

FROM THE PRAIRIE TO PASSCHENDAELE

BY FRED KNIGHT

(Adapted by Joy Lennick)



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MAN OF KENT - SOLDIER OF
THE 10TH CANADIAN INFANTRY

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Selected Chapters 7 to 10 from the original work. 2021

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PROLOGUE

I am one of Frederick Alfred Knight's grandchildren, and knew very little of the story between these two covers. My grandfather's recollections of his early life as an immigrant working on the prairies of Saskatchewan opened my eyes to the incredible hardship of being a pioneer farmer in the early 1900's, taking into account the extremes of the mid-Western Canadian climate, with the temperature plunging to 45C below in winter and soaring above 40C in summer.

When World War 1 broke out, my grandfather volunteered and became a soldier with the famed 10th Canadian Infantry ("The Fighting Tenth"), experiencing at close quarters the horrors of warfare and proving himself a worthy adversary of the German might. Battles at Passchendaele and Amiens held a special resonance for him, as you will read for yourself. He proved to be a determined and tenacious fighter and proud to be 'Canadian'. At the famous battle for "Hill 70" he was awarded the Military Medal for his conspicuous bravery under fire.

Having nearly died of wounds received at Amiens, he eventually lost his right arm and was unable to continue farming. Despite suffering terrible bouts of pain because of badly treated nerve ends in the stump which was his right arm, my grandfather battled on, retrained as an Accountant/Businessman, and – having married and with four sons to feed – returned to England, where he again made his mark in a different way. Joy Lennick has ably and accurately converted my grandfather's own story of his working life into this book. Fred Knight, at 83 years of age, and suffering the shakes of Parkinson's disease in his remaining hand, typed the original manuscript using a special appliance strapped to his head. My admiration for his outstanding courage and tenacity is boundless.

Graham Knight.

CHAPTER 7

“Never think that war, no matter how necessary, nor how justified, is not a crime.”

Ernest Hemingway

War had been declared, and at first, details were rather woolly. We heard that the Arch Duke Franz Ferdinand, heir presumptive to the Austro Hungarian throne and his wife Sophie, Duchess of Hohenberg, had been assassinated. They were shot in their open carriage by a man called Gavrilo Princip, an ethnic Serb and Yugoslavian nationalist from the group ‘Young Bosnia.’ (Apparently Bosnia and Sarajevo didn’t want to be ruled by the Austrians.). At the time of the declaration, I knew little of the background details or why Britain, Germany, France, Belgium and Russia were also involved; with Italy keeping quiet at the time. One thing I did know, was that I wanted to enlist and do my bit for my country. Several other lads I knew had already signed up, but Joe and Jim persuaded me that I was more useful at the farm and the war would probably be over by the time I got there, and so they convinced me to stay.

When the crop was harvested and threshed, Jim and I went south for two months, with two outfits comprising of four horses and a grain tank each. We hauled flax for his brother-in-law, who had a bumper flax crop. It was 40 miles from a grain elevator, and as most of the flax was threshed on the ground, he wanted it away before it became buried in snow. I stayed with the brothers for two years, but became very restless. The war was still raging, and in mother’s letters from home, she spoke of my brothers being in the forces. She further said I was lucky to be in Canada and well out of it. That made me want to join up even more! But, every time I mentioned it, the brothers talked me out of it. It was the same old line:

“You’re much more useful here working on the farm.” This went on until spring 1916, when I could stand it no longer. I didn’t say a word to anyone, but wrote to a unit being formed in Edmonton, Alberta. It was a unit an

acquaintance of mine had enlisted in and I asked if I could sign on and still work on the farm until they were ready to leave for England, explaining the situation I was in. They replied and agreed, enclosing attestation papers for me to fill in. I was told to arrange for a medical examination by a local doctor. This I duly did and he agreed to keep it a secret. After returning all the completed papers, I felt better than I had in a long time; and it quietened the worm which had been continually twisting in my gut, or so it seemed. Sometime later, I received a letter instructing me to report immediately to Calgary, Alberta, where the unit was then in camp, as they expected to leave for England in a few weeks time.

The McKinney boys' sister, who was fifteen years my senior, was a school teacher, and still lived with them. She had always been my confidante and I told her about my situation.

"I admire you for what you are doing, but please tell the boys before you leave," she advised, (I had planned on just walking out...)

I thanked her for her advice and told Jim first. Although he didn't like the idea, he wished me luck. With Joe, it was a different matter. He gave me a right tongue lashing, called me a damn fool and everything else he could think of.

"If I'm that valuable," I said, "I'll go to town and hire two men to take my place. You can pay them the money you owe me!" Then I walked away and went into the house. Early morning, just after breakfast, I told their sister what had happened and that I planned leaving straight away.

"Don't think too badly of Joe," she said... "He'll get over it and be sorry for what he said!" While changing, I asked her to contact Mr. Ashcroft, to find out if he was going to Unity, and if so, could I travel with him. He was, so I left without seeing Joe, who was busy in the barn. As soon as I arrived in town, I headed for the barbers, where I had my hair cut. As I left, I met a man I knew, and he told me Joe was in town looking for me, so I hid in a stack of hay because I thought he had come to persuade me to stay. I was in a position where I could see him leave town. My train was not due to leave until 10.30 pm and I just didn't want to meet Joe again. I stayed there until 3.00 pm, and was famished. I eventually saw Joe leave and went back into town. It seemed that everyone I met made the same statement:

“Joe McKinnley’s been looking for you!” I went to a restaurant; had a good meal, and then looked up Martha Gray, one of Mrs. Gray’s daughters, who had been ill and was staying in Unity with friends while having treatment from the doctor. I was very fond of her and told her what I planned doing; blurting out:

“I’m real fond of you Martha, how about waiting for me to return?” She went all coy on me, and said,

“I’m much too young to commit to anything now.”

“Well at least give me a kiss good-bye,” I said, but she wouldn’t and I left feeling very sad.

I left that night and eventually joined the Unit on the 15th September, 1916 in Calgary. Everyone was in a high state of expectation. They had received instructions to move in seven days time. I was issued with my uniform and equipment, and spent the next few days on the parade ground with several others. It was intensive training, and I was surprised at how quickly we all picked things up. We were soon on parade with the rest of the battalion. A week later, we marched to the station and boarded a train for Toronto, Ontario. There was a large crowd at the depot to see us off. One of the platoons of ‘A’ company had a reputation for being ‘Lady Killers,’ and where this platoon was waiting, was a seething mass of people. Being curious, we walked down to see what the attraction was, and there was a smashing blonde girl kissing all the chaps of ‘A’ platoon goodbye. Just then, the conductor yelled “All aboard,” and the blonde girl took off her hat, wig and outer clothes...before our widened eyes! ‘She’ was a ‘he,’ - a chap from another platoon - who had been a female impersonator in civvy street! We all had to run for our carriages, so missed some of the fun. Everyone involved had a good laugh and the audience got a great kick out of it. The incident found itself in the local paper with photographs to prove it! We had a great time on the journey through Canada. We stopped at all divisional points to change engines and crews, and at every stop, there were crowds wishing us well.

