

In Remembrance of Doomed Youth Private Ralph C. Crew (1893-1917)

87th Battalion, Grenadier Guards, Canadian Expeditionary Force

Thomas E. Crew

Introduction

One of the routines of my childhood was to visit my paternal Grandparents on Sunday evenings. They lived close and as the youngest of 18 grandchildren I got a good deal of attention. My Grandfather, James E. Crew, did most of his entertaining while seated in a reclining chair and a trip to his house was never complete without some time on his knee listening to stories. Growing up in Ohio, fishing and the adventures of raising a family on "the farm" were the most common topics. One Sunday when I was about eight years old Grandpa took a different track. He took firm hold of me and looked at me with eyes that were more sad and gray than the bright blue ones I like to remember. He related a vague story of sorrow and loss and the horrors of war in a manner that affected me profoundly even though I was a child. While I did not understand what he was really saying I knew at the time I would always remember this story.

Several years after Grandpa died I read a transcript of an interview conducted with him by a cousin, Dr. Bruce Crew, in which Grandpa had talked about his brother Ralph who was killed in World War One while in the Canadian Army. Further research revealed that with the exception of my Aunt Irene Matteson the family was mostly unaware of this story. Irene had a photo of Ralph Crew in his uniform and believed that he had died near the end of his service while trying to help a wounded friend. She was only three years old when Ralph left for the war and is the last living member of the family that had

contact with him. I had finally come to understand Grandpa's story.

In 1997 while in Ottawa, Ontario I visited the Canadian First World War monument, a large impressive sculpture. I mentioned my Great Uncle Ralph to my Canadian host who told me about the Books of Remembrance, Canada's tribute to her fallen of all wars. Three years later on a whim I searched the Internet, easily finding the Books of Remembrance posted by Veterans Affairs Canada. Within five minutes I had Ralph Crew's enlistment papers and the location of his grave. This provided me with enough information to request his military records. Now knowing his unit, the 87th Battalion, "Canadian Grenadier Guards" I performed additional web searches that fleshed out the details of his service. The web site amazon.com provided an out-of-print book listing with reader reviews. The auction site eBay.com allowed me to view uniform items, insignia and decorations that were essential in understanding Ralph Crew's story in depth. Of the greatest value were the out-of-print literature searches done on the Advance Book Exchange web site abebooks.com. These searches led to the purchase of some key sources whose bibliographies in turn led to additional sources, the most valuable of which was *The History of the Canadian Grenadier Guards 1760-1964*, by Colonel A. Fortescue Duguid, the originator of the Books of Remembrance idea. Canada had over 250 infantry battalions in the First World War, yet only a small fraction of the units have formal published histories. In the case of Ralph Crew's

unit, the 87th Battalion, I was fortunate to have benefited from the attention of such a notable historian as Duguid.

The emergence of the Internet has now made detailed historical research projects like this one possible without ever entering a library or archive. With the exception of the information provided by the Crew family, what follows was compiled entirely from sources located by the use of the Internet.

The Holy Glimmers of Goodbyes

Every day at exactly eleven o'clock a Uniformed ceremonial guard from the House of Commons Protective Service Staff enters the Memorial Chamber in the Peace Tower of the Canadian Parliament. The guard marches to the center of the vaulted chamber and faces

an altar whose steps are made from rocks quarried from Flanders Fields. He pauses, salutes and bows. He then marches to the altar across a floor inlaid with brass nameplates made of spent shell casings recording the names of Canada's major First World War battles. Upon the altar rests a glass-topped protective case, flanked by statuettes of two kneeling angels, containing the First World War Book of Remembrance. Here he pauses, bows, salutes and then raises the cover to the viewing case. With white-gloved hands he turns a page of the Book of Remembrance, then closes the case. The guard then proceeds in a clockwise manner pausing, bowing, saluting and turning a page of each of the five other Books of Remembrance. He then returns to the centre of the room pausing, bowing and saluting one final time. Finally the guard turns and marches out, completing one of the most solemn military ceremonies in Canada.¹



