

# **The Blind Leading The Blind**

## **The Battle of the St. Eloi Craters**

**Tim Cook**



The battle at St. Eloi between 27 March and 19 April 1916 was a minor side-show compared to the armageddon raging between the Germans and French at Verdun. Yet, it was an important event for the 2nd Canadian Division as it was their first set-piece battle on the Western Front. It was also an unmitigated disaster.

The Battle of the St. Eloi Craters is one of those battles which has been forgotten, perhaps conveniently, by Canadian military historians. There are no books or articles devoted to it and most military works use throw away lines when describing the embarrassing affair. Only G.W.L. Nicholson's official history of the Canadian Expeditionary Force thoroughly records what occurred during those two weeks in April. Yet the official account is unfortunately sterile and sheds little light on the nature of the fighting. The men who fought at St. Eloi deserve better.

The 2nd Division was rushed to the Western Front in September 1915 to join the 1st Division which had distinguished itself at the 2nd Battle of Ypres. The two divisions formed the Canadian Corps in the southern portion of the Ypres sector. As the Canadians settled into the terrible conditions of trench warfare, they not only had to protect themselves from the Germans but also from the wind, sleet and mud as they learned to adapt in the maelstrom of destruction of the Western Front.

St. Eloi was about five kilometres south of the town of Ypres and was situated on the corner of a salient, which expanded from a base of 600 yards wide and penetrated 100 yards northward into the British lines. As a result of earlier advances by the Germans the trenches within the sector ran almost east to west, rather than north to south, as was usual for the trenches on the Western Front. The sector had been the scene of vicious fighting throughout the war due to the slightly elevated land called the "Mound" which commanded a view of the entire area.

The Canadian Corps was part of General Sir Herbert Plumer's British Second Army. Following the accepted military principle of straightening out salients, and wanting revenge for a successful

German assault against the British held position called "The Bluff in February, Plumer ordered V Corps to attack and cut off the enemy-held salient at St. Eloi, where 33 mines had been blown to produce a shell-pocked wasteland of mud.<sup>3</sup>

In August 1915, British sappers had skilfully sunk three deep shafts beneath the German lines. The British set three mines beneath the "Mound" and the German front line in preparation for an upcoming operation. Plumer decided that the Canadians would relieve the attacking British brigades after the positions were taken in order to defend the newly-won trenches against the inevitable German counterattacks. This, of course, was not an ideal situation as the Canadians were taking over trenches which were facing the wrong direction, without a clear idea of the ground they would be trying to hold. But the men of the 2nd Division, eager to get into their first battle, were not only willing but unconcerned about such "trivialities." It is excusable for naive young soldiers to be "chomping at the bit" and wanting to see battle, but what about their commanders?

## The Battle

At 0415 hours on 27 March 1916 the British opened up with their guns and detonated the mines which all but obliterated the enemy front line. The blast was so powerful that it was heard at Folkestone, in Kent, England.<sup>4</sup> The massive explosion wiped out the old landmarks of the battlefield and collapsed trenches on both sides.<sup>5</sup> The outcome was seven large craters which pockmarked the "Mound" - numbered 1 to 7 from west to east.

The British 9th Brigade attacked as soon as the mines were blown, swarming over the German lines. The 1st Battalion, Northumberland Fusiliers captured their objectives, but the 4th Royal Fusiliers, attacking on the left near Craters 5 and 6, were held up by small-arms fire and the boggy terrain. A gap was left in the British lines and into it flowed the quick-reacting German troops who occupied Crater 5.<sup>6</sup> In bloody hand-to-hand combat, the British struggled for a week to drive the Germans out until the 8th King's Own Scottish Borderers finally captured the last crater on 3 April.

### *Opposite:*

*Canadian soldiers returning from the trenches.*  
(Photo by W.I. Castle, NAC PA 832)

Initially the Canadians were to replace the 3rd Division on the night of 6/7 April, but due to the exhaustive struggle and the intense casualties the relief of the 3rd Division was moved up three nights to 3/4 April.<sup>7</sup> The British feared a strong German counterattack would drive the exhausted British troops out of the hard-won lines; it was decided by Plumer to replace them, even though their lines were unstable, with the 2nd Canadian Division.<sup>8</sup> Initially it was suggested by the British that the Canadians lend one Brigade to the 3rd Division as new troops, but General Edwin Alderson, commander of the Canadian Corps, decided that the Canadians should take over the line in its entirety rather than dissect the Division.<sup>9</sup> Although it was important to keep the Division together, this unplanned early relief only added to the confusion of the new Canadian Division.<sup>10</sup>

At 0300 hours on 4 April, the 6th Canadian Brigade, commanded by Brigadier-General H.D.B. Ketchen, took over from the British 76th Brigade in front of the craters. Private Fraser of the 31st Battalion, remembered how the relieving British troops could furnish them with no information and as the exuberant Canadians passed by the dejected British, one Canadian whispered, "Cheer up! Don't be downhearted!" "You'll be downhearted," whispered the Tommy, "when you see what's up there; I have lost my best chums."<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the Tommy sobered up the Canadians, but nothing could fully prepare them for the horror they were about to encounter.

Craters 2, 3, 4 and 5 had been blown close together and they formed an impassable obstacle - the largest hole being 50 feet deep and 180 feet across. The 27th Battalion took over the trenches in front of the first five craters. Sergeant A.H. Bell described the Canadian line as being "on a forward slope, in full view of the enemy, and owing to the shape of the salient, exposed to artillery fire from the front, as well as from behind the left flank."<sup>13</sup>

When the Canadians took over the line, they had only a vague idea where they were relative to the enemy and where their positions were on their maps.<sup>14</sup> Even the Divisional Summary of Operations, rather dour in its descriptions, described the new line as "more of a line on the map than an actual line of defence."<sup>15</sup> The terrible state of the trenches made an impression on Private Fraser:

When day broke, the sights that met our gaze were so horrible and ghastly that they beggar description. Heads, arms and legs were protruding from the mud at every yard and dear knows how many bodies the earth swallowed. Thirty corpses were at least showing [in] the crater and beneath its clayey waters other victims must be lying killed and drowned.<sup>16</sup>

A Divisional order to Canadian Battalion commanders stated that "the craters themselves will form an obstacle in front of the middle of the line and will help towards its defence. The flank portions of the new line will be wired as soon as possible, and listening posts and bombing posts will be arranged for."<sup>17</sup> Although sensible orders, due to the hurried relief the Canadian officers had been unable to reconnoitre the front lines and what they now found left them appalled. The trenches were from two to three feet deep in water, for all the natural drainage in the area had been destroyed by shell fire and the explosion of the mines.<sup>18</sup> There was no barbed wire and there were only machine guns in four of the 12 posts that were supposedly held by British Lewis gunners.<sup>19</sup> More detrimental was the lack of a continuous defensive trench due to the massive bombardment by the German shells. The soldiers of the 27th Battalion were forced to inhabit shell craters and used night patrols in the hope of linking some form of common defence.

