

CANADA & THE GREAT WAR – 1915

Chronology 1915

In 1915 the first concentration of Canadian troops moved from the United Kingdom for France and met the enemy for the first time at the Second Battle of Ypres. The following is a select chronology of the events of 1915 that had a direct or indirect impact on Canada and the Canadian Armed Forces.

- 9-11 February: 1st Canadian Division crosses the English Channel to France.
- 18 February: German U-Boat blockade of Britain begins.
- 10 March: Canadians see first action in support of British offensive at Neuve Chapelle, France.
- 17 April: 1st Canadian Division enters the Ypres Salient.
- 24 April: Germans use chlorine gas against 15th and 8th Canadian Battalions in the Ypres Salient.
- 7 May: RMS Lusitania sunk by German U-Boat. 1,195 people lost.
- 8 May: PPCLI participate in action to prevent German breakthrough on the Ypres Salient. Canadians suffer 6,700 casualties during Second Battle of Ypres.
- 18 May: Canadians attack at Festubert, France.
- 25 May: 2nd Canadian Division formed.
- 15 June: Canadians support British attack at Givenchy, France. Canadian casualties at Festubert and Givenchy are more than 2,800.
- 13 September: Canadian Corps consisting of 1st and 2nd Divisions formed under LGen Alderson.
- 19 September: Newfoundland Regiment lands at Suvla Bay, Gallipoli Peninsula.
- 8 December: John McRae's poem, "In Flanders Fields" published.
- 20 December: Newfoundland Regiment withdrawn from Gallipoli.
- 25 December: Formation of 3rd Canadian Division authorised.



Landing of the 1st Division at St Nazaire, 1915 by Edgar Bundy

CWM 19710261-0110, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, © Canadian War Museum

This painting combines historical exactness in portraiture and presentation with a Turneresque mystery in the effect of the smoke clouds and the grouping of the

steamship "Novian" and the tall buildings behind it. The officers shown are Sir Richard Turner, Lt. Col. Loomis, Lt. Col. G.B. Hughes, Majors Buchanan and Norseworthy,

Captains McCuaig and Cameron and Lt. H.F. McDonald. Of these, Norseworthy fell gloriously in the Second Battle of Ypres, in which battle Major McCuaig was wounded and taken prisoner, and Major Buchanan was killed during the Somme Campaign in 1916. In the left foreground the Pipe band of the Black Watch (Royal Canadian Highlanders) march up and down the front playing the troops ashore, and is led by Pipe Major David Manson. The painting is vibrant with action and colour. Officers, troops and townspeople watched the arrival.

Second Battle of Ypres

In the first week of April 1915, the Canadian troops were moved from their quiet sector to a bulge in the Allied line in front of the City of Ypres. This was the famed—or notorious—Ypres Salient, where the British and Allied line pushed into the German line in a concave bend. The Germans held the higher ground and were able to fire into the Allied trenches from the north, the south and the east. On the Canadian right were two British divisions, and on their left a French division, the 45th (Algerian).

Here on April 22, the Germans sought to remove the Salient by introducing a new weapon, poison gas. Following an intensive artillery bombardment, they released 160 tons of chlorine gas from cylinders dug into the forward edge of their trenches into a light northeast wind. As thick clouds of yellow-green chlorine drifted over their trenches the French defences crumbled, and the troops, completely bemused by this terrible weapon, died or broke and fled, leaving a gaping 6.5 kilometre hole in the Allied line. German troops pressed forward, threatening to sweep behind the Canadian trenches and put 50,000 Canadian and British troops in deadly jeopardy. Fortunately the Germans had planned only a limited offensive and, without adequate reserves, were unable to exploit the gap the gas created. In any case their own troops, themselves without any adequate protection against gas, were highly suspicious of the new weapon. After advancing only 3.25 kilometres they stopped and dug in.

All through the night the Canadian troops fought to close the gap. In addition they mounted a counter-attack to drive the enemy out of Kitcheners' Wood, an oak plantation near St. Julien. In the morning two more disastrous attacks were made against enemy positions. Little ground was gained and casualties were extremely heavy, but these attacks bought some precious time to close the flank.