Pte.	Cox, Richard.	87 th Bn.	Sgt.	Crause, Joseph.	7 th Bn.
Pte.	Cox, Samuel Emanuel Andrew Winston.	131 st Bn.	L. Col.	Crawfield, Harry.	58 th Bn.
			Pte.	Crawford, Frederick.	20 th Bn.
Pte.	Cox, Sidney.	46 th Bn.	Pte.	Crawford, George.	50 th Bn.
Pte.	Cox, Thomas Henry.	4 th C.M.R.	Sgt.	Crawford, Harry, M.M.	8 th Bn.
Pte.	Cox, William.	75 th Bn.	Pte.	Crawford, Frederick.	85 th Bn.
Spr.	Cox, William.	9 th Ptd Coy C.E.	Spr.	Crawford, John James.	9 th Ptd Coy C.E.
Pte.	Cox, William.	2 nd Bn.	Capt.	Crawford, Alfred Thomas.	4 th Bn.
C.O.M.S.	Cox, William George.	40 th Bn.	Pte.	Crawford, Walter Henry.	10 th Bn.
Pte.	Cox, William Henry.	5 th C.M.R.	Cpl.	Crawford, Thomas Reinald, M.M.	1 st Div. Sig. Coy.
Pte.	Cox, Smith Walter.	27 th Bn.			
Pte.	Coxall, Arthur.	8 th Bn.	Cpl.	Crawfens, Lemur.	7 th C.R.T.
Pte.	Coxhead, Frederick George Walker.	5 th Bn.	Pte.	Crawford, Albert Burwell.	31 st Bn.
Spr.	Coxon, Charles.	3 rd Ptd Coy C.E.	Pte.	Crawford, Andrew.	1 st C.M.R.
Pte.	Coyne, David Cameron.	38 th Bn.	Pte.	Crawford, Arthur.	16 th Bn.
Pte.	Coyne, James John.	47 th Bn.	Pte.	Crawford, Arthur William.	2 nd Bn.
Sgt.	Coyens, William Henry.	54 th Bn.	Cnr.	Crawford, Bruce Leonard.	3 rd P.A.C.
Pte.	Coyuk, Nicola.	14 th Bn.	Pte.	Crawford, Cecil Roy.	78 th Bn.
Pte.	Craib, Hugh.	58 th Bn.	Sgt.	Crawford, Charles Bruce.	8 th Bn.
Spr.	Craib, Edward.	1 st C.R.T.	Pte.	Crawford, Clement Eric.	18 th Bn.
Cnr.	Cracknell, Benjamin.	9 th Bde. C.F.A.	Pte.	Crawford, Ernest Albert.	75 th Bn.
Pte.	Cracknell, Thomas Parkinson.	50 th Bn.	Pte.	Crawford, Frederick Borden M.M.C.	
Pte.	Craft, Chester.	20 th Bn.	Pte.	Crawford, Frederick William.	27 th Bn.
Pte.	Craibart, Frederick, M.M.	5 th Bn.	Pte.	Crawford, Gilbert.	58 th Bn.
Pte.	Craig, Charles Anthony.	8 th Bn.	Sgt.	Crawford, James Henson.	72 nd Bn.
Pte.	Craig, Cleveland Edward.	3 rd Bn.	Spr.	Crawford, John.	10 th Bde Coy C.E.
Pte.	Craig, Curtis.	15 th Bn.	Pte.	Crawford, John.	21 st Bn.
Sgt.	Craig, David, M.M.	5 th C.M.R.	Pte.	Crawford, John Louden.	31 st Bn.
Pte.	Craig, David.	5 th C.M.R.	Pte.	Crawford, Michael Daniel.	13 th Bn.
Pte.	Craig, David Robert.	38 th Bn.	Pte.	Crawford, Nathaniel Reuben.	10 th Bn.
Pte.	Craig, George.	49 th Bn.	Cpl.	Crawford, Reuben.	116 th Bn.
L. Sgt.	Craig, George Alexander, M.M. 102 nd Bn.		Pte.	Crawford, Robert.	75 th Bn.
Pte.	Craig, James.	16 th Bn.	Pte.	Crawford, Robert George.	1 st C.M.R.
Pte.	Craig, James A.	78 th Bn.	Pte.	Crawford, Robert Nelson.	7 th Bn.
Pte.	Craig, John.	47 th Bn.	Pte.	Crawford, Robert Wellington.	46 th Bn.
Pte.	Craig, John Duncan Beverley.	54 th Bn.	Pte.	Crawford, Sidney.	Corps Coy R.
Pte.	Craig, John Richard, M.M. 15 th M.C. Coy.		Pte.	Crawford, William.	217 th Bn.
Pte.	Craig, Robert Struthers.	80 th Bn.	Pte.	Crawford, William Edward.	8 th Bn.
Pte.	Craig, William.	42 nd Bn.	Sgt.	Crawley, Harry.	19 th Bn.
Pte.	Craig, William Clinton.	2 nd C.M.R.	Lieut.	Crawley, William Ashton, R.E.C. 16 th Bn.	
Pte.	Craighead, William John Pritchard.	102 nd Bn.	Pte.	Creese, Harold Ridal.	50 th Bn.
Pte.	Craigo, George.	75 th Bn.	Pte.	Craen, John Edward.	73 rd Bn.
Cnr.	Craigo, Gerard Russell.	9 th Bde. Coy.	Lieut.	Craighton, Arthur Ramsay.	46 th Bn.
Pte.	Craigo, John.	24 th Bn.		Craighton, George Gillespie.	43 rd Bn.
Pte.	Craik, James.	72 nd Bn.	Cnr.	Craighton, James Duncan.	10 th Bde C.F.A.
L. Col.	Crain, Percy Lewis.	51 st Bn.	Pte.	Craigh, Nielson Burt.	75 th Bn.
Pte.	Craigs, Lawrence.	24 th Bn.	Pte.	Craicar, John Campbell.	5 th Bn.
Pte.	Craigs, Dolphine.	21 st Bn.	Pte.	Craicar, John Robert.	14 th Bn.
Pte.	Cram, Gilbert.	P.P.C.I. 1.	Pte.	Cressay, Alan.	50 th Bn.
Pte.	Cram, William Howard.	16 th Bn.	L. Sgt.	Cressock, Harold Sudney, M.M.	51 st Bn.
Pte.	Cramer, Thomas Arthur.	46 th Bn.	Pte.	Crevier, Armand.	R.C.R.
Sgt.	Crammond, Robert.	2 nd D.A.C.	Pte.	Crew, Ralph.	27 th Bn.
Pte.	Crampton, Frederick.	116 th Bn.	Pte.	Crew, Charles William.	21 st Bn.
Pte.	Cram, Robert Gordon.	72 nd Bn.	Pte.	Crew, Frank.	8 th Bn.
Pte.	Crandall, Dallas Arthur.	10 th Bn.	Pte.	Cribbes, Thomas.	7 th Bn.
Pte.	Crandall, John Warren.	14 th M.G. Coy.	Pte.	Crichton, George.	13 th Bn.
Pte.	Crawdell, James Gordon.	47 th Bn.	Pte.	Crichton, Jack.	4 th Bn.
Pte.	Crandernie, Lee Wesley.	25 th Bn.	Pte.	Crichton, Robert.	50 th Bn.
Cpl.	Crane, Albert.	L. S.H.	Pte.	Crichton, William.	44 th Bn.
Pte.	Crane, Emmett Joseph.	2 nd Bn.	Pte.	Crichton, David.	60 th Bn.
Pte.	Crane, Florence Frederick.	31 st Bn.	L. Col.	Cripps, Arthur George.	1 st C.M.R.
Pte.	Crane, Lee.	46 th Bn.	Pte.	Cripps, John William.	10 th Bn.
Pte.	Cranfield, Arthur Frederick.	58 th Bn.	Pte.	Crisp, Gordon Wray.	75 th Bn.
			Pte.	Critchell, Leonard Arthur.	73 rd Bn.