Having arrived in Toronto, we were billeted in the Exhibition grounds building, where we stayed for around ten days. The Toronto folk were great; they couldn’t do enough for us. We were apparently the first battalion from Western Canada to stop off there. We were allowed out after

breakfast, and as long as we were in by ten, it was OK. We'd stroll along the streets, taking in the sights, when a car would pull up and the driver would wind down his window and say, "Hello Westerner, jump in and let us show you our city!" Off we would go to see all the interesting places, ending up at a show or restaurant, or even at our host's home for a feed, before being driven back to our billets. One thing which impressed me, was how proud the Toronto people were of their city.

All good things come to an end, and we were once again on a train, this time bound for Halifax, Nova Scotia. Here, we boarded the liner RMS Olympic, the sister-ship of the ill-fated 'Titanic'. Our liner was too fast to travel with a convoy, so it was, to a certain extent, armed. There were substantial naval guns, fore and aft, and the boat deck was ringed with machine guns, which were manned by various battalions every day. There were a tremendous number of troops on board - we never did find out how many - and the ship was one of the largest afloat at the time. We were packed in like sardines and slept in hammocks slung up to the ceiling of the large-dining room, where we ate in the day, and slept in at night. Large canvas containers held the hammocks, and it was every man for himself as we grabbed them as quickly as we could. They were slung on a set of hooks, and if you happened to be last, it was the devil of a job to get hooked up and in it! I was a good sailor, but 75% of the lads on that ship had never seen the sea, let alone travelled on it, and so there were some pretty sick lads for a day or two. But all in all, it wasn't too bad. We were kept busy with drills and emergency calls, and we daren't miss the latter for, if we weren't at our boat station when our names were called, we'd be for it.

We eventually arrived at Liverpool and disembarked. We were lined up but didn't know our destination. There were plenty of suggestions and surmises, but none of them were correct. As we waited, a small shunting engine with dozens of small carriages attached, pulled in. As most of the lads had never left Canada, and were therefore only used to the large Canadian locomotives and coaches, when they saw the small engine and carriages pull up, a roar of laughter went up and they shouted at the engine driver:

"Who bought you the train for Christmas then?" Others suggested the engine would never pull us lot along. They were ignorant of the type of

engine being hooked on the other end. Once we'd boarded and started up – travelling at a fair lick – it was a different story, and the chaps with the largest mouths grew rather quiet. Their derision quickly changed to admiration. We stopped very few times on our journey, and no-one was allowed out. We arrived, late at night, somewhere in Sussex.

We disembarked and were marched to Shoreham camp. What a dump! We couldn't see anything, which was just as well, as we would have felt worse! It was raining heavily and we realised we were squelching in mud. The huts we were detailed were old and miserable; some wag suggested they were built by the Romans! We only had the meagre rations issued in Liverpool but were brought tea after a fair wait. Some of us had to sleep on the floor as there were not enough beds to go round. Thankfully, when we awoke the next morning, it had stopped raining and the sun was shining, which gave us a brighter outlook. The men of our battalion were a decent lot, and it was a credit to them how well they adjusted to the life; for it held more questions than answers.

We were a mixed bunch: British, Central Europeans, Russians, Japanese, and Americans, but all Canadians and proud of it. Woe betide anyone saying otherwise. The washing facilities at the camp were *al fresco*, but everyone took the inconveniences in good humour. Luckily the food was good, which compensated for a lot. The Canadian Authorities supplied all the edibles direct, and they certainly did us proud. We went on route marches the first few days, which we enjoyed, and settled in well. The often gently undulating English countryside was a pleasant change from living on the flat prairie.

We had British regulars attached to us, and on the fourth day, got down to training in earnest. They sure gave us the works! Our men were very tolerant, considering some of the sarcastic remarks made to us and about us... I recall one occasion when we were having bayonet instructions: running and jabbing our bayonets into sacks full of sawdust hanging on poles. We were getting fed up and the instructor was becoming exasperated.

“You Canadians call yourself soldiers? You lot are soft! Show a bit of grit. When you're facing a Jerry, it's kill or be killed. You need to be blood-thirsty, not act like bloody fairies!” he really gave us a tongue lashing. One

of the lads, a bit riled, said: “If you think we’re too soft-hearted, you go and stand there yourself!” The instructor looked in two minds as to whether to chew him up or ignore him, then laughed and replied: “I don’t think I will. I really believe you’d bayonet me...” and all the lads joined in the laughter, although, darkly, they were probably thinking, like me, that they rather fancied the idea of sticking a blade of steel into him at that precise moment!

We had been given to believe, when we left Canada, that we would be going to France as a Unit, but after being in Shoreham for a couple of weeks, our hopes were dashed. On parade one morning, we were told that the battalion was being disbanded, a part of us going to the 10th Canadian Infantry Battalion, and part to the 49th Canadian Infantry Battalion. A draft was required immediately for the 10th Battalion, and as it was required with some urgency, there would be no leave. It was to be a substantial draft and they asked for volunteers. I was fed up with all the parade stuff, no matter how necessary, and anxious to have a crack at the Germans; and as some of my best friends had volunteered, I decided to join them. This action had a price, as, although my family lived in Kent, I hadn’t been able to see them, and would naturally have enjoyed meeting up again after all our years apart. This seemed impossible as the draft was urgent. I went to the orderly room and offered my services.

“Sorry Knight, you need more training!” I was told.

Disgruntled, I told my friends, and our sergeant, who was a good pal of mine, went with me to the Adjutant and gave him such a good report on my character and reputation, I was accepted, which was a great relief, despite my disappointment in not seeing my family. We were fitted out with our pukka battle equipment, and after a pep talk from the Colonel, we left for France. Apart from the fact that I’d miss meeting up with my else, I was glad to be going. Most of the Japanese who were in our battalion had also volunteered for our draft.

When we arrived at the 10th battalion, it had just returned from the front line. Many of the soldiers had been badly cut up and were on rest, and apparently, our draft was to bring the battalion up to strength again. We were assigned to “C” company, which had taken the brunt of the action. In our platoon, outside of the NCO’s, two others and myself, the

rest were Japs, who were a tough lot, but swell to get along with. They were wonderful fighters: absolutely fearless, and never let us down. Initially, our battalion men were insulted that a bunch of Japs should be attached to the 'fighting 10th', but after seeing them in action, they soon changed their unwarranted opinion. It wasn't long before we had the reputation of being second to none, especially for raiding parties!

We always had a generous rum ration, but had to watch the Japs' intake because, if they became too tanked up, they'd want to go and fight the whole German army themselves...

We had several quiet tours of duty on the front line and in reserve, when we carried out a lot of dirty work parties. On one occasion, we were up front, putting up barbed wire entanglements, when we became involved with a German patrol. They had spotted us without our seeing them; threw stick bombs at us and ran. Much confusion, although none of us seemed to be hurt badly, as luckily the Germans' aim was poor. However, it wasn't as innocuous as it sounds – they had, after all, thrown bombs and not stones at us - as a metal fragment hit me under the chin, and I felt a prickling sensation in my right heel, which grew painful. When we arrived back at our billet, I took my boot and sock off, and found a splinter of metal had penetrated my boot and entered my foot. I managed to remove it, washed my foot, put some iodine on it and tried to forget about it. A few days later, more pain kicked in; my foot was swollen and I was unable to get my boot on. I immediately reported sick and the doctor sent me to a rest camp, where they had first aid facilities. They treated me and sent me by ambulance to hospital. By the time I arrived, I was feeling pretty bad. They treated me with injections and I became feverish and in such a state, I hardly knew, or cared, what was happening. I remember a discussion that the hospital was being cleared out, ready to receive casualties from an attack being made at the front line by British troops.