To the left of the 27th Battalion, the 31st Battalion held the smaller craters 6 and 7. The craters had not been manned by the British, who considered them a target for German artillery. But Ketchen planned to consolidate them, for they were on higher ground and dryer than the watery ditches the Canadians were currently holding. That first night the Canadians set to shoring up their defences as the German guns remained relatively silent.

The Canadians worked hard at improving these defences, with the 2nd Pioneer Battalion attempting to dig a communication trench from the support trenches to the craters, reversing the parapet of the front line, pumping out some of the water and removing the British and German dead. Over 600 men in the working parties doggedly hoped to strengthen the trenches before daylight, but "at dawn...a very intense hostile bombardment opened on all trenches...of the Divisional front, causing great destruction to the defensive works and inflicting heavy casualties."<sup>20</sup>

Throughout 4 and 5 April, the whole Canadian front was intensely bombarded, resulting in mounting casualties. By noon on the 4th every second man in one of the 27th's forward companies had been hit.<sup>21</sup> Frank Maheux recalled the horrific conditions in a letter to his wife, "We were walking on dead soldiers and the worse was they was [sic] [in] about three feet of mud and water. I saw poor fellows trying to bandage their wounds, bombs, heavy shells falling all over them... it is the worst sight that a man ever wants to see."<sup>22</sup> The battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel I.R. Snider, was forced to thin out his front line to avoid more crippling casualties, but this made them more vulnerable to a German infantry assault. In front of the craters, the Canadians only had a few bombing parties and four Lewis gun detachments due to the lack of suitable trenches.<sup>23</sup>

The 31st Battalion's War Diary has the disconcerting note for 4 April, "A Company, holding right of our line, including No. 5 Crater in front of St. Eloi, is not in direct communication with balance of Battalion."<sup>24</sup> Not only were the 31st's Companies not in contact with each other but they were not in contact with the neighbouring 27th Battalion. A company commander described the chaos:

The conditions were such that I personally could do little or nothing. The communication between Battalion HQs and companies was much broken and, in the same manner, platoons and smaller bodies were cut off from their Company Commanders, and were obliged to act on their own responsibility.<sup>25</sup>

For the inexperienced Canadians, this led to confusion and a static position as frightened men attempted to burrow into the ground to escape the shelling.

On the 6th, still defiantly entrenched in front and in its craters, the 31st Battalion was blasted by the German artillery for 17 continuous hours. The shelling was, as one soldier noted, "painfully accurate."<sup>26</sup> The War Diary recorded the bombardment as:

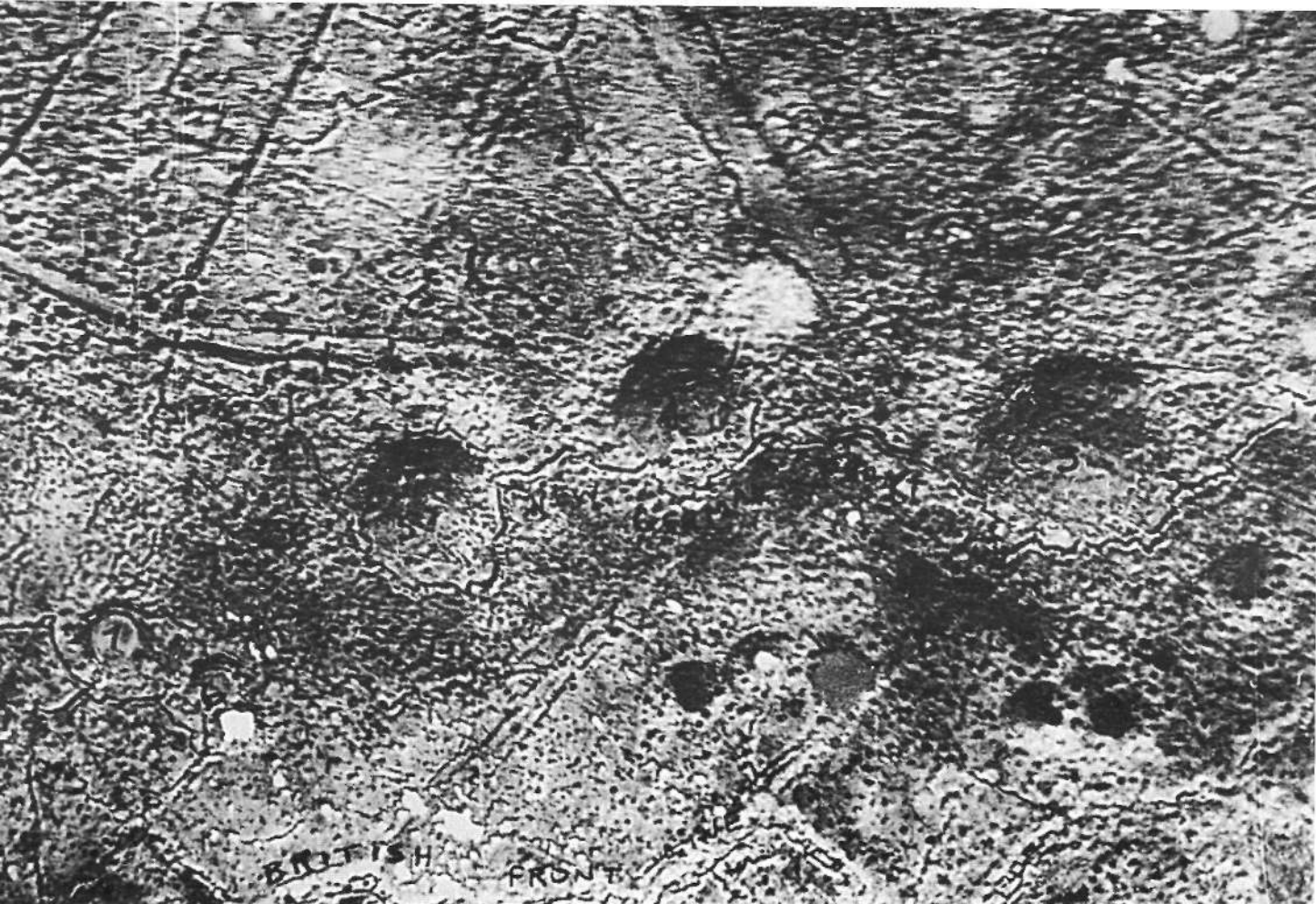
A most terrific concentrated enemy bombardment...[they are] using trench torpedoes and all shells of all kinds and sizes. Hundreds of shells must be bursting per minute. We must expect heavy losses...<sup>27</sup>