The fierce battle of St. Julien lay ahead. On April 24, the Germans attacked in an attempt to obliterate the Salient once and for all. Another violent bombardment was followed by another gas attack in the same pattern

The Origins of Canada's War Art

by Laura Brandon

The Canadian War Memorials Fund, the First World War art collection, consists of nearly 1,000 works by over 110 artists, more than a third of them Canadian. The paintings powerfully capture Canada's part in this tragic "*war to end all wars*". The collection was the brainchild of Sir Max Aitken, later Lord Beaverbrook. Born in Canada, he moved to Britain as a rich businessman. Always a Canadian at heart, Beaverbrook's nationalist fervour contributed to his decision in 1916 to initiate a project to record the war from Canada's point of view. The result was the creation of the Canadian War Memorials Fund.

A single event, the horrific German gas attack on Canadian troops during the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915, convinced him that the war should also be documented by art, since the event had not been photographed. So, in November 1916, Aitken's new organisation commissioned a huge 3.7 x 6 metre painting from British society artist Richard Jack. The success of this venture, combined with the prevailing belief that the lifespan of photographs was no more than twenty-five years, contributed to Aitken's decision to commission more artists to record Canada's war.

Dr Brandon is the Canadian War Museum Historian, Art and War

as before. This time the target was the Canadian line. Here, through terrible fighting, withered with shrapnel and machine-gun fire, hampered by their issued Ross rifles which jammed, violently sick and gasping for air through soaked and muddy handkerchiefs, they held on until reinforcements arrived.

Thus, in their first major appearance on a European battlefield, the Canadians established a reputation as a formidable fighting force. Congratulatory messages were cabled to the Canadian Prime Minister. But the cost was high. In these 48 hours, 6,035 Canadians, one man in every three, became casualties of whom more than 2,000 died. They were heavy losses for Canada's little force whose men had been civilians only several months before—a grim forerunner of what was still to come.

Courtesy Veterans Affairs Canada
<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/history/first-world-war>



The Second Battle of Ypres, 22 April to 25 May 1915, by Richard Jack

CWM 19710261-0161, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art © Canadian War Museum

Painted in 1917 by Richard Jack, (1866 – 1952). The Second Battle of Ypres, 22 April to 25 May 1915” is the first commission completed for the Canadian War Memorials Fund (CWMF) and also one of the biggest. It commemorates the first major action of the First Canadian Division at Ypres. Although Jack visited the ground where the fighting took place, he did not witness the event, but interviewed several survivors and studied “all manner of military accoutrements” before he completed the painting. The standing soldier exemplifies the courage and resolve of the inexperienced Canadians in their first major battle. British Field Marshal Sir John French declared that the Canadians “saved the situation.”

The man in the white shirt on the right of the picture is Sergeant D’Arcy Albert Latimer of the 2nd Battalion, CEF. He is wearing the white shirt because he got soaked in a thunderstorm and he grabbed a Belgian farmer’s shirt to replace his wet tunic. Sgt D’Arcy was wounded during the battle and made prisoner. He spent 18 months in a POW Camp in Giessen but escaped in

July 1916 and made his way to Holland and eventually back to Canada. This information was provided by Sgt. Latimer’s son, Art in an interview with FCWM Volunteer Mai-yu Chan on 14 May 2013.

The Gas Attack of 24 April, 1915

by Bob Anglin

Poison gas made its debut on the battlefields of Europe on the 22 April, 1915 when the Germans attacked the French troops along the northern side of the Ypres salient. Chlorine was used because it was easily obtained and effective enough to try as a means of attacking an enemy near enough to make other means of attack a risk to one’s own troops. Chlorine hurt the eyes, made noses run and caused violent vomiting in those exposed. British and Canadian troops were not directly gassed on this

occasion but they recognized the smell because they had been drinking chlorinated water for some time.

Canadian troops first encountered gas two days later at 4:00 am on 24 April. The Germans released another cloud of chlorine gas from cylinders along their front line about 200 metres away from the trenches of the 1st Canadian Division which was occupying the apex of the Ypres salient. The gas cloud, carried by the wind over the Canadian lines in about 10 minutes, was accompanied by an artillery bombardment. Then the German infantry attacked.