That night we were evacuated to England. I was very hazy and almost out of it, and the next thing I remembered was being taken off a ship at Southampton. I must have been delirious, and a doctor gave me another injection. I later awoke in a Canadian hospital in Eastbourne. A Sister looked at the medical details at the foot of my bed regarding my condition, and shook her pretty, fair head:

“You are one lucky lad,” she said,”...do you realise that poison had entered your blood stream and started making its way up your leg? Thankfully, we’ve managed to stop its progress and you won’t lose the leg after all.” Her bald statement made me sit up sharply I can tell you. It was hard to believe that I was back in England, and all because of what I thought of as a paltry wound. The Sister added:

“You are still a very sick lad, and should have had proper treatment earlier.”

In France, they had been preparing for a British offensive, so I couldn’t have been high on their list of priorities...but the fact that I could have lost a leg hit home and was a sobering thought. Good fortune smiled on me thereafter as the the nurses and doctors treated me with care, and I was soon back – a bit wobbly - on my two feet. You can’t keep a good man down, I thought.

Sent to a convalescent home in Eastbourne, where I remained for two weeks, I was then mighty pleased to be given leave and went home to see my folks. I gave my mother quite a surprise!

“Goodness me, Frederick, I didn’t expect to see you. Are you now quite well?” I felt a bit emotional, and there were tears in my mother’s eyes. I had a most enjoyable time being with my folks and seeing friends – although a lot were missing – plus three of my brothers, who were serving away.

My leave up, I reported to Bramshott camp and was assigned to the 23rd Canadian Reserve Battalion, where I grew anxious, as I understood it might be difficult to get back with my own unit. However, I found quite a few of the 10th battalion men there. We hoped it would be possible to reunite with our group and were determined to do so.

After parade one morning, I was told to report to the orderly room (wondering what I’d done wrong en route) and was in a bit of a funk. My mind was soon put at ease.

“There’s a registered package at the Liphook Post Office and you have to collect it personally,” I was informed, and given a 12 hour pass. I left scratching my head. Who on earth could have sent me a registered

package?! I was quite intrigued. It didn't take me long to present myself at the Post Office, where the old chap behind the counter – staring at me over half spectacles – said: “Right, lad – let's see your identity disc and pay book then. And have you any letters to identify you?” He really was suspicious and careful, while friendly enough; even after I had given him the necessary, he still seemed doubtful. He continued to question me, and asked who I knew in Canada. I rattled off:

“The McKinnes,” adding their address.

“You must be the one then. Right you are.” And he handed me the package, which I signed for. What a very nice surprise! It seems that Joe McKinney had followed me into town that day, not to persuade me to return, but to make his peace with me and give me my money. When he couldn't find me, he asked his Bank Manager for advice. They didn't know which unit I was in, only that it was supposed to be in Edmonton, Alberta. They phoned the bank's branch in Edmonton with no luck, and by the time they discovered I had been in Calgary, I had left for Toronto. Joe was determined to get the money to me one way or another, so he obtained an order, payable at any post office in England for three hundred dollars, and put another three hundred dollars in the bank in my name, which I could draw on. An extract from the enclosed letter said:

“I'm real sorry for the way I acted and for the nasty things I said. hope you'll forgive me?! And when you get back from the war, there's a home here for you.” I turned to the postmaster, and signed the order, saying:

“Would you cash it for me please.” He surprised me by replying –

“If I give you all that money, someone will murder you for it!” I assured him that it would be all right, but could see he was genuinely worried someone might relieve me of it. We figured out the rate of exchange and he my tunic and put all but ten pounds inside my top shirt pocket. When I offered him a few pounds for his trouble, he graciously refused.

“I'm only doing my job, lad,” he said.

What a journey that registered packet had been on! Calgary, Alberta, redirected to Toronto, Ontario, then the Canadian Pay Office at Millbank, London – it had several London frankings on it - Shoreham, back to

London, more frankings in France...to the battalion, and finally back to England where I caught up with it - or it with me, at Bramshott! I kept the envelope as a souvenir and gave it to mother to keep for me, and much later, when I went to claim it, it had disappeared. Why would anyone want to steal an envelope, unless they thought something was in it? Back in the post office, due to the banter and prolonged conversation the postmaster and I had, I left as a friend!

When I reached camp, my mates had just returned from a route march and were eager for meal time. A couple of them, who had been wounded like me, were from our original battalion, and we were all waiting to return to France. They didn't know why I had been called to the Orderly's office that morning and started pulling my leg.

"Who got you out of clink then?!"

"Never mind that..." I said, enigmatically; "put your tunics on and make yourselves presentable, I'm taking you to the Church army hut in Tintown and buying you the best meal of egg and chips you've ever had!"

"Don't add insult to injury," one of them piped up, "We know you're as broke as we are!" It was then I casually produced a few pound notes, and they leapt off their beds faster than hounds after a fox.

"Who did you rob then?" went unanswered; I merely told them that a friend in Canada had sent me a few bob, thinking I might need a little extra cash. (I'd remembered the 'wise tongue' advice.) It wasn't long before we were all seated and enjoying the fruit of the chickens, accompanied by generous portions of golden, fried, chipped potatoes.

We were kept longer than we cared to at Bramshott, despite several requests to return to France, but they refused us leave as we were down for draft. We were all glum and asked to see the Adjutant. We were duly seen, and eventually given leave before being drafted with our unit in France. I was reassigned to my old company and platoon with my Japanese friends, so was well pleased. To say we saw a lot of action in 1917 is something of a major under-statement!



The author as a young man in Canada (c.1921)



A soldier of the 10th Canadian Canada. (c.1921)



Martha (nee Gray) and Fred Knight. (c.1925)



Military Medal. Awarded
to Pte. Fred Knight for his "conspicuous
bravery and distinguished conduct in
action" at the Battle for Hill 70. (Sept.
1917

CHAPTER 8

“Older men declare war, but it is youth that must fight and die.”

Herbert Hoover

When one of the famous battles at Vimy Ridge took place, some soldiers in our battalion were left out - as sometimes happened – and we were bitterly disappointed. However, the honour of the 10th was upheld, and the Canadians did themselves proud.

(Note: The 10th Battalion of Canadian soldiers became known as “The fighting 10th” and were held in high esteem. The battle to capture Vimy Ridge was as noisy as hell and as bloody as an abattoir. Several heavy guns were employed. It was regarded as “The greatest victory of the war” by us Canadian soldiers, and the best “tactically, for ingenuity and military engineering.”) The 10th stepped in when the British and French were unable to clear the heights; despite heavy casualties. Someone was overheard to remark: “What do they feed you Canadians on? Iron?” The victors paid a high price for their valour, with 15,654 dead and wounded).

