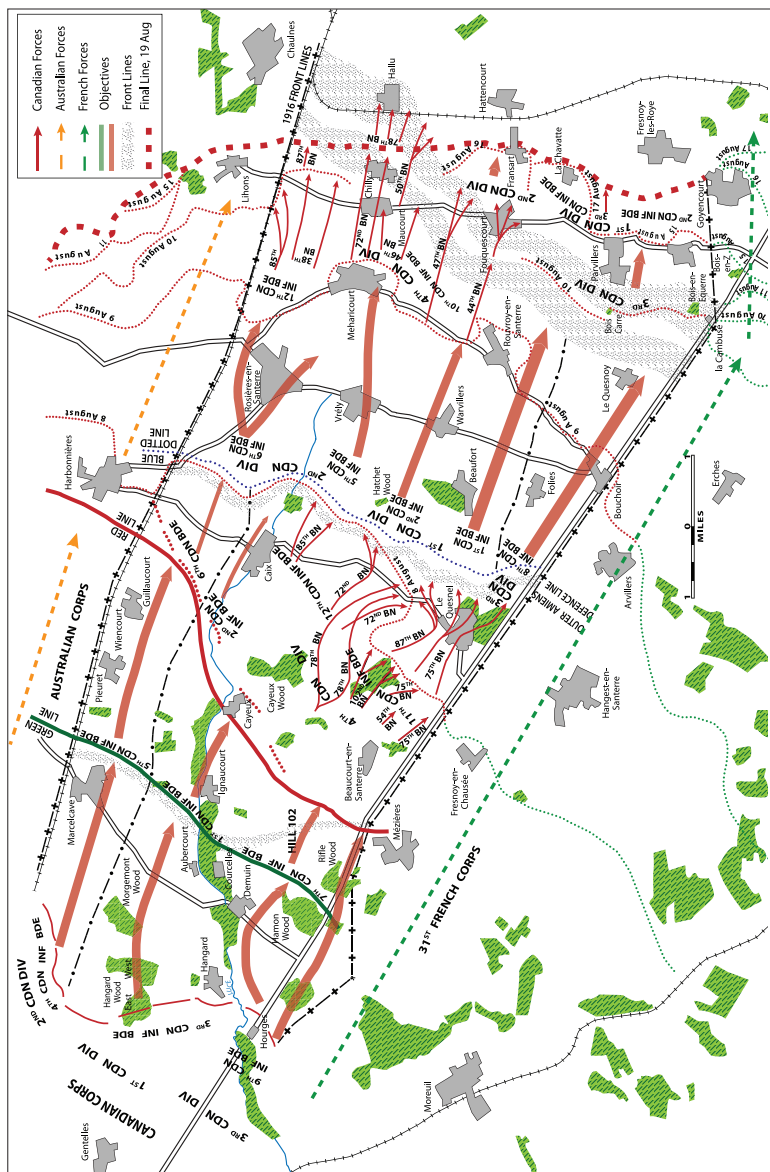
The 4th Division’s objective on the opening day of their attack was the southern half of the Blue Dotted Line that ran just beyond the villages of Harbonnières (in the Australian zone), Caix, and Le Quesnel. The 12th Brigade gained its section of the objective that day, but the 11th Brigade encountered much tougher going and had to resume their assault the next day. The 50th moved forward to the Blue Dotted Line that same afternoon to relieve the 12th Brigade’s 85th Battalion on the outskirts of Caix, where they spent the night. Once again the battalion had emerged all but unscathed, with only a single man wounded.¹⁵

While the Canadian Corps continued to make spectacular gains on the second day of the battle, overall German resistance—and Canadian casualties—steadily mounted. German reinforcements were being rushed forward to plug the many gaps torn in their defences. While they found no prepared positions, they did inherit something almost as valuable, “a belt three miles wide pitted with shell-holes and befouled with tangles of barbed wire and the remains of old trenches overgrown with long concealing grass,” the remains of the Allied and German front lines from the late winter of 1917.¹⁶ It would be their killing ground. The fighting on the 10th, when Hayter’s brigade would be fully committed, promised much harder going.¹⁷

Facing the Enemy

Late on August 9, 10th Brigade received orders to launch their assault the following morning at 0800. The details were immediately passed on to battalion, but there was obviously little time to prepare. Page’s men spent a poor night trying to catch some sleep surrounded by the carcasses and stench of numerous dead horses. Desperate for water, quite a few had slaked their thirst from a well or ditch and dysentery was now racing through the ranks.¹⁸ The battalion fell in at 0600 and hastily marched to its assembly position abutting the Vrély–Warvillers road, just south of the former and about 2 kms west of the larger village of Méharicourt. Currie’s plan called for MacBrien’s 12th Brigade to attack eastward along the railway embankment that constituted the boundary between the Canadian and Australian battle zones, with the 10th Brigade attacking on its right. Hayter’s battalions would advance in pairs, with the 46th on the left (and the 50th in support) and the 44th on the right (with the 47th in support). Once the lead battalions reached the Maucourt–Fouquescourt road and captured the latter village, the support battalions would leapfrog and press the attack all the way to the shallow embankment of the Hallu–Hattencourt rail line, the brigade’s final objective. The sixteen tanks allotted to the 10th Brigade would precede the infantry, and two field artillery brigades, one of them Australian, would fire a rolling barrage to further shield the infantry as they advanced over open ground. The gunners were rushed, with only an hour to prepare,¹⁹ and when the assigned tanks were late arriving,²⁰ divisional headquarters delayed the attack until 1015. When it did finally commence, the 50th encountered no serious opposition, save some sporadic shelling, until they were about to pass through the 46th Battalion, whereupon “heavy machine gun fire was encountered from Fouquescourt and the wood to the rear which made it impossible for us to advance until the [44th Battalion] had cleared up the situation on their front.”²¹ In fact, the MG 08s tore through the Albertans like scythes. Among the great many casualties were three company commanders,

MAP 5:
Amiens, 9–18
August 1918.



two of whom were wounded—Maj. W. J. Eveleigh and Capt. J. B. Corley—and the other killed, Capt. Thomas M. Tweed, who had been cut down while trying to direct one of the tanks.²² The twenty-six-tonne behemoths were supposed to silence machine-gun nests and crush uncut wire, but with their limited manoeuvrability and modest speed further compromised by the many broad remnant trenches in the area, they proved easy targets for German field guns hauled forward for the purpose.

The entire 10th Brigade advance depended on the 44th Battalion evicting the German garrison from Fouquescourt. By midday, Page still believed everything was going well, and assumed his companies had already advanced through the 46th Battalion. Nevertheless, with all communication cut, he decided to go forward himself, whereupon he soon grasped that Fouquescourt was still in German hands and that his own infantry were well short of their objectives, stuck in the open, and being shelled, machine-gunned and even strafed. He hurried to the brigade command post to consult with Brig. Hayter, who confirmed his assessment—the brigade's operations were stalled until the village was taken. Offers by the commanders of the two field artillery brigades to push forward a few of their guns to provide neutralizing fire were accepted by Maj.-Gen. Watson, and a pair of tanks miraculously showed up as well. By late afternoon, the bloodied 44th Battalion had finally cleared the Fouquescourt, opening the way for the resumption of the advance by the 47th and 50th Battalions.²³

Hallu

To cover the 1½ kms to their objective, the 50th faced very bad ground, riven with wire and old trenches (and with no suitable maps to navigate them). They faced fresh German troops, manning improvised but formidable defences, and they would face them without artillery or tank support.²⁴ At 1940, in the face of withering machine-gun and rifle fusillades and a 77-mm battery firing over open sights from nearby Hallu Wood, the infantry set off. With three of his four companies now commanded by lieutenants, Page personally led his men to a point just south of the village of Hallu where those who made it quickly dug in. While lasting barely an hour, the advance must have seemed an eternity. Although the 78th Battalion (12th Brigade) had matched the 50th's progress on their left flank, the 47th, commanded by Page's former adjutant, Lt.-Col. Herbert Keegan (a 50th original), had fallen well behind, leaving the 50th's right flank hanging dangerously in the air. Page only managed to seal that off by committing his last reserves.²⁵ Brig. Hayter acknowledged the courage and tenacity of all his officers and men, particularly singling out the 44th Battalion, which had faced the worst of the action. The open warfare training undergone

in May, June and July, he enthused, had enabled them to carry the day.²⁶ But the fighting on August 10 had not exactly been open warfare. All four battalions had been engaged in trench warfare in its crudest form, mercilessly clearing the enemy with bayonet and bomb. Training had been invaluable, but ultimately the day had been carried by hundreds of terrified clerks, labourers and farm boys—officers, NCOs and men—who had summoned the fortitude and endurance to do it.

