Canada & The Great War–1916

The third year of the Great War was dominated by four major events, three on land and one at sea – on the Western Front; the Battles of Verdun and the Somme; on the Eastern Front, the Brusilov Offensive; and, at sea by the Battle of Jutland.

Prior to participating in the Battle of the Somme, the CEF 2nd Division received its "baptism of fire" in the Battle of St Eloi in a battlefield of water-filled mine craters and shell holes. The Canadians, wearing the new steel helmets which had just been introduced, suffered 1,373 casualties in thirteen days of confused attacks and counter-attacks over possession of six water-logged craters and the dominating land on which they sat.

Canadians on the Somme Nov 1916, LAC 3194728

For the 3rd Division, the initiation to battle was even more devastating. This time the Germans attacked from their positions at Mount Sorrel just south of the Ypres-Menin Road. In the fiercest bombardment yet experienced by Canadian troops, the 3rd Division fought desperately until overwhelmed by enemy infantry. The important vantage points of Mount Sorrel and Hills 61 and 62 were lost.

In an effort to recapture the lost ground, the newly appointed Commander of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Sir Julian Byng, gave orders for a carefully planned attack, well supported by artillery, to be carried out by the 1st Canadian Division under the command of Major-General Currie. Careful planning paid off, and the heights lost on June 2 were re-taken but at high cost. At Mount Sorrel Canadian troops suffered 8,430 casualties

The Somme

The Allied plan for 1916 was to launch simultaneous offensives on the Western, Eastern and Italian Fronts. In the West the region of the Somme was chosen for a joint French and British assault about mid-year.

But in February the Allied scheme was upset when the German Chief of the General Staff, General Erich von Falkenhayn, seized the initiative. For his battlefield he chose the fortress-ringed city of Verdun, a position, he correctly believed, so essential to the French that France would fight to the last man to hold it. He hoped to lure French forces into the narrow, dangerous salient, slaughter them with artillery fire, and thus "bleed France to death." By Christmas, when the battle finally ended, casualties for both sides totalled 680,000, of whom some quarter of a million were killed.

During this holocaust of fighting, the French sent frantic appeals to Sir Douglas Haig, the new British commander, to hasten the Somme offensive and take the pressure off Verdun.

The Somme campaign involved a massive build-up of men and munitions. By the end of June all was ready for the "Big Push," and Haig was quietly confident that his planned assault would destroy the enemy lines and open the way to attack the German rear areas, battery positions, headquarters and communications. Meanwhile, the German Army, long forewarned of the attack, was firmly entrenched along the ridges and the villages of the northern Somme countryside.

On July 1, at 0730 thousands of British and French troops began their advance across No Man's Land on a front of over 40 kilometres toward the German positions The result was slaughter—57,500 British soldiers killed, wounded or missing in one day—the heaviest day's combat losses ever suffered by the British Army. At the end of the day the French had gained nearly all of their objectives as had the British divisions to the south; but for two thirds of the British sector almost nothing at all had been gained.

The Battle of the Somme was not a one day affair and the fighting continued through the summer months. In late August 1916, the Canadian Corps moved from the muddy fields of Flanders to the Somme, where they took over a section of the front line west of the village of Courcelette. They ran into heavy fighting and suffered some 2,600 casualties before the full-scale offensive even got underway.

There were no further advances that year. The autumn rains turned the battlefield into a bog and the offensive staggered to a halt. The line had been moved forward only ten kilometres. The Allies had suffered some 650,000 casualties, and both sides had about 200,000 killed. The Germans refer to the Battle of the Somme as das Blutbad—the blood bath.

The Somme had cost Canada 24,029 casualties, but it was here that the Canadians confirmed their reputation as hard-hitting shock troops. "The Canadians," wrote Lloyd George, "played a part of such distinction that thenceforward they were marked out as storm troops; for the remainder of the war they were brought along to head the assault in one great battle after another. Whenever the Germans found the Canadian Corps coming into the line they prepared for the worst."

Battle of Courcelette by Malcolm Embree

As the battle hardened Canadian Corps marched the 100 km from the Ypres salient, in Belgium, to the newly captured French town of Pozières they knew they were in for something big. The Battle of the Somme had been raging since 1 July 1916.

It was late August 1916. The land, freshly tilled by shellfire was dry and chalky and liable to turn into an ocean of thick clay and mud during any heavy rain.