The British Commander Lt. General Sir Julian Byng, and Commander of Canada, was promoted, and his successor was a Canadian, Lt. General Sir Arthur Currie. Another soldier worthy of mention, was John McCrae, a Canadian doctor who attended the wounded and dying. At the second battle of Ypres in the Flanders area of Belgium, as the Canadians held the attack against chlorine gas. McCrae’s friend Lt. Alexis Helmer of Ottawa was killed. The next day – after arranging a quick funeral service – McCrae wrote the famous poem ‘In Flanders Field,’ which I feel should be included here:

IN FLANDERS FIELD

In Flanders field, the poppies blow
Between the corpses, row on row.
That mark our place, and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly.
Scarce heard amid the guns below
We the dead; short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
And now we lie in Flanders Field.
Take up our quarrel with the foe.
To you their failing hands we throw
The torch, be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us and die
Wishing sleep, though poppies grow in
Flanders Field.

John McCrae 1915

Our turn came later, at Hill 70 (so-named because it was 70 metres above sea level). Our battalion “C” company had a particularly tough time. We took the hill, which dominated the countryside. It had a large excavation at the summit, with dug-outs around the side, made by the Germans. We attacked early one morning, and were in occupation by 8.00 am. We disturbed a German HQ of some kind, with German officers having breakfast in a very deep dug-out; promptly took them prisoner, and reduced them to the ranks. We then made them carry their own wounded out, to which order they strongly objected. As we were short of stretcher bearers – some having been knocked out during the German shelling, we said:

“You either carry your wounded comrades out, or they stay here!” That got them moving. We had been ordered to:

“Consolidate the side of the excavation facing the Germans, and hold it at any cost.” We were thinly scattered along the ridge and there was difficulty

getting reinforcements to that area. Flares were issued and a point given on our maps to put up a flare when the Germans, during their counter-attack, reached this point. We followed instructions to the letter, and in seconds, the whole area the Germans held, erupted. It was sheer slaughter. A number of guns moved in behind us and the slaughter continued. We could see the pile of German bodies growing higher. The Germans badly wanted our position back and were obviously going to extreme lengths to retrieve it. We held on tenaciously, but at a high price, it must be said, for our casualties were also mounting substantially. The Germans had our range and they shelled us continuously all day long. Still no reinforcements! The remnants of our company were holding the main ridge of the excavation - quite a wide area - and the Germans were lobbing their largest shells: the explosions of which were ear shattering. It was unbelievable how we survived that day and night, but thank heaven, early next morning our relief arrived.

Only six of us and a Sergeant were left on our feet. 'Battle-weary' consists of just two words, but unless you were there and had experienced the horror, it is almost impossible to describe the emotions we all felt. Note: Re Hill 70 – Canadian casualties over 9,000 German casualties: 25,000 plus.

When we arrived at the battalion's quarters, Muggins the cook had some real hot Mulligatawny soup waiting for us. It was the first real meal we had eaten in 48 hours! It tasted like I imagined nectar would...

I was next offered the job of battalion runner, and in accepting it, was attached to the BHQ (British Headquarters). We used to act in pairs, and as a partner, I had a small Welshman, Dai, who was a grand chap. One night, we were on our way to one of the company's headquarters, when we came across a strong smell of rum. It seems a ration party, also in the same direction, were caught by German shelling. The rum carrier – with two large jars of rum slung over his shoulder - was wounded, and we later discovered, had taken himself to a dressing station, and we found one jar undamaged, and the other smashed and almost empty except for about half a pint.

"What 'ave we got 'ere then, mun?" said my Welsh companion in his singy songy lilt. We both grinned, and after searching for other casualties and not

finding any, filled one of our two water bottles with rum, and hid the jar with the remainder in a shell-hole, covered it with loose earth and marked the spot with a cross for further, hopeful, consumption. (We were not being utterly selfish and had in mind to give some to the chaps as we were passing through the night). There is an amusing postscript to the rum story...

As I carried water in one bottle and rum in the other, a strict procedure had to be adhered to. Even more so when I was asked to accompany the Colonel and company commanders to an area the battalion was due to take over. We drove a fair distance in trucks and walked awhile before entering some trenches, Quite suddenly, I suffered terrible stomach cramps until I could stand them no longer. The colonel told me to:

“Nip up that side of the trench. We’ll wait here and have a rest.” Once relieved, I returned to the colonel and he said:

“You’re a sensible runner. I noticed you’re carrying two water bottles,” adding

“Do you mind giving me a drink?” I told him he was welcome, and thought if only you knew what was in the other bottle, you old so and so! A little later, he asked me for another drink, and again, I passed him the water bottle. As I was then thirsty myself, I took a swig and quickly realised I must have accidentally switched the bottles over...I thought the colonel had noticed my embarrassment, and I’d be for it when we got back. Time passed, and once again, the colonel requested a drink. I thought I may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, and passed him the rum bottle. He took a sip and quickly spat it out:

“Runner,” he said, frowning “...that damned water is getting too warm!” I heard nothing more about the incident until a few weeks later, when I was unexpectedly called to his office.

“Now then, Knight,” he said – “I want an explanation about that rum!” I took a deep breath and told him the whole, true story.

“I happen to believe you as I’ve never seen you worse the wear from drink, but woe betide you if I ever caught you stealing!” He then swore a

bit, and told me what he'd do if he did, continuing, "Despite the circumstances, consider yourself severely reprimanded! Dismiss."

The battle at Ypres 1915-17 (pronounced 'wipers' by the Canadians) was the first major action of the 10th Canadian unit; and the first instance of poison gas being used. Two entire French divisions suffered between 6/10,000 casualties but the first Canadian division held firm. After the battle of St. Julien and the counter attack at Kitchener's Wood, the Oak Leaf shoulder badge distinction was granted.

(Note: The 10th Battalion Canadian Expeditionary Force was technically distinct from the militia in that soldiers were drawn from the unit, especially the 1st Canadian division 1914-1919.) Canadian troops took part in most of the major battles fought in the Ypres Salient between April 1915 and November 1917. There are many monuments in Belgium and France commemorating the Canadian troops' bravery and the terrible price they paid for their valour.

The next big offensive our battalion was involved in, was Passchendaele. It is difficult to adequately describe, as it was a sea of seemingly endless, squelching, disgusting mud. The drainage system had been destroyed, and Lord knows where the angels or Mother Nature were, and despite many prayers sent upwards... we suffered the heaviest rains for thirty years. However, despite it, I passed the chance of promotion because I enjoyed being a runner, although it was hellishly difficult to do so in the gelatinous stuff! Perhaps it was more dangerous and I often had to take chances, but maybe that's something in my make-up. I seem to like a challenge to show what I'm made of.

At Passchendaele, the battalion HQ was a greater distance from the company HQ, so presented more hazardous trench work. There were no such conveniences as roads, and there were heavy trench mats, or strips of wood laid on top of the mud for both men and animals to travel over. All ammunition went by pack mule, and I saw some pitiful sights when mules got stuck in the unbelievable expanses of deep mud. Some would get sucked down and struggle until they could struggle no more and their drivers would have to shoot the poor creatures to put them out of their misery. Conditions were horrendous and the mud even stopped some tanks

at times.

The Germans were entrenched all around the Salient and the shelling seemed to come from all directions. There were no trenches there or dug-outs to shelter in and one had to just keep going, hope for the best, and keep on the trench mats. As fast as the Germans blew them to pieces, fresh ones were laid down at various points. Being in the Infantry, I often wondered how the Artillery handled their guns in such awful circumstances, and did see one large gun being pulled through the mud by dozens of men with ropes, and it was a herculean task. The state of those trench mats and the never ending mud were an absolute nightmare.

