

52 THE OFFICIALLY AUTHORIZED STORY OF THE FIFTY-SECOND BATTALION 52

ITS RECORD IN FRANCE, BELGIUM AND CANADA

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As the time went on there was a marked falling off in the number of men found puffing and wheezing when the morning's run was over. Many probably thought they had come to learn to fight, not to run, but when the terrible days of France and Flanders confronted them, when the success of an operation depended on their ability to keep plugging ahead through mud and slime with about two tons of load on their back, plodding along through unending hours and days, these same men learned to bless the wise foresight that had decreed this gruelling and strenuous physical culture as a part of their training, as heartily as they had then uttered mental maledictions, for the endurance and toughness they acquired undoubtedly saved many a lad's life, and made possible that wonderful spirit of assurance that dominated the Battalion in France.

Those who thought to evade the unpleasantness of the morning exertions by falling out on the roadside were not overlooked by the Colonel. He detailed nimble-footed subalterns to take their names and numbers, and they then had the undiluted pleasure (?) of holding eloquent and earnest converse with the "Old Man" during the afternoon in his private office.

It must be borne in mind that the majority of these men had never known what it was to be governed by a rigid code of regulations. Discipline was a startling and unwelcome innovation. They were all practically only grown-up boys who had offered themselves in the spirit of adventure, and who had not as yet come to the realization that before they could be of any real service to their country they would have to sink their own ambitions and desires, and conform to the requirements of the whole organization. They enjoyed the new sensation of being the cynosure of all eyes at a house party or dance as their country's defenders, but it required far more patience than they had ever been called upon to display, to submit to the prosaic and irksome tasks that make up the larger part of a soldier's life.

At first they thought it would be quite a simple matter to pull the wool over the Old Man's eyes. Hadn't they done it before with their teacher? When has youth ever been willing to concede superior knowledge and wisdom to gray hairs. Youth is youth the world over. It thinks the transition from knee breeches to trousers is the open sesame to illimitable wisdom; and at eighteen or twenty the average boy thinks he has run the whole gamut of human experience, and has learned all there is to know in life.

So they came trooping up before the Colonel, armed with all sorts of wily and ingenious arguments, and even threats, marshaled for the rout of the calm-eyed gentleman who was for the time being the tyrannical arbiter of their fates. Oh, the weird and wonderful tales that were poured in his unsympathetic ears: I wonder why it is that so few of us, when we are young, ever give men credit for having been boys themselves at one time. With all his knowledge and wisdom and age, the Colonel was still very much of a boy, and he must have been hard put at times to keep a straight face at the many ludicrous attempts to outwit him. But above all, the "Old Boy" was a tactician. He would sit there attentively, taking in with the greatest interest the fanciful creations of the youthful Munchausens, and after the creative powers of the culprits were exhausted, recommend a course in domestic science or scrubology, with an occasional extra tour of guard duty while the other men were down town having a good time.

Although these awards resulted in a noticeable decrease in the number of delinquencies, "crimes" didn't cease entirely. The men were still in "civvies" and probably figured they could get away with a lot of stunts they would not have tried to pull off had they been wearing the uniform. Even rifles had not been furnished at this time, and it is hard to feel that you are a soldier, and expected to live up to the discipline demanded of all in the service, when you haven't been furnished with the two distinguishing badges of military life. However, these conditions were gradually improved and the handicaps overcome. Rifles for drill purposes were borrowed from the 96th Militia Lake Superior Regiment; and very superior to our men the latter looked in their brilliant red tunics and polished brass. This unit performed a very valuable service in providing guards for the various grain elevators, bridges, power-houses, wireless and other important utilities in the vicinity of the Twin Cities, which German agents were very anxious to destroy.