The Books of Remembrance were the idea of Colonel A. Fortescue Duguid, Canada's preeminent scholar of the World War One era. For a country whose soul had been tortured, tested and redefined by its immense losses, it needed to pay tribute to its sacrifice, and the Books of Remembrance were an important step in Canada's process of national healing. They contain the highest expression of workmanship - their heraldic illumination, water coloring, calligraphy and leather tooling are of a quality unequalled. Over the course of a year the names of the 114,710 men and women killed in the service of Canada are exposed on the pages of the six Books of Remembrance. Each year on 19 May page 222 of the first Book of Remembrance is exposed. One of the names written with a gold-filled pen nib on this piece of ornately decorated calf skin vellum is "Pte. Ralph Crew 87th Bn."²

Page 222 of the first Book of Remembrance showing the name of "Pte. Ralph Crew 87th Bn."



came from border-states such as New York and Michigan, many having prior military experience with the U.S. Army or state militias.⁴

The news of the war in Europe and the opportunities in the Canadian Army were certainly known to the majority of the service aged men in the northern tier of states.

Whether Ralph Crew claimed Canadian citizenship through the guidance of his enlisting officer to avoid possible legal implications or from his own choice to insure an enlistment free of complications is not known.

What Candles May Be Held To Speed Them All?

For several months the 99th Battalion trained and equipped itself in Canada. On 31 May 1916 sailed from Halifax, Nova Scotia on the *HMS Olympic*, the sister ship of the *HMS Titanic*. The *Olympic* had been under repairs in 1912 from a collision with the cruiser *HMS Hawke* when the *Titanic* sank. As a result she was modified to increase her ability to sustain damage and additional lifeboats were added. In 1914 she became a troop ship and had unsuccessfully tried to tow the mined and sinking battleship *HMS Audacious* to Scotland. In 1915 she was camouflaged and fitted with 6-inch guns. During 1916 she was attacked twice and missed by torpedoes in the Mediterranean. To Ralph Crew and his shipmates it must have seemed that they had embarked on a ship of destiny as they steamed through the same waters that had claimed the *Titanic*. This was surely the topic of many conversations among the anxious soldiers headed off to war. The *Olympic* would have yet one other encounter with the enemy in 1918 when she survived her final torpedo attack and rammed and sank the German submarine *U-103*. By the end of the war

Olympic had carried 200,000 troops and steamed 180,000 miles.⁵

After an uneventful transit across the North Atlantic, the troops disembarked in Liverpool, England on 8 June 1916. On 17 July Private Crew was transferred to the 35th Canadian Reserve Battalion posted at West Sandling and was soon sent to Le Havre, France where he would join the Canadian Grenadier Guards.⁶

Founded in 1760 the Canadian Grenadier Guards were an established institution of the Canadian Army. The regiment had previously contributed three battalions (14th, 23rd & 60th) of infantry to the CEF without the designation of Grenadier Guards, as standing policy had prohibited the use of militia titles in overseas battalions. In September 1915 the Governor-General approved the use of the title "Canadian Grenadier Guards" and the 87th Battalion CEF was created.

They began recruiting in the Guards' traditional home of Montreal, before enlisting men from across Canada, which gave the unit quite a cosmopolitan flavor. The 87th Battalion also had a height requirement of 5', 9" in anticipation of high physical standards. They trained for several months in Quebec where discipline was lax by traditional military standards. Even so, desertion and the weeding out of the physically unfit thinned the ranks, as the men with insufficient viscera became aware of the realities of army life. American Alexander McClintock*

from Kentucky had joined the Grenadier Guards in response to the reported German atrocities in Belgium. He had attended the Virginia Military Institute and was made a sergeant on the basis of his prior military training. After returning from leave five days late he was surprised that he was not punished. His

* McClintock would be decorated and meet the King of England after suffering wounds that would end his service. He wrote a candid memoir in 1917 to help prepare other Americans for the horrors of the Western Front



company commander's only comment was that he "...seemed to have picked up Canadian habits very quickly." McClintock was especially amused by the Canadian's informal military behavior, when during a dress review he heard his Major say, "Boys, for God's sake don't call me Harry or spit in the ranks. Here comes the General!"⁷

The Grenadier Guards arrived in England on 5 May 1916. They were to be part of the 4th Canadian Division, then mobilizing in England. The Canadian Guardsmen were to be treated to an extra dose of military indoctrination by their British cousins. The British Grenadier Guards, the senior regiment of the British Army, had contributed an officer and four Drill Sergeants to their training. The British trainers were all wounded veterans of the desperate fighting of 1914. They were hardened to the ways of war and understood that only through close personal contact and rigorous training could the institutions of the Grenadier Guards be instilled. The Canadians soon took on a new polished look and considered their previous training to be little better than croquet practice. The British Guards had prepared their Canadian counterparts to fight in the most disciplined manner possible. On 15 August 1916, the 87th Battalion, now part of the 11th Brigade, 4th Division arrived in Le Havre, France, finally headed for the war.⁸

Only the Monstrous Anger of the Guns

Ralph Crew was already in Le Havre having been admitted as a patient in the 7th Canadian Hospital on August 5th for a contused nose and face. The cause of the injury was not stated in his records. When the 87th Battalion disembarked at Le Havre they conducted some final training before going to Flanders for an instructional tour followed by a three-week stint in the front line trenches. During Ralph Crew's 30-day hospitalization he was formally transferred along with 74 other men of the 99th Battalion to the 87th Battalion. The 87th had lost 300 men as replacements to an Ontario unit while in England and were in need of additional men to reach their nominal strength of 35 officers and 996 other ranks.* Discharged from the hospital on 6 September, Ralph Crew finally

