

# THE OFFICIALLY AUTHORIZED STORY OF THE 32 FIFTY-SECOND BATTALION 52 ITS RECORD IN FRANCE, BELGIUM AND CANADA

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In one of our trips in the line, a Canadian officer who wanted to gain experience at the front was attached to the Battalion and Colonel Hay was requested to see that as far as possible he be initiated into the mysteries of modern trench warfare. There is no question but what he got the experience. It is doubtful if he will ever forget one particular experience that he enjoyed in common with our Colonel. On this occasion the old man, in order to assist him to acquire a more intimate knowledge of the art of war in its varying aspects, decided to take him out to a mine crater, showing him the advantage of taking up positions in these miniature dugouts, and also to show him the best methods of defence against a position had been taken up. During their wanderings, in which the "tender foot" major displayed a little uneasiness and nervousness, they wandered out too far and exposed themselves to the attention of an enemy sniper. Although the Germans have been accused of every form of brutality and of the lack of almost every virtue known to civilization, no one who has ever opposed him out in the far flung reaches of the front line will ever admit of inability to shoot well and to shoot quickly. Their snipers were perfect. It was seldom that our men dared to expose themselves against the sky line for even a fraction of a second, and many of our casualties were more often due to the effects of enemy sniping fire than from almost any other cause. So that when the two officers momentarily exposed themselves to view, they drew down a fusillade of shots that proclaimed the unhealthy nature of the neighborhood, and the Colonel, who was very familiar with the effects and the potential qualities of the sniping fire, wisely decided to subordinate valor to prudence and sought for shelter in a nearby trench, taking it for granted that the Major would follow his lead. On reaching the trench he found that the seeker of military information had failed to follow him, and like the gallant soldier that the Colonel always was, he immediately left the shelter of his trench and retraced his steps in the hopes of finding his brother officer. After an extended search he found him sitting up to his waist in water in a near-by shell hole. He crawled in beside him, and as there was too much light to make a successful attempt to get back to their own trenches, the two officers remained in this uncomfortable position all day, while the Battalion suffered considerable uneasiness over the fate of the man who had won his way into the hearts of every one of them. At nightfall the two of them cautiously emerged from their uncomfortable position and made their way back to their own lines, but even here a tragedy was narrowly averted, when one of the sentries, who had not through some error been informed of the absence of the Colonel and the Major, almost fired on them as they came within sight. Great rejoicing took place when the men found out that their Colonel was still safe and sound. Although the latter showed little effect from the days' experience, the visiting officer's nerves were all on edge, and shortly afterward he left the Battalion and returned to England with a knowledge of war and conditions that it would have been impossible for him to have acquired anywhere but on the actual scene of operation, and I imagine if he is still alive, and looks back to the time spent with Colonel Hay in hunting for experience at Ypres, that a shiver of unpleasantness runs through him whenever he thinks of that frightful experience in the shell hole out in No-man's Land in April, 1916.

During this period also, a very popular Boy of "C" company, Corporal Matheson, was killed because he failed to credit the German snipers with the intelligence that they really possessed. He decided he would take a look at the surrounding country over the parapet, and although he managed to get away with this stunt the first time, his head was nearly blown off on the second occasion, for a sniper had spotted him and marked the position, so that when his head reappeared for a bare fraction of a second, a bullet found lodging there, and another brave Canadian was added to the long list of casualties that was beginning to pile itself up.

The Germans attempted one attack on a rather limited scale, although they put over a heavy artillery barrage to support it. The 58th and the 52nd were the objects of themselves, and considerable damage was done to the trenches and a few casualties occurred. The two battalions repelled the attack, and refused to be ousted from their trenches.