The war diary included a full page of names nominated for gallantry awards and brief descriptions of their actions. Some of these entries bear repeating. Lt. William Oliver, despite being wounded, led his men to their final objective. When a second wound left him with a broken arm, he refused evacuation until the gains had been consolidated. Three other subalterns, Lts. James Taylor, Percy Brown, and W. S. Grant, were also cited for exceptional leadership. Taylor won an MC, but though put forward, the other two did not.²⁷ Brown already held the MM, a reminder that the heavy casualties among lieutenants were increasingly filled by promotions from the ranks. Not surprisingly, many of the platoons lost all their officers, and leadership fell to NCOs. Sgt. A. B. Dixon was one such. Despite being wounded in the arm, he continued to lead his comrades forward until a second wound—in the stomach—ended his battle. His leadership earned Dixon a DCM.²⁸ L/Cpl. W. G. Watson, the war diary adding the by now redundant “with conspicuous gallantry,” had repeatedly exposed himself to fire while repairing communications lines, and along with two comrades even found time to storm a machine-gun nest, taking the entire eight-man crew prisoner. He, too, won the DCM,²⁹ as did Pvt. R. A. Harrop who neutralized an enemy machine gun and then under heavy fire carried his grievously wounded platoon commander to an aid post.³⁰ Also most deserving of note were the stretcher bearers from the 13th Field Ambulance under Capt. Walsh who were tireless in performing their duties, as was the battalion chaplain, Capt. the Rev. W. L. Murray, who was constantly seen tending to the wounded.³¹

For leading the attack on Hallu and repeatedly rallying his men, Page won a bar to his DSO. The many acts of heroism and leadership that day by officers and men all mattered, but those of the commanding officer were singularly vital. Before the attack was even launched, he had lost three of his company commanders, and during the course of the next few hours, a total of ten officers. BEF tactical doctrine had come to rely on the leadership abilities of company and platoon officers and senior NCOs, with each the proverbial next man up, trained to carry out his superior's role as well as his own. Under the chaotic circumstances Page faced he had to be—and was—everywhere on the battlefield, constantly exposing himself to enemy fire as he directed, steadied and encouraged his men. It was a superb performance by a superb battalion commander.³²

The Canadian Corps won a major victory at Amiens, arguably the greatest so far, and the 50th Battalion had fully shared in that victory. But it had been costly, with the 4th Division alone suffering 585 officers and other ranks killed and 1,623 wounded. The battalion's own preliminary casualty report listed three officers killed and seven wounded; among the other ranks, the figures were twenty-nine killed and 159 wounded, with twenty more missing in action. This represented slightly more than a third of the strength committed.³³ Of the stress casualties we know nothing, as its impact was seldom acknowledged unless the man was too far gone to function as a soldier. Losing 218 officers and men reflected the price inevitably paid for what amounted to an unsupported infantry attack against stout trench defences, and a sad reminder of the norm earlier in the war.³⁴ It was mainly such infantry fighting that was sustaining the Amiens offensive now, and none of the senior commanders, Field Marshall Haig included, saw merit in continuing to press such attacks. Before the day ended, after consulting with GHQ, Gen. Rawlinson communicated to his corps commanders that Fourth Army's offensive would be discontinued for now, leaving it to their "discretion ... to make local improvements in the line which they were then holding."³⁵ Unfortunately, the 50th Battalion was going to face further hard fighting before its battle was over.

Gegenangriff

Efforts to bring up supplies and evacuate the wounded on the night of August 10–11 were stymied by the near impossibility of navigating through the old trenches and wire in the darkness. With the battalion so short of men, signaller Charles Oke found himself manning a parapet for the first time. "Peering into the darkness and watching the flares and star shells and the gun flashes," he was struck by the awful beauty of it all and pondered "the thousands who had been doing this, night after night for years."³⁶

Daylight brought some respite from the random shelling, but the machine-gun fire was relentless, and that, along with the ubiquitous sniping, made daytime movement a precarious project, too. This was a serious matter given the men were now running very short of the staples of trench defence—rifle ammunition, Lewis-gun magazines, and Mills bombs, not to mention iron rations and water. As we have already seen, shortages of potable water were a constant during the Amiens operation, and especially hard on the wounded lying in the hot sun. The summer weather had been glorious, but the heat—temperatures exceeded 30°C—and the long hours of daylight at basically the same latitude as Calgary took their toll.³⁷ Showing great initiative, Sgt. Swanson organized a party from battalion headquarters staff and at least managed to get sufficient ammunition forward. And it was none too soon, for while inspecting

his positions that morning, Lt.-Col. Page witnessed the obliteration of Hallu, which compelled the 78th Battalion to fall back. Drawing the obvious conclusion, Page hurriedly readied his men to repulse a counterattack. Occupying a miniature salient protruding well ahead of the rest of the 10th and 12th Brigade line, their position was precarious. It wasn't long before everyone could see German infantry forming up in front of Hallu Wood. Flares fired requesting a barrage in front of their position went unanswered because brigade were unsure exactly where the 78th was and feared friendly fire casualties.³⁸ The CO scrambled from position to position, ordering his company commanders to "contest every inch of ground" before returning to his temporary command post some distance from their forward positions to establish contact with brigade headquarters.³⁹

At 1030 the German infantry surged forward in densely packed waves but quickly lost momentum as Lewis-gun and rifle fire ripped bloody gaps in their ranks.⁴⁰ Unsurprisingly, the counterattack found more success on the open flanks. Fearing they might be cut off, Capt. Moore, the senior officer forward, ordered a fighting withdrawal to a more tenable position.⁴¹ Mustering as much covering fire as they could (and finally benefiting from artillery support), they managed to extricate themselves, taking great pains to leave no wounded behind. In his after-action report, Page was quick to acknowledge the vital efforts of the 46th Battalion dug in immediately behind them in keeping the enemy at bay.⁴² By late morning the counterattack had withered away, though the Germans continued to shell the surrounding area for hours. Given what they had endured, the casualties were remarkably light—seven killed and ten wounded.⁴³

From Lt.-Col. Page's perspective, much had been learned at Amiens, particularly noting that "our recent training ... and the lessons learned during that time were of great value." Still, there were things to be mastered. Liaison between battalions had broken down during leapfrogging operations. Furthermore, in this sort of fighting with its broad frontages and thinning manpower, holding a common axis of advance rather than drifting apart was crucial, and had to be impressed on junior officers. Finally, the fighting had placed a greater premium than ever on NCO training, for "much depended on them [and their] casualties ... were very heavy."⁴⁴

What was left of the battalion was relieved on the evening of August 12, reaching Rosières-en-Santerre, about 6 kms behind the Canadian line, by 0300 where they were promptly fed and told to sleep. If signaller Oke's experience was typical, most of them had hardly slept in five days.⁴⁵ The following evening they moved on to Le Quesnel to rest and refit, while tentative plans were drawn up to move the 4th Division back into the line and resume the attack.

Indeed, by nightfall on August 16 the 50th had reoccupied positions near Fouquescourt. But wiser heads prevailed, and instead the Corps rejoined First Army in the Arras area where preparations to attack the formidable German defences guarding Cambrai were already in motion.⁴⁶

On August 13, in his order of the day, the Corps Commander had attributed the Canadians' impressive success to their professionalism: "your training was good, your discipline was good [and] your leadership was good."⁴⁷ Currie's comments aptly summed up the 50th Battalion's performance. But for the rank and file there was one obvious difference about Amiens. While they had won battles before, the haggard columns trudging west toward prisoner of war cages made it possible to think they were winning the war.⁴⁸

When Your Number's Up

The 50th Battalion's brief period back in the line near Fouquescourt was unmemorable save for the shocking death on August 18 of their peerless marksman, Henry Norwest. Norwest had been shot through the head shortly after he and his spotter (Oliver Payne) had set up in their "hunting blind" to start the day's work. As soon as he heard, Lt.-Col. Page ordered a couple of soldiers to find the exact spot where Norwest had fallen so it could be appropriately commemorated, a rare honour for an enlisted man. He also assembled the officers from his headquarters to salute the body as it was carried in. Canadian artillery even put a crash shoot on Dead Wood from where the fatal sniper shot had been fired. At least one soldier, Herbert Hogg, remembered the normally jovial Norwest being sad when he had gone up to the front line two days earlier, as if he had a premonition. Ironically, Norwest had been temporarily assigned rear duty to rest, but hearing German sniper activity was menacing their forward positions, he'd insisted on returning, managing five more kills to bring his confirmed total to 115.⁴⁹ The battalion was soon taken out of the line, but the joy of moving rearward was tempered by having to take their dysentery with them. By nightfall on August 28 the battalion was encamped on the southern outskirts of Arras, some 60 kms to the north.⁵⁰

MSA Men

A little over four weeks hence, in the gruelling attack on the Marquion Line, Pvt. David Muirhead would be killed—as is so often the case, it is not clear exactly how. What is known is that on 20 October 1917 the twenty-four-year-old unmarried labourer had been called before a draft board in Welland, ON under the terms of the Military Service Act (MSA), briefly interviewed, given a medical examination, and accepted for military service in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. He reported on 10 January 1918 and embarked for

England a month later. After completing the bulk of his infantry training there, he was despatched to France as a reinforcement and taken on strength by the 50th Battalion on August 26. Supposedly a reluctant warrior, young Muirhead left a widowed mother—and no doubt others—to grieve.⁵¹

Three days after Muirhead joined the battalion, and just before the men were served supper, Lt.-Col. Page took time to address the 181 reinforcements who had arrived that day, welcoming them to their new family.⁵² The battalion war diary consistently mentions the arrival of reinforcements, but never clarifies whether they were returned wounded, part of the last trickle volunteers from 1917, or others who had enlisted earlier but had only recently been assigned to front-line service, or whether, like David Muirhead, they had been conscripted under the MSA. In fact, conscripts are never identified as such even when they earned gallantry awards. Prejudice against MSA men was most pronounced among senior officers, whereas assessments were generally favourable among the junior officers, NCOs and ordinary riflemen who had led and fought alongside them. Victor Wheeler effusively praised the conscripts he encountered in the 50th Battalion during 1918:

Draftees' loyalty was never in question; their willingness to fight and sacrifice, once in khaki, was certain; and their prowess as first-rate infantrymen and front-line soldiers was equal to that of [the volunteers]. No differentiation was ever made between "volunteers" and "draftees" [in the 50th Battalion]—neither should there have been!⁵³