* Battalions were divided into four companies (A-D) with a machine gun section and headquarters and brigades consisted of four battalions.¹⁰

joined his new unit on 30 September in their billets. By this time the 87th Battalion had finished its initial front line deployment and seen its first offensive action during a night raid on 16 September. As Crew joined the unit he had missed its rigorous indoctrination in England as well as its first combat. He was still essentially a green recruit that had landed in a unit that was priding itself as a cut above the average battalion.⁹

Several movements by train and by foot occurred over the next 10 days with the battalion moving into the support areas of the Somme. There was little doubt among the Grenadier Guards that they would soon go into battle. The Somme was by any standards one of the biggest and most horrible battles of all time. It had been raging since 1 July and had been a bitter disappointment since it had seen the use of an unprecedented amount of troops and weaponry without substantial gain. As Ralph Crew and his unit were approaching the Somme front they marched around a rock-quarry hill outside the town of Albert and were met with a scene that according to fellow American, Sergeant Alexander McClintock, "...was wonderful beyond description." They halted and the men were tremendously impressed as they sat by the roadside. Another American named Macfarlane remarked, "Boy, we're at the big show at last." Sadly "...it was not only the big show, but the last performance for him. Within sight of the spot where he sat, wondering, he later fell in action and died. The scene, which so impressed him, gave us all a feeling of awe. Great shells from a thousand guns were streaking and criss-crossing the sky. Without glasses I counted thirty-nine observation balloons. Away off in the distance I saw one German captive balloon. The other aircraft were uncountable. They were everywhere, apparently in hundreds. There could be no more panoramic picture of war in its new aspect." The Grenadier Guards remained at Albert, where the Germans methodically shelled the town every night at six o'clock with their "evening hate" dosage of 30 shells. The Canadians became accustomed to the rigid behavior and stayed under cover in the cellars of the town waiting for the 30th explosion before emerging. In the wreckage of the town was a cathedral with a statue of the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus inclined at an angle of 45 degrees about to topple from the roof. Superstition had it that when the

statue fell the war would end. It did not fall until the German Spring Offensive in 1918, though many weary and cynical soldiers considered testing the theory by blowing up the icon themselves.¹¹

On the night of 17 October 1916, the 87th Battalion moved forward to relieve the 54th Battalion CEF, which was covering a frontage of 400 yards just north of the village of Courcellette, France. The area "...was dreadful beyond words. The stench of the dead was sickening. In many places arms and legs of dead men stuck out of the trench walls." The battalion got lost amidst the destruction and around 0200 hours found themselves in the darkness "...half-way across 'No Man's Land,' several hundred yards beyond [their] front line and likely to be utterly wiped out in twenty seconds should the Germans sight us." When they finally reached their intended front line position they found nothing more than shell holes connected by shallow ditches. The early hours of 18 October would be hazardous to at least two Americans in the service of Britain's King. Within 15 minutes of reaching their position the Germans welcomed the fresh troops with an artillery barrage that buried Sgt. McClintock. He was unearthed stunned and unhurt. A few minutes later three more soldiers of the 87th Battalion were buried, but only one arm and a leg could be found. Another bursting shell buried Private Ralph Crew after less than one day in the front line.¹²

Their Flowers the Tenderness of Patient Minds

Wounded, Private Ralph Crew was dug out of the ground and carried to a regimental aid post before being transferred to a casualty clearing station. There he was treated for a severely contused spine while awaiting transportation to a general hospital. While Private Crew still lay in the casualty clearing station, the Canadian 4th Division continued its preparations for its first major action and at six minutes past noon on 21 October, the assault on Regina Trench began. The noise of battle was a disturbing companion for a man wounded immediately upon his introduction to the war and now three days awaiting evacuation. Of some comfort was the news that the Canadians had been successful in their attack. Most disturbing was the flood of wounded men into the casualty

clearing station. The 87th Battalion had suffered 283 casualties with 114 fatalities. A commanding officer of another unit lamented in his diary, "If hell is as bad as what I have seen at Courcellette, I would not wish my worst enemy to go there." The following day, 22 October, Private Crew was transported to Boulogne, France.¹³

The officer in charge of medicine at the 3rd Canadian General Hospital in Boulogne was Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae. McCrae had been a prominent Montreal pathologist before the war. He was a veteran of the Boer War and had been an early participant in World War One as an artillery officer mobilized from the pre-war militia. In June 1915 McCrae was transferred into the medical service, reluctantly leaving his field command. The previous month while posted in Flanders he had witnessed the death of a close friend, a fellow officer who had been hit by an artillery shell, disintegrating his body. McCrae's gunners gathered up what they could find placing it in a sandbag. Additional bags were filled with rags and attached to create the appearance of a body and then buried with McCrae performing the funeral himself. McCrae objected to the popular form of religion preached by army chaplains. The questions and contradictions raised in war by sudden death and squalid living revealed the average sporty Church of England chaplain to be the amateur he was. In grief, following the funeral, John McCrae sat down and penned one of the most famous poems of the war, *In Flanders Fields*, which gave birth to the idea of the poppy as the symbol of remembrance for the war dead. Two years of warfare had churned up the soil of Flanders and provided the perfect environment for poppies, which were thriving in the loose soil among the graves. Already weakened by overseas service, McCrae's obsession with combating infectious disease and contaminated wounds ended with his death in January 1918 of pneumonia and meningitis.¹⁴

Private Crew's brief stay in Boulogne was the start of a series of transfers common to those on extended convalescence. Crew had what English-speaking soldiers had come to call a "blighty," a wound severe enough to warrant transfer to Great Britain. On 25 October he was sent to the 2nd Australian General Hospital in Wimereux, France and then the following day to the 3rd Scottish General Hospital in Glasgow

before finally ending up at the Canadian Convalescent Hospital in Woodcote Park, Epsom, England on 29 November. Still suffering from pain in his lower back, he had a tendency to lean to the right. It was not until 12 December that he was found fit for full duty and discharged from the hospital. Crew would be transferred a total of nine more times between various reserve units in England before rejoining the 87th Battalion on 21 August 1917. While in England he rose to the rank of corporal in the reserves. Before returning to active duty in France he reverted to his official overseas rank of private.¹⁵