Casualties began to flow back to the medical officer who recorded "cases of shattered nerves...[due to] some men being buried by shells" and "a number [of men]...coming in with chilled, sodden feet...[from] standing in water and mud for 48 hrs [without relief]."<sup>28</sup> Yet the Canadians responded in kind. Major Daly recorded that his platoon was cut off during the bombardment and attacked by about 150 Germans, but he and "his platoon opened up with rapid rifle fire under heavy bombardment, and accounted for about 25 dead at close range."<sup>29</sup> The 31st may have been demoralized and battered, but it refused to break.

On the morning of 6 April, the 29th Battalion began to relieve the badly mauled 27th Battalion.<sup>30</sup> The men of the 27th were exhausted and "most officers had not slept for over 100 hours." In three days they had suffered 40 killed and 189 wounded.<sup>31</sup> With only one narrow communication trench for both the exhausted and wounded defenders and the fresh troops of the 29th, the relief took much too long to carry out. The Germans, aware that inexperienced or sloppy troops were coming into the line, attacked behind a violent artillery barrage.

The Germans raided with two battalions astride the road that ran from St. Eloi south-eastward between the 3rd and 4th crater. Due to the broken front line there was a gap of 80 yards between the right flank of the 31st Battalion and the left flank of the 27th Battalion. At no time were the two units touching each other and the gap was covered with only two platoons of bombing parties.<sup>33</sup> The unfortunate bombing parties were quickly overrun and within three hours the Germans had regained Craters 2, 3, 4 and 5.

The greatest failure during the battle was that those in the rear, did not know what was occurring at the "sharp-end." Lieutenant S.H. Wilson of the 27th Battalion described their situation: "Men were holed up in shellholes and it became impossible to keep in touch....It was impossible to use runners in the daylight, the enemy being in the habit of using field guns for sniping purposes, and [with] the landmarks constantly changing in many cases my runners could not find their objectives after dark."<sup>34</sup> The atrocious weather which kept aerial reconnaissance to a minimum, combined with the intense German



*The St. Eloi Craters, photographed from the air, 16 April 1916.  
(Mitchell-Turner Air Photos Collection, NAC C-43979)*

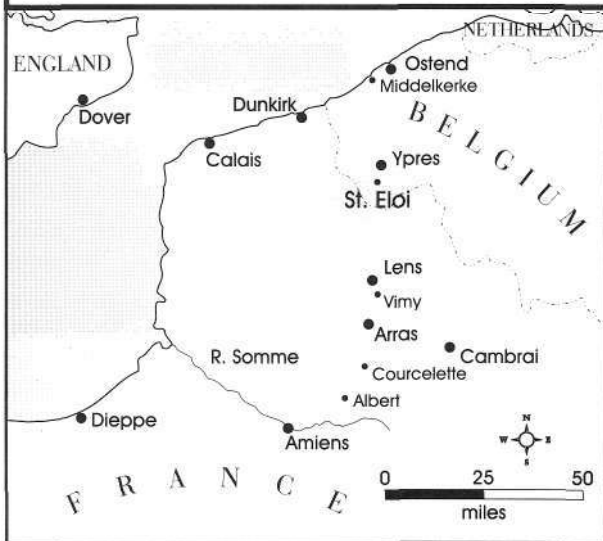
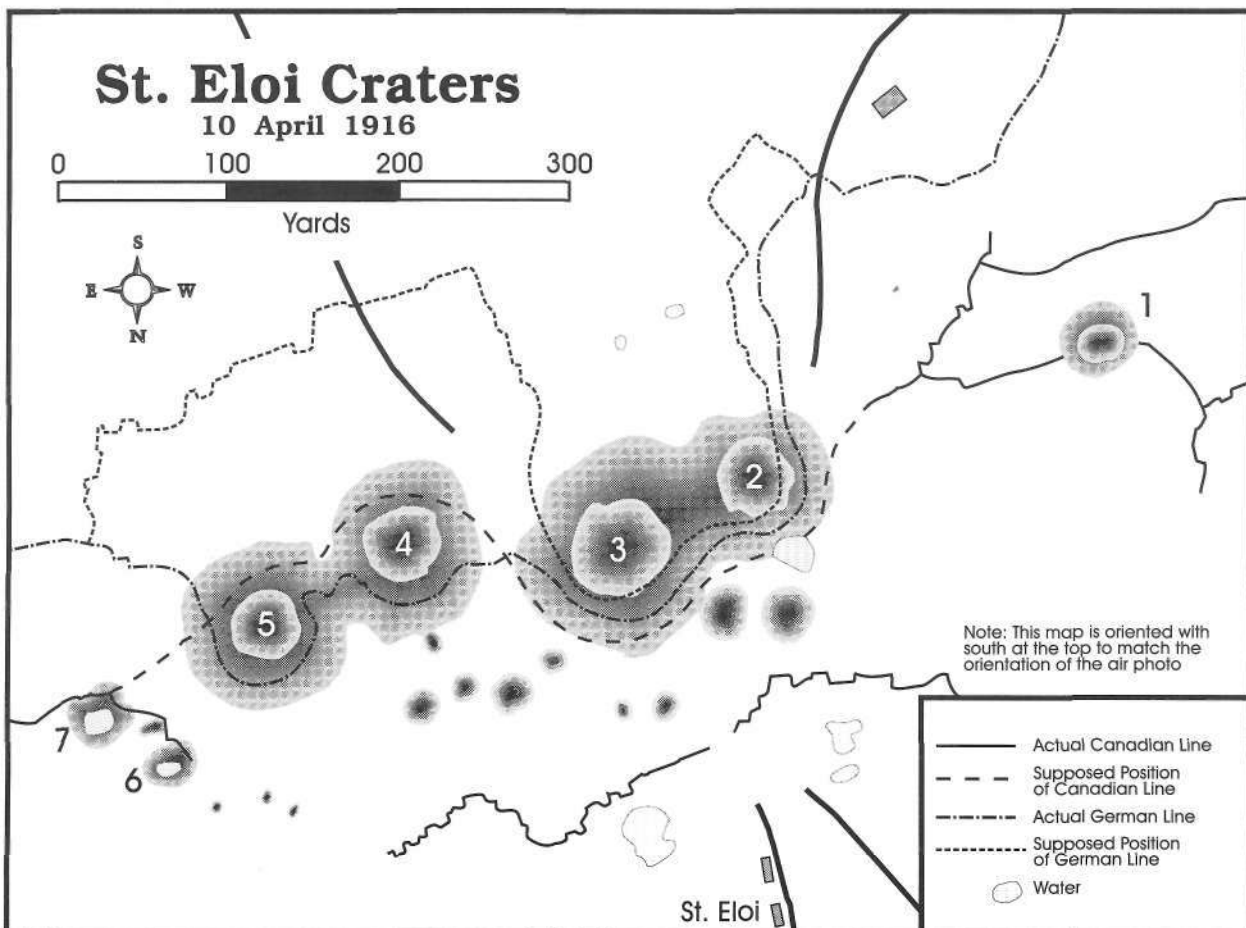
artillery barrages, left General Richard Turner, commander of the 2nd Division, and the staff officers at Divisional Command with an unclear idea of what was occurring. In the Summary of Divisional Operations for 7 April, it was reported that, "after an intense bombardment which destroyed all communication and wire, it was reported to the Divisional HQ that there were no Germans in C5, but suspected Germans in C3 and C4."<sup>35</sup> The Divisional and Brigade Headquarters did not realize the full extent of their losses (the Germans were in all three craters), while the inexperienced soldiers at the front had even less idea of what positions they held.