The gas cloud passed over two Canadian infantry Battalions – the 15th (about 1,200 men, mainly from Toronto and Sudbury) and the 8th (about the same number of men, mainly from Winnipeg and Thunder Bay). The 15th (3rd Brigade) was on the left and the 8th (2nd Brigade) was on the right. Each Battalion had three of its four rifle companies in the front line.

The right hand company of the 8th Battalion was completely missed by the gas cloud. Also, the 8th had been given improvised respirators in the form of cotton bandoliers which were to be wetted and tied over the nose and mouth to provide some protection from gas. Here the attacking Germans made little progress because they were subjected to steady rifle and machine gun fire from the 8th as well as a heavy bombardment of shrapnel fired by the supporting Canadian artillery.

The left hand company of the 15th was also missed by the gas cloud but its members were unable to see the front of their neighbours and thus could not fire on the Germans attacking the companies on their right. One platoon of the centre company was missed by the gas cloud also and was able to bring rifle and machine guns fire to bear on the Germans. The rest of both front line companies met the full gas attack with only wet handkerchiefs for protection. Furthermore, the 15th was without supporting fire from their own artillery because, in the confusion of the previous two days' fighting, some of the guns had been placed too far to the rear to be in range of the whole front.

The ensuing battle went on for five hours and the Germans managed to push the Canadian 15th Battalion back about 1,000 metres on a 1.5 km front but the line held. The casualty report of the 15th Battalion for 24 April listed losses of 647 men, of whom 249 were killed or died of wounds, including 33 recorded as "having died of gas".

Bob Anglin is a former infantry officer. He is now an FCWM Volunteer Interpreter at the Canadian War Museum

The Ross Rifle

by Bob Anglin

When attempts by the Canadian government to purchase Lee-Enfield rifles from the UK in 1900 failed because British manufacturers were working at capacity to fill orders for the war in South Africa, a decision was made to produce rifles in Canada. Sir Charles Ross, a manufacturer of sporting rifles in the US offered to do so. A factory was built at Québec City and the first rifles were delivered in 1903. The Ross had the somewhat unusual feature of a straight-pull bolt, i.e. a cartridge could be fed into the chamber by simply pulling the bolt to the rear and then pushing it forward again. The idea was not new as a similar rifle had been adopted by the Austrian Army in 1895. For the next nine years various trials resulted in many modifications or model changes. Finally a new Mark III Ross rifle with many improved features was adopted in late 1911 and subsequently rushed into service in 1914 with the outbreak of war.

After the Canadians' first big battles in April, 1915 there were a number of complaints about Ross rifles jamming in action. An investigation followed and a number of defects were discovered. Most of them, such as weak springs, fragile sights and burred locking lugs could be corrected but there was one problem that was not easy to fix. Rifles with a straight-pull bolt mechanism such as the Austrian Model 1895 Mannlicher and all of the various models produced by Ross suffer from what is called poor primary extraction. That is the point in the cycle when a fired cartridge case is freed from the walls of the rifle chamber before it is withdrawn and ejected. In most turn-bolt rifles this part of the cycle occurs as the bolt handle is raised and the operator has good leverage. In straight-pull bolts the bolt head must be turned to unlock the mechanism, the firing pin spring compressed and the expanded cartridge case freed from the rifle chamber all at the same time. There is a lot of friction to overcome with poor leverage and that friction is often increased as the rifle heats up after a period of rapid fire.

Austria had solved the problem by making the brass of their cartridge cases harder which reduced the amount of expansion when fired thus facilitating removal. Extraction problems had occurred in the various Ross rifles before the war during trials and had been largely solved in Canada in a similar fashion by making the

Fragment from France

Well, if you knows of a better 'ole, go to it.