During May considerable preparations were made by the enemy for some big attack of which our General Headquarters were cognizant, although they were not aware of the exact date or nature of the proposed attack. The Germans were busy running new saps toward our trenches, running out at angles to the main front line trench, and in their attack on the last of May they used these saps jumping off places after the tremendous artillery barrage had been opened up. It was while these saps were being run out into No-man's Land that Colonel Hay expressed some uneasiness as to the nature and purpose of these engineering projects and he mentioned his fears to some of his officers. Lieut. Hatton, who had been Signal Sergeant up to the time the Battalion arrived at St. John, thought of a scheme that would give warning of any intended surprise by the Germans. His idea was to run a wire out into No-man's Land well toward the enemy trenches, and put at special receiver at the end of it with another one inside the trench, and he believed that this would catch any unusual sounds and be communicated to our lines. In furtherance of this project, without the Colonel's consent, he went over the top on his own, and made a reconnaissance in the open ground between the battalion front and the enemy line. He secured the information he was after, and was well on his way back when, believing that he was near enough to his own trench to take a chance and make a dash for it, he started to his feet when an enemy bullet struck him, killing him instantly. He was the first officer to be killed in action and it made a very vivid impression upon all those who had come to learn to admire and respect him. Lieut. Pringle, who saw him fall, asked for permission to go over the top, in the face of a very heavy fire that was being played over the parapet by machine gunners, and ascertain if life was extinct, and if so bring back all papers that might be on the body. He crawled over the parapet, and up to the motionless figure, lying out there in the open, and having assured himself that Lieut. Hatton had crossed the Great Divide, possessed himself of all his papers and safely crawled back to the trenches. For this action Lieut. Pringle was mentioned in a recommendation for some award, and although no decoration was granted, to him lies the distinction of having received the first official recommendation for any act of gallantry performed of the field. During the period in which these wire positions, Maple Creek and Hooge, were occupied, numerous recommendations for reward were made by the Colonel, in recognition for the many gallant deeds accomplished by the men. Pte. Edward Forest was recommended for recognition, for carrying messages in the Hooge trenches, and out from headquarters at "Halfway House", under heavy shell fire, from April 28 to May 2, and especially during the heavy bombardment of May 30. Late in November, of the same year, he was awarded the Military Medal.

There was ample opportunity for the individual display of initiative, courage, and gallantry in the days that followed, beginning with the 30th of May. The opening assault of the 3rd battle of Ypres found the battalion just completing its tour of duty, and necessitated its coming back into action after only a few days' rest. On the last trip into the line prior to this sanguinary engagement, the Battalion frontage had been extended a few hundred yards, covering Sanctuary Wood in the direction of Hill 60, and

it was the lengthening of the line at this point that was largely responsible for the Germans breaking through in their great assault a few days later.

## CHAPTER III.

### THIRD BATTLE OF YPRES.

Although the third battle of Ypres did not actually begin until the 1st of June, the artillery preparations for the attack were initiated about the middle of May, with the introduction, for the first time in the experience of the battalion, of the heavy trench mortar fire. During this constant shelling numerous casualties occurred, in spite of all the precautions that were taken to keep them down to a minimum. On the evening of the 31st Lieut. Naylor, who was in charge of the repairs of barbed wire, trench parapets, trench walks, etc., was instantly killed by a trench mortar shell landing almost directly in front of him, being the second officer to forfeit his life since the arrival in France.

On the evening of the 31st the Battalion was relieved by the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles. All ranks were well pleased at the prospect of obtaining a good rest, for this had been a very trying experience in view of the continuous and nerve racking shell fire that the Germans had directed toward our lines. The Battalion left about 2:00 a.m. via the Menin Road, for billets. Later in the morning all ranks had changed clothes, were paid, and settled down to enjoy a week's rest, without the slightest idea that they were about to enter into one of the most crucial periods of the Battalion's existence.

At times the Germans had an uncanny method of learning the vital facts and secrets of their opponents. Whether this was due to the brilliant foresight of their leaders, or to information received from spies located in our midst, is hard to say, but on the occasion of the third battle of Ypres, as well as on subsequent attacks that proved very successful, they unerringly launched the assault at the weakest point of the line, i.e., the extended frontage that had been given over to the 52nd from Maple Cope through Hooge, in the direction of Hill 60, and covering Sanctuary Wood, and which was now being held by our relieving battalion, the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles.