But it speaks volumes that the commanding officers of nineteen of the Corps' forty-eight infantry battalions refused to nominate a single conscript among the scores of men they put forward for the Military Medal from the Battle of Amiens onward. To his credit, Lionel Page was not one of these—seven of the 50th Battalion's MSA men were awarded the MM for bravery in the field, the most for any Canadian battalion. What is clear is that conscripts fought well. A cross-section of reports on their service from officers who had commanded them in action prompted the Militia Department to conclude that "the recruits obtained under the Military Service Act are a fine body of men, physically and mentally—the equal of the best sent over since the war began."⁵⁴ Equally clear is that the 25,000-odd who reached combat after Amiens were the largest portion of the reinforcements received, likely constituting one-quarter of active infantry strength during the last three months of the fighting. As such, they were central to the Canadian Corps' success during the campaign that did so much to shape its historical reputation. Simply put, the Military Service Act

meant that the Corps did not have to be particularly worried about reinforcements and could keep up the hard-pounding style of attack used so successfully against the exhausted German forces they faced. Yet beginning in the months following the armistice and continuing through the interwar years, with Sir Arthur Currie in the vanguard, the wartime commanders of the Canadian Corps never ceased besmirching the conscripts' reputation as fighting men and understating their role in the common victory.⁵⁵

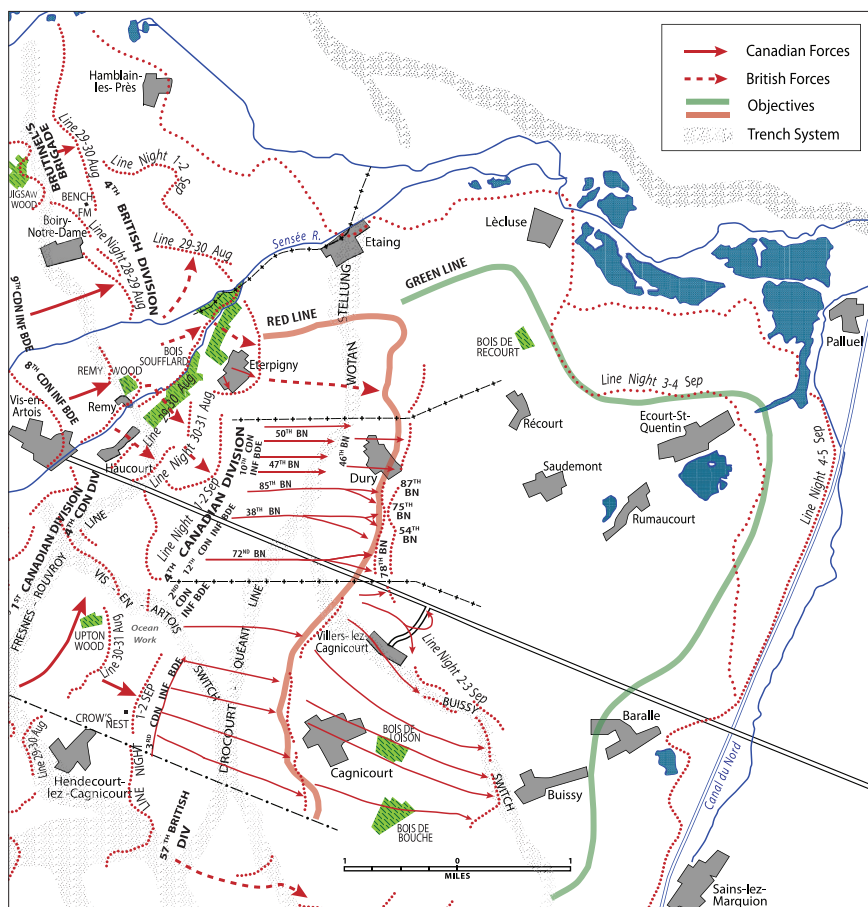
The Drocourt–Quéant Line

Unlike the attacks launched earlier in the war by the Canadian Corps, this time there would be only a few weeks for units to recover, upgrade the training of their reinforcements, and rebuild a sense of teamwork before everyone was thrown into a new offensive.⁵⁶ On the morning of 31 August 1918, Page attended a conference at brigade headquarters where plans drawn up by Watson and his senior field and staff officers only the day before were discussed. He immediately briefed his company commanders on the 50th's role in the forthcoming operation.⁵⁷

In the aftermath of the stunning success at Amiens, Foch's strategy of mounting successive offensives to draw off and wear down the enemy's reserves was given free rein. Virtually the entire BEF, including the two powerful Dominion Corps, would be committed, and French and American forces would follow suit in their sectors of the front.⁵⁸ All but the AEF were worn-out armies, but their opponent, as the coming weeks would confirm, was in even worse shape.

The task set for Gen. Horne's First Army was breaching the formidable defensive complex of the Drocourt–Quéant Line (D–Q Line) and Buissy Switch east of Arras, a particularly robust section of the extensive *Siegfriedstellung*⁵⁹ (or to the British, the Hindenburg Line) fortifications, then fight their way across the Canal du Nord to liberate the major logistical junction of Cambrai. The operation would be carried out in two stages just over three weeks apart. In order to gain more favourable positions from which the 1st and 4th Divisions could attack the D–Q Line proper, the 2nd and 3rd Divisions would have to overrun the intervening Fresnes–Rouvroy Line, which they completed by August 28 after two days of very bitter fighting.⁶⁰ The main attack was set for September 2. The nemesis facing the 4th Division, and their 1st Division comrades on their right,

Consisted of a front and a support line, both abundantly provided with concrete shelters and machine-gun posts and protected by dense masses of barbed wire. The Buissy Switch, connecting the



MAP 6:
Drocourt-Quéant Line, 2-5 September 1918.

D-Q Line with the Hindenburg support system, was constructed along the same solid principles In general, the front [of the] D-Q Line was sited either on a crest or a forward slope in order to provide a good field of fire—the support system being on the reverse slope.⁶¹

The final plan called for the 12th Brigade, supported by the 11th, to sweep up and over the D-Q Line dominated in that section by Mont Dury, while simultaneously Hayter's brigade, along with the 4th British Division, would attack to the north, advancing through the village of Dury that formed an integral part of the overall defence line. All three brigades would then press their attacks eastward to clear the enemy all the way to the Canal du Nord. The 50th Battalion, with the 47th on its right, would attack and seize the first four defensive lines in the Dury sector, with the 46th then leapfrogging both to overrun the village itself. The 44th would then pass through the 46th to continue the brigade attack.⁶² Six tanks and two British field artillery brigades (thirty-six 18-pounders and a dozen 4.5-inch howitzers) would support the assault. After being briefed at Currie's headquarters on August 29, Watson confided in his diary that "it is a very ambitious programme, and I doubt if it can be carried through to the extent they have laid down."⁶³ But optimism reigned at the highest levels of the Corps, and if he voiced his concerns they were not accepted. The only alteration to the original plan was a last-minute reduction in the British 4th Division's role. Currie had little option since the latter had been decimated in recent fighting. The additional burden fell to Hayter's men.⁶⁴

The 50th Battalion's move to their assembly point had to be carried out at night, the ground being under direct observation and—when anything moved—heavily shelled. Maj. James Parry led the men on an onerous 15 km march which got them into position by 0245 on September 2. For the attack, Page decided to have two companies up, and two in support, each with their four platoons lined up one behind the other. From the outset there were bad omens. There were the last-minute modifications to the assault plan, in addition to which their British predecessors had been unable to clear out a nest of machine guns, forcing the assembly position back 200 m. On top of that, bombs for the trench mortars, which were a key support for the attack, failed to arrive. The C Company lost its commanding officer, who was wounded and gassed before they even set off for the assembly positions, necessitating Lt. J. R. Harris assume command. Officially, "the men were in good spirits and the many new recruits were eager for their first show."⁶⁵ Given the Germans had bombarded the assembly areas with high explosives and gas all night long, this might have been a tad optimistic. For Pvt. Charles Oke, it was his worst experience waiting

for zero hour. Surely surprise had been lost, which was always a depressing thought.

Dawn brought fine weather, and at 0500 “promptly on the second every gun for miles on either side opened fire and furnished the heaviest and most effective barrage ever experienced by our troops.”⁶⁶ Having only received their fire plans at midnight, it was an extraordinary performance by the British gunners. The ferocity of the barrage stunned the defenders, and in short order infantry were able to overrun the problem machine guns. The first wave of infantry, much aided by smoke screens (but not the tanks, which were late), stormed the 500 m to the German forward line so quickly they actually had to stop and wait for their own creeping barrage to lift before they could leap into the trench and commence their grim butchery with grenades and bayonets. Within a minute all was calm, with “every Hun ... accounted for.” The enemy machine gunners—generally select troops now—fought their weapons to the end but the garrisons in bunkers “showed a willingness to surrender.”⁶⁷ The few hundred prisoners, many of them wounded, were shepherded to the rear under minimal guard. Upraised arms and plaintive cries of “mercy kamerad, mercy kamerad” spared most of them from anything worse than rough handling and the theft of “souvenirs,” but no doubt some were simply gunned down in the mayhem by men who were as frightened of dying as they were or seeking revenge. As succeeding platoons surged forward, they encountered wire uncut by the barrage, but the tanks had finally showed up, and with their help the attackers managed to overrun the remaining trenches in short order. Just as the barrage lifted from the furthest zone of the D–Q Line, the last dugouts and tunnels had been cleared. The whole enterprise—“the most brilliant attack ever made by the battalion”—had taken barely two hours.⁶⁸ The 47th Battalion had been equally successful, permitting the 46th to pass through both units and carry the fight into the ruins of Dury and the 44th to start moving forward so it could continue the assault as soon as that objective was cleared. Dury had been cleared by 0825, though the 46th had faced much harder going. Brigade ordered Page and Keegan to reorganize their battalions and prepare to move forward immediately, if ordered.⁶⁹ The marked decline in their opponent’s capabilities and battlefield good fortune that fell disproportionately to the victors underpinned much of the day’s success. But apart from the deserved praise for his men’s courage, initiative and esprit de corps, Brig. Hayter correctly identified preparation, specifically small unit training, as key factors in the successful execution.⁷⁰ This was true, but Charles Oke’s perspective as an ordinary soldier was telling—infantry could only get through such tough defences if the way was paved by “an avalanche of shell fire.”⁷¹ By the summer of 1918, Canadian infantry were thoroughly trained in a tactical attack doctrine in which they had

confidence. Supported by a powerful artillery arm, they could break into any position, even if well defended, and at Dury they had.