Charles Bruce Bairnsfather, 1915

brass in cartridge cases slightly harder. But during the war, Canadian troops were often issued British-made ammunition and some of it had casings that were too soft for use in Ross rifles. By reaming and enlarging the chambers of the Ross rifles, they could be made to function with ammunition from some British factories but not all. For a time, Canadian units traded ammunition with their neighbours in the line to get ammunition that would work in their rifles but in the end it was decided to replace the Ross rifles in front line units as soon as sufficient Lee-Enfields became available. By the end of September 1916 the Ross rifle was no longer in front line service except for a few in the hands of snipers.

John McCrae

by Mike Braham

Lieutenant Colonel John Alexander McCrae was a Canadian poet, physician, author, artist and soldier during World War I. He was also a surgeon during the Second Battle of Ypres. He is best known for writing the famous war memorial poem *"In Flanders Fields"*.

He was born in Guelph, Ontario, on November 30, 1872. John McCrae graduated from Guelph Collegiate at 16 and was the first Guelph student to win a scholarship to the University of Toronto.

McCrae worked on his Bachelor of Arts at the University of Toronto in 1892–93. While there, he was a member of the militia, The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada. He was promoted to Captain and commanded a Company. He completed his B.A. in 1894. McCrae then returned to study medicine on a scholarship and received his Bachelor of Medicine degree in 1898. While attending the university he published his first poems.

In 1899 he interned at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, under Dr. William Osler.

When the South African War broke out in October 1899, he requested postponement of a McGill fellowship and was commissioned to lead D Battery, Canadian Field Artillery. McCrae sailed to Africa in December and spent a year there with his unit.

Upon his return in 1902, he was appointed resident pathologist at Montreal General Hospital. In 1904 he

resigned from the military in the rank of Major and was appointed an associate in medicine at the Royal Victoria Hospital. Later that year, he went to England and became a member of the Royal College of Physicians.

In 1905, he set up his own practice and in the same year, he was appointed pathologist to the Montreal Foundling and Baby Hospital. In 1908, he was appointed physician to the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Infectious Diseases. In 1910, he accompanied Lord Grey, the Governor General, on a canoe trip to Hudson Bay to serve as expedition physician.

At the outbreak of World War I McCrae re-enlisted into the army and was appointed a field surgeon with the Canadian artillery and was in charge of a field hospital during the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915. McCrae's friend and former student, Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, was killed in the battle, and his burial inspired the poem, *"In Flanders Fields"*, which was written on May 3, 1915 as McCrae sat on the back of a medical field ambulance near an advance dressing post at Essex Farm, just north of Ypres.

McCrae later discarded the poem, but it was saved by a fellow officer and sent in to *Punch* magazine, which published it later that year.

From June 1, 1915 McCrae was ordered to set up No. 3 Canadian General Hospital at Dannes-Camiers near Boulogne-sur-Mer, northern France. C.L.C. Allinson reported that McCrae *"most unmilitarily told [me] what he thought of being transferred to the medicals and being pulled away*

from his beloved guns. His last words to me were: 'Allinson, all the goddamn doctors in the world will not win this bloody war: what we need is more and more fighting men.'"¹

"In Flanders Fields" appeared anonymously in *Punch* on December 8, 1915, but in the index to that year McCrae was named as the author. McCrae regarded his sudden fame with some amusement, but *"he was satisfied if the poem enabled men to see where their duty lay."*²

On January 28, 1918, while still commanding No 3 Canadian General Hospital (McGill) at Boulogne, McCrae died of pneumonia. He was buried the following day with

¹ Prescott, J F (1985). *In Flanders fields: the story of John McCrae*. Boston Mills Press. P.99

² Ibid, P.106



full military honours in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission section of Wimereux Cemetery.

His flag-draped coffin was borne on a gun carriage and the mourners – who included Sir Arthur Currie and many of McCrae's friends and staff – were preceded by McCrae's horse, "Bonfire," with McCrae's boots reversed in the stirrups. Unlike most gravestones in Commonwealth War Grave Commission cemeteries, McCrae's gravestone is placed flat, as are all the others in the section, because of the unstable sandy soil.

