

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

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After a very miserable night, the Battalion moved off in busses which were without any heat and very crowded, to the Ypres Salient, detraining at Houperre siding, near Poperinghe, and were marched to billets in Eecke. This was one of the most heart-breaking routes marches that the Battalion ever made. Although we had a guide, he seemed to know as little about the general directions of our line of march, as did the Colonel himself. It had been raining all day previous to this, and then turned intensely cold. All the roads were hard, rough cobbles, and the water froze, making a very slippery and untenable route. Four times the way was lost, and many miles were marched that were not shown on the map. The Battalion was in heavy marching order, and every once in a while a man would slip and fall heavily. It was pitch dark during the latter portion of the trip, and everybody was feeling disheartened, discouraged, and disgusted. The Colonel rode up and down the column, dropping a word of cheer and comfort as he passed, every once in a while telling the men that there was only a mile or two farther to go. The weary, frozen men would take fresh heart, and proceed again with a doggedness that was beginning to establish itself as one of the marked characteristics of the Battalion. It would be difficult to describe the thoughts of these men as they dragged themselves over the slippery road, and when billets were finally reached, the men threw off their packs and flung themselves without blankets, and without waiting for supper, on the ground inside the big barns. There was no question of insomnia that night. All slept like logs, and whether it was the fact that the buglers failed to awake in the morning, or that the Colonel didn't give the order for the bugles to blow, no reveille was sounded the following morning. A good breakfast was furnished, with plenty of hot tea. The men carried on with cleaning up parades, and under the influence of daylight the depressing effects of the previous night soon wore off, and the men went around, whistling and humming, animated groups here and there discussing the probabilities of being in action soon. The Battalion was billeted in two or three big farms, and the immense barns gave splendid quartering accommodations. The rest of the brigade was billeted close to us, in order to make its final preparations for taking over a part of the line for instructional purposes. Two or three days after the arrival at billets, the brigade was inspected by the Divisional Commander, General Alderson. He was very much pleased with the result of this inspection, and final details such as the apportioning of men to the Army Service Corps, Post Office, and so forth were made. The Battalion then moved to Esere, just east of Kemmel Hill, and were now, for the first time, within easy casualty range of the enemy artillery fire.

Numbers and companionship always impart a feeling of confidence. A person going to a strange town always feels the loneliness more keenly if he is by himself than if he has a comrade with him. It was the practice at this time, suggested by this knowledge, to send newly arriving troops into the line with "veterans," both in order to let the recruits get the hang of how things were done, and to impart that spirit of confidence that is so essential to the success of all military undertakings. Consequently, the Battalion was detailed to go into the line at Kemmel Hill with various detachments of the 28th, Princess Pat's and Royal Canadian Rifles. One squad, including Major Reid, R. S. M. Springette, (who had received his appointment at St. John, N.B., following the promotion of former R.S.M. Cooper to commissioned rank) and Pioneer Sergeant George Hutchison, were sent in to the trench held by the 28th. A large detachment went to the Princess Pat's and "C" Company was detailed to report to the same company of the Royal Canadian Rifles. One of the severest trials of the war awaited the latter company. It was ordered to meet the R.C.R. force at five o'clock that evening, but for some unaccountable reason, missed it. Major Young, the company commander, had gone ahead at two o'clock to make complete arrangements for the accommodation of his company with the R.C.R.'s, so when the two companies, going up to the line failed to meet, Captain Horn, who was second in command, didn't know just what to do. He finally decided to proceed in what he thought the proper direction and gave the order for the march. A heavy drizzle and sleet was falling and covered the hard, unyielding cobbles with an icy film, causing men to stumble and fall time and time again. All ranks carried heavy loads in their packs, for at that time the troops went into the trenches in full marching order, instead of the "battle order" adopted later. The heavy clouds caused darkness to come rapidly, and for a while the company plodded on without the slightest idea as to its direction or destination. Heavy and intermittent shell fire was kept up by the Germans, and the spirits of all dropped considerably. Part of the men were feeling pretty blue over the loss of a jar of rum, entrusted to Sergeant E. Maxwell for two of the platoons.