Not In the Hands of Boys But In Their Eyes

Upon returning to his old outfit Ralph Crew must have felt more out of place than he did during his original, awkward arrival in 1916. Surely he had to explain that he was not a total stranger and the wound stripe on his sleeve was at least some circumstantial proof of his credibility as a soldier. The 87th Battalion had on several occasions received replacements from other battalions, some which were disbanded. The Grenadier Guards had become a source of pride to the Canadians. Keeping them up to strength by absorbing other units such as the 60th Battalion was partly a political decision that often did not sit well with the replacements. Yet assimilating new troops into existing units is a fact of war, which is made easier when the unit is proficiently led and trained.¹⁷

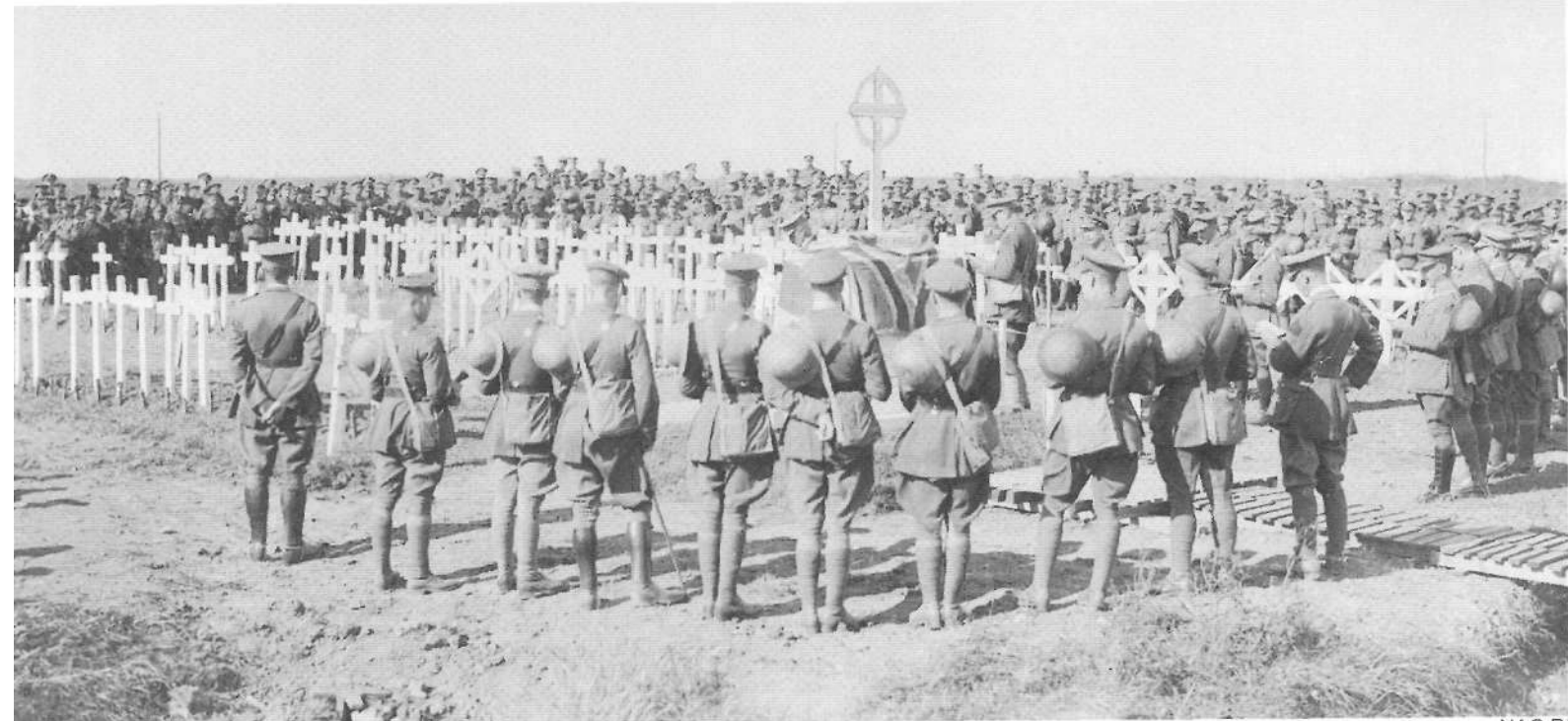
Ralph Crew had missed much over the last 10 months including a recent visit by the King of England, George V. More significantly the Grenadier Guards had just come off the line again after an attack on Aconite Trench near Lens, France on 15 August. They had made a strong push in support of 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions during the successful assault on Hill 70. The butcher's bill for the 87th Battalion was again steep with 238 casualties, 102 that were fatal. Four days after his arrival Private Crew found himself in the front lines again for six days. During this period 18 more guardsmen were lost, two of whom died. After pulling back into a support trench for five more days they were shelled with gas on 5 September. Five men were affected, two fatally. On 6 September the 87th Battalion left the front and went into bivouac for a rest.¹⁸



(Irene Matteson Collection)

