



THE WAR LETTERS

Reg Beckett: A Canadian Soldier in the Great War

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*Awarded to Grandfather H.C. Beckett
March 18, 1914*

Introduction

The year 1914 yielded some very mixed emotions in the Hamilton, Ontario, home of Henry Charles and Edith Maud Beckett. We don't know which of the seven children, ages thirteen to twenty-four, were present when their father received his high award on March 18, but those who attended would have been justifiably proud. In recognition for his distinguished service to the Hamilton Board of Trade and the community, Mr. Beckett was presented with a stunningly handsome grandfather clock. I began this writing project in the shadow of this imposing timepiece exactly 100 years after it was gifted to my grandfather. The clock, passed down at some point to my parents, has been in our home in Colorado for the past 20 years, where it continues to tick away in perfect working order.

The Beckett family's excitement that accompanied the honor to my grandfather would, however, soon be tempered by a gathering storm in Europe. Ultimately the continent would erupt into a prolonged, agonizing war that would encompass much of the world. Closer to home, WWI would directly impact the Beckett family including my father, Reginald Walter Beckett, the family's fifth eldest child and fourth eldest son.

When the United Kingdom declared war on Germany on August 4, 1914, Reg, born on the 19th of that month in 1897, was sixteen years of age. Yet the national fervor to counter Germany's aggression would captivate young Reg. How could he best serve? When might that occur? What was the responsible course?

This is an account of Reg's early life, from childhood through his service abroad and, by God's grace, his eventual return home at the war's close. It is brief, both to spare you, dear reader, and because details are sparse. How quickly history becomes hidden! What we do know, however, especially of his wartime involvement, is remarkable. A few years ago we discovered a family treasure—copies of more than thirty letters Reg wrote home from the front during 1917 and 1918. I found these in near perfect condition—as perfect as one

might expect from hundred-year-old carbon copies held together with rusty straight pins. We have them because Grandfather Beckett, on receiving handwritten missives from Reg, would painstakingly type them with enough carbon copies to distribute the news to Reg's siblings. I will glean from these letters the highlights and insights from the war years, correlating, as I am able, with the involvement of the Canadian Forces in that war.

Apart from these letters we know little of Reg's early years. We have some photographs, news clippings and a few stories from my dad's growing-up years as recounted by my sisters, Beverly and Susan, and me. Four of my cousins—all in their eighties—Uncle Harold's Tom, Uncle Hubert's Tom and Suzanne, and Uncle Jack's Molly (Nixon) generously lent rich resources from their personal collections including albums I didn't know existed until this project got underway. Sadly, Thomas L. Beckett, Hubert's son, passed away at age eighty-seven on November 25, 2014, during the final stages of this writing project.

I view Reginald Walter Beckett as a man of great substance and significance. No doubt his difficult experiences abroad, in his teens and into his early twenties, forged his character, competence, courage, passions and stamina. These, in turn, became an enduring legacy to his wife, Jean, his three children and countless others through his distinguished career in business and in the communities in which he lived over his sixty-seven years.

My goal as I dive into my father's early history is to more deeply understand the man I came to know, love and admire, and to share these insights with family and friends. Come with me as we get to know more of my dad, Reginald W. Beckett.



The War Letters, 1917 - 1918

PART I

CHAPTER 1

Stories from Childhood



116 Charlton Ave. Hamilton, Ontario



Edith and H.C. Beckett

The Beckett home at 116 Charlton Avenue, which the family moved into in 1903, was just blocks from downtown Hamilton, Ontario.¹ The household must have been a beehive of activity, with eldest and only daughter Muriel holding sway over six younger brothers. Recently, Wendy and I drove through the neighborhood. An apartment house now stands where the Beckett family lived, but other homes, stately and distinctively styled, bear witness to a well-to-do, comfortable neighborhood lifestyle.

A few stories, seemingly offhand, passed along here and there, help define Reg's childhood. There was sufficient backyard for his father to erect a train around the inside perimeter of a fence that gave privacy to the gardens and children's play area. I imagine the rail gauge must have been some twelve inches in width because youngsters could apparently sit in the open cars as the train chugged along its tracks. Rail was the dominant transportation in those days—the automobile was just being introduced—and how fitting for the Beckett family to have its own train! But not just a train—an auto as well. Grandmother Edith apparently had the first electric car in Hamilton, a Baker Electric manufactured in Cleveland, Ohio, and described as “quiet, smooth, and pollution-free.” A New York Times article, from May 5, 2007, on the Baker noted: “Well-dressed society women could simply drive to lunch, to shop, or to visit friends without fear of soiling their gloves, mussing their hair or setting their dresses on fire.”

Mint flourished in the family's garden. We know this because Reg's initial business venture was to bundle fresh clumps and purvey them to local meat markets so butchers could include a sprig with their spring lamb. Reg must have had a source of topsoil as well for he would load up his teddy wagon and go door to door selling soil for neighbors' gardens.

¹In the previous decade-plus, the family had moved often, living at 36 West Avenue S., 501 Main Street E., and 47 Wellington Street S.

I don't know how much these initiatives were Reg's, or how much his father was behind them, but, in any case, seeds were sown that would blossom decades later in Reg's entrepreneurial activities.