The troops may have noticed something a bit different amongst the usual tire treads and hoof marks as they advanced. Unusual tracks and the loud rumble of an unfamiliar engine in the distance announced Commander-in-Chief Douglas Haig's new secret weapon - the tank. Six of the 49 iron behemoths would make their debut alongside the Canadian Corps as they moved into position on the left flank of the attack.

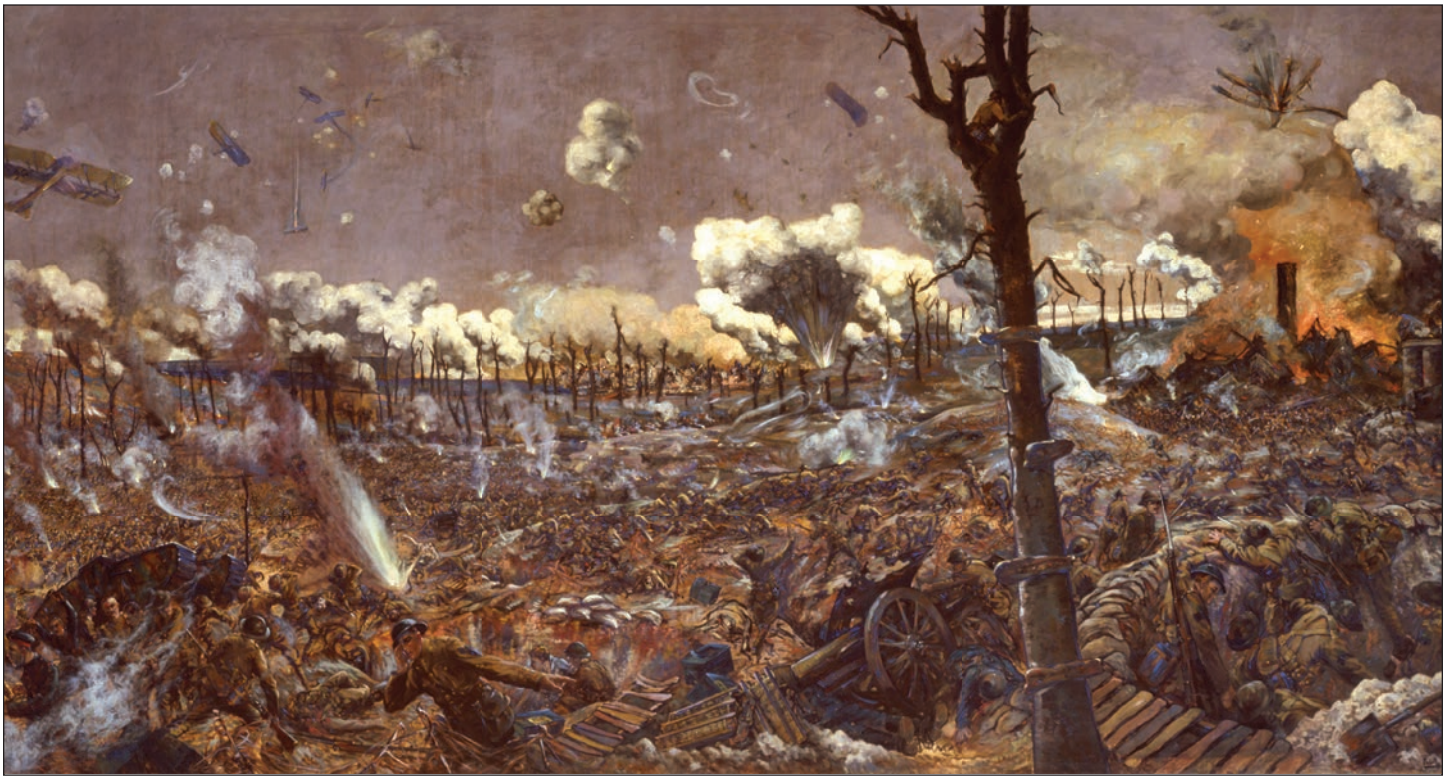
The Canadians took up residence in the vast network of trenches that faced the German fortified town of Courcelette, their main objective. Previously, the Canadian Corps had proven itself in the defence of Ypres in 1915. This was a chance for the Corps to prove itself as an offensive force.

