

THE OFFICIALLY AUTHORIZED STORY OF THE 52 FIFTY-SECOND BATTALION 52 ITS RECORD IN FRANCE, BELGIUM AND CANADA

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INTRODUCTION

When great events are being enacted, the world thinks along great lines. The rapid, kaleidoscopic movement of vast armies and immense navies, the sacrifice of millions of lives in their prime, the appropriation and expenditure of fabulous sums of money, the obliteration of hundreds of villages and towns that a short while before were teeming with life and activity—these and other similar momentous happenings incident to the carrying on of the greatest conflict in world's history have momentarily driven from the mental horizon of the average man the less important details of his local world, concentrating his entire attention upon the far-removed perspective of world-conflict.

It is obvious that under such conditions the actions of small units and of individuals fade away into a sort of hazy obscurity, resulting in the loss of recognition of the many splendid individual performances of valor. Our modern complicated system of internationalism demands that this be so. The interests of the few are sacrificed, of necessity, to the requirements of the many. We live in an age where only the maximum of benefit to the majority is considered. But this abstract principle, with all its undoubted advantages, does not heal the lacerated heart of Mrs. Jones, whose husband, Bill, fell somewhere in No-man's land in Flanders, in the performance of his duty, nor does it compensate little Mary Smith and her brother Bob for the loss of a good father, and in the excitement and mental derangement produced by the World Drama, we have lost sight of those things that in normal times would have excited every iota of our sympathy and compassion.

It is for this reason that justification is sought for placing on record the part played by the Fifty-Second Canadian Infantry Battalion in the great fight for Democracy. The role it played was a vital one. It responded to every call. It played its part in the great game as only Canadians can. And as a Battalion it is proud of its achievements.

In justice to the men who unhesitatingly left all that they held dear in life, and are today keeping eternal vigil over the battle-scarred fields of France and Belgium; in justice to the men who endured every hardship and torture synonymous with modern trench warfare; in justice to the many, many aching hearts that smiled when their "men-folk" went away to fight for an Ideal, and again tried to smile a welcome for others, while their own loved ones paid with their lives for the attainment of the Ideal; in simple justice to the land that has been, and in the years to come, will be glorified by the achievements of the Unit that found birth in this wonderful Northland of ours, it is thought fitting to place on record the history of the band of simple, ordinary men, in the commonplace walks of life, who, in the darkest hours of the Empire, couldn't realize that there was such a thing as defeat, and who hung on with a grim tenacity of purpose that turned defeat into victory, commanded the wondering respect and admiration of the enemy, and earned for themselves the title of "THE FIGHTING FIFTY-SECOND."

F. W. L.

CHAPTER I.

THE CALL

There is an indefinable something about war that stirs the imagination as nothing else can do. The echo of the first shot fired across the Atlantic that scarce touched the eastern shore of Canada, when a feverish wave of excitement ran the length and breadth of the Dominion. The Government, sensing the fervor and enthusiasm of the people, hastened to place the resources of the country at the disposal of the British Government.

Even before the mother country decided to accept the patriotic offer of Parliament, steps were taken to raise and recruit battalions all over the Dominion, and not the least of the splendid traditions that will make up the heritage of future generations of this country of ours, is the splendid and noble response that followed the call to arms and the appeal for volunteers for overseas service.

The eagerness displayed by the manhood of the Twin Cities and District to shoulder a musket and be off to the war, foreshadowed the wonderful spirit that made possible "Bellevue Spur" "Vimy" and "Danery."

The actual origin of the Battalion was in what might be termed the "One Twenty-Seven." In December, 1914, the Government recruited 127 men in the Twin Cities of Port Arthur and Fort William, for service overseas. These men were originally taken on the strength of the 27th Winnipeg Battalion, but were quartered in Port Arthur. Subsequently the entire body was transferred from the 27th to the 44th Battalion, still retaining Port Arthur as the training and billeting station. Finally, and largely through the instrumentality of Lieutenant-Colonel S. C. Young, it was decided to raise a local Battalion independent of Winnipeg, and this unit was gazetted as the Fifty-Second Canadian Infantry Battalion, (New Ontario) March 25th, 1915.

Prompt action was now instituted to bring the new unit up to full strength. The "127" were again transferred, this time to the Local Battalion, and formed the nucleus of the organization that was to bring lasting fame and honor to its birth-place.

The Battalion was actually mobilized at Port Arthur, and a very large portion of its strength recruited in the Twin Cities—approximately two companies. The remainder were raised in the New Ontario district between the Head of the Lake and the Manitoba border—the chief contributions coming from the towns of Kenora, Fort Francis and Dryden. These places are all included in the Military District administered from Winnipeg, and hence, although the Fifty-Second is a New Ontario Battalion, it is also part of the Manitoba Regiment.

Many of the officers who were posted in the new Battalion were residents of Port Arthur and Fort William, but in order to complete the establishment, a number of officers were detailed by H.Q., M.D., to—quite a few coming from Winnipeg.

Recruiting stations were established in various parts of the district and officers sent down in charge. A local man, Lieutenant (later Major) H. J. Hughes took charge of the work in Fort Francis; Lieutenants A. J. Snaddon and A. L. Saunders, both later "killed in action" (Snaddon as a Major with a Battalion in the First Division, Saunders as a Captain with the Fifty-Second) were entrusted with the recruiting work in Kenora. In Dryden there was no officer required at first, as the local militia officers kindly offered to take charge of the work, but later Major J. W. Allen was sent down.