It was about the middle of May when the first consignment of uniforms arrived. There were not enough to outfit the entire Battalion; but bit by bit they came in, till at last all our chaps walked out in full service khaki, and the Resplendent Redcoats suffered a final eclipse, for no girl would now parade the towns with a Redcoat when she could scare up a "King in Khaki." This period was a very lucrative one for the city photographers. Its a pity some enterprising photographer couldn't have devised a camera that would have taken pictures of soldiers, not as they are, but as they imagine they look in uniform. He might not have made much money on sales to the men themselves, but I am sure he could have found a ready market for them with the editors of comic sections.

A never-ending source of worry to the C.O. was the advent of Pay-day. The waterfront saloons in Port Arthur looked forward to this day with even more anticipation and pleasure than did the men themselves. Many of the men lost no time in "looking upon the wine when it is red" after receiving their Government wages, with a resultant increase in the absentee list the morning after. The frequent recurrence of these post-pay delinquencies set the "Old Man" thinking, and one bright morning following the "perambulation of the ghost" Colonel Hay led the Battalion, following its usual morning run, down through the waterfront saloon district of Port Arthur, halted, and sent pickets into the bars to search for defaulters. Many were rounded up still drunk. Lieutenant G. S. Rutherford was given a detail of thirty sober men to escort these convivial spirits back to barracks. The party formed an odd and amusing spectacle—the gentlemen with befuddled minds, in full uniform, but lacking the upright and steady bearing one naturally associates with soldiers; the sober men hatless, coatless, perspiring and breathing hard after their strenuous morning's physical exertions, half leading and half dragging the former. Lieutenant Rutherford very solemnly marched this interesting platoon through the streets of Port Arthur, followed by the amused and curious glances of the passers-by. We shall charitably draw the curtain upon the scene enacted in the Colonel's office that afternoon.

No record of this period would be complete without mention being made of "Nigger." This dusky little mongrel suddenly appeared on parade one day, sponsored by a Fort Williamite, and firmly attached himself to the Battalion. He was a very wise dog, was Nigger. He found out that he could get more grub and more affection from the men than from the officers, so he disclaimed all knowledge of the commissioned personnel and attached himself permanently to the men's mess. He attended every parade, and would stand stiffly to "attention" with the troops; and some even accused him of keeping a watchful eye on the R.S.M.—and when the dismissal was given, he would give one wild yelp of joy, and bound off with frantic barking. He was always to be found leading the first platoon out for training, and was so particular in the performance of his duty, that he resisted every temptation to exchange the usual canine greetings with other dogs who happened along while he was on duty. When the Battalion left for St. John he accompanied it, but was left behind there. To the best of our knowledge he is still carrying on the good work in that city.

While in Port Arthur, most of the officers' roomed at the Y. M.C.A., which was near the Armory, and therefore very handy. The Shuniah Club of Port Arthur and the Kakabeka Club of Fort William extended the privileges of their club-rooms to the officers. Most of them got lunch and dinner at the Shuniah, and it was there that the Officers' Mess was inaugurated and held its first dinner. The Commanding Officer gave a series of lectures to the officers, in one of which he particularly emphasized the fact that although many of the officers were perfect strangers to the people of the two cities, they had been accorded every possible kindness, and that, as officers and gentlemen, he expected the most exemplary conduct on their part. He called their attention to the opportunities they would have of reciprocating the courtesy that was being shown them, and asked them not to forget their social obligations. The officers never forgot this earnest appeal, and they carried out to the letter every inducement he made in this respect.

Many dances were held at the Armouries, clubs, and elsewhere. Frequent entertainments were given and every attempt made to provide the Battalion with pleasure. However, amusement was not permitted to interfere with routine and training. Frequent route marches were carried out, and all forms of drill gone through. The football field at Current River Park was used as a drill ground, furnishing a splendid place for parades, and it daily resounded to the echoes of the Bugle Band. This was before the Battalion had ascended to the dignity of a brass band. There were only a few bugles, and the bass drum had only one head. Nevertheless the musicians made a brave showing. Not the least of the attractions of this band was "Teddy," well known to the people of Port Arthur, who always marched at the head of the procession, occupying a whole set of fours all to himself, owing to the generous plan on which he was fashioned. He was later twice seriously wounded, and I have been informed that he has lost so much of his former superfluity that he could, with very little difficulty, manage to squeeze himself through the proverbial "needle's eye." The big drum was a constant source of worry to its manipulator, for when the wind blew from the direction the headless part faced, it would fill the drum like a sail and turn the drummer round, nearly carrying him off his feet.