Upon losing the craters the Canadians launched a daylight counterattack, but the raiding party of bombers from the 27th and 29th were virtually annihilated by German defenders as they struggled to get within throwing distance.<sup>36</sup> The Canadians attempted to take the Craters again but the raid was cancelled; as the Intelligence Summary recorded:

The enemy, possibly expecting such a move, and not seeming to care whether they hit our men or their own, sprayed the craters all morning with heavy shrapnel. The reconnaissance returned all wounded except the officer, who deemed a change in plans necessary.<sup>37</sup>

Following the failure to take Crater 2 and S Ketchen ordered the 31st, reinforced by the 28th to retake Crater 4. From a starting position *i*: Craters 6 and 7, the bombers could see the high lip of a crater to their right. Enemy shellfire and heavy rain, combined with the darkness, confused the 75 raiders and they attacked and took a series of small craters north of Crater 4. As Sergeant A.H. Bell wrote after the war:

The craters...referred to were not No. 4 and 5, as we supposed but the foremost of a group of three [craters] which faced No. 4 crater [to its North]...At this time we did not realize that this part of the front was pelted with a mass of craters of varying sizes (but all of them very large to us) and therefore, firmly believed that we had made Nos. 4 and 5 secure.<sup>38</sup>



Interestingly, on the night of the 7th three Germans were captured by a Canadian patrol. The Summary of Operations reported that, "2 of these prisoners came from C3 and one states that he had been in C4. They all were unanimous in stating that the Germans hold all the craters - 2, 3, 4 and 5 - with seventy men each."<sup>41</sup> This troubling information was recorded, but both Turner and Brigadier Rennie did nothing to verify the prisoners' testimonies.

The Canadians were in a bad situation, defending the low ground of a poorly constructed defensive position, and surrounded by artillery on three sides which was firing into a narrow area of front. On the 8th General Turner suggested to Plumer that he should either pull the Canadians out of the craters and bomb the Germans with artillery, as they were doing to the Canadians, or attack on a wider front in order to have a larger target for the German artillery to fire at. To attack on a wider front would have been suicide, for surprise was lost and the porridge-like conditions of the front would make the crossing of no-man's-land close to impossible for the heavily-laden soldiers. The other option was to pull out of the untenable position, as one company commander

The men of the 28th began to dig in against the expected artillery onslaught, but "suffered heavy casualties and were relieved that night."<sup>39</sup> The situation as reported by the Division's Summary of Operations, was that, "Our bombers and infantry companies in support were still in Cr. 4."<sup>40</sup> With no aerial photography, Turner relied on his men, who had no maps or any battlefield features in which to guide themselves.

suggested in a report: "To even attempt to hold this [the Craters] if we are successful in winning it, in the first place, would be rather like committing useless murder."<sup>42</sup> But General Turner either did not have the courage to stand up to the British, or was convinced that was it unnecessary to demand the withdrawal.

During the night of 9/10 April, Brigadier General Rennie of the 4th Infantry Brigade ordered the recapture of Crater 3. Despite the muddy conditions at daybreak, it was reported

looked like another. It was not until the morning of the 11th that Brigadier Rennie received word that the Canadians did not hold the northern lips of Crater 2 and 3.<sup>45</sup>

The following night the Germans attempted to enlarge their holdings, but were driven back by Canadian bombers.<sup>46</sup> The Summary of Operations recorded that "the 18th and 19th Battalion reported a German bombing attack on Crater 4 and 5."<sup>47</sup> Since the 18th and 19th were not in Crater 4 and 5 but rather in craters to the