Foremost among the leaders that morning had been D Company's commanding officer, Lt. A. J. Slade, "who seemed to be everywhere at once, encouraging and directing his men and urging them on to even greater efforts," deservedly earning a DSO.⁷² But remarkable acts of courage and initiative under fire were commonplace that day. Sgt. J. H. Dowler, a signaller, had repeatedly risked his life to maintain the telephone lines linking the fighting companies and battalion headquarters. When Sgt. R. N. Tufts' platoon had been pinned down by a machine gun, he silenced it single-handedly, bayonetting the entire crew of eight. Dowler's and Tufts' were among the thirty MMs (five of them second awards) for particularly noteworthy actions by non-commissioned officers and privates. Among his several feats of valour, Pvt. Charles Davis had attacked another machine-gun position with grenades, killing the crew and taking fifty prisoners, for which he was awarded the DCM. Cruelly, the battalion also lost two of its company commanders—Capt. A. R. Batson and S. A. Moore—ironically killed by the same shell burst as they crouched behind cover discussing consolidation plans.⁷³

Casualties were amazingly light during the attack itself but as consolidation got underway in the trenches immediately in front of Dury, German artillery began firing high explosive and gas shells into the position, killing and wounding many. Counter-battery fire couldn't be summoned, as Hayter's communications with division had been severed and remained so until evening despite the heroic efforts of signallers and runners who both suffered heavy losses.⁷⁴ The day's work had yielded over 1,000 prisoners and 90 German machine guns, the former hinting at declining German morale and the latter pointing to the growing reliance the enemy were now forced to place on the machine gun to hollow out infantry attacks.⁷⁵ Under the circumstances, the 50th's own losses were not considered severe—thirty-one killed and 183 wounded.⁷⁶

Unfortunately, while the morning's operation was unfolding according to plan for the 10th Brigade, the fate of their sister brigades remained uncertain. As they grimly fought their way up the slopes of Mont Dury, the 12th's battalions were raked by machine-gun fire, and once cresting the ridge they were immediately pinned down. In an attempt to save the situation, Watson ordered Odlum's men forward, only to have them meet a similar fate.⁷⁷ Casualties—MacBrien's brigade suffered nearly 50 percent losses—were appalling. It was one of the worst setbacks inflicted on the Canadian Corps during the war. The hoped-for hard push up to the Canal du Nord had failed, a combination of bad luck but mostly bad planning by Currie and Brig.-Gen. Norman "Ox" Webber, his chief of staff. No doubt it was small consolation to Watson that his suspicion

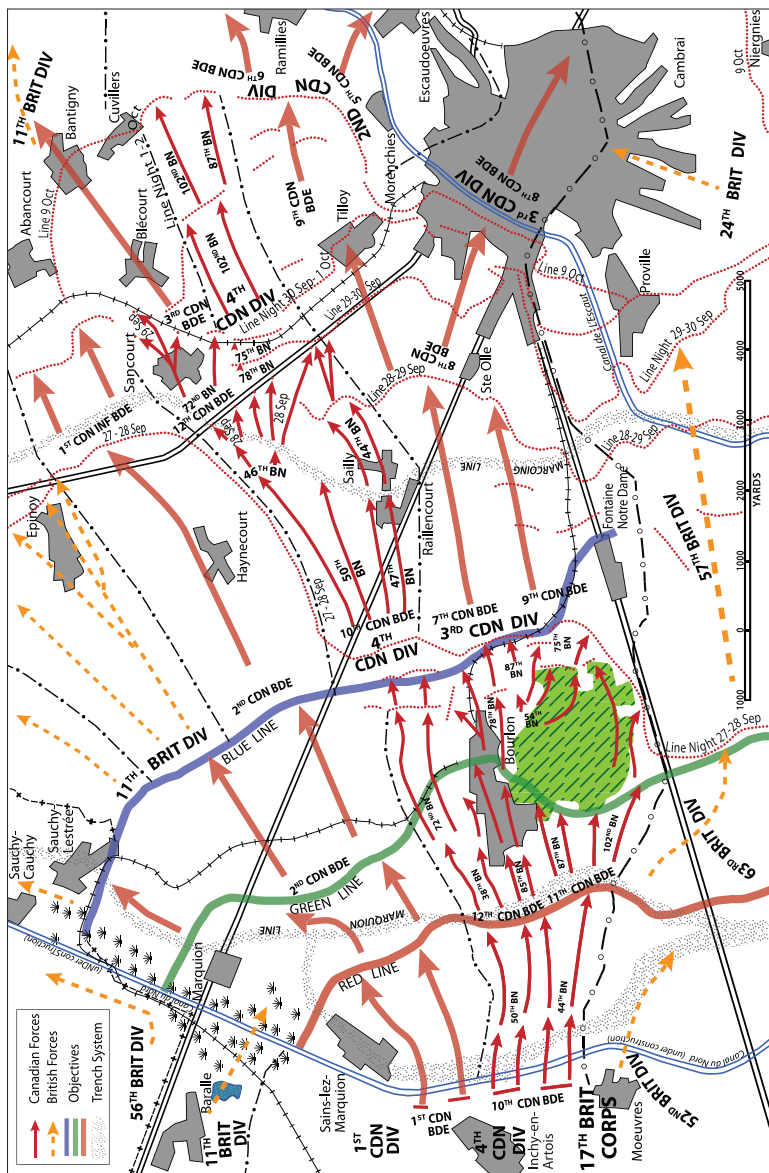
about the plan expecting too much from soldiers and underestimating German resistance was borne out. A chastened Corps ordered the attack resumed at 0500 the next morning when the situation would be clearer and units reorganized (and reinforced), and critically when tank support and a robust barrage—both absent in the original plan for Mont Dury—could be guaranteed. With his communications down, none of this reached Brig. Hayter before he had already gone ahead on his own authority and cancelled any further advance, sparing his men from what would likely have been heavy losses.⁷⁸ For his part, Lt.-Col. Page was understandably very pleased with the performance of his officers and men. Their only sin was not holding back when it might have been prudent to pause, but he was hardly going to fault anyone for being too keen.⁷⁹ Quite properly, the week's fighting to breach the Drocourt-Quéant Line was considered a major victory, with Field Marshall Haig stopping by to congratulate Currie on his Corps' fine effort even as the luckless infantry of the 11th and 12th Brigades were fighting for their lives on the far slopes of Mont Dury.⁸⁰

With first light on September 3, reconnaissance patrols were able to confirm that the enemy had retreated.⁸¹ During the next two days the 1st and 4th Divisions followed cautiously until they had secured the western approaches to the Canal du Nord. And so the situation would remain for almost three weeks.⁸²

The Canal du Nord and Cambrai

Now in reserve, Page's command spent their time attempting to train, but good intentions initially were frustrated by rainy weather, muddy ground, and a shortage of facilities for classroom work.⁸³ Only once the weather turned for the better could proper training resume. Reinforcements, including returned wounded, were welcomed (or welcomed back). No fewer than seventeen lieutenants had been taken on strength since Amiens, most of them green as the proverbial grass, so that considerable time was specifically devoted to upgrading their skills, with the CO himself frequently taking a hand.⁸⁴

On September 18, Brig. Hayter summoned his battalion commanders to discuss forthcoming operations, with Page briefing his own officers in turn that evening.⁸⁵ The CO wasted no time readying his men, for the following day the entire battalion practised quickly clearing and consolidating trenches, with two companies assaulting the mock front-line trench and the other two leapfrogging them to take the support trench, all of this carried out within the strict time constraints of a mock rolling barrage.⁸⁶ The battalion completed its move into the support line just before midnight on September 25. The fixing of the "Left out of Battle" and burial detail nominal lists earlier in the day were sure signs an attack was imminent. On the 26th everyone was allowed to rest, and many of the soldiers spent their time lying in the grass in the fine weather,



MAP 7:
Canal du Nord,
27 September
– 11 October
1918.

taking in the spectacle of dogfights over the German lines.⁸⁷ Meanwhile, the heavy artillery commenced blasting lanes through the wire, which infantry patrols later confirmed had been cleared. Brig. Hayter briefed his four battalion commanders one last time during the afternoon. Now, like everyone else in the 50th Battalion, Lionel Page had nothing left to do but wait, though unlike the former, he bore life-or-death responsibilities for hundreds. His decision to have the kitchens brought up before dawn and again after dark so his men could enjoy some hot food was no doubt much appreciated.⁸⁸ Across the Corps nothing seemed to have been left undone—thorough preparation would not guarantee success, but everyone recognized it was the necessary precondition.