After two weeks of rest and acclimation the attack was to be part of the third phase of the Somme offensive. With 1st Canadian Division holding a defensive position, the 2nd Division was tasked with taking a ruined sugar factory and its surrounding trenches, then moving on towards what was left of the town.

On the left, the 3rd Division was to take the trenches in the fields that surrounded the town. Their main goal was Mouquet Farm, dubbed "Mucky Farm" by the soldiers. The site had already been the focus of much fighting and now resembled the rest of the Somme region- flat fields marked by moon-like craters.

On the morning of September 15, 1916 the assault began. Another recent innovation, the creeping barrage, signalled the advance and moved slowly move forward with the infantry, keeping just in front of the advancing Canadians.

The six tanks had mixed results. They were slow and found it difficult to navigate the muddy craters, causing them to advance even more slowly than a walking soldier. Four of them broke down almost immediately. However, the other two saw relative success, rolling over



The Battle of Courcelette by Louis Alexander Weirten 1918. CWM 19710261-0788

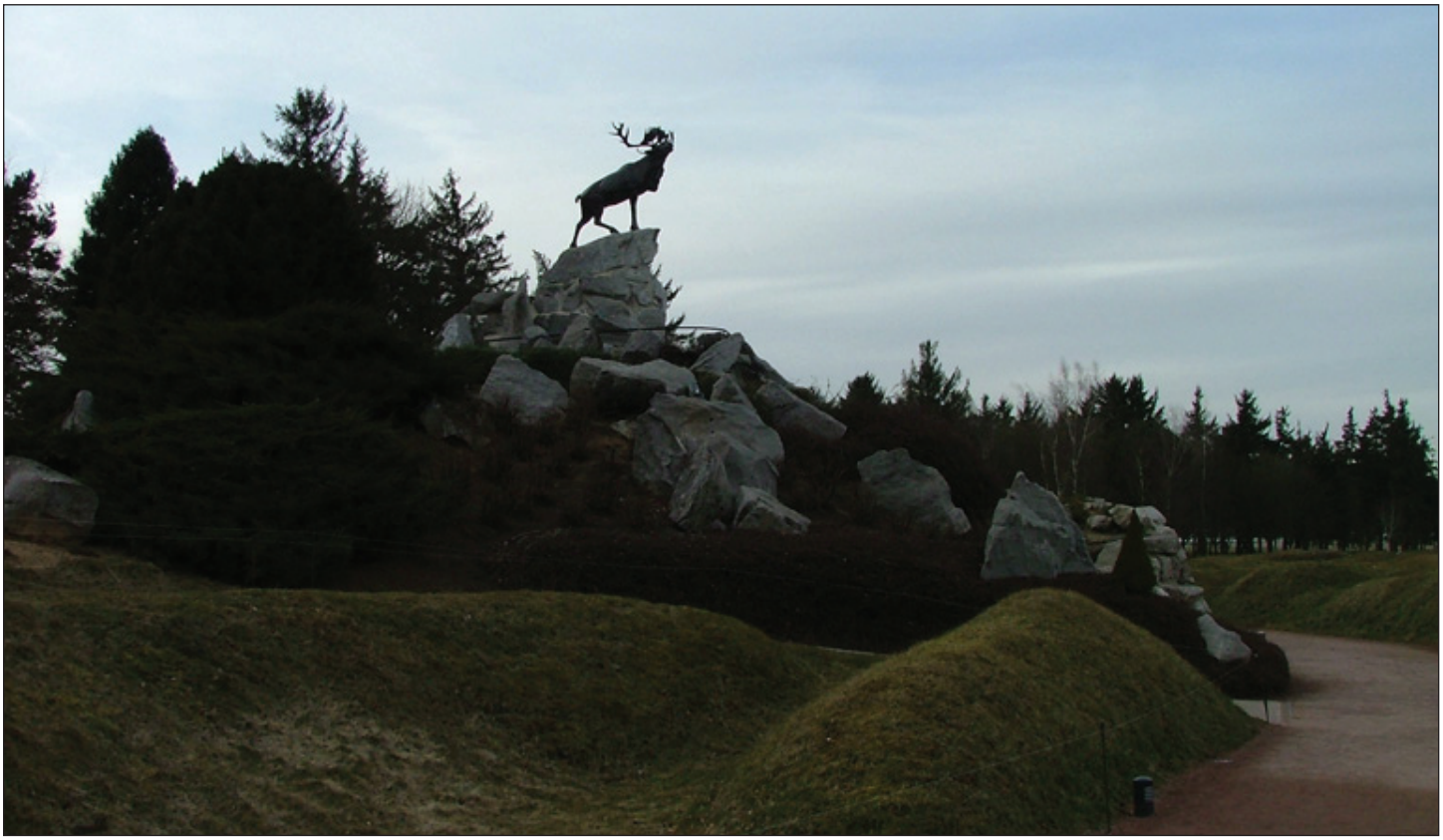
machine gun outposts and cutting through barbed wire. Many Germans surrendered at the mere site of the great rhombus giants, which responded to their useless rifle fire with either a 6 pounder cannon or a burst from an 8 mm Hotchkiss machine gun.