*A Canadian soldier cleaning up on the battlefield.*

*(NAC PA 1193)*

to Rennie that the raiding party of 50 men from the 18th Battalion were holding the crater.<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, for reasons unknown, but likely due to the weather, darkness and inexperience of the troops, the report was once again inaccurate. The Canadians were not in Crater 3 but rather in much smaller craters to the north of the German fortified position. Up to this point it was thought that there were only seven craters; in fact there were seventeen craters of varying sizes. Thus the raiding parties, moving over the blasted landscape at night without proper maps or guidance from the rear, had little idea of where they were going and could only attack craters which were in front of them. From their position, one large crater

north of them, it is no wonder they were perplexed as to where the Germans were attacking from. If the Canadians were holding the front, from where were the Germans mounting these raiding parties? With this accumulating evidence, it is astonishing that Turner or his Brigadiers did not attempt to ascertain a clearer view or ask pointed questions as to the location of his men and the enemy.<sup>48</sup>

Scouts were sent out by the 18th and 19th Battalions on 12 April to investigate the German defences around Crater 3. Lieutenant-Colonel Hilliam reported that "the Crater was strongly held and impossible to approach." But more

importantly, "[Canadian raiding] attempts were made from Crater 4 and 5 [thought to be held by the Canadians] and every attempt was immediately driven in by machine gun fire from the enemy trench in rear of the craters [the real Crater 4 and 5]."<sup>49</sup> Some of the Canadians at the front began to realize that there was something wrong with their position in relation to orders passed down from the staff officers in the rear.

Incredibly, Turner still did not know that the Germans occupied Crater 4 and 5. And although the aerial photography was largely grounded during the poor weather, planes had been able to go up briefly on the 8th and take photographs of the demolished battlefield. Yet despite the aerial photographs, no one at the Divisional staff detected the error in the occupation of the craters.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps it was a case of simply not wanting to believe the harsh truth, but more likely it was a case of shoddy work among staff officers not looking for anything because they thought there was nothing to search for.

During the night of 14 April, the 24th Battalion relieved the 25th.<sup>52</sup> That same night the 24th defeated a German bombing party from retaking Craters 6 and 7 in a ferocious 40 minute battle.<sup>53</sup> One of the greatest disservices to the Canadian infantry attempting to defend against the German raiding parties was the complete safety of the Germans from the Canadian artillery. While the Canadians were being furiously shelled, the Germans were consolidating their position and launching raids against the Canadians free from harassing fire because the Divisional artillery thought their position was a Canadian one.<sup>54</sup> Any movement among the Canadians drew artillery fire and the 24th was effectively cut off from its commanders in the rear.<sup>55</sup> Brigadier Watson, commander of the 5th Infantry Brigade, feared that the 24th had lost its position and attempted to send runners to gather any information. The runners were unable to penetrate the artillery box barrage set up by the Germans, but the 24th Battalion was eventually able to get a pigeon back to the rear informing them that it still held the position but had suffered heavy casualties.<sup>56</sup>

The 2nd Division's Daily Intelligence Summary for 15 April reported, "At 2:30 a.m. assisted by artillery fire, the enemy made a bombing attack on Craters 4 and 5....The craters were both in our possession and there are no

casualties."<sup>57</sup> On that same night Major J.A. Ross of the 24th Battalion made a personal reconnaissance of Craters 2, 3, 4 and 5 and was shocked to find that they were in enemy hands. This was confirmed by aerial photography on the 16th and all plans for "offensive operations were therefore cancelled."<sup>59</sup> Although the Divisional Headquarters ordered the battle to be ended, that meant very little for the infantry in the trenches or for the Germans.<sup>60</sup>

On the night of the 16th, to further harass the Canadian defenders, the Germans fired tear-gas shells into the 24th's position causing, as the regimental historian modestly wrote, "a number of men...to be affected."<sup>63</sup> The exhausting conditions of the front were a great strain on all the Canadians, but they clung on with grim determination and repulsed another attack that night.<sup>64</sup>

In the dark hours of 17 April, the 29th Battalion relieved the 24th in front of Crater 6 and 7 and repulsed another German raid.<sup>65</sup> It was reported by Lieutenant Grosvenou of the 29th Battalion "that Crater 6's position was absolutely untenable and the condition [was] beyond description."<sup>66</sup> Not surprisingly, therefore, under an intense artillery bombardment and driving rain on the night of the 19th, a German raiding party captured Crater 6 from the battered defenders. Lieutenant C.R. Myers described the near-hopeless situation of the men in the craters:

[The] Germans started to shell our crater with 5.9 HE [shells] at 4/min. I placed my men under what little cover was afforded by the 'lean to' under the parapet but in several cases a direct hit was made and casualties resulted. All of the pigeons in the crater had been killed so there was no way to get information back to HQ. The barrage continued with the parapet...being blown in several places.<sup>67</sup>

With only a dozen men left unwounded, Lieutenant Myers ordered a defence of the parapet against the German attack. "It was then found," Myers wrote, "that none of our weapons would work [due to the mud], the Lewis gun was also out of commission and most of the bombs had been exploded by HE."<sup>68</sup> Half of the men surrendered, while the other half crawled away through machine gun fire to escape. Of the one hundred or so men defending Crater 6, only

eleven returned to the rear and only one was uninjured.<sup>70</sup>

Upon hearing of the loss, Major Tait of the 29th Battalion ordered a raiding party to regain Crater 6. The attack was held up by "machine gun fire in the lip of No. 5 crater."<sup>71</sup> Two more companies of the 31st Battalion were brought up, but it was "thought [by Tait] that such an attack across about 800 yards of open ground badly cut up by shell holes in daylight would be costly."<sup>72</sup> Tait was right and he saved two companies from being annihilated. And thus ended the Canadians' involvement with the battle for the craters. With the Germans in control of all but one of the major craters on the "Mound," their commanders wisely surveyed the situation and pulled back from the untenable position. The sector again became quiet as the British and Canadians attempted to determine who was responsible for the Canadians' failure.