Before starting the company had been issued with two jars of rum, one for nine and ten platoon being turned over to Sergeant Jim Morrison and the other to Sergeant Maxwell for eleven and twelve platoon. The former, knowing the tendency of the average soldier towards the surreptitious application of spirits to augment drooping spirits, kept a careful watch on the men detailed to carry the jar, this being passed from one man to another to ever up the carrying of the load, whereas the other N.C.O., having a more sublime faith in the temptation-resisting powers of his platoon, paid no further attention to the jar after having entrusted it to one of the men, with the result that he was disagreeably "jarred" out of his complacency by the discovery of a missing rum issue and a couple of wildly hilarious drunks. Some of the men even accused the Sergeant himself of too intimate a knowledge of the missing stimulant, but this was taking an extreme view of an embarrassing incident.

By this time the company had gotten pretty well forward toward the enemy lines, and at last reached a place called Siege Farm. Here there was a respite from the irritating shell fire. The owner of this farm was strongly suspected of being pro-German, and of possibly acting as a spy for them. At any rate, they never directed fire on his farm, in spite of the fact that it lay well under their observation and within blank range of their artillery and machine gun fire. However, it worked a distinct advantage for our people as knowing its immunity, a detachment of Engineers were stationed here, and night after night sent out working parties to repair trenches and throw out saps and mines.

The company arrived here about ten o'clock, and again found themselves "up against it." There was no accommodation for them, so Captain Horn detailed two men to return to the R.C.R. Headquarters and ask for a guide to show the company the route to the quartering point. These two men themselves got lost, and after waiting what seemed a reasonable time for them to return, Capt. Horn formed the Company up and started on the return trip. While marching along the road to Kemmel he encountered

a man from the R.C.R.'s who directed the Company to Headquarters. Here another disappointment awaited them. No guides were available and no one seemed to know what to do. After a period of indecision Captain Horn was ordered to return to the place he had just come from. This was certainly pleasant news to the men. Here they had tramped hour after hour through mud and ice and sleet, weighed down like pack horses, stumbling into mudholes and ditches filled with icy water, hungry and chilled to the bone, and with the expectation of being at least permitted to rest, when they were informed that they had to again take up the march and go back to the point they had just come from. Readers, have you imagination enough to realize the feelings of those men? If you have, you will in a measure appreciate some of the things these boys of yours went through in order to help make the world safe for democracy. Many people think that the hardest part of a soldier's life in the field is the going over the parapet to come at handgrasp with the enemy. Unquestionably it is the most important, but I believe I am safe in saying that few soldiers will hold with you that it is the most difficult part. It is the silent watches of the night, when men are face to face with their thoughts and with the lurking and unseen terrors of darkness that wear the nerves down to the breaking point. It is the loss of a comrade who has been with you through thick and thin, who has shared your last "pill" and has cuddled up alongside of you in the coldest nights and kept you warm that stokes the going hard. It is the ceaseless daily grind of drudgery, the heart-breaking marches under the worst conditions and in the bitterest kind of weather, that depletes the reserve enduring power of the boys, and makes them wonder at times if the bally thing is worth while. And the fact that your boys went through all this without being permanently "sour" against life, is a finer tribute to their manhood than a dozen decorations would be, and is conclusive proof that they are well fitted to perform any duty that may be required of them in the days to come.

They felt unprintable things when they were ordered to return to the farm, but wearily shouldering their packs and rifles, they started off again. They had barely reached Siege Farm when a runner came bearing a message for them to return to Headquarters immediately. What it cost the men to comply with that order will never be known; but they went. When they got there a guide was furnished and each man told to take a gallon can filled with water and proceed to their original destination in the line. Both their patience and endurance were taxed beyond the ordinary limits, but dead beat and worn out, they staggered into their trenches, soaked to the skin and ready to drop in their tracks. Only about half a dozen men had hung on to the water cans, the rest having "ditched" them while wading through shell holes and trenches waist deep with water. That trip into the line will never be erased from the memory of those boys of "C" Company as long as they live.