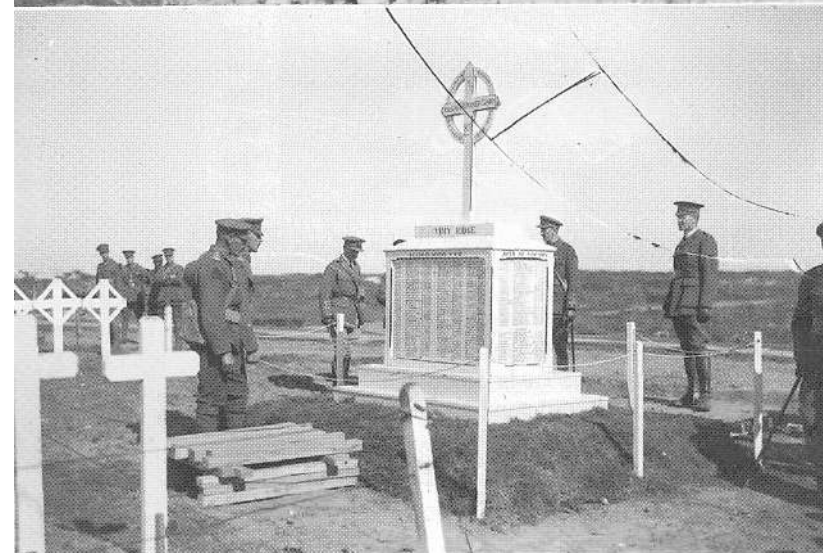
Ralph Crew (standing) as a Corporal in England between 24 March & 7 July 1917. Crew is wearing a seven button Canadian tunic with general service CEF collar devices and "GG CANADA" shoulder titles. His friend has a wound stripe on his left sleeve (Crew's is hidden) and has "87-C" collar devices. Both men are wearing 87th Battalion Canadian Grenadier Guard cap badges.¹⁶

September 16th saw the entire battalion marching towards Vimy Ridge for an impressive ceremony to unveil a monument dedicated to the 155 Grenadier Guards killed there on 9 April 1917. The monument was positioned in what had been no-man's-land and was surrounded by a small cemetery. Major-General Sir David Watson, commander of 4th Division, unveiled the monument. The Battle of Vimy Ridge had already taken on a special significance for the Canadians. In 1915-1916 the units of the CEF were joined together to form the Canadian Corps. The creation of this Corps allowed the Canadians more freedom in planning operations which was advantageous to them and the allied cause. The attack on Vimy Ridge by the Canadian Corps as part of the Arras offensive tested the theory of independent corps level operations within the British Army. The Canadians only used 60,000 men in the assault (Allied losses had already been over 180,000 in the Vimy sector since 1914). The meticulous planning and training down to



Above: Memorial service to the men of the 87th Battalion who fell at Vimy Ridge, September 1917.

Left: A close-up of the 87th Battalion memorial.



NAC PA 8140

the platoon level integrated with the overwhelming use of artillery at Vimy were to become Canadian trademarks. Added to the Canadians' arsenal of wiles was their aggressive use of trench raiding to gather intelligence. And for the first time in the war confidence was being shown in the enlisted ranks to take the initiative should their command structure be shot to pieces. To the British this was radical doctrine so foreign to their institutional thought that it was dismissed as doomed to failure. The result was that Vimy Ridge was the first unqualified large-scale victory for the Allies on the Western Front. The Germans, who considered the ridge an impregnable fortress, withdrew far enough to the east of to render observation from its heights of little value. From now on they would take notice of where the Canadian Corps was positioned. The battle also proved that units that

were well trained and had high esprit de corps would still suffer enormous casualties. In five minutes German machine guns had cut down half of the Grenadier Guards. Vimy Ridge proved to be a watershed event that marked the emergence of the Canadians as a credible and independent military force.¹⁹

The image of the 87th Battalion gathered on the slopes of Vimy Ridge in remembrance to their dead still inspires deep emotions in Canadians. To the men who took place in the ceremony it surely grounded them in the fatalistic realities of their mortality as soldiers.

What Passing-Bells for These Who Die As Cattle?

The year 1916 had been disastrous for the Allies with losses of over 500,000 at Verdun and 600,000 on the Somme. By 1917 the French were losing their will to fight and large-scale mutinies occurred in front line areas. They needed time to rebuild their discipline and only the British could provide such a commodity by distracting the Germans. The distraction would be a full scale British summer offensive in Flanders. In theory the attacks would be aimed at liberating Belgian ports being used as U-Boat bases. German rail lines were also as close as ten miles to the front and a breakthrough in

Flanders would disrupt the Germans' ability to make war at sea and supply their forces in the area.²⁰

The Belgian coastal plain of Flanders had at one time been a swamp that was drained and turned into farmland. The farmers had fertilized their fields with both animal and human excrement for hundreds of years. Three years of bombardment had destroyed the man-made drainage system and turned Flanders into a sea of putrid mud after heavy rains. Unknown to the British planners, the summer of 1917 would be one of the wettest ever. After a preliminary barrage of over 4 million shells the British launched a massive attack on 31 July against the Germans in the Ypres Salient aimed at taking the village of Passchendaele before slicing north to the English Channel. The battle became known as Third Ypres or in the vernacular of the fighting men simply "Third Wipers." The results were the same as the previous large-scale battles. Tens of thousands of men were traded for parcels of muddy wasteland. British strategic objectives sank into the mud. Attrition had become the new justification for the futility of the carnage. By October the goals had become simplistic - take the pile of rubble that was now Passchendaele and the surrounding high ground in a symbolic victory. To fail could result in devastating political consequences. The British needed help and they turned to the Canadians.²¹

The Shrill, Demented Choirs of Wailing Shells

Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie, Commander of the CEF, rejected his original orders to send the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions to the Ypres Salient. He insisted on keeping the Canadian Corps intact. The British high command relented and was then presented with two additional demands from Currie. That after taking Passchendaele the Canadians would return for the winter to the Vimy sector, and that the CEF would get all the artillery it needed. The British agreed and the 4th Canadian Division began moving north to Flanders to relieve the 3rd Australian Division. As the Canadians moved forward they were unprepared for what had possibly become the most tortured landscape in the history of warfare, a wasteland of churned up shell holes with not a blade of grass left. Dead carcasses of men and animals combined with the detritus of countless rotting bodies blown to pieces were mixed with the debris of battle in a sea of viscous, virulent yellow mud. It was a melange of human suffering beyond comprehension. Sir Philip Gibbs attempted to put the indescribable scene into words:

Bodies and bits of bodies, and clots of blood, and green metallic looking slime, made by explosive gases, were floating on the surface of the water below the crater banks...Our men lived there and died there within a few yards of the

Men of the 87th Battalion listen to a comrade playing a mouth organ.