(Note: The Canadians seized Passchendaele on November 6th 1917. They were awarded nine Victoria Crosses, but the cost was terribly high. There were 15,000 wounded and dead for an advance of just a few square kilometres of mud, and the battle had lasted three months.)

Having been relieved at Passchendaele, we went on to Poperinge in Belgium for a rest and refit as the battalion had suffered heavy casualties. We took over part of the line in danger of the Germans breaking through, stabilized it, and handed it to another battalion. This was early in 1918 and our battalion saw a lot of action. I had been promoted to Lance Corporal while on two weeks leave in England, and was told that, this time, I had to accept. I didn't mind as I had lost my partner, just before taking my leave.

My Welsh pal, Dai, and I were on our way through trenches from battalion headquarters to one of the company's headquarters, when the Germans started lobbing over some shells in our direction. There was a trench facing the Germans with part of it dug back, leaving about two feet of earth on top, with just enough room for us to crawl into. We sat side by side, with our backs against the earth; knees drawn up to our chins, with shells falling everywhere, and thought we would be OK until the bombardment stopped. We were quietly talking, when there was a terrific thump behind us and a hissing sound. I turned to my partner. A large shell splinter had shot through the earth behind us and severed the top of my mate's head as if he had been scalped. He had not uttered one word and his body was still in the sitting position, not having moved an inch. He was a terrible sight and I scrambled to my feet, walked up the trench apace, and was violently sick.

As the shelling had lessened by then, I proceeded forward but suddenly decided I had to return to get the poor devil's papers from his pocket to send to his folks. Steeling myself from sight of the dreadful mess, I managed to remove his effects; marking the spot so that a detail could come and collect his body for burial. With heavy heart, I made my way to headquarters to make my report.

After leave, I was posted as Lance Corporal to my old platoon, and was pleased to find some of the Japs left. The battalion was on the march and appeared to be going in the opposite direction from the battle. Again, lots of suggestions and rumours, but none proved to be correct. We marched for several days, camping at night, through countryside foreign to us. Then, loaded onto trucks, we travelled a considerable distance before arriving at a camp near Amiens quite late at night. We trained at the spot for several days and were confined to a certain area. In the camp, were large models laid out of a section in front of Amiens occupied by the Germans. We were lectured daily on the specific spot, and aerial photographs were taken of the continual damage caused by our artillery and aircraft bombings. Early in August, the whole battalion was assembled and the colonel told us:

“If you chaps achieve what is expected of you and what you were trained for, it could herald the beginning of the end of the war.” What magical words they were to our beleaguered ears.

On the way to our positions, after darkness had fallen, we were treated to a wonderful experience, which left us elated. There was an anticipation of hope and victory coursing through our veins, and it seemed, positive expressions on everyone's faces. There was every conceivable type of transport, guns and so on, moving with us, but strangely, in a fairly quiet and orderly fashion. It was somehow mysterious how thousands of men, vehicles, and guns could be assembled with so little noise and confusion. Many travelled in silence, some exchanging just a few words. I had been through so much during my sojourn in France, but nothing when compared to what lay ahead... Right then, we were all keyed up and thrilled to think that victory lay within our grasp.

When we arrived at our destination, it was as if I had been there before, such were the drills and models constructed back at camp. It was new, yet

familiar; an odd feeling. The sight and experience was one which has never left me. It was around 1.00 am: with the front line ahead of us, and we were to remain quiet until 'the balloon went up,' scheduled for just before dawn. During this period, there was such a continual barrage of gunfire by our artillery, I thought surely the Germans must know we are on our way. We later learned the bombardment had been going for weeks, as a 'softening up' process. We were given our final instructions, and just before dawn, every gun ceased firing – a practice followed for several days – and everything grew deathly quiet. Then, out of that ominous silence, all at once, thousands of guns opened up. It seemed that the very earth was convulsing and erupting in a huge explosion. It was indescribable, and whatever words I grasp to do it justice, seem totally inadequate. We left our position as day was breaking. The first group had 'broken the ice' so to speak and had been successful in reaching their objective. It wasn't long before we joined them - to a cheer – and they wished us luck as we passed through. Prisoners were already pouring in, completely demoralised. We soon dealt with what little resistance we came across, but had been warned not to proceed too quickly for fear of running into our own barrage. We then came upon a German gun emplacement, and the sight we beheld was staggering. Our barrage had been accurate and devastating. They were blown to smithereens; guns askew, bodies strewn everywhere.

By noon, we were in fairly open country, and came across more of the same, or simply lone guns, with no sign of the crews. It was eerie! We came across a bunch of Germans, disarmed them and sent them back under guard. They seemed glad, or at least relieved, to be going back as prisoners, and why wouldn't they after suffering such a beating? During the afternoon, we received a message to stop and consolidate as our pace was too fast and the troops at our flanks were unable to keep up. We found some old, overgrown trenches, made them habitable and awaited further orders, as there were no signs of Germans in the immediate vicinity. Later relieved by a British machine-gun battalion, we offered help to French troops who had been held up. We assisted in gaining their objective and were then withdrawn.

On the night of 14th August 1918, we arrived and camped in a place called Beaufort Wood. We must have smelled like skunks as we hadn't had a bath since being in Amiens, and early the next morning, 15th, the company paraded on open ground at the edge of a wood before proceeding to a

mobile bath unit. We were called to attention – eager to feel the pleasure of water and soap on our filthy bodies. Then, something totally unexpected and life-changing took place.

Two shells – six inch calibre – fired from a German, long-range gun mounted on a truck, and absolutely fluke shots (the only two to ever fall in that area) and ironically called ‘harassing fire’ - caused our unit many deaths and injuries. I never ascertained exactly how many, but my name was on one of the shells and I was knocked out for good. Finished! No more soldiering for me.

I received severe injuries to my right arm and hip, and later, had a problem with my vision. Our colonel leaned over me while I was awaiting a stretcher-bearer and said: “Tough luck, son. I’m sorry you got it this way. I hope your wounds are not too severe. You were being promoted to corporal; I will see that it goes through.” I must have then passed out, and the next thing I recall is waking up on a stretcher on the floor of a large room.

APPENDIX I

The entry in the official war diary of the 10th Canadian Infantry Battalion for that day reads as follows:

August 15th 1918

BATTALION IN BILLETTS AT BEAUFORT

“As usual, enemy bombing planes were active over the neighborhood throughout the night dropping a number of bombs but no damage was reported.

About 9.00am this morning several enemy shells landed in the Battalion area which unfortunately caused a number of casualties. One shell fell within 50 yards of Battalion Headquarters, killed Capt. D. McAndie DCM.MM. ,Sergt. J. McCallum, (the Pioneer Sergeant) and several men, and wounded Lieut. T. Dale and a considerable number of other ranks. Two other shells which hit close to the Company billets caused the death of several more men and severely wounded a large number. The total casualties in the Battalion were 7 killed and 53 wounded.

The shells seemed to be about 6” caliber and were evidently fired from a long range gun possibly mounted on a railroad track. As the fire passed through the Battalion area and continued for a considerable distance apparently carrying out a harassing “shoot” with no particular target.

The shelling commenced again about 1.00pm.....”