The Overall Plan

The BEF planned to launch near-simultaneous offensives in late September, an attack by Horne's First Army (which included the Canadian Corps) toward Cambrai, and another by Byng's Third Army toward St. Quentin. The former would puncture the defensive positions in front of the vital rail centre of Cambrai, envelop the city, and immediately press on toward the Belgian border so the Germans would have no opportunity to re-establish any sort of formal defensive position. But there were daunting challenges. Cutting across their axis of advance was the partially constructed canal. A marshy area, which the enemy had further flooded, extending north from Sains-les-Marquion almost to the Canal de la Sensée would be impassable to major units. But from Sains-les-Marquion southward for 4 kms to Mœuvres, the canal bed and ground on either side of it were dry. Any large-scale crossing would have to occur here. Numerous machine guns and extensive wiring constituted the main obstacle the attackers would face immediately beyond the canal, but a kilometre further on lay the Marquion Line and the dominating feature of Bourlon Wood, and 5 kms beyond that, the Marcoing Line. The plan put together by Currie and his staff called for a two-stage assault. The first step entailed crossing the canal, then breaking through the Marquion Line and seizing Bourlon Wood and the high ground between it and the Arras–Cambrai highway. The second would send reserves pouring through this bridgehead and fanning out to the north and northeast, crushing the Marcoing Line and sweeping past Cambrai all the way to the Canal de l'Escaut. First Army's other two corps, the British XXII and XVII, would advance on the Canadians' flanks. But the main thrust, upon which overall success depended, would fall to the powerful Canadian Corps, which made up more than half of Horne's force.

The offensive was scheduled to start on September 27 with a set-piece attack executed by two brigades from 1st Division and, in front of the village of Inchy-en-Artois, by Watson's 10th Brigade. Brigadier Hayter's infantry would carry

the attack as far the Marquion (or on Canadian battle maps, Red) Line, then consolidate. The 11th and 12th Brigades would then pass through their position to reach first the Green and then Blue Lines, the latter to capture Bourlon Wood and the former to seize Bourlon village and brooding high ground immediately to the northeast. The 46th and 44th Battalions would lead the 10th Brigade's assault, forcing the canal and then neutralizing the defences immediately beyond. As soon as practicable, the 50th and 47th would leapfrog them and press on to the Marquion Line. To maintain critical momentum, the entire brigade would effectively move forward as one.⁸⁹ For his part, Page chose to attack with his A and D Companies abreast,⁹⁰ while B and C Companies, with specific consolidation and mopping-up responsibilities, would follow close behind.⁹¹

The Attack

Dawn on September 27 promised another fine autumn day with warm (but not hot) temperatures, excellent visibility for both ground observers and reconnaissance aircraft, and dry footing for the men as well as the horse teams drawing supply wagons and field artillery forward, and towing ambulances to the rear. It was a good day to attack—and hopefully survive. As soon as darkness had fallen the previous night, battalion scouts had set out to complete their crucial tasks, laying tapes marking the 50th's assembly positions and the routes leading to these, and then leading the silent lines of their comrades forward. That night Pvt. J. E. Fox earned a DCM for executing these very responsibilities.⁹² The trek had been made more difficult by constant German shelling, including gas shells that forced everyone to wear their restrictive respirators, but at least the men had been held back as long as possible so as to limit their time under fire. At least attacking infantry were no longer the beasts of burden they had been at the Somme or Vimy. Full battle kit now meant only gear that would help them kill Germans—anything else was left behind. The only exception was scaling ladders to get everyone up and over the far side of the steeply sloped canal wall. Predictably, the bombardment knocked out all the telephone lines forward from brigade headquarters, which meant the start of another arduous day for battalion signallers who would need to locate the breaks and (repeatedly) repair them. Snipers knew full well how critical this work was, making them prime targets.⁹³

The Marquion Line

Unbeknownst to the Canadians, the German command was so confident in their defences in this sector of the canal that they had dismissed the possibility of an attack. But an attack it would be for the troops who had reached their jump-off positions by 0330. There they waited in silence under a steady drizzle

for the better part of two hours. "A nasty, miserable night," Oak recalled. Many of the men relied on cups of rum-laced tea to keep from getting too stiff.⁹⁴ Despite personally disapproving of "drink," Page knew that the double-ration of "liquid courage" traditionally doled out before an attack was a godsend for officers and men alike, so rum it would be this night.⁹⁵

Then, precisely at 0520, the wait was over, shattered by the deafening thunderclap from hundreds of artillery barrels firing high explosive, shrapnel and, to blind German machine gunners, smoke shells. The din led the old-timers to claim it even put the Vimy barrage to shame. In addition, the brigade benefited from the supporting fire of five Vickers machine-gun batteries as well as the two trench mortars that would advance with the men.⁹⁶ German artillery barely responded, which allowed the men to get well away from their jump-off positions relatively unscathed. But not entirely, as Capt. D. Fraser was cut down as D Company crested the far side of the canal. All four of the company commanders from August 8 were now gone, with three of them killed. With Fraser dead and every other D Company officer wounded within minutes of leaving the start line, Sgt. Maj. A. L. Watkin successfully led them to their objective, single-handedly subduing a machine-gun nest along the way. For his courage and leadership, he was awarded the DCM.⁹⁷ Overall, the 50th advanced rapidly, following close behind the 46th. Having strictly adhered to the artillery barrage tables, the latter were on their objective in just over two hours, whereupon their Alberta comrades pressed on through their position.

Prisoners started flowing back almost immediately—a bedraggled lot, mainly cavalrymen sent into the line despite having no infantry training. Stunned by the opening barrage's ferocity, few had put up much resistance. In contrast, German machine gunners kept firing their weapons until the bitter end, inflicting many casualties during the early stages of the advance. Despite a "heavy and accurate" barrage, machine-gun positions were almost impossible to identify beforehand and generally only hit by luck, and there were still plenty in action.⁹⁸ By 0730 the engineers had completed the first bridges over the canal, enabling some of the 4th Division's field artillery batteries to get forward, and with that, the German machine guns could be silenced one by one. But before the gunners could assist, it had chiefly been an infantry battle, with the sections and platoons having to root out enemy strongpoints using the fire-and-movement techniques mastered in training.⁹⁹ Once the 50th gained the Red Line, the men, protected by a 45-minute standing barrage immediately laid down in front of their position, put their entrenching tools to work with gusto. Right on schedule, the battalions of the 12th Brigade leapfrogged them and kept moving forward.

During the afternoon, Page received word by runner that he should prepare to renew the attack come morning. A preliminary casualty list showed fourteen killed and 122 wounded. As was usually the case, officer losses had been especially heavy, with two of them killed and nine wounded, and Page ordered replacements forward from among the supernumerary officers who had been retained on strength for just this eventuality. Even with one company having been merged into the remaining three, their commanders were now looking at fewer than 70 men on average, and were forced to reorganize their units by reducing the number of platoons to three or even two.¹⁰⁰ Late in the afternoon, a conference was held at brigade headquarters where Hayter encouraged—and got—a frank discussion of the next day’s attack and the barrage to support it. Just after midnight his battalions received their final orders.¹⁰¹

The Marcoing Line

There was little time to prepare and none at all to sleep.¹⁰² All four battalions assembled during early morning hours, with the 50th reaching its jump-off point by 0550, barely ten minutes before zero hour.¹⁰³ The brigade plan placed the 50th Battalion on the left flank of the attack, once again with two companies up and two in support, each with three platoons abreast and a fourth in close support. This was purely aspirational given the “consolidation” of companies and platoons necessitated by the first day’s losses. The 46th would follow up, while on the right flank the 47th Battalion would lead with the 44th in support. This arrangement would carry the attack as far as the Marcoing Line, running northeast from Raillencourt (on the Arras–Cambrai highway) toward Sancourt, whereupon the two support battalions were to leapfrog and continue pressing forward as far as the Cambrai–Douai highway running just to the west of Sancourt. Rather than digging in, the 50th and 47th would follow some 300 m behind them.¹⁰⁴ Despite their losses so far, the 50th’s morale remained high.

When the attack went in, Page’s men encountered little opposition until they had advanced about a kilometre up to the outskirts of Raillencourt where they were raked by heavy machine-gun fire from positions in the village and along the Marcoing Line itself, the latter fronted by dense swaths uncut wire. One by one, the German machine guns were dealt with using the tactics that were now habit, with Capt. Alfred Hodges’ A Company doing most of the work. The 50th’s ruthless neutralization of the Marcoing Line was much aided by the bravery and enterprise of Lt. Henry A. Sharpe, a former NCO who already wore the MM ribbon on his tunic. Sharpe managed to find a way through the wire, enabling his platoon to outflank and then enfilade a section of the main trench, wiping out practically the whole garrison (at least eighty bodies were subsequently counted) and forcing the rest to pull back, decisively shifting the

tide of the battle and sparing many Canadian lives. Sharpe earned an MC for his “conspicuous gallantry and initiative” while Hodges got the same award for “exemplary tactical leadership and gallantry.”¹⁰⁵ Still, it was not always individual heroism that carried the day, but sometimes steadiness under trying conditions. Page later took pains to highlight the case of Lt. F. L. Clouse, who, although he had only been with the battalion for 18 days, and whose combat experience was measured in minutes, had had to assume command of C Company in the midst of the attack and rose to the occasion.¹⁰⁶

The 47th and 50th Battalions completed the capture of the Marcoing Line by 0900, enabling the 44th and 46th Battalions to sweep forward. But murderous machine-gun fire from both flanks and the railway embankment beyond the Douai–Cambrai road forced them to fall back almost to their starting positions where they dug in as best they could. Sustained artillery fire and the constant machine gunning inflicted heavy casualties on all four battalions as the day wore on. Likely, only the close proximity of the 12th Brigade dug in southeast of Sancourt spared them from German counterattacks. Of great assistance, too, were standing barrages put down by field batteries valiantly attempting to keep up with the infantry’s advance (and much praised in the 50th Battalion’s war diary for doing so).¹⁰⁷ Meritorious service did not automatically entail fighting, as the case of Capt. (the Hon.) William Murray, the 50th’s padre, made clear. He had volunteered to join the attack that morning so he could help with the wounded. Then, seeing a greater need, he offered to accompany the 46th Battalion as it leapfrogged his own unit. When their medical officer was seriously wounded, Murray dressed his wounds and carried him back to safety, after which he “continued advancing with [the 46th Battalion], who had lost all their medical staff except one, dressing wounded in the open, [and showing] splendid devotion to duty under heavy fire.” Padre Murray deservedly won a second MC.¹⁰⁸

