

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

ITS RECORD IN FRANCE, BELGIUM AND CANADA

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As time went on the men gradually became accustomed to the strangeness, and as they came to realize that they were holding down the first line of defense in this great war, they gradually acquired an assurance and confidence that was never afterwards overthrown.

When the Battalion had somewhat accustomed itself to the novelty of the machine gun bullets whizzing overhead, some of the men began to look for honors, and incidentally dangers. Two boys of Russian parentage went to Major Wilcox and volunteered to go out that night and attempt to put out of commission a machine gun that had been directing a constant fusillade over our trench. Major Wilcox reluctantly gave his consent and that night the two worked their way silently over the top and through the barbed wire entanglement. What took place after that is related by Private Mazerinka, who returned at the break of dawn the following day, without his comrade. He stated that they had almost attained to bombing distance when a flare was sent up which revealed their position to the German machine gunners, who immediately swept that portion of the ground with a heavy fusillade. Private Mazerinka immediately dropped to the ground, but before his companion could follow his example he was struck and instantly killed. Mazerinka felt of his comrade's heart, and finding him lifeless, started to work his way back in the direction he thought his own lines were. He reached a trench and received a shock when he heard some Germans conversing in low tones. He realized his critical position, and with extreme care he again began to retrace his steps. After what seemed like an interminable period he finally reached our lines at daybreak, and rendered his report to Major Wilcox. On the following evening a detachment of scouts was sent out to try to locate the body of the boy who had lost his life in No-man's Land, but although the scouts crept forward in the face of a deadly machine gun barrage, and made careful search, they failed to find the body. Some weeks later the Germans sent a report that they had found the body of this man.

Another incident during this trip in the lines was the splendid spirit shown by a young Fort Francis boy, Frankie Keenan, who although seriously wounded in the shoulder, refused to be carried to the dressing station, but insisted on walking there unaided.

The Battalion suffered eight casualties while occupying the "M. & N." trench and was finally relieved by the 27th.

On March 17th, St. Patrick's day, after the companies came out of the line, the Battalion formed up again and marched back to billets in Ekke. Here one of those annoying little things that are continually cropping up wherever troops are stationed, occurred. Having run out of fuel, and wanting a bit of hot tea, some of the boys went rumaging round and "salvaged" a little wood. The owner discovered this and immediately decided that his billings had been torn to pieces, and presented a bill to Major Young, whose men were billeted at this place, for seventy-eight francs. Although he tried his best to convince the excited little Frenchman that the bill was utterly ridiculous, the gentleman stood pat on his demand for indemnity, and the end the Major paid the bill out of his own pocket, although he expressed himself very forcibly to some of the N.C.O.'s who were in charge of the men in billets.

It was very rare for depredations of any kind to be committed by the men, but the French, and later the Belgians saw a way to make a little extra money out of the Canadian Government, and at every billeting area, after the troops had vacated, claims for ridiculous amounts were forwarded on every conceivable and inconceivable pretext. Sometimes these cases proved legitimate ones, and of course satisfactorily adjusted; but most of the time they were fraudulent, and disallowed, although not until a few reams of correspondence had been exchanged on the subject.

During the stay here a very deplorable accident occurred. One of the Machine Gunners was cleaning his rifle, and in opening the bolt to insure the ejection of any cartridge that might have been in the chamber, he touched off the trigger, killing one of his comrades. A Board of Investigation found that it was entirely accidental and due to no criminal negligence on his part, although he was very much put up over the matter. The deceased was buried with full military honors, and his parents notified.

After a short and final period of instruction, the Battalion was paraded for the purpose of being drafted to the Ypres Salient. Everyone has heard of this battleground, where Canada leaped into the limelight through the deathless saga of her sons. This is not a history of the Great War; it is simply a story of the part our Battalion took in this struggle. One cannot help but wonder, however, at the miracle of peaceful men being transformed almost overnight into fighting demons who put the fear of death and defeat in the heart of an arrogant and overbearing foe, and who, in the face of poison gases and destructive fosses van deathless glory and unending fame by making such a stand against overwhelming odds as has not been surpassed even by the legendary of Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans.

It was on the march to this salient that the "famions" Pike Moot was issued to the men. This product of some overworked genius' brain reached to the knee and had a soft sole. The inventor of this wonderful piece of footgear must have had an idea that cobble-stones in France were made of a softer material than the cobble-stones in Canada. At any rate, half the Battalion were almost incapacitated at the end of the hike through sore feet, and had there been enough of these boots to have gone round, and the men permitted to wear them, all would have been disabled.

In conjunction with the other three Battalions of the Ninth Brigade the march was taken up to the Ypres Salient, the Battalion stopping for billets in Vlamertinghe. On the road at a little town called Renalther, Sir Douglas Haig, escorted by a smart looking troop of lancers, had the Battalion halted, and personally inspected it. He expressed himself very favorably on the appearance of the men and wished all ranks the greatest success in their undertakings.

The unit arrived at its billeting area, taking over what was known as "B" Camp on the left of the road leading to the St. Eloi trenches. Orders were received that the Battalion would remain in this camp about a week or so before making its first trip into the Ypres salient. Substantial huts were assigned, and everyone felt better at the prospect of enjoying decent billets. A cinema show

near the huts afforded plenty of amusement at tuppence a head, and entertainers abounded in the villages. Training of course was still carried on, but the men had a chance to get over the effects of the terrible exposure some of them had undergone in the Kemmel region. At this time two of the officers who had been left behind in England when the Battalion left for France, rejoined the unit.