NAC PA 1662

The 87th Battalion enjoying a mid-day meal amid mud caused by storms, July 1917.

enemy, crouched below the sandbags and burrowed into the sides of the crater. Lice crawled over them in legions. Human flesh, rotting and stinking, mere pulp, was pasted into the mudbanks. If they dug to get deeper cover, their shovels went into the softness of dead bodies who had been their comrades. Scraps of flesh, booted legs, blackened hands, eyeless heads, came falling over them when the enemy trench-mortared their position...²²

As the Canadians relieved the Australians they "...looked like grisly discards of the battlefield, long unburied, who had risen and were in search of graves." For the moment the 11th Brigade and the 87th Battalion were spared the worst of it. They marched through the ruined city of Ypres by the future site of the famous Menin Gate Memorial and up the Zonnebeke road where "...every 20 paces or less lay a body. Some frightfully mutilated, without legs, arms and heads and covered in mud and slime..." to the village of Potijze where they went into headquarters reserve. The period from 27 October to 2 November was spent improving ground communications. Working parties of 300-500 men were supplied nightly to carry wooden bath mats and duckboards forward for the creation of walkways only wide enough for one man to pass. Down these paths came the stretcher details, the walking wounded and the dazed zombie-like men being relieved. The 87th

Battalion was also assigned to bury communications cables, arduous work often done under shellfire for which the battalion received letters of recognition from both the Division and Brigade Commanders. During this time 87th Battalion Military Cross winner, Lieutenant Howard Sutherland, while in charge of a mule pack train was thrown by a shell burst from a plank road face first in a water-filled crater. One of his mules clamped its teeth to his coat collar and pulled the stunned officer's face out of the mud saving him.²³

When not working the Grenadier Guards remained in their miserable holes that served as temporary homes and tried to avoid drawing the attention of the numerous German bombing planes. One of the few comforts in being a soldier in the British or Canadian Army was the rum ration for units in the front lines. Usually just before dawn or immediately prior to an attack each man was given "...one-half gill (one-sixty-fourth of a gallon) of pure unadulterated Jamaica rum, the real article, thick, syrupy stuff, such is not generally known commercially, particularly in the United States. It was administered by an officer or sergeant in person, at a stated time, and had to be swallowed then and there, or not at all." Private Crew's records show that he was a man of good character and no entries were made under the heading of "number of drunks."



Men of the 87th Battalion receive their mid-day ration within a shelled area, August 1917.

But it is easy to imagine that any man regardless of his views on temperance would take comfort in an officially administered drink under such horrendous conditions.²⁴

At 0550 hours on 30 October 420 guns of all calibres opened up in a deafening barrage that preceded a major push by the Canadians under a blood-red sky. It was the beginning of the end for the Germans in Passchedaele, but the Grenadier Guards would miss this action as they pulled back from the forward area and went into billets on 2 November. The men settled down comfortably in the farmland, safely removed from the front. Here they were issued new underwear after bathing away the grime and vermin of the battlefield. The mornings were devoted to training and the afternoons to recreation, predominately athletics and music. Equipment was repaired and special attention was paid to the protective muzzle and breech covers that were ordered attached to the rifles to prevent mud fouling. On 5 November the news came that the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions had captured Passchendaele. The Canadians had prevailed in a stubborn and deliberate fight that had cost them 16,000 men added to the nearly 300,000 lost by the Allies. The 87th Battalion would be needed to relieve the tired troops and hold the newly-won ground. On 10 November they started forward, carrying two days of rations

and three pair of dry socks which were to be changed daily after rubbing their feet with whale oil to prevent trench foot. Marching all day the battalion made its way single file over the broken stretches of wooden bathmats to relieve the 22nd Battalion whose headquarters was in a concrete pillbox half full of water. There were no trenches or dugouts, only isolated sections of fortified shell craters. One company became lost and spent an exhausting night slogging through the glue-like mud under occasional shellfire. Over the next few days men became easily detached while running messages or carrying rations and had difficulty finding their places in the line.²⁵

Just to the left of the 87th Battalion's position, northeast of Passchendaele the Senior Chaplain of the 1st Division, CEF, Canon Fredrick Scott had been visiting the front to offer comfort and assistance to the wounded and religious rights to the dead. His son, Sergeant George Scott of the 87th Battalion, had been killed instantly by a machine gun bullet through the head in the Regina Trench attack that followed Ralph Crew's wounding near Courcelette, France. Under difficult conditions Canon Scott hunted for his son's grave near where he had fallen. He uncovered a hand as he scraped away the mud in the area around a poorly marked swallow grave. He was able to identify his son's body from a signet ring on an

exposed hand. The dead Grenadier Guard could not be retrieved under the still dangerous conditions, so the grieving father hastily paid tribute to his son and marked his grave, hoping to return for it in more peaceful times when it could receive a proper burial. For the duration of the war Canon Scott dutifully followed the fate of his dead son's battalion, while continually trying to bring a purpose to the human suffering and losses of all the Canadian soldiers. After three years of warfare he had yet to witness such a scene as the Passchendaele battlefield. In his postwar memoir he describes it with disturbing visual detail:

Rain was falling, the dreary waste of shell-ploughed mud, yellow and clinging, stretched off into the distance as far as the eye could see. Bearer parties, tired and pale, were carrying out the wounded on stretchers, making a journey of several miles in doing so. The bodies of the dead men lay here and there where they had fallen in the advance. I came across one poor boy who had been killed that morning. His body was covered with a shiny coating of yellow mud, and looked like a statue made of bronze. He had a beautiful face, with finely shaped head covered with close curling hair, and looked more like some work of art than a human being. The huge shell holes were half full of water often reddened with human blood and many of the wounded had rolled down into the pools and been drowned.