APPENDIX II

Citation for Military Medal awarded to KNIGHT. F. A., Pte. 905177, 10th Canadian Infantry Battalion:

For conspicuous bravery and distinguished conduct in action. On August 15th 1917 this man showed exceptional ability in the handling of a Lewis Gun and pushed it forward with great enterprise. On August 16th 1917, in the attack, he again displayed his energy, skill and fearlessness. Finding a Lewis Gun on his flank in difficulties, he protected it by his fire and sent S.A.A. To keep it going. He inflicted many casualties on the enemy.

Form R 148 1912-5M-9/5/17.		NAME. <i>Kn. F. A.</i>	RANK. <i>Pte</i>	NUMBER. <i>905177.</i>	UNIT. <i>10th. Can. Inf: Bn</i>	HONOUR OR AWARD. <i>MILITARY MEDAL.</i>
KNIGHT. F.A.		Pte		905177.	10th. Can. Inf: Bn	MILITARY MEDAL.
AUTHORITY.		DATE.	RECEIPT NO. <i>4081</i>		DETAILS.	
R.O. 3327. Macdonell		21-9-17	MILITARY MEDAL			
L.S. 30289		19-11-17	For conspicuous bravery and distinguished conduct in action. On Aug: 15th 1917 this man showed exceptional ability in the handling of a Lewis Gun and pushed it forward with great enterprise. On Aug: 16th 1917, in the attack he again displayed his energy, skill and fearlessness. Finding a Lewis Gun on his flank in difficulties, he protected it by his fire and sent S.A.A. to keep it going. He inflicted many casualties on the enemy. (A.F.W. 3121 3-9-17).			
OTHER AWARDS.						
NATURE.	AUTHORITY.	DATE.				

CHAPTER 9

“Nurses are angels in comfortable shoes” (Except one!)

Source unknown

Bemused is, perhaps, not the best choice of word to use in the circumstances – for I was in pain and half ‘with it’ when a doctor, nurse and two sisters stooped over me, and the doctor said:

“How did this poor devil get missed? I thought we had seen everyone? He is in a bit of a mess, we had better see to him straight away!” Not words I enjoyed overhearing... Soon wide awake, I learned I was in a casualty clearing station in Amiens, and the staff had been so busy with other casualties, I had been overlooked, which was hardly comforting news. Fortunately, I was soon whipped into an operating room, and awoke in a bed on a hospital train. A sister was seated beside me and told me:

“The train waited for you as you were last to be patched up. You are on your way to England!” I realised that my right arm, waist, back and sides were all bandaged up. I only had on a small shirt with my left arm in, tied at the back.

“Where are my clothes?” I asked her.

“They were such a state, we had to cut them off. Don’t worry, when you recover, you’ll get a brand new uniform.” She gave me a comforting smile. In response, I frowned, for it dawned on me that my souvenirs were missing – they had been on a stretcher with me in a clean sandbag. I really treasured those souvenirs and had been collecting them for some time. I had heard the expression “the last straw,” but had never given it heed until that moment. Unbelievably – because I can be quite stoic – I almost went berserk and the sister was finding it difficult to hold me down and had to call for help. I was apparently then given an injection (sedative) by a doctor and woke up again as we were moving across France. There was an Army Orderly sitting beside me, and as I woke up, he called the Sister. I soon noticed that she had a black eye, and not remembering what

happened, laughed and said, “Who in hell gave you that?!” She merely grinned and said:

“You did!”

“Don’t talk silly, Sister! I have never hit a woman in my life...” She then explained that I struck out with my good arm when I realised my souvenirs had gone and accidentally caught her eye.

“I know it was unintentional,” she added, placating me, but I felt pretty mean about it, just the same. I had an idea who could have stolen my souvenirs, for some of the drivers and bearers were known as RAMCs (officially: Royal Army Medical Corps – mostly good lads – but for a few ‘bad eggs’ it also stood for ‘Rob all my Comrades.’)

We later stopped at a hospital, as some of us had to have our wounds redressed. I must have been quite badly wounded, as I overheard one of the train orderlies saying, “This Canadian needs watching. He’s in a bad shape and has been a bit troublesome.” The next morning, breakfast arrived and consisted of nearly board- stiff porridge (detested at the best of times), a piece of half-cooked, fatty bacon, toast and tea. One look was enough; I left it. Later, a sister came in to clean and dress my wounds. The forearm had been smashed right through, as it took the full force of the shrapnel, and had probably saved my hip being more damaged than it was, which was bad enough. The sister commenced taking the bandages off the arm – congealed hard in dried blood – but continued unravelling with a jerky motion, and the closer she grew to the wound, it hurt like hell.

“Could you moisten where the bandage is stuck, as it’s a bit painful,” I requested, adding “Each time you pull, it makes it worse!” She completely ignored me and kept pulling until she reached the open wound. It was a terrible sight, with bloody gauze packing and seeping blood. As she started removing it, I thought every nerve in my body was being torn. “I can stand a lot of pain, but this is beyond tolerance. Can’t you do something about it?” Still no answer and still those probing forceps pulling away...The wound was now bleeding badly. I reached to where my cold breakfast lay:

“Dare touch my arm again, and you’ll get this,” I said. She mumbled something about “Canadians...” and reached down with her forceps, so I let her have the plate of porridge full in her face... She gave a gasp of

shock, then rushed out of the ward, and soon a doctor, matron, and a couple of orderlies came in. The doctor said “What’s the matter Canada?”

“You ask me what’s the matter? Look at this mess! Couldn’t it be moistened?” I replied angrily.

“My God, do you mean to tell me the dressings are removed dry?” He looked at my chart, shaking his head, adding,

“Hip wound too!!” He gave instructions to some orderlies and I was again wheeled into the operating theatre, given an anaesthetic and cleaned up. A different sister attended me later and I asked where the other one was. She told me,

“You’re to forget about all that. It was a misunderstanding. Now, you’ve had nothing to eat for a long time and you must keep your strength up or we’ll keep you here instead of putting you on a train tonight for Blighty!” The realisation that I was hungry kicked in, so more as a joke than anything else, I said.

“I’d like some hot soup and fried chicken, Maryland style.” and grinned.

“We’ll see what we can do, soldier!” she nodded.

When she left, I had a chat with the man in the next bed and asked him the time as I had lost all track. He told me and further said the sister I had trouble with was a bit hard but otherwise OK, although:

“For some reason or another, doesn’t like Australians or Canadians.” I then discovered I was the only Canadian in that ward. It wasn’t long before the Sister returned with a hot meal. Guess what it was? Yep, just as ordered: hot soup, a nice breast of fried chicken, cut to make it easy for me to eat; a large baked potato, out of its skin, with butter and fruit to follow. My hunger took over; I ate the lot, and felt all the better for it. Just before we left, the doctor came to say goodbye. I apologised for causing so much trouble and asked if I could see the Sister to make amends for throwing porridge at her, but he said,

“It’s for the best that you don’t, but really there is nothing to apologise for anyway. Try and forget the whole incident.” Easier said than done, of course. He then wished me the best of luck; we were soon loaded on a

train and on our way to Le Havre. It was a beautiful morning when we arrived at Southampton, although I don't recall much of the journey. We were taken up on deck ready to be carried ashore. Next to me was a Canadian named Jimmy, who had a severe back wound and had to lay on his stomach most of the time. We became quite friendly and hoped we would be taken to the same hospital. We then noticed that German prisoners of war were carrying stretchers off the ship. I said to Jimmy:

"I'll be damned if I'll let those so and so's carry me off!" He said:

"Me neither, but how can we avoid it?" I replied, "Watch me!" And as the German bearers approached, I worked myself off the stretcher onto the deck of the ship. It was a bit of a bump, but I managed it. Jimmy did the same, and some of the other cases copied us! The Germans were a bit perplexed and didn't really understand, but we called them and their kin every bad word we could put our tongues to and it grew quite unpleasant. When you've seen your fellow soldiers, and, sometimes, best mates killed in so many grotesque ways, or left badly wounded, you can't suddenly become bosom friends with the men responsible. If not directly to blame, then through their so-called 'Emperor,' the Kaiser, and his cohorts.