By the end of the day two Canadians, John Kerr and Leo Clark, were awarded the Victoria Cross for their actions. The allies had taken 2.3 km of territory, though thousands of ANZAC, French, British and Canadian lives were lost in the assault. Nonetheless, the capture of Courcelette was one of the few Allied victories on the Somme Offensive. The Canadian Corps stayed in the line for two more months and proved themselves a formidable force.

The newly introduced, 4th Canadian Division, under British Command, entered the campaign in October/ November and, in appalling weather conditions, finally succeeded in capturing the infamous Regina Trench system during the Battle of Ancre Heights.

When the Somme offensive was finally abandoned on November 18 the Canadian Corps had lost 24,029 casualties. However, valuable lessons on coordination, communications, and unit tactics had been learned that would pay dividends in later campaigns.

Malcom Embree was an FCWM Intern from Algonquin College



The Battle of Beaumont Hamel

Although not part of the Canadian Corps due to status as a separate colony, the Royal Newfoundland Regiment went into action on the first day of the Battle of the Somme as part of the British 29th Division.

As part of the general Somme offensive, the Regiment went over the top on 1 July 1916 near the Village of Beaumont-Hamel against well-entrenched German defences. The results were disastrous. Within thirty minutes, the regiment suffered a crippling 324 killed and 386 wounded out of a total of 801 soldiers. 1 July is now a Day of Remembrance in Newfoundland.

The Beaumont-Hamel Newfoundland Memorial site was officially opened, and the memorial unveiled, by Field Marshal Earl Haig on 7 June 1925. Since Newfoundland's confederation with Canada in 1949, the Canadian Government, through the Department of Veterans Affairs, has been responsible for the site's maintenance and care.

The RCN, 1915-1916

by Alec Douglas

The Canadian naval story in 1915 can be summed up as a struggle against bureaucratic indifference. As the official history tells us, *Niobe* was a floating barracks in Halifax, *Baleine*, *Deliverance*, *Gopher*, *Musquash*, *Sable* and *Premier*, hired trawlers fitted out as minesweepers, swept the entrance to Halifax Harbour and HMC ships *Tuna*, *Canada* and *Margaret*, with two other minesweepers, watched the Halifax approaches, while the government ships Sable and *Acadia* were available to watch for suspicious vessels …which might be engaged in minelaying, for enemy submarines and floating bases for the latter, and also to investigate rumours concerning them, in the Bay of Fundy and the approaches to the Gulf of St Lawrence…

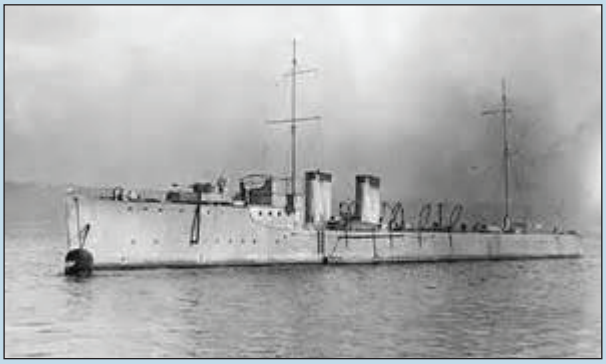
Two submarines, purchased in 1914 by the premier of British Columbia, were a novel addition to the RCN, and the total estimate of naval expenses in March 1915 were estimated as $3,000,000, compared to $95,475,000 for total war expenses. In the event, of the $100,000,000 voted for the armed forces in 1915, $3, 274,019 went to the navy. The first twelve months of the Second World War totalled $314,000,000, of which about $63,000,000 went to the navy, in other words approximately six percent compared to three percent in the First World War.