At the front that day, a runner and I had joined in a brief burial service over the body of a gallant young officer lying where he fell on the side of a large shell-hole. As I uttered the words "I am the Resurrection and the Life, saith the Lord," it seemed to me that the lonely wind bore them over that region of gloom and death as it longed to carry the message of hope far away to the many sad hearts in Canada whose loved ones will lie, until the end, in unknown graves at Pas[s]chendaele."²⁶

The Germans were out of breath and could not muster the strength for the anticipated counterattack so they retaliated with a prolonged artillery bombardment. On 14 November the 87th Battalion's position was shelled intermittently throughout the day causing a number of casualties. The misty morning of the 15th began with the battalion trying to move closer to the enemy and away from the outskirts of Passchendaele, which was an obvious target for artillery. At 0630 hours the Germans opened up again for one hour on the Canadian front lines with gas, overhead shrapnel and guns of all

calibers. The heavy shelling resumed for about an hour that evening. The 16th was to be their last day at the front and the morning mist presaged another heavy round of shelling that began at 0650 hours and continued throughout the day. At 0430 hours the 102nd Battalion began relieving the Grenadier Guards. Sometime on the 16th, probably during the relief of the 87th Battalion, a German gunner east of Passchendaele methodically pulled the lanyard of his artillery piece. A man born and suckled in a more hopeful and innocent world set into motion a chain reaction that sent a mass of steel and high explosive arching through the Belgian sky. At the end of the shell's arc was a man who had also been born and reared in a more innocent reality. Private Ralph Crew was struck by shrapnel in his hip, groin and face, and lay writhing in the infected mud, bleeding and with a broken leg.²⁷

And Each Slow Dusk A Drawing-Down of Blinds

Stretcher-bearer details had the unenviable task of carrying the wounded while sliding into shell holes with almost every step, often under shellfire. At times they were forced to carry "in squads often men to a stretcher" because of the difficult conditions. A trip from the front lines to the regimental aid post was often an excruciating six hours or more of jostling for a wounded man. From there seriously wounded men such as Private Crew would have been immediately sent from the 4th Division's transfer point at Frost House and then by light railway or ambulance car to the advanced dressing station at Vlamertinghe Mill. There shrapnel cases were immediately given anti-tetanus inoculations using a horse syringe. The injections would leave "...a lump on your chest as big as a base ball which stays there for forty-eight hours." Clothes were then removed, wounds cleaned and disinfected with flavine, iodine or hypochloride of lime, and if needed, surgery performed. In Crew's case he had one of the most desperate and difficult wounds to treat, a fractured right femur and shrapnel in the pelvis. "There was a chance of doing something but the hope was small." The accepted course of action was the Carrel-Dakin method, which attempted to control the sepsis by removing shrapnel, debris and hopelessly damaged tissue, followed by repeated deep

the members of the battalion who had been killed. It was the first memorial service held in England by a Canadian unit. Attending were the Director of Canadian Chaplain Services and the Commanding Officer of the British Grenadier Guards. It was an impressive service and the Last Post was sounded by the Grenadier Guards drums followed by the words:³¹

Let us remember with thanksgiving and with all honour before God and man, the members of the Canadian Grenadier Guards who died gloriously on the field of battle, giving their lives in service of their Country and Empire. Rest eternal grant to them, O Lord, and may light perpetual shine upon them.³²

Ralph Crew never participated in an attack and it is quite possible that he never fired a weapon at the enemy. He served predominately in support roles or a reserve capacity for most of the war. On the three occasions that took him to the front lines he did little more than hold ground, while enduring shellfire and gas. He was a human soul sent to occupy space into which friend and foe introduced as many explosions, chemicals and projectiles as possible. It was a statistical exercise in which survival was a mathematical probability determined by not occupying the wrong space at the wrong time. Ralph Crew had become a victim of the insane concept of attrition. Just keep attacking until the enemy loses the will to resist. Create and sustain continuous violence on an unprecedented scale until suffering and grief exhaust entire cultures. Crew family lore claims that Ralph Crew was killed at the very end of his service. While the United States had entered the war in 1917 it is doubtful that he would have been released to serve with his own country. Yet being mortally wounded at the close of Third Ypres, one of history's largest battles, gives some merit to the family's story that he died near the end of his service.

Four years of war and three major battles had seen over 500,000 men die in the 25 square kilometer stretch of ground known as the Ypres Salient. Nearly 90,000 of these men (not including the missing Germans) disappeared into the mud and were never found. After the war a Belgian farmer told a Canadian correspondent that " my land is richer than before. It is the best I have ever seen. My crops are... the biggest yet."³³

No Mockeries for Them; No Prayers nor Bells

At the time of Private Crew's death, one of the greatest of the World War One poets, British Lieutenant Wilfred Owen, was recovering from shell shock. Owen had been discharged the month before from a psychological convalescent hospital in Scotland where he had taken to writing war poetry as catharsis for what he called a "seared spirit." He was an articulate and sensitive man whose whole being had become extraordinarily focused on his poetry by the trauma of war. In a pre-war poem he had ironically used the phrase "E'en blood, which makes poets sing and prophets see." Strangely Owen had himself become prophetic and believed that mankind had broken its covenant with God resulting in an apocalyptic bloodbath. He was a man who in the words of one of his poems "...saw God through mud" yet he had rejected his Anglican upbringing as being nationalistically dogmatic. Owen felt true Christianity required rigid pacifism that was blind to the fates of nations. Writing war poetry helped Owen resolve his inner conflict between his role as an army officer and his Christian beliefs that fueled a desire to see all forms of militarism abolished. Owen returned to combat duty and was awarded the Military Cross for valor. On 11 November 1918 bells rang across Great Britain rejoicing the end of "The War to End All Wars" that had claimed over 13 million lives. On that same date Owen's mother received a telegram notifying her that her son had been killed during one of the last actions of the war.³⁴

Anthem for Doomed Youth

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
-Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.*
No mockeries for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,-
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.³⁵

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)

* A devotional prayer, often a doublet

Notes

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