CHAPTER 10

“We can all make a difference in the lives of others in need, because it is the most simple of gestures that make the most significant of differences.”

Miya Yamanouchi

Having been carried off the ship by British Orderlies, with no word of reproach for our actions, we were put on a train for London. We had been carried to the station platform where the other stretcher cases were taken away by ambulance; while Jimmy and I were left. I spotted the Medical Officer from the ship and called him over.

“Excuse me, have you any idea where we are going?”

“We’re sending you to a really nice, quiet VAD hospital in Wiltshire. You should have gone direct from Southampton, but in the upset, you were put on this train by mistake. Don’t worry, we’ll make you comfortable and you’ll be looked after.” The next day, we arrived in Wiltshire and went to a small VAD hospital run by Lady Hoare of Stourhead. Other than a doctor, and a couple of sisters, all the staff were VAD personnel, all volunteers and truly wonderful, often chasing around from the moment they arrived on duty until their shift was over. I never heard one complaint from any of them.

Our wants were many and varied, and sometimes nigh impossible, yet they were always met with the same kind and sympathetic attention. The first two weeks I was there, I was a trial to them, for besides my bad wounds, I was a very sick man, and for a while, almost helpless. Practically everything had to be done for me, which made things worse, but there was never one word of reproach or complaint. At one time, my condition must have given cause for alarm, as they sent for my mother, and was I glad to see her! They found accommodation for her and she stayed a week and visited me every day. After those first two weeks, I made a rapid recovery,

except for the hip wound. It just wouldn't heal up and kept breaking out. It took an absolute age, and I still have a terrible scar to this day.

Lady Hoare made almost daily visits to "My hospital," as she called it. And when patients were well enough, she took them for trips in her Rolls Royce. Jimmy and I were the first Canadians to be admitted to the hospital and she seemed to have taken a liking to us. We were invited to her home at Stourhead, as were all the patients as they recovered. She had an excellent system of records of patients going through her hospital. In a large room on the ground floor of her home, there was a huge fireplace in the centre of one wall with deep recesses each side. In these recesses, she had had built two large filing cupboards up to the height of the mantel. Kept in them – in alphabetical order – were photographs and letters from all her ex patients. As soon as they were able, Lady Hoare would ask them to visit the local photographer and have their images taken at her expense. They had to be postcard size – the standing order was for two photos. She would write the patient's name and date at the bottom. One photo would go in the cupboard, the other in slots above the mantelpiece. Jimmy and I followed suit and discovered our photos were a larger size. We mentioned this but the photographer said, "There's no mistake, Lady Hoare gave me special instructions... She giving you a place of honour."

That afternoon, Lady Hoare picked us up and took us to her residence for tea. She put the photos in the centre of the bottom row, and said we were the first Canadians to stay at her hospital, and deserved the special place. She then took us on a tour of her magnificent home. There was a collection of paintings in one room and a full size portrait of a fine young man in Guard's uniform. We stood looking at it and Lady Hoare said, quietly,

"That is a portrait of my only son. He was killed in action early in the war." I dare say it was one of the reasons she did so much for others. I discovered that tea at Stourhead was a weekly occasion for the patients of the hospital; anywhere from six to ten soldiers, depending on the numbers there, and who were sufficiently mobile. On one occasion, Lady Hoare was absent and we were left in the care of a butler. We were lying on the lawn, when he informed us "Tea is served." The tea room was on the second floor with large French windows opening on to a small balcony. Jimmy was appointed 'mother/tea pourer.' He poured and we all took sugar and cream. "Ugh!" I said, realising that Jimmy had accidentally put salt (in a

small bowl on the tray) in the tea instead of sugar. The butler wasn't there to see our embarrassment, and Jimmy said,

"I know what I'll do, I'll pour it back into the teapot and throw it out of the window and will ask old sobersides – our nickname for the butler – to bring more tea." And this we did. Jimmy stepped out onto the balcony and dumped the tea, still quite hot, over the balustrade. There was one hell of a shriek from below as, it seemed, some of the servants from their quarters were sitting outside and suffered a direct hit!

We rang for the butler expecting some sarcastic remark, comment or reprimand and requested more tea and hot water. He never said a word, and with his face illegible, he reached across, picked up the salt bowl and tray, and left. He soon returned, but with a proper sugar bowl this time. He was a wise old chap and never let on. All good things come to an end, and Lady Hoare told us one morning she had received instructions to send Jimmy and me to Epsom convalescent camp. Our travel documents were ready and we were to leave the next day. She kindly drove us to the station and saw us onto the train, insisting to the station master that we travel first-class. What a kind and generous lady she was!

After a few days at Epsom, we were given sick leave, and having bid all my friends and relatives goodbye (always mixed emotions), I arrived at Liverpool on 26th December 1918 and boarded a hospital ship for Canada. It was a very rough trip and we were battened down for several days, before arriving at Halifax, Canada on 10th January 1919. All the men on the hospital ship were quite badly wounded, with every conceivable type of injury: arms and legs missing – sometimes both; and blind, but I think the most tragic of all, were a number of men – who we hadn't seen on the journey across – suffering from severe shell shock. We were waiting on deck to disembark and were told to be patient so the most serious cases could be taken off first. What we saw, will forever remain in my memory. There must have been thirty men, each with an attendant; some with two. Their minds had completely gone. When friends or relatives recognised some of them and ran up to greet them, all they received was a vacant stare or were roughly pushed aside. It was heart-breaking. I don't mind confessing that tears flowed down the cheeks of some of us. One lad, who was near me in his wheelchair, having lost both legs, remarked:

“Thank God I am as I am, and not one of those poor souls.” We were later told that the men would be taken to a good place in Eastern Canada and it was hopeful that many would, eventually, recover.

When it came to our turn, we found ourselves on a wonderful hospital train, fully staffed with doctors, nurses and orderlies. Just before it pulled out of Halifax, the officer in charge of the train came round and told us,

“You boys have done your bit for us, and now we want to do something for you. The sky’s the limit!” It proved to be a great trip. They sure did look after us. There was only one unpleasant incident .

Our train pulled into a divisional point in Ontario to change engines and crews. On the platform, there were quite a lot of girls and young women shouting at us as we arrived. We heard the remark, “Fetch the bitches out here. We’ll show them!” Four policemen came along and the women started to leave. The official wouldn’t let us off the train, and later explained that, running ahead of us, was a train of returning soldiers with their English wives on board; and they almost looked upon them as the enemy!! There was an industrial centre employing a large percentage of female labour in the area, and the locals were fearful, not only for their jobs, but annoyed by the ‘taking away’ of their men! They had mistakenly thought we had some English wives on board our train too.