The first Commanding officer of the Battalion was Lieutenant-Colonel S. C. Young of Fort William. Too much credit cannot

be given this officer for his tireless and indefatigable efforts to complete the organization of the new Unit, and when his successor, Lieutenant-Colonel Archibald W. Hay, of Quebec, took over the command, he paid very high tribute to the energy and genius of Colonel Young. In passing, it might be well to state that Colonel Young later performed valuable service as O.C. of the Officers' Training Corps in Winnipeg, training and turning out many young officers who later won fame and distinction in France. The Colonel subsequently went to England, where, after a short stay, he proceeded to France, was seconded to the Imperial forces, and placed in charge of troop transportation at Cherbourg. He carried on this work with great efficiency for over two years, displaying the same qualities that characterized all his work.

In the early period of the Unit's organization (about the end of March) there were so few officers on the strength of the Battalion that the Winnipeg authorities sent several local men, who had originally enlisted with the 44th Winnipeggers, "on loan" to assist in the training. Among these was Major Francis, the Battalion's first Adjutant, and Lieutenant Brough. The former must not be confused with the officer of that name who was for a long time Adjutant in France. As the strength of the commission personnel increased, these officers were gradually returned to their own unit.

Colonel Young's appointment by Headquarters M.D. 10 was not confirmed at Ottawa, and Lieutenant-Colonel Archibald W. Hay, of Quebec, accompanied by Lieutenants W. F. Guild and G. S. Rutherford, (the latter both Adjutants at different times in France) arrived in Port Arthur and assumed command of the Battalion, this was on the 12th of April, 1915—a day that will long be remembered by the boys that he came to lead—and who saw him for the last time on that memorable and terrible day of early June, when he answered the "Last Roll-Call."

It is given to few men to be able to exact implicit obedience and at the same time command the love and admiration of the men under them. No higher tribute can be paid to this splendid leader than to say that he typified all that was best in the "Northland Breed," and never called upon his men to do any task that he did not himself pave the way for. However, it is not desired to catalogue him in this part of the story, as his actions outlined in future pages will speak more eloquently of his admirable qualities than any descriptive effort could do.

The Battalion was not long left in doubt as to the intentions of the new C. O. He wanted a body of soldiers, and he soon demonstrated his ideas of what a soldier ought to be. At this time morning parades were carried on in both cities, the men, not yet having been assembled in barracks, living at home and receiving a billeting allowance. The detachment in Port Arthur was, of course, directly under the control of the Commanding Officer, those living in Fort William receiving their instructions from Major E. A. C. Wilcox, with a proportion of the officers being assigned to each place. For afternoon parades, the entire command assembled at Port Arthur. The business and organization of the Battalion was directed from the new Armouries in Port Arthur, where the headquarters of the Fifty-Second was located, and parades were usually held on the adjoining square. After the organization was well under way, the Colonel had the whole Battalion come to Port Arthur for all training.

And then, like a thunderbolt from a clear sky, came the "Old Man's" famous "P.T. Edict." Oh! those Physical Training parades. Who of the stalwart young aspirants for martial honours does not recall those days of exquisite (?) and unalloyed (?) bliss. The Colonel was essentially a practical man, and having been a famous athlete and sprinter in his younger days, he knew the value of hardened muscles and the development of staying qualities when the time came for the "last spurt." He realized that only fit men could produce good fighters, and it was fighters with staying qualities that he set out to develop. Nor did he delegate this task of muscle and lung culture to his sergeants and corporals. Not he. To quote one of the celebrities of the "Original" bunch, every one, from the senior, superfluous Major, to the last acting assistant subordinate, private had to turn out, and mostly "down." The stentorian bellows of the R.S.M. (now Major Cooper) roaring "on the hands down" during the parade, the desire to do more, the unfortunate victims who were in the process of remaking, and will always be associated with a vindictive desire to do murder. And not the least of these pleasant recollections is the memory of those stinging, sarcastic lectures he would deliver and level at some big-gard or innocently recruit who found it difficult to persuade himself that other anatomical appendages, besides his nether limbs, could be trained to support his hundred and odd pounds of average. And mind you, these lectures were invariably delivered while the training squad was in the painful posture of "on the hands down." If you readers think this is a joke, lay aside your paper for a moment, ask some returned soldier to indicate the position of this exercise, and then try and remain in that contorted position while your better half (if you are fortunate enough to possess one) delivers one of Tom Cooper's "lectures," and if after the performance you still believe that R.S.M.'s ought to go unhung, we are ready to condone all your crimes on the ground of incipient insanity.

After the R.S.M. had vented his spleen on the unoffending "rookies" committed to his tender mercies, the Commanding Officer took a turn at hardening their already weary muscles, by taking them out for a little "jog trot." At first this form of "disguised work" gave the impression that the "Old Man" was sorry for the boys and was trying to ease off on the strenuous training. He only took them out for a couple of hundred yards and then returned to the Armouries. Wily Colonel. The next day three hundred yards was covered, and the distance gradually lengthened till fully three miles were added to the morning's physical requirements. It was a sore and trying period for those sons of luxury who had formerly considered a walk down town too much of a strain on their muscular energy and regularly handed the conductor his five cents. And, oh! the horror of those days to the misguided youths who nightly went forth into the city seeking "spiritual" comfort. The morning training period confronted them like a hideous nightmare.

But it is fortunate that we cannot always refuse to do things we don't like. This physical torture was so popularly styled "performed an inestimable service, and did the Battalion a world of good. Although many fell by the wayside, probably expecting some good Samaritan to happen along and pick them up and minister unto them, the majority gritted their teeth and "stuck it out."

(To Be Continued.)

NOTE—This story of the Fifty-Second Battalion, with illustrations, will be published shortly in book form and may be purchased at the usual prices.