Fritzie's attack for a while was irresistible. He broke through the weak portion of the line, and worked in behind the 4th C.M.R.'s, and those who had not been killed or wounded by the terrific bombardment that had opened up just before the grand assault took place, were taken prisoners. The scene in and around Maple Cope was appalling. Where before there had been a lovely wood with trees from ten to fifteen feet apart, there was now nothing but a mass of twisted and broken stumps with dead and wounded lying all about. A red cross dressing station in the copse was completely demolished, a large portion of the staff being killed or wounded.

The situation was a very critical one, and the divisional commander directed every possible man to be rushed forward, not only to stem the tide of the attack, but at the first opportunity, to retaliate by counter-attacking. As already stated, the battalion was settling down to a week's inactivity, and even dispatched some men on their first leave when the order came for all ranks to stand to in full marching order, ready to return to the support of the hard pressed troops in the line.

The order to advance was received about 5:00 p.m., and the Battalion, fully equipped for the field, was marched to a set of trenches just to the rear of Ypres, under intense and incessant shell fire. Casualties were occurring every moment. The transport suffered very heavily. One shell exploding in the midst of a platoon, killed five and wounded seven. All felt considerably relieved when they reached the shelter of the trenches, where they remained till about 3 o'clock on the morning of the 3rd. Orders were received to make an immediate forced march to Sanctuary Wood, in which direction the Germans had broken through and where a desperate defence was being made by the Canadians.

To insure the greatest possible speed in reaching the wood, the men were directed to throw off their heavy packs. The Battalion reached the China Wall, a long rampart about eight feet high by three feet wide, constructed of sand bags. This wall was plainly visible by the observers on the ridge occupied by the Germans, and was subjected to one of the most severe strafings that Fritzie had yet put over. Men were falling right and left. Captain Guild, the adjutant, met the Battalion at this point and took charge of it, giving orders for the distribution of the companies to cover Sanctuary Wood. Daylight was just breaking, and the men pressed forward as rapidly as possible to get into position, but the terrific bombardment caught them before they had settled themselves, and the inferno that broke loose, beggars any description that mere language can express. Within less than fifty seconds, while the "B" Company was deploying through the ground about 100 yards to the right of the China Wall, almost thirty per cent. of the Battalion was wiped out, and the China Wall completely demolished. "C" Company was just getting out of the Wall through a communication trench, where the concentrated fire enveloped it, and wiped out the greater part of the company. Major Young, the company commander, was struck by a shell while leading his men, and he too, made the supreme sacrifice. (It would be impracticable to give the names of all the casualties that occurred here, although they will be added as an appendix when this is published in book form.) During this fighting the hardest blow of all struck the Battalion. Throughout the hottest part of the fight the Colonel's well known figure was seen moving from point to point, cheering a man here, rallying him there, inspiring confidence wherever he went, and imbuing all with the spirit of action wherever he went. Although various and conflicting reports have been made as to his last appearance, it was generally conceded that, knowing the desperate plight in which the Princess Pats were at this time, he went forward and asked the commanding officer of the famous unit to permit him to take over his position, and give the men of the Princess Pats a rest. Whether or not he was successful in his request is not known, but it is supposed that on the way back to rejoin his Battalion he was struck by a shell, as many another poor lad has been, and passed into the great beyond without a trace of his remains being found.

There are some men of whom it is difficult to say anything that could add one iota to the lustre of their characters and their achievements. He was one of the men of whom Canada will ever justly be proud, and who in turn reflected the wonderful potentialities of his virginal country in new and unknown fields. He was a gentleman, he was kind, he was firm and he was just. His was the task of bringing about the human transition from the raw to the finished product. With inanimate objects this is merely a case of mechanical perseverance. With men, live, red blooded animals, subject to the passions and virtues and inconsistencies of the human mind, this was a task requiring every display of tact, wisdom, and leadership. That he performed his task well needs no assurance from the writer; the battalion that returned with a dozen honorable well won battles to its credit, and with a reputation that will live as long as Canada exists, is all the assurance that will ever be required for posterity, and although no monument is erected over his last resting place in France, he has carved an epitaph for himself upon the hearts of the men with whom he came in contact, both as commanding officer, and as counsellor and advisor, that will never be erased as long as life lasts.

(To Be Continued.)