On April first, All Fool's Day, an advance party consisting of one sergeant from each platoon, under the leadership of Captain Hunter and Regimental Sergeant Major Spruget, were sent in to relieve a unit holding a piece of trench to the left of "Hill 60." This position was in a heavy grove of trees, nicknamed by our predecessors "Maple Copse." In spite of the seriousness of the occasion, some fellow tried to celebrate the day by passing a message along the line that the Huns were getting ready to send a gas attack across, and he managed to put the wind up a number of fellows before the report was officially denied.

It was originally the intention to have the Battalion spend four days in the line, four days in support and eight days in reserve. However, as conditions later changed considerably from what had been anticipated, the tour of duty in the line was frequently increased to meet pressing contingencies, until on one or two occasions almost a month was spent in the front line trenches. The defences in this salient were the best that had been met with as yet. The trenches were clean, sanitary, well vetted, with good dug-outs, and the working parties of the various units were constantly making repairs and additions that contributed to the welfare of the men.

After the first eight days in the line and support the unit went back for a change of clothes and clean up. Billets were good, and in and around Ypres facilities were at hand for furnishing recreation, so as to take the men's mind off the harrowing details of their daily casualties. In billets the Colonel made every effort to provide for the comfort of the men and special lectures were held among the officers, outlining what they should do under certain emergencies, and how to best obtain the maximum of results with a minimum loss of life. A draft of reinforcements coming up from the base and accompanied by Sergt. Davidson, the Battalion Orderly Room Sergeant, who had been down at the Base with regard to some records, were greeted by heavy artillery fire and a shell landed near some of them, killing and wounding quite a number. Sergt. Davidson was blown up beyond recognition, and with him a large part of the orderly room records, which he was bringing up to the Battalion in person. It was because of this incident, and because of another occasion on which some records were lost, that the history of this portion of the Battalion's record is incomplete, and it has been necessary to depend largely upon the reminiscences of those who were present with the Battalion at the time. It was also at this time that one of the most popular men in the Battalion, Bill Rennie, rejoined from Rouen.

After a good rest the Battalion was sent in to the Hooge trenches, and during the remainder of the period that the Battalion was stationed in the Ypres salient, it alternated between Maple Copse and Hooge, near Hill 60. At Hooge one of the concrete evidences of the destructive effects of the war, was ever present with the men. Near the line there was a famous estate, formerly the property of a Belgian nobleman, but which was now no more than a heap of ruins. The terrific effects of the high explosive shells could be seen on all sides, where the ground was ploughed up into holes and ridges and furrows from the artillery fire incident to the operations around this sector since 1914.

In the Hooge sector, the battalion bombers were given their first real opportunity to display the knowledge they had acquired at the school in Meteren. Lieut. Burns McKenzie was detailed to take a squad of bombers and occupy a prominent mine crater, a short distance from the line, this crater being about thirty or forty yards from a similar one occupied from time to time by the Germans. Behind this crater there was a big gap containing three posts which were specially under the care of Sergt. Boler, and these in turn were covered well back by our machine guns, and the brigade machine gun section. Necessarily the men in these advance posts were in the nature of things, mere stop gaps, and in the event of an attack, would have been sacrificed, as it was their duty to hold on to their positions as long as there was any hope at all, in order to give the machine gunners sufficient time to prepare either for defence or attack, and the probabilities were that the men in the gap posts would have been mown down by our own machine gun fire.

Frequent exchanges of bomb throwing took place between the two mine craters, with honors usually laying with our detachment, as the bombs, in use by the Canadians at this time were a more efficient factor of destruction than were the German bombs, the latter depending largely upon their detonating effect, whereas the Canadians depended largely upon the serrated shell of the bomb bursting into innumerable fragments of shrapnel and causing both painful and numerous wounds. During the month of April, although we suffered some casualties, nothing noteworthy occurred, as far as attacks were concerned, and all ranks were beginning to feel as though they were veterans in every sense of the word. Many an amusing as well as tragic incidents occurred to relieve the monotony and the continual drudgery of trench life, and during this period, the Colonel was indefatigable in his efforts to keep the spirits and morale of the men up to the highest pitch. He personally supervised the issue rations as far as possible, and it was largely due to his supervision that both rations, water and supplies were available at the proper time during this period of comparative quiet. It must be borne in mind that when the word comparative quiet is used, it does not mean that the enemy was asleep; it simply means that no operations on a large scale were taking place. Interchanges of rifle fire, machine gun fire, and artillery fire were constantly going on. Patrols were carrying on their work out in No-man's Land, and frequently meeting and fighting small battles on their own. Individual acts of bravery and conspicuous courage would crop up here and there, and it was during the period of occupancy in the trenches at Maple Copse and at Hooge, near Hill 60, that the first of that long series of brilliant exploits, which won for the Battalion the reputation of having been awarded the highest number of decorations of any battalion in the Canadian corps, took place. It would be almost impossible, in a book of this nature, to specify individual by individual, and act by act, all the splendid deeds that were performed upon the field of that fighting arena. However, as far as possible, especially where the acts for which recommendations were made are particularly conspicuous, an account will be given of those cases.

(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.

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