Throughout the navigation season in 1915 there was constant tension between the RCN and the politicians in Ottawa. Starved of purpose built warships, the navy struggled to build up anti-submarine forces. Sir George Foster, minister for trade and commerce responded to the notion of an enemy submarine threat with the fatalistic suggestion "*we can only watch and wait*". Other members of cabinet, including Sir Robert Borden, did just that, while Kingsmill struggled to build up an anti-submarine force. The Deputy Minister, George Desbarats tried unsuccessfully to allay the fears of the politicians.

Meanwhile, Admiral Kingsmill had to ensure a command relationship that was at arms length from the Royal Navy. He issued standing orders for the St Lawrence Patrol in July, and with the help of the wealthy Canadian J.K.L. Ross, who was serving as a Lieutenant RNCVR, was able to add to the fleet the yacht *Winchester* bought for $100,000 out of his own pocket (as he had done the year before for the *Tarantula*, renamed *Tuna*) commissioned into the RCN as *Grilse*. This time the navy reimbursed Ross, and purchased two more yachts in New York, *Columbia* and *Waterus*, renamed *Stadacona* and *Hochelaga*.

In August 1915 Captain E.C. Pasco RN (Retired), lent by the Admiralty to act as senior officer in Sydney, took over command of the Sydney flotilla. There were a number of false sightings during the year, and it was of no help to the RCN when in July the Admiralty informed NSHQ that the submarine threat was by no means immediate.

HMCS Canada



HMCS Grilse

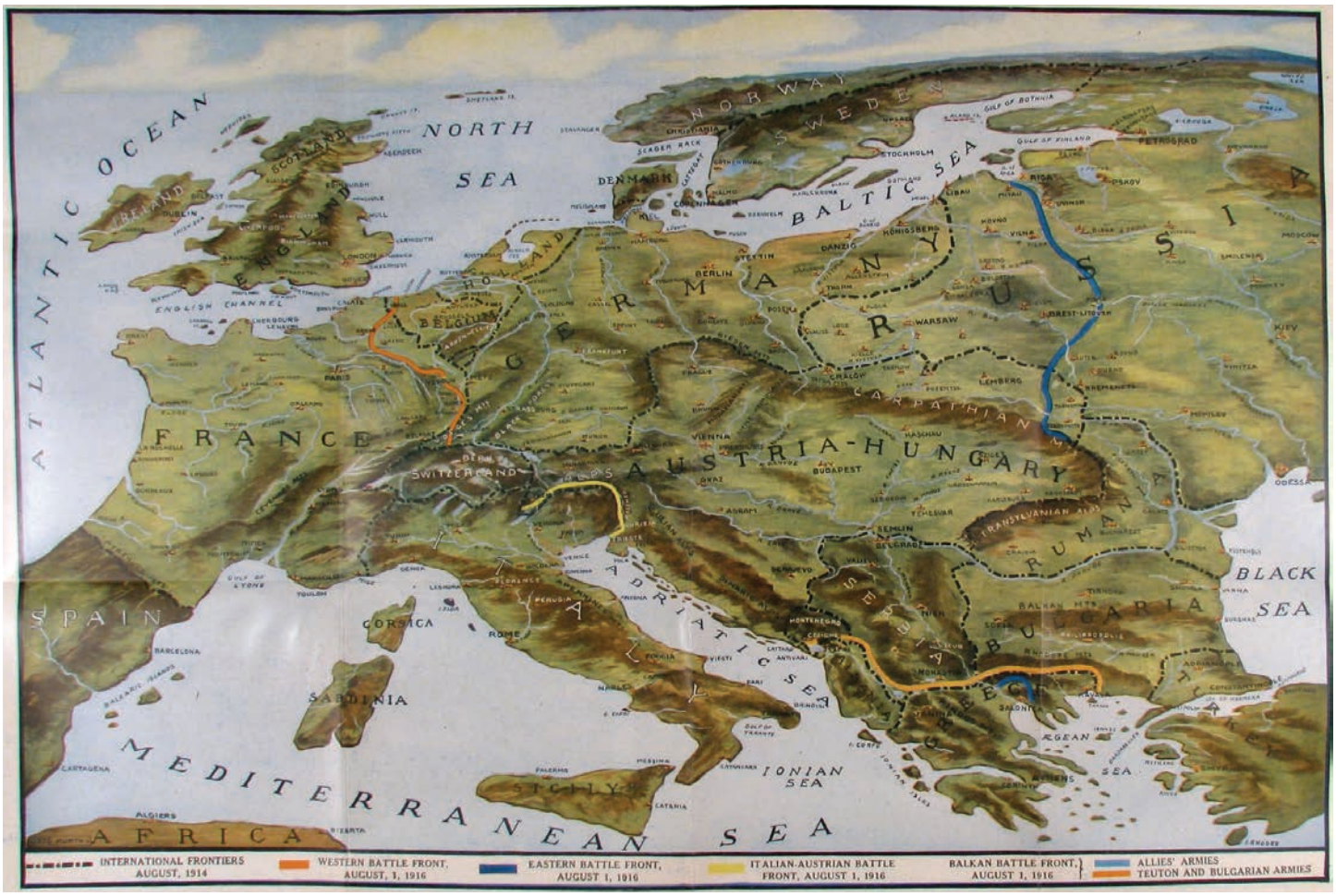
Kingsmill, in response to the totally inadequate support he was receiving from government, ensured that arrangements for 1916 would be more satisfactory. After consultation with Vice-Admiral Sir George Patey, C-in-C North America and West Indies Station, he sent Captain Pasco to Newfoundland early in 1916 to set up a joint sea patrol in the Gulf of St Lawrence and the Grand Banks.