Late in the afternoon, around 1700, just after telephone communications had been restored with all four of his battalions, Hayter informed Page and the others that 4th Division had ordered them to make another push to seize the Douai–Cambrai road, with zero hour set for 1915. By this time the 50th Battalion was a shadow of itself, having been reorganized yet again by merging what remained of the four companies into two under Lts. Hodges and Dyde.¹⁰⁹ Given the approaches to the road were heavily wired, the field artillery promised to pound the position for 45 minutes. The objective was taken in a short, sharp action, opening a route to the fortified railway embankment just to the east, which the 12th Brigade successfully overran the following day.¹¹⁰ Efforts to consolidate 50th’s gains during the evening and into the night required the last reserve of energy from officers and men who were exhausted, physically and

emotionally. In fact, their position was parlous—ranks so thinned that it was impossible to maintain a continuous line, which left them vulnerable to infiltration, let alone counterattack. All four of the 10th Brigade's battalions resorted to offensive patrolling in the hope of conveying a semblance of strength.¹¹¹

It had been another long and arduous day of combat, with not only a successful advance to point to but also 450 prisoners and considerable battlefield booty that included sixty machine guns and a pair of 15-cm howitzers.¹¹² Their casualties were a further eighteen killed (a third of them conscripts) and 114 wounded, raising the total to thirty-two killed and 236 wounded, close to 40 percent of their initial strength. But there was relief at the high proportion of wounded-to-killed and the fact that so many of the wounded were suffering from bullet wounds rather than the far more dangerous shrapnel wounds.¹¹³ In his after-action report to Brig. Hayter, Lt.-Col. Page praised his officers and men for their "keenness and determination in the attack, their cheerfulness in the face of hardships, [and] their willingness to respond to all orders." And in a special order, he told them their efforts had given "me the greatest pride and confidence in the battalion."¹¹⁴ He was also quick to acknowledge the unstinting co-operation of the entire 10th Brigade, highlighting in particular the 46th and 47th Battalions without whose timely support the 50th's own success would have been in jeopardy. As was always the case, it had been a brigade attack even if made by battalions. Hayter's assessment of the actions the 50th Battalion had fought was straightforward: "There were no particularly new features in the way of lessons brought out during these operations [; rather] the lessons learned in previous battles were put in practice and proved invaluable."¹¹⁵ In essence, the bite-and-hold tactics of 1917 had been successfully applied to the new environment of semi-open warfare. Still, the cost was heavy. While the German Army's undeniable decline helped the Corps succeed at the Canal du Nord, the Canadian infantry paid a hefty butcher's bill.¹¹⁶

As soon as the 12th Brigade had passed through its lines on the morning of September 29, the 50th Battalion (along with the rest of the 10th Brigade) withdrew about 5 kms to divisional reserve just north of Bourlon, taking over "organized shell holes" that, ironically, many of the men they'd just killed had only recently occupied. The last day of September—the cruellest month of the war for the 50th Battalion—saw the usual post-action routine unfold—inspecting gear for repair and replacement and mustering the survivors to enumerate the casualties, but mostly resting and coming to terms with private horrors.¹¹⁷ Two lieutenants and thirty-six other ranks joined the battalion on October 2, its last reinforcements of the war.¹¹⁸ A day earlier, Gen. Horne, recognizing the attack was losing steam and that the troops were played out, ordered Currie to consolidate his gains. With that, the rest of the 4th Division were relieved.

On a cheerier note, word came the same day that Lt. D. G. L. Cunningham, a popular officer everyone believed had been killed at Amiens and buried by the enemy, was alive and well in a German prisoner of war camp.¹¹⁹ A few days later Watson inspected the 10th Brigade, now just over 2,000 strong, or about half-strength. The general, who was always brief on such occasions—a trait the men appreciated—expressed his gratitude to all for their grit and determination. But he was furious over reports of fraternization with captured Germans, and admonished the troops to “impress upon the enemy in the most forcible manner that we were at war.”¹²⁰ During the next few weeks, the great majority of Page’s men would take that injunction to heart.

End Game

By early October, BEF attacks had ripped open the Hindenburg Line along almost its entire length. The German Army was now in permanent retreat, utterly beaten but still capable of inflicting pain on its pursuers. On October 14, Hayter’s brigade left reserve, the 50th Battalion being assigned a section of line abutting the Canal de la Sensée. Elements of First Army, including the Canadian Corps, were ordered to closely pursue the retreating Germans toward Valenciennes and the Franco-Belgian border. If the enemy could be brought to battle, all the better, but it was critical to prevent them from regrouping or improvising a proper defensive line. The German scorched-earth tactics, especially the destruction of bridges and crossroads, combined with the ever-increasingly distance from railheads, strained logistics. And with every advance the troops marched past lines of refugees who “have lost all and are in a pitiful condition.”¹²¹

Victims and Executioners

As the German Army’s discipline broke down, militarily justifiable destruction blended seamlessly into wanton destruction that the Canadian soldiers could see with their own eyes every day as they marched northeastward. What they witnessed made more credible the accounts of a heartless occupation freely related to them by the civilians who often billeted the soldiers at night. Atrocity stories, particularly the spate of rapes and cold-blooded killings committed during the withdrawals, matched the worst propaganda the men had been fed about the brutish Hun, and hardened hearts.¹²² Not every soldier saw evidence of an atrocity first-hand, but in the cold and wet of a bleak French autumn, they all faced the danger of a random shell or burst of machine-gun fire. No one wanted to die with the end so close. And after the appalling slaughter of the past few weeks,¹²³ many had scores to settle, too. For all of these reasons, many soldiers gave little quarter as the war’s final weeks played out.¹²⁴ Increasingly,

those among the enemy who offered more than token resistance fared badly. As Currie bluntly confided to his diary: “I know that it was not the intention of our fellows to take many German prisoners as, since they have lived amongst and talked to the French people here, they have become more bitter than ever against the Boche[s].”¹²⁵ It is common to see front-line soldiers in the First World War as universal victims, but they were executioners, too, and the moral line separating a soldier’s duty to kill an armed opponent from the choice to kill an unarmed one was definitely blurring.

Liberators

In the final weeks of The Hundred Days, the Canadians were a bone-tired, wet and cold lot, and save for the few fresh reinforcements, the very definition of “war weary.”¹²⁶ Yet they did find cheer in their role as liberators. Heretofore it had been rare to see civilians in battle zones—now it was common. “In each town we went through the women were at the front doors inviting us to have coffee,” one 50th man remembered, “and the people were out with flags ... everybody had a French flag ... and couldn’t do enough for us.”¹²⁷ On October 19, Charles Oke’s diary records that as he and his comrades were “feeling our way forward” near Denain, “we liberated [our] first civilians. They were delirious with joy [and] wanted to kiss everyone.”¹²⁸ Even their very proper commanding officer could not escape the patriotic attentions of *les mesdemoiselles et madames*, much to his men’s amusement.

Onward ... One Last Time

Prisoner interrogations convinced First Army that the Germans would not defend the Canal de la Sensée. On the 17th, in dense fog, which in the absence of German resistance ironically did more to hinder the crossing than aid it, Capt. A. J. Slade managed to get his own D Company and one other, plus two more from the 54th Battalion, across on a bridge improvised from spare lumber and abandoned wagons.¹²⁹ By dawn, the entire battalion was across and patrols had gotten as far as Fressain. But just after noon, as the lead platoons approached Émerchicourt, about 5 kms beyond the canal, machine-gun fire and shelling forced the battalion to wait for their own artillery which, upon arriving, quickly reduced Émerchicourt to rubble.¹³⁰ The infantry then attacked, though it took the better part of a day to clear the place, at the cost of four killed and twenty-two wounded. The 50th was soon advancing again. Many villages they would pass through had been forcibly depopulated—even livestock and dogs had vanished—and “everywhere there was abundant evidence of wanton and senseless destruction by the enemy, the contents of the houses being smashed up and thrown in all directions, nothing being left intact that it was possible to

destroy.”¹³¹ Rœulx, their next objective, was an exception but thankfully they were able to take it without a fight. Its 900 inhabitants were understandably overjoyed.¹³² Advancing through this new, largely natural, landscape proved a terrible strain. For a man used to fighting in almost obscene surroundings, pretty woodlands filled with bird songs were “sinister asylums for [German machine gunners]—and in those woods every movement or sound in the foliage—the scurrying of a hare, the caw of a crow, the chirp of a cricket, the dancing of dappled light in the shadow—startled him.”¹³³

The 10th Brigade was relieved during the night of October 22–23. On October 27, two days after Brig. Hayter had left to take over as Currie’s senior staff officer,¹³⁴ the battalion formed part of the honour guard lining the streets of Denain through which Currie, Watson and the Prince of Wales passed on their way to a memorial service at the cathedral.¹³⁵ Valenciennes, a major pre-war steel-making and industrial centre, and the largest French city still occupied, lay barely 10 kms to the northeast. On the evening of the 29th, Lt.-Col. Page briefed his senior officers on its capture.¹³⁶

The Plan

Taking Valenciennes would be a formidable challenge. To the west and north, the city hugged the eastern bank of the Canal de l’Escaut. The bank was thickly wired with numerous machine-gun nests hidden in the houses, factories and warehouses overlooking the waterway. Further constraining any assault, most ground southwest, west and north of the city had been purposely flooded. Although rising less than 20 m above its surroundings, wooded Mont Houy with its defensive works and artillery emplacements dominated the approach from the south and southeast. Finally, with so many civilians sheltering in the city, artillery could not automatically employ their usual annihilating bombardments.¹³⁷ Judging by the numbers of troops thought to be garrisoning the city, the enemy intended to make a stand.¹³⁸