After a long journey – several days and nights – we pulled into the railway depot at Edmonton, Alberta and were taken by ambulance to a hospital. There for several weeks, we were eventually allowed out every day, and it was most enjoyable. While in Edmonton, I purchased my first civvy suit. We had been invited to a dance, and I needed it to attend. It was navy blue, a good fit and appeared to be good quality cloth. Having secured a late pass, a few of us went to the dance and it was all rather jolly. Returning to the hospital, we had to cross a high level bridge over the river, just as it started to rain. Hard! We were soaked through by the time we reached home base. The crunch came when we went into the building – what a sight! Dark blue water was running from my suit, and when I undressed, my shirt, underwear, and even my skin, was stained with the same colour!! I believe I said a few rude words...I had to scrub like mad in the bath to get the damn dye off. The next day, six of us – all in hospital blues, which

were compulsory - took my suit back to the shop. At first, the proprietor argued and haggled and even tried saying I hadn't bought it there,

but there were half a dozen of us, becoming quite firm with him, and so he paid up. I never attempted to buy 'off the peg' suits after that experience, and bought 'made to measure' with better results. Shortly after this episode, I sorted out my pension and received my discharge in March 1919.

I received a wonderful welcome from everyone when I returned to the McKinnys. Several folk in the area gave parties for me, and at one the McKinnys gave, they presented me with a gold watch. I was very touched by that, and worked for them all that summer.

At night, safe in my bed, with the silence almost eerie after the cacophonous, ear-splitting sounds of war a distant, but still very real memory, it was a time of reflection before my lids closed. Peace had been declared on the 11th of November, 1918, but nearly 61,000 Canadians would not be returning home. Their divisions had their baptism of fire in Flanders Fields and one in every four of the total killed, died in that area. So many brave men gave their lives for peace, and I thought for a moment of my doomed Welsh pal and several other soldiers who had crossed my path and never made it home. One who did, was a Cree Indian; a member of the 1912 Canadian Olympic team. 'Joe Keeper' made good use of his talent as a runner, and like me, was awarded the Military Medal.

As soon as I could, I visited the Grays and found Martha's attitude towards me had changed considerably. We fell in love and became engaged, but didn't see a lot of each other outside of the flying visits as I was working a considerable distance away. In the fall though, I got my own back on her for being the ring-leader and frightening my horse and spoiling my breakfast all those years before, by marrying her. We went to Saskatoon for our honeymoon and then returned to the Gray's farm.

The snow came early that year and Mr. Gray's (now my father-in-law) crops, as well as many other farmers, were buried in the stuff. Rodway and Mr. Gray had purchased a small threshing outfit between them. This system was becoming more popular with the prairie farmers, than the larger outfits. Mr. Gray told his two sons, Rodway and myself that we could use the outfit and thresh his crop which was snowed under, on a

share basis, to see how it worked out. We were in the depths of winter, the days were short, and it was very cold. However, as it was clear and sunny, we had a go. Rodway and I ran the outfit: he the engine, I the separator. The others put the sheaf stacks on the sleighs. The team men had the worst job, digging out the sheaves, shaking off the snow and loading them on the racks. They were then hauled to the separator and threshed. The snow was so powdery, there was little left once the grain was threshed, and before the weather broke, Mr. Gray had quite a quantity which would otherwise have lain under the snow until spring.

As I have mentioned, my right arm was severely wounded, but after they patched it up, it seemed OK. There was, however, one small problem. The little right-hand finger was gradually becoming useless and just flopped around; I couldn't control it at all, but I became used to it and it didn't hinder the use of my hand in any way. However, things changed...

We had been threshing for several days, and I was screwing down the grease cups on the self feeder of the separator, when I noticed blood all over my overalls. It seems the knives of the feeder had caught my flopping finger and split it all the way up and half of it was hanging by a small thread. I fastened it down the best I could, then made for the house where it was washed and bandaged. The nearest doctor and hospital were around fifty miles away; the nearest railway depot eight miles. It was late afternoon and I decided I should go to Macklin at once and stay the night there, ready to catch the 6.30 am train the next morning. One of the boys drove me by team and cutter, but by the time we arrived, I was covered in blood. I again cleaned it up and bandaged it and we dined at a local restaurant. I had just finished supper, when a man sitting opposite me passed out and fell off his chair to the floor. My finger had started bleeding again and he couldn't stand the sight of blood...I sat up on a chair all night for fear of losing yet more. What a mess I was in!

When I arrived at the doctor's, he took one look and said, "I'm afraid it's beyond repair. It will have to be amputated." The hospital was nearby, and in a short time, the finger was removed and the area cleaned up. I was fed up with hospitals and stayed in a hotel so that the doctor could change the daily dressings until I had the stitches removed.

On one of my visits to the doctor, we started talking – he knew Martha and me well - and that we had recently married.

“What are you and Martha going to do in the spring? Have you made any plans yet? he asked.

‘I’m thinking of farming on my own under the Government Soldier Settlement Scheme.’ I told him. ‘I’ve searched out some land near Unity, but as it is a half section of raw prairie, there are no buildings yet and we need somewhere to live until I get a well dug and a building up.’ The doctor then surprised me by saying,

“As you know, I have a large farm about five miles from town, and my manager is retiring and moving to live in Vancouver. Would you and Martha like to come and run it for me for a year, and it will give you the opportunity to get your own place organized?”

He went on to tell me there were already six men working all year, with extra men in the spring and fall.

“I will pay you well and also pay Martha for all the meals she puts up for the men, should she want it that way.” I naturally thanked him profusely and discussed it with Martha before deciding. We agreed to accept his offer as it would give us a start, and we spent the next few weeks buying furniture and other necessary items; moving to the doctor’s farm in March 1920.

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FROM THE PRAIRIE TO PASSCHENDAELE

MAN OF KENT - SOLDIER OF
THE 10TH CANADIAN INFANTRY

This is the story of one man's fight against the odds.

Fred Knight was born in 1893. One of twelve, his was a tough childhood through hard times in rural Kent. Fred got by with quick wits, hard work and dreams of becoming a cowboy.

And then at seventeen, broke, with few prospects in England, Fred followed his dream. He borrowed money for his fare, left behind family, friends and everything he knew, for the savage winters and barely settled emptiness of Saskatchewan. It wasn't the cowboy fantasy of his boyhood; Fred had a debt to honour, life was hard. He earned the respect and friendship of the tough men and women of the scattered towns and farms. He grew to love the stark simplicity of the Canadian prairie.

In WW1 Fred was with the 10th Canadian infantry on the Western Front. For his valour he was awarded the Military Medal but he paid a terrible price. He was severely wounded, eventually losing his right arm. Fred took his young wife and family to Winnipeg. He started again, qualified as an accountant but his wounds did not heal. In constant pain, with frequent relapses, he was forced to leave the harsh Canadian climate. In 1933 Fred arrived back in England with a family, little money and few prospects.

But for Fred Knight that wasn't the end of it. In a few years he proved himself to be as tough and formidable in business as in all else. He prospered. In later years, when Parkinsonism had robbed him of the use of his one good hand, he had a device made so he could type with his head. At 83, he wrote this:

The story of a boy, who just wanted to be a cowboy.



FRED KNIGHT
(1893-1982)