Although all this took place a hundred years ago, today`s naval authorities can no doubt detect a certain pattern on the relationship between government and the navy that will not be unfamiliar.

This is the second in a series on the RCN in the First World War. Alec Douglas is a retired Naval Officer, former Director of History for the Department of National Defence and currently a volunteer with the FCWM.

Where the War Stood in 1916

This map illustrates where the battle lines stood on August 1, 1916, exactly two years into the war. Russia fared poorly, losing control of territory in what is now Poland, Ukraine, and the Baltics, while Serbia had been overrun. Fighting in the West and in Italy had accomplished essentially nothing beyond what the Germans had managed to achieve before the Battle of the Marne. The tiny blue line near Salonika in Greece represents a small Allied force that had seized the city to try to maintain a token force in the Balkans. Their presence embroiled Greek politics in crisis, but had little military significance until the Central Powers were on their last legs.



Women in WWI

by Krista Duncan

When images of wartime come to mind, one usually conjures up an image of a brave soldier marching off fearlessly into battle, or perhaps on the battlefield heroically fighting the enemy. However, there is another image that is not evoked nearly as often and that is of the many brave and selfless women who helped Canada's war effort in a variety of ways.

On the home front, women took on a number of previously 'male' tasks and jobs. Although there was an initial reluctance to allow women into traditionally male dominated areas, as the war dragged on it was realized that their help would be essential to Canada's war effort. Women began working in munitions factories, helping to create shells, often working long hours in poor conditions, making an average of $9 a week - barely enough to make ends meet. Others worked on farms and were referred to as 'farmettes'. They helped with planting, harvesting crops, caring for livestock, milking cows and other regular farm chores. For those working as farmettes, they earned $4 a week but had room and board included.

Munitions Women

For many of these women, they were required to maintain their traditional household and child rearing roles as well. Women also tended to victory gardens, gave blood, purchased war bonds and donated old cookware and household items to scrap metal drives. There were a number of women's groups such as The Women's Institute that worked together to make quilts, clothing such as hats, mitts, scarves, and sweaters as well as bandages to send to men overseas. The Canadian Women's Hospital Ship Fund raised money by holding concerts, tag days, teas, card parties, lectures and bazaars. Some groups held canning clubs, while others adapted recipes to wartime shortages and published special cookbooks as an aid to others. In addition, many of these groups held send off and welcome home parties for troops and were often at the forefront of efforts to create local war memorials.

WWI Nursing Sisters

However, it wasn't just at home that women assisted with the war effort in the Great War, some women were on the front lines; not in battle, but as nursing sisters. This would be women's first military involvement and saw nearly 3000 trained with the Voluntary Aid Detachment, Red Cross and St John Ambulance serving with the Canadian Army Medical Corps, often very close to conflict. Their blue dresses and white veils earned them the nickname of 'bluebirds'. Thirty three of these brave women lost their lives, while approximately 200 received medals for bravery.