## Investigation

**A**s a result of the fiasco at St. Eloi there was a formal examination into the conduct of the operation. On 26 April the General Representative of Canada at the Front, Sir Max Aitken (later Lord Beaverbrook), cabled Sir Sam Hughes, Canada's Minister of Militia, that the British viewed St. Eloi as a serious breakdown within the Canadian command.<sup>73</sup> Plumer ordered Lieutenant-General Edwin Alderson to take "severe disciplinary measures" and wanted to remove both Turner and Ketchen for their incompetence.<sup>74</sup> Alderson issued a damning report regarding Brigadier-General Ketchen of the 6th Brigade, whose brigade suffered the worst of the disaster, and attempted to remove him from command. Turner's refusal to endorse Alderson's report and sack Ketchen further damaged their relationship, which had already been strained with Turner's questionable performance during the Second Battle of Ypres.<sup>75</sup>

Alderson asked General Haig, commander of the British Expeditionary Force, to dismiss Turner for his insubordination and ineffectiveness. Haig, acting with political astuteness and perhaps showing a different side to those critics who have labelled him a donkey, refused to remove Turner for fear of a political backlash in Canada. Turner, a Canadian and Victoria Cross winner, could not be released, as

Haig wrote in his diary, for "the danger of a serious feud between Canadians and the British," which could be avoided by the simple "retention of a couple of incompetent commanders."<sup>76</sup> Therefore, for political reasons Turner, twice displaying incompetence on the battlefield, retained command over Canadian troops.

On 28 May 1916 General Alderson was appointed Inspector General of Canadian Forces in England, a change brought on by the debacle at St. Eloi, but more importantly through the political interference of Sir Sam Hughes and Max Aitken. Aitken had reiterated the need to keep the Canadian generals, who could not be retained if Alderson were in command.<sup>78</sup> Hughes, no stranger to meddling in military affairs, had an intense dislike for Alderson as a result of the Ross rifle debate and had no qualms in sacrificing him. Although Inspector General was lower on the chain of command, Haig believed, after being "briefed" by Aitken, that "the difficulty under which the commander of the Canadian Corps in the field now suffered through having so many administrative and political questions to deal with, in addition to his duties as commander in the field" should be alleviated.<sup>79</sup> He was replaced by Lieutenant-General Sir Julian Byng, who quickly won over the Canadian troops.<sup>80</sup> While Alderson became the scapegoat of the affair and was released for political rather than military reasons, the historian is left asking who is really to blame?

The question arises how could the Canadians have had no idea where they were at the front? The key for a commander to properly react to what was occurring in battle was both to understand what was happening and then to respond appropriately. It is a difficult task, but one which the commander must master - and it was one which the senior Canadian officers failed to accomplish at St. Eloi.

The most important breakdown at St. Eloi was not the Canadians' discipline or fighting ability, but rather communication between the front and rear. Communication was a constant problem throughout the War.<sup>84</sup> With the front so broad as well as so deadly, most commanders stayed in the rear in an attempt to exert some control over the situation. At St. Eloi, the constant bombardment made it difficult for the Canadians to keep telephone wire from being cut, let alone



*One of the craters at St. Eloi. It was here that the 29th (Vancouver) Battalion was engaged in heavy fighting. The scale of the crater can be seen by the wagon and person on the Jar side of the crater.*

*(NAC PA 4394)*

laying new lines.<sup>86</sup> The terrible weather conditions combined with the confusion of being under fire for the first time also did not encourage soldiers to stand above the trenches waving flags back to headquarters to show that they were still alive - at least for the moment.

One method of gaining knowledge of the battlefield was to employ aerial photography. But the fragile airplanes of the day could not be used effectively in the rough weather over the St. Eloi battlefield where there was almost continual snow, sleet and rain. Robbed of information, Turner and his Brigadiers were without accurate battlefield intelligence. However, the confusion of the battlefield has often left commanders without accurate knowledge of what was occurring. Unfortunately Turner, much as he did at the 2nd Battle of Ypres, did nothing to rectify such a clearly chaotic situation. He could have sent trusted officers forward to find out what was happening. And he could have analyzed more carefully the information he did receive. It is too easy to exonerate Turner and his Brigadiers for the poor handling of the battle by blaming the inaccurate information they received from the front. In light of the conflicting reports from the front, information given by German prisoners, German

artillery patterns indicating changed positions at the front, and the inexperience of the Canadian troops, a more diligent attempt should have been made to understand the situation. This is especially true because Turner knew that by relieving the British Division three days earlier than intended, he had not allowed his officers enough time to either investigate the trenches or to acquire adequate maps of the area. Turner sent his troops into the line effectively blind. Never was it more truly a case of "the blind leading the blind."

A greater share of the blame, and certainly more than previously assigned by historians, must fall on the British command. It was Plumer who inserted the new Canadian Division into the lines at St. Eloi, a tactically unsound position where the enemy had all of the advantages and was willing to press them. When Turner suggested either pulling out of the line or attacking on a wider front, the British official historian suggests that Plumer was misinformed by the 2nd Division which craters they held and refused the request.<sup>87</sup> As we have seen this was true, but it did little to change the fact that the Canadians were holding an untenable position which should have been abandoned after its deficiencies were reported.

One must wonder if Plumer's perception was clouded by his desire for revenge against the German attack against "The Bluff" or if he was not fully informed as to the deplorable battlefield conditions which the Canadians were fighting in. Either way, he must shoulder some of the blame.

At a lower level the commanding officer of the British 3rd Division was negligent in handing over inadequately fortified lines to the relieving Canadians, yet under the terrible German bombardment and vicious trench fighting there was little his troops could have done. Ultimately, however, Turner must be held accountable for his neglect of the situation throughout the battle. The 2nd Canadian Division was far from being the shock troops of 1918, and although it was to develop into one of the finest divisions on the Western Front, at St. Eloi it was ill-prepared and ill-led to defend the newly-won Allied position against its experienced and well-supported German counterparts.

In less than three weeks of fighting, the Canadians had suffered at least 1,373 casualties.<sup>89</sup> Although the casualties were small by Western Front standards, they were casualties of the most murderous kind: soldiers squatting in terror day and night with no chance of retaliation or advance against the German shells. Fortunately, the men of the 2nd Division were to fight in the Battle of the Somme at Courcellette where they redeemed themselves and were later regarded, as part of the Canadian Corps, as an elite formation among the British troops.