The RCN in 1915

by Alec Douglas

When in 1908 the Canadian-born Captain Charles Kingsmill RN, promoted Rear Admiral on the retired list, accepted Prime Minister Laurier's invitation to transform Canada's marine and fisheries department into a naval service, there was no immediate threat of war. When war did come, the direction received, both from the Admiralty and the Canadian government, was literally to make bricks without straw. In spite of Liberal government neglect and British disinterest, Canada's navy, which had come into being on 4 May 1910, when Parliament passed the Naval Service Act, played a remarkably important part in the First World War.

In October 1910, the opening of the Royal Naval College of Canada and the arrival of the *Diadem* class cruiser *Niobe* in Halifax, and in November the arrival in Esquimalt B.C. of the *Apollo* class cruiser *Rainbow*, had started the service off well. On August 29 1911, with royal assent, the Naval Service of Canada had become the Royal Canadian Navy. However, with the defeat of the government by Robert Borden's coalition of conservatives and Quebec *nationalistes* on 21 September, Laurier's plans for immediate expansion of the navy were abandoned. Borden had no practicable alternative to offer. He proposed repealing the Naval Service Act, and put before Parliament the Naval Aid Bill for direct cash contributions to British naval shipbuilding. This was defeated by the Liberal majority in the Senate, and over the next three years the RCN declined to a force of less than 350 officers and men. When asked for a report on the state of the navy in December 1913 Kingsmill,



HMCS Niobe

who on 17 May 1913 had been made Vice Admiral on the Royal Navy's retired list, pointed out that without a policy on some sort of permanent naval service, it was difficult of not impossible to prepare a memorandum on the subject.

After war broke out in 1914 Kingsmill and the Deputy Minister, Georges Desbarats, worked under difficult circumstances. The enormous contribution of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, which Winston Churchill, as First Lord of the Admiralty, had advised Borden was "...where Canada's energies should be devoted ... for the purpose of this war"; overshadowed the efforts of an undermanned and underfunded Canadian navy. Consequently, neither *Rainbow* in Esquimalt, nor *Niobe* in Halifax, was adequately prepared for war. Kingsmill improvised by sending *Rainbow*, unfit though the ship was, as a physical presence to counter the German cruiser *Leipzig* off the



HMCS Rainbow

coast of British Columbia. His assessment of the risk led him to requisition the Grand Trunk steamship *Prince George* as a hospital ship, no doubt less than hopeful about the results of a successful interception. Fortunately, the German cruiser left to join Admiral Graf von Spee's squadron on 18 August. On the east coast, when on 2 September 1914 *Niobe* finally completed the refit made necessary when she had gone aground in the summer of 1911, she was put at the disposal of the Admiralty, until in July 1915 the ship, worn out and beyond repair, went alongside in Halifax for good. *Rainbow*, also under Admiralty control, continued patrols on the west coast until paid off in May 1917.

Kingsmill and his minuscule staff in Ottawa struggled to provide adequate naval defences against ill-defined

threats, mostly possible German submarine operations in the western Atlantic and the Gulf of St Lawrence. Every effort to construct purpose built destroyers and submarines would meet stubborn resistance from a government informed by conflicting advice from the Admiralty. They would also have to oversee the shipment of vital war supplies across the Atlantic, done with the indispensable help of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company. The navy's activities over following three years of war, and the aftermath of war, will be covered in future editions of the *Torch*.

Alec Douglas is a volunteer with the FCWM; a former naval officer; and, former Director of History with DND.

The Victoria Cross – Canadian Awards 1915

The Victoria Cross (VC), instituted in 1856 by Queen Victoria, is the Commonwealth's premier military decoration for gallantry. It is awarded in recognition of the most exceptional bravery displayed in the presence of the enemy, although in rare instances the decoration has been given to mark other courageous acts.

Since its inception during the Crimean War, the VC has been awarded 1,358 times. Depending on which of a variety of sources is cited and on the selection criteria applied, somewhere between 94 and 100 Victoria Crosses have been awarded to Canadians or to others serving with the Canadian Forces.

A distinctly Canadian version of the medal was introduced in 1993. To date no one has been awarded the Canadian medal.

The following Canadians, or foreign nationals serving in the Canadian Armed Forces, were awarded the decoration for their acts of bravery during 1915.