The original plan of attack hinged on a British division overrunning Mont Houy and 4th Canadian Division’s 10th Brigade extending that assault as far as the southern outskirts of Valenciennes the following day. Then, after a short pause to reorganize the artillery, the 4th Division would outflank the city from the east, enabling the rest of the Corps to cross the Canal de l’Escaut and complete the envelopment from the west.¹³⁹ This plan came unstuck when the Scottish battalion that had fought its way onto Mont Houy failed to hold it against a German counterattack. A revised plan now called for Valenciennes’ capture in a single powerful thrust, with 10th Brigade overrunning Mont Houy and immediately pressing on into the southern outskirts of the city, while Odum’s men, in conjunction with British formations on their right, would

sweep along the city's eastern flank. That left MacBrien's brigade to force the canal and mop up Valenciennes proper. To minimize infantry casualties, the assault on Mont Houy would rely on a crushing artillery bombardment. It would prove Brig. Andrew McNaughton's tour de force, employing no fewer than eight field and six heavy artillery brigades (well over 300 barrels) and what amounted to an inexhaustible stock of shells for an attack by barely 1,200 infantry.¹⁴⁰

The Last Attack

As zero hour approached, the 50th's sergeants distributed the double tots of rum, ensuring "all men were then in good shape for the work in hand."¹⁴¹ The assault went in at 0515, with no preliminary barrage in order to maximize the effect of McNaughton's maelstrom. The 44th and 47th Battalions quickly swept over Mont Houy, and the surviving garrison surrendered in a daze. 50th Battalion's assembly positions had been heavily shelled with both gas and high explosive, though the effects of the former were not felt until hours later. While the 50th was serving as brigade reserve, Capt. A. J. Slade's D Company had been assigned a mopping-up role for the 47th Battalion. They encountered tough fighting, especially in the built-up area along the Escaut River where German machine gunners often waited until the range was point-blank before opening fire. Slade's men took numerous prisoners. "It was impossible to avoid taking so many," the war diarist acknowledged almost apologetically, before adding "but some very useful killing was also achieved."¹⁴² In his own summary report written after the battle, the 10th's new commanding officer, Brig. John Ross, brusquely noted that "the miserable enemy could expect and certainly received no quarter."¹⁴³ Slade's personal courage and leadership was acknowledged with the award of an MC.¹⁴⁴

As the attack unfolded, the battalion's three remaining companies, which were keeping pace with advance, increasingly found themselves drawn into the fighting. Early on, when Sgt. William Mayson's platoon ran up against heavy shelling and machine-gun fire, the soldiers wavered. But Mayson managed "by personal coolness and his exceptional bravery" to rally them and continue moving forward. Later in the day, with his men holding a series of shell craters atop Mont Houy and once more under relentless fire, he calmly crept from post to post, raising their spirits and keeping them focused on the fight. For the many such displays of "conspicuous gallantry and good leadership," Mayson earned a bar to his earlier MM.¹⁴⁵

Once the outskirts of Valenciennes had been reached, stiffening resistance pinned the two attacking battalions down. This was particularly true on the right flank in front of Marly where, around dusk, the British brigade across

the La Rhonelle fell back in the face of a sharp counterattack, exposing the Canadian flank.¹⁴⁶ It fell to two of the 50th's companies to hurry forward and repair the damage.

The overall operation had been a remarkable achievement for the 50th Battalion (and the rest of the brigade). In their mopping-up role, D Company alone had killed 200 of the enemy and taken 450-odd prisoners, and when called upon, the reserve companies had fought very effectively, too. Losses in action were surprisingly modest, just five killed and thirty-five wounded.¹⁴⁷ Only late in the day were the serious effects of the much earlier gas bombardment apparent, with a total of eighty-five soldiers, including Lt.-Col. Page and Capt. T. H. Prescott, his adjutant, having to be evacuated. Although all of them were suffering from breathing problems and nausea, and temporarily blinded, the majority were able to return to duty in a matter of days.¹⁴⁸ The following day the 11th and 12th Brigades finished the 4th Division's job by clearing the city itself. Valenciennes had been almost entirely a Canadian victory, but when Gen. Horne chose to downplay that, Currie, Watson and many of their subordinates were furious, resulting in the official liberation ceremony on November 7 turning into a rather testy affair.¹⁴⁹

Some Good Homemade Apple Pie

After marching into Valenciennes on November 5, the 50th Battalion was billeted by rank, the officers in private homes and the men in a rather less posh pre-war French Army barracks. And there they would stay. "What glorious news," Watson recorded in his diary the following day, having received word of the pending armistice. Early on Monday, November 11, the general took a telephone call from Corps headquarters confirming hostilities would officially cease at 1100. When the hour arrived, the assembled bands of the 10th Brigade played "La Marseillaise," the mayor raising the tricolour in the city square as a remarkably sombre throng looked on.¹⁵⁰ Members of the 50th Battalion had had no sense the end was so close. One soldier recalled hearing the news from civilians as he and his comrades walked to the square for the formal ceremony. Another heard about it around 0900, and had it confirmed by his officers about an hour later.¹⁵¹ Division issued an order that officers were to maintain strict discipline in marking the event—in other words, no untoward celebrating by the other ranks—and that there be no fraternization with German prisoners. Untoward celebrating or not, among the Canadians the sense of relief was palpable. A letter written a day earlier by Pvt. Earl Doxsee to his mother in Alberta surely reflected the immediate thoughts of many:

Next year at this time I hope that I am at home. It will not take a great deal to feed me ... and I don't think I will turn my nose up at anything, as I used to before I came out here, but one thing I shall want and lots of it is some good home-made apple pie, my mouth waters for some now, and let us hope mother it will not be long before I can have some.¹⁵²

Victor Wheeler, a man of acute insights into his comrades' feelings, also observed "a depressing languor ... we were tired and inexplicably drained of purpose and spirit." Somehow they had managed to survive. In the reasonably near future they would return home, and with any luck die of old age, albeit pursued by memories—many comforting and others terrifying. Literally overnight, the great unknown that with difficulty they had come to terms with had been supplanted by another. Drawing on soldierly metaphors, Wheeler wrote eloquently about this:

Our scarred minds and hearts, where barbarism and savagery, fear and hatred, had so long lodged, wondered what lay beyond the peaceful western horizon. The future for us was but another No Man's Land—and we were reluctant to go Over the Top into the treacherous unknown.¹⁵³

A Winter of Waiting

Only the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions participated in the occupation of the Rhine bridgeheads that winter. Instead, the 4th Division would spend the better part of the next six months guarding Belgium and waiting for shipping to take its men home. During the two months following the armistice, the battalion moved several times, until finally reaching Overysse near Brussels in early January, where they remained for the remainder of their time in Belgium.¹⁵⁴ No matter how busy the officers kept everyone, it was not long before morale began to suffer, the men grumbling mostly about the snail-like pace of repatriation. They were civilians again, or certainly felt they were, "an army of homesick civilians, cold, restless [and] fed up."¹⁵⁵

At long last, on April 15 the battalion entrained for the Canadian Embarkation Camp at Le Havre where, after more waiting, they finally boarded an overnight ferry for England. Early the following afternoon, on April 28, they reached Bramshott Camp, tired but no doubt pleased. It had been thirty-one months and eighteen days since the battalion had left there for the front. For the relative handful of originals remaining, it must have been an emotional

moment. Preparations for demobilization were now in full swing, with everyone having to endure the rigours of documentation and medical boards.¹⁵⁶ Page's battalion seemed unaffected by the turmoil festering among some of the Canadian units at the English camps, undoubtedly at least in part because they arrived so late and were there so briefly. Apart from an honour party of four officers and 125 other ranks selected to participate in the great victory parade held in London, everyone was kept in camp until May 4 when thirty officers and 300 other ranks set off on an eight-day leave, with the remainder the battalion quickly following suit.¹⁵⁷ With so many of the soldiers having friends and family in Britain, the leaves were a great morale-raiser.

Homeward Bound

The men began streaming back into camp on May 20, and six days later orders confirmed their embarkation on the *SS Empress of Britain* two days hence. The 50th was the last of the Corps four Alberta battalions to leave England. Final arrangements hurriedly completed, the officers and men assembled at 0200 on the night of May 27–28 and marched out of Bramshott Camp, proudly carrying the battalion colours they had left for safekeeping at a nearby church in 1916. Arriving in their train at the Liverpool docks just after 1 pm, they immediately boarded the liner and were soon steaming past Merseyside, bound for the open sea and Canada.¹⁵⁸ What their individual futures held must have been on many minds—rebuilding civilian lives, including marriages and families, would be a daunting task for some. But at least they had a future, which could not be said of their comrades who would lie forever in the soil of France and Belgium.