Militarily, St. Eloi was a lesson, albeit a bloody one, for the Canadians on how not to engage the enemy. It brought the realization that there was more to warfare than simply fighting: one had to know where one's troops were in relation to one another and the enemy. And interestingly, St. Eloi displayed the political interference that so often affected military conduct. Turner was certainly out of his depth as a Divisional commander, yet his incompetence was overlooked for fear of removing one of Canada's few heroic generals. After the St. Eloi battle the British command, although sacrificing Alderson for political reasons, realized that Turner\* was unfit to command front-line troops and cleared the way for Sir Arthur Currie to take command of the Canadian Corps.<sup>90</sup>

St. Eloi was a squalid affair in which the Canadians were trounced by both German commanders and troops. But it was not simply, as one historian has observed, a battle in which "the 2nd Division lost the ground a British division had painfully captured."<sup>91</sup> There were many factors, especially the incompetence of both Canadian and British commanders, which deprived the inexperienced soldiers of the 2nd Canadian Division of a fair chance to defend its position. But just as the 1st Division's troops had a bloody inauguration into the Western Front, so those of the 2nd Division at St. Eloi displayed in defeat the determination and bravery that in time marked the Canadian Corps as one of the finest fighting forces on the Western Front.

## Notes

The author would like to thank Professor Terry Cook, Dr. Jack English and Dr. Robert McIntosh for their insightful comments which helped to strengthen this work.

1. Reginald H. Roy, *The Journal of Private Fraser* (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1985), p.109.
2. G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1918* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1962), p.137.
3. James E. Edmonds, *History of the Great War: Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1916* (London: Macmillan, 1932), p.178; Nicholson, 138.
4. Major H.C. Singer, *History of the 31st Canadian Infantry Battalion, C.E.F.* (Private, 1938), p.75.
5. Nicholson, p. 139.
6. National Archives of Canada (NAC), Records of the Department of Militia and Defence, Record Group (RG) 9, Vol.4098, Folder 42, File 3, ref. to GX.5303/8, 4 April 1916.
7. It was decided on the afternoon of April 1st that the 2nd Division would relieve the 3rd British Division earlier than planned. NAC, Turner Papers, Manuscript Group (MG) 30, E46, Vol. 1, Folder 9, Report on 2nd Canadian Division's Operations at St. Eloi, 20 April 1916.
8. Edmonds, p. 184.
9. Turner Papers, MG 30, E46, Vol. 1, Folder 9, Narrative of Events Up to the Occupation of the St. Eloi Position, 12 April 1916.
10. RG 9, Vol.4688, Folder 42, File 15, Protest by Brig-Gen. Ketchen, against adverse Report of G.O.C., Cdn. Corps, addressed to 2nd Cdn. Division, 18 April 1916, p. 1.
11. Roy, p.113.
13. RG 9, Vol.4937, Folder 429, File 1, Personal account by A.H. Bell, p.2.
14. Lord Beaverbrook, *Canada In Flanders* Volume II (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1917), p.95.
15. Turner Papers, MG 30, E46, Vol. 1, Folder 9, Narrative of Events Up to the Occupation of the St. Eloi Position, 12 April 1916.
16. Roy, p. 113.

17. RG 9, Vol.4098, Folder 42, File 3, 2 CD - G.S. 597.
18. Turner Papers, MG 30, E46, Vol. 1, Folder 9, "Narrative of Events."
19. Nicholson, p. 139.
20. Turner Papers, MG 30, E46, Vol.1, Folder 9, 2 CD - G.S. 592, Summary of Operations 1-7 April by Turner; RG 9, Vol.4098, Folder 42, File 3, 2 CD - G.S. 577, 4 April 1916.
21. RG 9, Vol.4935, War Diary of the 27th Battalion, Summary of Operations, Appendix II.
22. Desmond Morton, "A Canadian Soldier in the Great War: The Experiences of Frank Maheux," *Canadian Military History* Volume I, Numbers 1 & 2, p.82.
23. Nicholson, p. 141.
24. This is an early example of the Canadians' confusion as to what Crater they were in. It seems from the start that the Canadians thought they were in Crater 5 when in fact they were in Crater 6. This is partly why General Alderson asked General Turner to remove Brigadier Ketchen from command following the battle. RG 9, Vol.4937, War Diary of the 31st Battalion, 3 April 1916.
25. RG 9, Vol.4937, Folder 429, File 1, Report on Operations of the 31st Battalion, 7 April 1916.
26. RG 9, Vol.4937, Report of Operations of the 31st Battalion. 3-9 April 1916, Appendix 16; Roy, p. 117.
27. RG 9, Vol.4937, War Diary of the 31st Battalion, 6 April 1916.
28. On the night of April 3rd the Battalion had a nominal strength of 24 officers and 703 men. When the 31st were relieved on April 8 they had suffered 29 killed, 154 wounded and four missing. RG 9, Vol.4937, War Diary of the 31st Battalion, 4-7 April 1916.
29. RG 9, Vol.4937, Folder 429, File 1, Report of Operations of the 31st Battalion, 3-9 April 1916, Appendix 16; RG 9, Vol.4694, Folder 56, File 7, The Gallant Stand of Major Daly's Company, 2.
30. This was the start of the relief for the 6th Brigade by the 4th Brigade. To relieve a whole Brigade could take up to two days and as a result some battalions from different brigades were in the line together. When the 6th Brigade was finally relieved it had suffered 617 casualties. See RG 9, Vol.4688, Folder 42, File 14, Casualties During Tour In St. Eloi Trenches, 4-8 April 1916.
31. RG 9, Vol.4935, War Diary of the 27th Battalion, 6 April 1916.
33. The area was to be covered by platoons from "B" and "D" Company of the 27th Battalion but they had been thinned out to prevent further crippling casualties from the German artillery. Singer, p.79.
34. RG 9, Vol.4935, War Diary of the 27th Battalion, Appendix IV.
35. Turner Papers, MG 30, E46, Vol. 1, Folder 9, Summary of Operations for the Canadian Corps 1-7 April 1916.
37. RG 9, Vol.4098, Folder 42, File 3, Intelligence Summary, 10 April 1916.
38. RG 9, Vol.4937, Folder 429, File 1, Personal account written by A.H. Bell, p. 7.
39. Turner Papers, MG 30, E46, Vol. 1, Folder 9, 2 CD - G.S. 592, Summary of Operations 1-7 April 1916.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*
42. RG 9, Vol.4098, Folder 42, File 3, 2 CD - G.S. 611, Memo from Lieutenant-Colonel E. Hilliam to General Watson, 12 April 1916.
43. *Ibid.*
44. Turner Papers, MG 30, E46, Vol. 1, Folder 9, Summary of Operations 8-14 April 1916.
45. *Ibid.*
46. Nicholson, p. 144.
47. Turner Papers, MG 30, E46, Folder 9, Summary of Operations 8-14 April 1916.
48. In an order from the Second Army to the Canadian Corps dated April 12 it stated, "I am to point out the necessity for superior Commanders, especially in the case of the comparatively new units at present in our armies, to take steps at once to satisfy themselves that all is necessary, advisable and possible has been done." RG 9, Vol.4098, Folder 42, File 3, 2 CD - G.S. 617, 12 April 1916.
49. RG 9, Vol.4098, Folder 42, File 3, 2 CD - G.S. 611, 12 April 1916.
50. D.J. Goodspeed, *The Road Past Vimy* (Toronto; Macmillan of Canada, 1969), p.58. Goodspeed writes that there were aerial photographs taken on 8 April but has no documentation for this assertion. He may have deduced this from a photograph in the National Archives of Canada of the battlefield dated 8 April 1916.
52. The 25th Battalion relieved the 12th Battalion on the night of the 12th. The 4th Brigade had suffered 389 casualties while holding the craters. RG 9, Vol.4688, Folder 41, File 16, 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade: Casualties During Tour in St. Eloi Trenches, 7-13 April 1916.
53. R.C. Featherstonhaugh, *The 24th Battalion, C.E.F., Victoria Rifles of Canada 1914-1919, Regimental History* {Montreal: Gazette Printing, 1930}, p.47.
54. Featherstonhaugh, p.44; Roy, p.121.
55. Private Fraser described the situation, "After the harassing and nerve wracking experience in the crater we were all highly strung, and woe to the man who took liberties of even permitting a glimpse of himself to the enemy. The slightest exposure would be the occasion of a violent outburst by his comrades and for minutes afterwards there would be angry mutterings about giving the position away. We saw several Huns, most inviting targets they were, but orders had been given that we were not to shoot, in case positions were spotted." Roy, p. 120.
56. Turner Papers, MG 30, E46, Vol. 1, Folder 9, Summary of Operations 15-21 April 1916; Featherstonhaugh, p.48.
57. Nicholson, p. 144.
59. Turner Papers, MG 30, E46, Vol. 1, Folder 9, Summary of Operations for 15-21 April 1916; Nicholson, p. 144.
60. Desmond Morton, *A Peculiar Kind of Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), p. 72.
63. Featherstonhaugh, p.49.
64. Sergeant D.A. Ewen wrote that "75 Bosche [were] coming over the lip of Crater 3 but were immediately dispersed by machine gun and rifle fire." RG 9, Vol.4693, Folder 53, File 5, Report on activity in Craters by Lieutenant D.A. Ewen, 24th Battalion, 16 April 1916.
65. RG 9, Vol.4098, Folder 42, File 3, 2 CD - G.S. 654. The 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade, which was entrenched in parts of the Canadian line from the 12th-18th, suffered a total of 277 casualties. RG 9, Vol.4688, Folder 42, File 4, 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade: Casualties During Tour In St. Eloi Trenches, 12-18 April 1916.
66. RG 9, Vol.4936, War Diary of the 29th Battalion, 19 April 1916.
67. Turner Papers, MG 30, E46, Vol. 1, Folder 9, Report by C.R. Myers.
68. Sargeant Bostel collaborated Myers' statement where he wrote, "We covered our rifles with sandbags but it was