Finally it was decided to get a new Brass Band. Every officer and man in the Battalion gave a day's pay, concerts were held, dances given, and enough money was raised to purchase the instruments. Mr. Sara, a local musician of considerable talent, joined the Battalion as Bandmaster, and formed the first Battalion Band. The instruments lasted until 1918, when a complete new set were purchased out of Battalion funds.

About the early part of June the Colonel was ordered to prepare a draft of five officers and 250 other ranks for service overseas. He called for volunteers, and immediately every man in the Battalion stepped forward. The Colonel thanked his men very warmly for the commendable spirit all had displayed, but added that much as he would like to lead the entire unit over at once, the government only required 250 soldiers. So he set to work and personally selected each man for the draft. Many were bitterly disappointed because they had not been selected, but the Colonel assured them that they would have a chance to go in good time. The men selected were a fine looking body of soldiers. All of them looked fit and capable of answering any demand that might be made upon them. They were formed into a draft company and five officers detailed to command it. The officers chosen were Lieutenant N. V. Sankey, the machine gun officer, who was promoted captain; Lieutenant R. B. Penman, Ewart, Towers, Alan Richardson and Norman Kittson. Penman and Towers both eventually went to the R. C. R.'s, while Towers later commanded the 7th Brigade Trench Motor Battery. Both of these gallant officers were killed on the Somme in 1916. Richardson went to the 5th Battalion, where he gave up his life for the cause. Kittson went to the famous 8th Battalion, where he was Adjutant for awhile, and fortunately survived the great struggle. All these officers played their part to the best of their ability, and reflected lasting credit upon the Battalion they went out from. Under these officers the draft company carried on training preparatory to its departure in June.

As summer approached, the all-absorbing topic was when and where the Battalion would go into camp. For a time many thought that Camp Hughes, where the other troops from M.D. to were training, would be the ultimate choice. After a period of uncertainty and suspense, the authorities decided that the Battalion would camp independently somewhere at the head of the lakes. As soon as the decision was arrived at, the C.O. began the search for a suitable site. One was selected about three miles from Port Arthur in a subdivision known as Gresley Park. It was an ideal spot for looking, and about half a mile distant from Lake Superior, the camp site being well above the swamps bordering the shore line. The soil was sandy, and covered with underbrush and small trees. One of the advantages of this place was the neighboring hillsides, which, with a little clearing in front, would make a splendid butt for a rifle range.

Before this site could be utilized as a camp, however, an enormous amount of work was necessary. The camp site and rifle range had to be cleared, water mains and electric lines installed and connected up with the city systems, ditches dug, and numerous details attended to that might take an indefinite length of time. After consultation with the officers, the C.O. decided that the Battalion would do all this work itself. The task was undertaken by all with great enthusiasm under the leadership of Capt. G. M. Thompson, assisted by Capt. Cauchon, Lieutenant Mills and Sergeant Hutcheson, who was in charge of the Pioneers. The men worked like trojans. The projected camp was cleared of all trees except those required to shade the avenues between the rows of tents. The heavy timber covering the proposed range was cleared for five hundred yards. Twenty-one butts and targets were made, firing points built, ditches for mains dug, shower baths and a cook house erected and screened in, electric lines laid and sanitary arrangements completed. Bear in mind that all this was accomplished entirely by Battalion labor, and without one cent of expense to the Government. Too much praise cannot be given to Captain Thompson, the directing genius, and Sergeant Hutcheson, who, as Pioneer Sergeant, responded to every demand made upon him and his hard working group of pioneers.

The camp was now ready for occupancy.

(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 price.

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