L/Cpl Michael O'Leary – 30 January.

Serving with the British Army at the Battle of Quinchy.

2nd Lt. Benjamin Geary – 20 April.

Serving with the British Army at the Second Battle of Ypres.

L/Cpl Frederick Fisher – 22 April.

Serving with the 13th Battalion, CEF at the Second Battle of Ypres.

Lt. Edward Bellew – 24 April.

Serving with the 7th Battalion, CEF at the Second Battle of Ypres.

Sgt. Maj. Frederick Hall – 24 April.

Serving with the 8th Battalion, CEF at the Second Battle of Ypres.

Capt. Francis Scrimger – 25 April.

Serving with the 14th Infantry Battalion, CEF at the Second Battle of Ypres.

Lt. Frederick Campbell – 15 June.

Serving with the 1st Battalion, CEF at the Battle of Givenchy.

For additional information on these courageous individuals and on other Canadians awarded the Victoria Cross, you are invited to consult the FCWM Research Paper, "*Chronicles of Courage*" on the FCWM Web Site at <https://www.friends-amis.org/index.php/en/document-repository/english/research-papers/57-chronicles-of-courage-canadas-victoria-cross-winners-1/file>

The Sinking of the Lusitania

RMS *Lusitania* was a British ocean liner launched on 7 June 1906 and built for the transatlantic passenger trade in the early years of the twentieth century.

Lusitania and her sister ship *Mauretania* provided a regular service between Britain and the United States until the intervention of the First World War. The two ships both held the “Blue Riband” speed record for a transatlantic crossing at different times in their careers.

At the time they were constructed the sister ships were the largest ever built and had 50% greater passenger space than their nearest rivals.

As part of an agreement with the British government *Lusitania* and the *Mauretania* were designed so that they might readily be converted to an auxiliary cruiser in times of war.

However, they proved to be impractical as armed cruisers. They had very high fuel consumption and were found to be too expensive for the Admiralty to operate. *Lusitania* was released from the Royal Navy shortly after the commencement of the war with instructions to resume passenger services. *Mauretania* served as a troop ship.

On 4 February 1915 Germany declared the seas around the British Isles a war zone and announced that from 18 February allied ships in the area would be sunk without warning.

Lusitania (Captain William Turner) departed New York on 1 May 1915. Prior to her sailing, the Imperial German Embassy in the United States had placed a warning in 50 American Newspapers that stated in part, “... vessels flying the flag of Great Britain, or any of her allies, are liable to destruction in those waters and that travellers sailing in the war zone on the ships of Great Britain or her allies do so at their own risk.”

On 7 May *Lusitania* was making for the port of Queenstown, Ireland, when at 2:10 p.m. she crossed in front of *U-20* commanded by *Kapitänleutnant* Walther Schwieger. Schwieger fired a single torpedo. It hit under the bridge, blowing a hole in the side of the ship, and was followed by a much larger secondary explosion that blew out the starboard bow.

The secondary explosion led to much speculation that *Lusitania* had been carrying a cargo of high explosives. Recent revelations following research on the wreck disprove this claim.

The ship quickly developed a severe list to starboard. Many lifeboats overturned while loading or lowering, spilling their passengers into the sea below. *Lusitania* had 48 lifeboats, more than enough for all the crew and passengers, but only six managed to get to the water and stay afloat.

Lusitania sank in 18 minutes at 2:28 pm, 11 miles (18 km) off the Old Head of Kinsale, killing 1,198 (including 128 US citizens) of the 1,959 people aboard, including almost a hundred children.



Contrary to popular belief, the *Lusitania* disaster was not the proximate cause of the United States entering the First World War. However, the sinking of the *Lusitania* is credited with turning the then-neutral American public opinion against Germany. Furthermore, Germany, fearing American wrath, restrained its submarine campaign for a time, which may have been its best chance of winning the war.

Nonetheless, it was Germany's resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare in early 1917 that finally forced the United States to declare war.

Later in the war Schwieger was killed in action when, as commander of *U-88*, he was chased by HMS *Stonecrop*, hit a British mine, and sank on 5 September 1917.