- impossible to keep them in working order owing to the terrible state of the ground." Turner Papers, MG 30, E49, Vol. 1, Folder 9, Statement by Sergeant Bostel.
70. RG 9, Vol.4694, Folder 55, File 17, Eleven of Brave Hundred Got Back From Crater Fight, 3.
  71. Turner Papers, MG 30, E49, Vol. 1, Folder 9, Messages Received, General Staff, 2nd Canadian Division, April 19th/20th.
  72. *Ibid.*
  73. Nicholson, p. 145; Interestingly, after the shock of finding that the Canadians were not occupying the right craters on the 16th, General Alderson sent a conciliatory message to General Turner in which he wrote, "Just a line to say how much I sympathise with you in this new development of the situation!... Do not worry, we have been in far worse situations and shall get out of this as we done of the others." Turner Papers, MG 30, E49, Vol. 1, Folder 9, Alderson to Turner, 16 April 1916.
  74. Nicholson, p. 145.
  75. Morton, *A Peculiar Kind of Politics*, p.73; Daniel Dancocks, *Welcome to Flanders Fields* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988), p. 117.
  76. Nicholson, p. 145; Goodspeed, p.58.
  78. Ronald Haycock, *Sam Hughes: The Public Career of a Controversial Canadian, 1885-1916* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986), pp.291-2.
  79. Nicholson, p. 146.
  80. Swettenham writes that "Byng's appointment was popular with the troops. This," reported one officer, 'is a soldier - large, strong, lithe, with worn boots and frayed puttees. He carries his hands in his pocket, and returns a salute by lifting his hand as far as the pocket will allow." John Swettenham, *Canada and the First World War* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1969), p.46.
  83. RG 9, Vol.4937, Folder 429, File 1, Memoir of A.H. Bell, pp.4-5.
  84. See Bill Rawling, "Communications in the Canadian Corps, 1915-1918: Wartime Technologies Progress Revisited," *Canadian Military History*, Autumn 1994, Volume 3, Number 2, for an excellent description of the problems of communication within the Canadian Corps.
  86. See the 6th Brigade's after-battle report for the intense confusion caused by having all communication with the front severed. RG 9, Vol.4688, Folder 42, File 14, 'Enclosure F,' p.3.
  87. Edmonds, p. 190.
  89. This figure only includes the casualties up to April 16. The German casualties during the fighting with the Canadians were 483. Nicholson, p. 144.
  90. On 5 December 1916 Turner took command of the headquarters of the General Officer Commanding Canadian Forces in the United Kingdom. Morton wrote in his seminal work on the administration of the Canadian Corps overseas, *A Peculiar Kind of Politics*, about the competition between Turner and Currie. "In return, he [Turner] would be promoted to lieutenant-general, retain his authority over Currie, and extend at least his nominal authority over the Canadians in France. Currie had the real prize and both men knew it." p. 121.
  91. Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up* (Toronto: Random House, 1993), p.153.

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