The crossing was uneventful and the coast of Newfoundland was sighted on the evening of June 2. After stopping briefly at Halifax, the *Empress* proceeded on to Quebec City, with its superior railway connections, docking late on 4 June. There, Lt.-Col. Page received a telegram from R. C. Marshall, the mayor of Calgary: "Calgary rejoices in your homecoming. You have covered yourselves with glory in the service of your king and country. We are proud of you. Welcome home."¹⁵⁹

The following morning they boarded a troop train bound for Calgary.¹⁶⁰ Batches of soldiers from the battalion, mostly seriously wounded men, had already been repatriated, some as early as December, and the large crowds that had braved vile winter weather to welcome these heroes home spoke volumes about how ordinary citizens felt.¹⁶¹

Having already welcomed the 10th and 31st Battalions back, the city could hardly wait for the arrival of the main body of the 50th. From the moment they reached Quebec City, the local newspapers had published daily updates on their progress across the Dominion. After years of censorship that had masked

the true nature of the 50th Battalion's war, the *Herald* began publishing unvarnished accounts of all their battles.¹⁶² In October 1915, forty-one officers and 1,036 other ranks had left Calgary—the contingent now steaming across Canada numbered thirty officers, including Lt.-Col. Page, and 438 other ranks. Only one officer, Maj. Eveleigh, and about seventy other ranks were originals.¹⁶³

Finally the great day arrived—Monday, June 9. Three days earlier, the 50th Club and The Great War Veterans Association had finalized arrangements for a grand reception to complement what city officials had already planned.¹⁶⁴ It was mid-morning when the train slowly pulled in with its precious cargo, bands serenading everyone with refrains of “Home, Sweet Home.” The open areas of the station were jammed and large crowds waited outside, undeterred by drenching rain. The soldiers in one of the cars had chalked on its side “From Calgary to Hell and back, via the Somme, Vimy, Passchendaele, Amiens, Arras, Canal du Nord, Cambrai, Valenciennes.” Accompanied by his English war bride and their daughter, Lt.-Col. Page climbed down first to be immediately hugged by his mother who had travelled from Red Deer for the moment. This touching scene completed, some of his men hoisted him on their shoulders and carried him the length of the platform to loud cheers. Then it became utter chaos as the remaining soldiers rushed from their cars to meet the crowd of friends and loved ones surging forward. It took some time to reassemble the battalion, whereupon, led by their own band, they marched out of the station, down Centre Street to 8th (Stephen) Avenue and on to the armouries. Large crowds lined the route and the drill hall was crammed with well-wishers. Standing in ranks on the parade floor, their colours proudly displayed, a hush fell as Page spoke to his men. The *Herald's* summary, like Page's speech, was brief: “He told the boys he was proud of them and thanked them all for the way in which they had responded to every call [and] on their endurance and bravery since he had been in command of them ... [then wished] them good-bye and Godspeed.”¹⁶⁵ Spontaneously, he was hoisted in the air again to loud cheers from what were truly *his* troops. A bouquet of roses was presented to John Pattison's widow and a few other dignitaries added their words, and it was over. But as the crowds exited the armoury, the paperwork of formal demobilization commenced. It wasn't finished until mid-afternoon. Wheeler remembered the latter as rather an anti-climax after the “deeply emotional” reception. The army at least thought to provide a “tasty lunch” for the waiting lines, with members of the Great War Veterans Association Ladies Aid serving.¹⁶⁶ The day ended with a smoker held jointly for veterans of the 50th and 31st Battalions and doubtless uncounted private parties. Some of the men probably had nowhere to go, and others were already aboard trains dispersing them across Alberta.

Moving On

While the demobilization of the 50th was completed the day it returned to Calgary, the battalion itself was not officially dissolved until 15 September 1920. But only one more significant event in its history remained. On Sunday, July 27, before a large contingent of battalion veterans, the original colours received in Ottawa in 1915 as they proceeded overseas, were deposited in Central Methodist (now United) Church. It was a moving ceremony, blending the religious with the patriotic, from a stirring sermon simply entitled *The British Flag* to the enthusiastic singing of “Onward Christian Soldiers” and “Land of Hope and Glory.”¹⁶⁷

Soon enough, however, the celebratory tone that marked the men’s homecoming petered out. There is no doubt that most members of the community deeply respected the returned men, but the values embraced at the time, not least by the veterans themselves, held that citizen soldiers were not supposed to be defined by their military service, which they had taken on as a duty. Having returned to civilian life, they should make their own way. Moreover, upper class Canadians as well as the great majority of the middle class had viewed the war as a fight to preserve the social and economic status quo, not to empower supposed “radical” reforms, no matter how badly large swathes of the population wanted (and needed) them. The 50th Battalion had returned to the city at the height of the Winnipeg General Strike, and sympathy strikes in other parts of the West, including Calgary. Some leading lights openly warned the demobilized men that Bolshevism was the greatest threat facing the country—one prominent clergyman in the city had dismissed returned soldiers as putty in the hands of Red agitators. This was too much for Page, who publicly refuted such extreme talk, insisting that soldiers who’d served overseas had surely proven their loyalty to Canada.¹⁶⁸ Demobilization benefits were slender and oftentimes impractical, and the pension system, while probably the most comprehensive and generous among the Allies, fell well short of meeting the needs of physically disabled veterans, and did next to nothing for the psychologically wounded. As best they could, most veterans looked to return to the farm or factory or business they had left when they enlisted—for the younger men, who had not left anything, there was the need to find a career. Both groups would have to integrate into peacetime Canada in the midst of a severe recession that dragged on through 1921.¹⁶⁹

Some closest to the 50th Battalion saw the difficulties hampering many of the veterans and set about assisting them. In July 1919 a group of wives, widows, mothers and sisters of former members founded the 50th Battalion Ladies Auxiliary under the leadership of Mrs. Katherine Mason, the wife of

its first commanding officer. Whether visiting the sick or those suffering from war wounds, comforting the lonely, or simply helping those in general need, the Auxiliary did sterling work. Mrs. Mason remained its driving force until 1949 when old age and ill-health compelled her to step down.¹⁷⁰ The veterans themselves soon formed the 50th Battalion Veterans Association, which helped veterans cope with wartime memories only they shared simply by keeping former comrades in contact with each other.

The 50th Battalion at War

When the 50th Battalion assembled prior to marching out of Sarcee Camp in October 1915, Col. Paul Weatherbee solemnly addressed them: "I know ... that the men of the 50th will do their duty and will be a credit to Alberta and your country, and in wishing you good-bye and good luck I hope that many of you will return."¹⁷¹ Given the optimism of such send-offs during the early years of the war, his closing observation was a remarkably frank assessment of their prospects. The number of men who served in action with the battalion will never be known precisely, but from the date it reached France through the armistice the total for other ranks alone reached 4,227. In total, twenty-nine officers and 623 other ranks were killed in or as a result of battle, and another 127 and 2,562, respectively, were wounded.¹⁷² These are disheartening totals for the twenty-five months the 50th was deployed on the Western Front and they speak to both the extensive action it saw and the attritional nature of the fighting. But at the same time, the colonel's confidence that they would do their duty and be a credit to Alberta and Canada had proven well placed. The great majority of the men serving in the battalion had no prior military experience. Their training got steadily better, but mostly they learned to fight by fighting. And probably one-quarter of them were facing combat for the first time in each battle. Courage and spirit were never enough by themselves, though the awarding of five DSOs (plus two bars), thirty-two MCs (plus four bars), twenty-two DCMs, 215 MMs (plus twenty-two bars) and a Victoria Cross are ample evidence of exceptional leadership and bravery under fire.¹⁷³ All who served in the battalion benefited from the steady improvement in the firepower, staff work, and tactics at the disposal of the Canadian Corps, which matured into arguably the best fighting formation of its size in the BEF. In Lt.-Col. Page, they had a first-rate commanding officer with all the advantages accruing from that. And they faced an enemy that, not the least as a result of their own efforts, was steadily worn down even if it remained dangerous to the end. As one of the last battalions in the last Canadian division to be sent into action, the 50th and their 4th Division comrades quickly matched their predecessors' proficiency on the battlefield.¹⁷⁴ This was a crucial factor in their success, for they never

fought in isolation but side by side with other elements of the 4th Division, and especially their three sister battalions in the 10th Brigade. Overall, the 50th Battalion was not exceptional but it was certainly good. And it performed at its best when it mattered most—during the Hundred Days when the Canadian Corps was a battering ram in the most decisive military campaign Canadians soldiers have ever fought. The officers and men had indeed done Alberta and Canada proud.



3.1 Unveiling the Great War soldiers' memorial in Calgary's Central Park, 23 May 1924. (Glenbow Archives, na-2742-4)



3.2 Lt.-Col. Douglas Cunnington, c. 1930. Cunnington had been severely wounded during the 50th's fierce fighting near Hallu on 11 August 1918 and thought dead until miraculously turning up on a prisoner of war list. During the late 1920s, he served as the postwar militia regiment's commanding officer, tirelessly promoting their British connections. (KOCRA, P-300-10-0015)



3.3 Lt.-Col. Louis Olaf Svenson served with the 50th Battalion, rising to Major and for a time commanding a company. Like other COs during the interwar years, he struggled against long odds to keep the Calgary Regiment afloat. (KOCRA, P-300-10-0049)

3.4 Lt.-Col. Frederick L. Shouldice served with the PPCLI, earning a MC for the exemplary leadership of his company during the Canal du Nord attack. His tireless efforts on behalf of the Calgary Regiment during the 1920s, including a stint as commanding officer, won him much respect in militia circles. (KOCRA, P-300-10-0050)





3.5 Lt.-Col. Water Jull (L) and Capt. John Begg lead the Calgary Regiment past the Cenotaph on Remembrance Day 1935. Participation in such annual rituals helped to keep the militia in the public eye during the difficult interwar years. (KOCRA, P-300-10-0003)



3.6 (L-R) Capt. John Begg, Lt.-Col. L. A. Cavanagh and Maj. Walter Jull assist with the supervision of militia training at Sarcee Camp during the summer of 1935. (KOCRA, P-300-10-0060)



3.7 Improved armour for an armoured regiment without tanks. “Snow White” and the “Six Dwarfs” arrive at Sarcee Camp for summer training in 1939. (KOCRA, P-300-10-0021)



3.8 The 14th Reserve Army Tank Battalion (The Calgary Regiment) marching in the Stampede Parade, July 1941. It did yeoman work during the 1941–1945 period, providing the initial training for over 1,500 young men who went on to serve in the Army, RCAF and RCN, many of them overseas. (KOCRA, P-300-10-0068)