Women's involvement during the war years allowed them to realize their potential and see just what they were capable of when allowed to do it. Out of their participation the suffragette movement grew. Many women wanted some vestige of equality after having done a man's job for a fraction of the pay. A huge step in that direction was the enfranchisement of women. Beginning in 1916 with Manitoba and four other provinces by 1917 women had begun to gain the right to vote. The Wartime Elections Act gave the vote to mothers, sisters and wives of those fighting as well as those women who had served as nursing sisters. It excluded Aboriginals, Asians and other racial minorities. Although this was a politically motivated initiative by Prime Minister Borden, it was nonetheless a victory for women.

When their support was needed, women mobilized and answered the call in a wide variety of ways both at home and overseas. Women are the frequently forgotten heroines in Canada's war effort -lest we forget. To provide additional insights into the role of women in both World Wars, the Canadian War Museum has an excellent temporary exhibition entitled "World War Women" on display in the LCol John McCrae Gallery until 3 April 2016.

Sources:
http://historyarchive.whitetree.ca/pages/article0027.html
http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/feature/women/history/homefront

Krista Duncan is a member of the FCWM and a Volunteer at the CWM

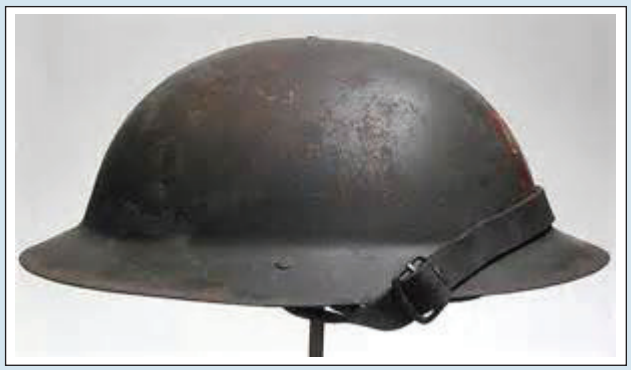
A Good Tin Hat for Tommy

During the summer of 1915, most armies involved in the Great War came to the conclusion that many wounds could be avoided if men wore a metal protective hat that would cover the head thereby protecting them from flying dirt, during shelling, and from shrapnel bullets.

The French soon came up with the *casque Adrian*, drawn by Auguste-Louis Adrian, a light, stylish cap-style hat with a crest and visor, with stamped insignia.

The Germans replaced their spiked combat helmets (*pickelhelm*) with the *Stalhelm*, drawn by Dr. Friedrich Schwerd, a headgear with a reputation as being the most effective against neck wounds.

The British opted for an easier pattern to stamp. John Leopold Brodie suggested a bowl that could easily be stamped out of a single metal sheet of high-ductility manganese steel and produced in large numbers. The simple design of the 'Brodie Streel Helmet, War Office Pattern' of 'Hadfield steel' proved to be the most effective at stopping low velocity shrapnel.



These British «Tommy helmets» started arriving in forward companies at the end of October 1915. The Canadian Corps adopted them in 1916, and later, each US Doughboy got one of the 7.5 million 'salad bowls' that were mass-produced in the War.

Edward F. Law, «Helmet», Encyclopaedia Britannica, 12th Ed. (1922), XXXI:366.
A good tin hat for Tommy

The Victoria Cross – Canadian Awards 1916

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.

In the FCWM Research Paper, "Chronicles of Courage", available on the FCWM Web Site, the author recognises 100 Canadian recipients. In this case, the author has used the word "Canadian" as an adjective and his criteria for inclusion has been persons born in Canada; those who lived and died in Canada; those who were awarded the VC while serving in the Canadian armed forces; and, finally those (actually only one) who won the VC while serving in Canada.

Based on these criteria, he has identified 73 Canadian winners of the award during World War. The following were awarded the decoration for their acts of bravery in 1916.

Cpl Lionel (Leo) Beaumaurice Clarke,
2nd Battalion,
5 October, 1916, Battle of the Somme.

Pte John Chipman Kerr,
49th Battalion,
16 September 1916, Battle of Courcelette.

Piper James Cleland Richardson,
16th Battalion,
8 October 1916, Battle of the Somme.

Capt. John Alexander Sinton,
Indian Army,
21 January, 1916, Mesopotamia.

Lt. Thomas Orde Wilkinson,
British Army,
5 July 1916, Battle of the Somme.