In spite of the fact that Major Young had preceded them for the purpose of arranging for their accommodation, there was nothing there that could be used to make them comfortable, and rather than wait around on the chance of obtaining sleeping accommodations, many of the men threw themselves on the firing step and dropped off to sleep in the snow. The result of this exposure was that a number of very serious pneumonia cases were contracted, and it was only by a miracle that some of them pulled through.

It was on this occasion that an incident occurred which at the time seemed very unjust. Sergeant Jack Curry had left his rifle standing up against the firing step, and during the night the muzzle received a coat of ice. In the morning he had occasion to fire it, and the obstruction of the bore resulted in the blowing off of the front sight. He was fined thirty shillings for the damage done to his Ross rifle, and he resented the charge very bitterly. Although at first sight it might appear that this was very unjust on the part of the authorities, it must be borne in mind that even commanding officers must conform to instructions from those higher in authority, and although a point could have been stretched and the rifle repaired at government expense, from the technical point of view the charge was justifiable, inasmuch as every soldier is at all times supposed to see that his rifle is ready to fire.

After this experience, the company rejoined the rest of the Battalion back in billets. Here it was decided to send a squad to the bombing school at Meteren, as Headquarters looked forward to great activity with bombing parties in the near future. Lieutenant Burns-MacKenzie was selected to command this detail, with Bombing Sergeant Tommy Williams and a non-commissioned officer from each company to assist him. The total strength of the party was fifty. The detachment remained at the school about two weeks, and when it returned, the Battalion was well qualified to give the Hun bombers a run for their money. It is worthy of note that Lieutenant Burns-MacKenzie is at present Adjutant of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in Siberia.

Another trip was made in this part of the line, and the men were gradually beginning to get the "feel" of things. Everything was rather quiet now, and little activity was displayed anywhere along this sector. There were really no trenches at this point, only an embankment having been thrown up in front, protected by barbed wire. Civilians were carrying on in the villages behind the line as though they didn't know there was a war on, even though an occasional shell dropped in their midst, carrying off a few of their number.

It was customary for two companies to hold the line and the other two companies rested. This rest consisted in furnishing working parties for carrying rations, water and supplies, building roads, digging graves or sanitary trenches and making sandbags.

After returning to Loere for rest, the Battalion made preparations to go into the line on their own. On March 11th the Fifty-Second took over the "M & N" trench at Wytshaeete and settled down to a real active participation in the big scrap. Fritzie soon learned that more of those "verdelmer" Canadians had arrived, for it is one of the characteristics of raw troops to try to hide their natural nervousness by an indiscriminate banging away of their rifles. Were this a tale of fiction, I should be tempted to portray every one of these boys in the Battalion as dauntless and intrepid heroes, utterly incapable of fear. But as this happens to be a chronicle of things that actually happened, I fear I shall be compelled to disappoint, to a certain extent, the ultra hero-worshippers. The majority of the men fell very far short of Mr. Graustark's and Robert W. Chamber's superb depictions. There were distinct evidences of nervousness on the part of practically all ranks. This was only natural. It must be remembered that men were coming face to face, for the first time in their careers, with the greatest issues of life, and that they were passing through a crucial test. The unknown is always dreaded by mankind. Few are gifted with such an iron nerve that they can conceal every visible indication of the tension caused by their first contact with death in every form. Very few men in those trenches but were cowering in humiliation and a disgrace for a man to be afraid. The crowning humiliation and the unpardonable military offense is the subordination of the will power to the fear that is inherent in most men. The difference between the real V.C. and the real coward is control. One controls his fear by his determination and heads towards the enemy. The other lets his fear control his will, and heads away from the enemy.

(To Be Continued.)

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