Studies were of central importance for the Beckett children. In fact, a family Bible carefully logs when each child began school and music lessons—in Reg's case, at ages five and thirteen, respectively. For young Reg, such learning graces as a good vocabulary, penmanship and diligent note taking were formed in the early years. Can you believe a person would read a page of the dictionary each day? Reg did. Would you consider making your entries in college lab books in ink? Reg did. (I have several of these lab books from his University of Toronto engineering courses—all in “mint” condition.)

As for hobbies, we know little, but a clue into Reg's mechanical interests is the “Wee B.” The Wee B was a handmade boat, some four feet long, that was passed along to Reg. I would not be surprised if this was a joint project with his father, carved as it was out of a solid block of wood and meticulously outfitted with mahogany decks, brass hardware and a battery-powered drive motor, shaft and propeller.



Wee B



Reg, second from right – 1901



Reg's University of Toronto Lab Book



Susan, Bev, John at Hubert's Studio – 1948

Perhaps most important, there's ample evidence that Reg and his siblings formed close bonds with each other. Our annual vacation trips to the North Country would always involve a stopover in Hamilton, usually staying at the Royal Connaught Hotel. Often there were photo shoots at Uncle Hubert's photography studio at 142 James Street or visits to Hubert's modest but delightful "cottage" on Hamilton Mountain.

Occasionally we would intersect with other Hamilton-area aunts and uncles. It was immediately apparent that "the boys" and Aunt Muriel had no difficulty picking up where they'd left off, their stories often embellished by a few glasses of their favorite Scotch whiskey.



Harold, Hubert, Reg, Muriel, Gerald, K.C., Jack – 1947

CHAPTER 2

Sister and Brothers

Two years after the marriage of Henry and Edith Beckett on April 26, 1886, the first of their seven children was born. Edith Muriel arrived March 4, 1888; she was always known as Muriel. Firstborns get lots of attention, and Muriel was no exception. She had four living great-grandmothers, and they, along with her mother and two grandmothers, all gathered at Muriel's christening.

Little did Henry and Edith imagine Muriel would be their only daughter. To their surprise, six sons followed:

Harold Champ February 24, 1890
Hubert William October 27, 1892
Arthur Gerald December 10, 1895
Reginald Walter August 19, 1897
Kenneth Charles April 5, 1900
Jack Ernest May 16, 1902

For those interested, a much fuller history of the families of Henry Charles Beckett and Edith Maud Champ may be found in the Appendix: The Family Tree. This is more than dry genealogy, for it reveals some surprising discoveries—even relatives going back to the 1500s.

Henry C. Beckett was a highly regarded businessman—disciplined, honest and hardworking—described in the *Hamilton Spectator* at the time of his passing in 1921 as one “known among tradesmen (in his industry) as the mainspring of the wholesale grocery business in Canada.” The same article cited an earlier quote of Henry's: “If you want the people to think right, you must first adopt a standard that stands for the highest principles, for honor in business, for just, equitable treatment for all.”



Baby Muriel, her mother Edith, Edith's mother and mother-in-law (standing) and four great-grandmothers – 1888



Beckett's seven children – 1904



Henry and Edith Beckett with children. Reg. far right – 1904

Grandfather began his work career in 1876 at age sixteen, working in the machine shop of F.G. Beckett & Co. in Hamilton. Fredrick Garner Beckett was Henry Beckett's paternal uncle. His company made small steam engines and boilers. After two years, in 1878, Henry was given an opportunity to work as an apprentice in another family-affiliated business, W.H. Gillard & Co., a wholesale grocery company established earlier that same year by his maternal uncle, William Henry Gillard. At age twenty-one, Henry became a traveling salesman for the company. The opening of the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway made access to points west possible, and Henry was tasked with covering the Northwest Territories. He became a partner in the company in 1894.¹

Henry Beckett's draw toward business and commerce helped chart the course for his sons. Harold became a renowned architect with a passion for landscape design. Working from his Detroit and Windsor, Ontario, offices, he designed many premier Detroit homes in the 1920s. During the depression years of the 1930s, Harold designed landmark buildings and

gardens at the famed Cascades of Time Gardens in Banff, Alberta. Hubert became an award-winning professional photographer, opening his Hamilton studio in 1925. Among those he photographed was Field Marshall Montgomery ("Monty"), a leading British military commander during WWII. Hubert was a skilled pianist and composer, crafting the popular WWII songs, "Here We Come the Boys of Canada" and "Home Again."

Arthur, who went by Gerald, the only son other than Reg to see overseas duty in the war, worked much of his career at Stelco (The Steel Company of Canada) in Hamilton. More about Reg later, but he clearly had a mind for engineering, for he enrolled at the University of Toronto after the war to study electrical engineering, a demanding program he completed in three years. Kenneth (generally known as KC, or "Uncle Kay" to me) owned and managed a number of residential apartment buildings in greater Hamilton and enjoyed painting in watercolors. Jack, the youngest, became a Chartered Public Accountant, with his office in Port Credit, Ontario.

With boys arriving every two to three years, robust rivalries and good camaraderie were always present in the Beckett household. One popular teenage activity was "hydroplaning" behind a speedboat in Burlington Bay—even wearing full formal dress including top hats. The hydroplane was a wood plank towed by the boat—no handholds, but only a wood strip across the plank around which the passenger curled his toes. (One summer, years later, we made a hydroplane, and I'll guarantee, balancing on it was not easy!)



Reg at age 13 – August 1910

¹The partnership dissolved on April 1, 1916; on the same date and with the same name, a new partnership was formed with a Mr. H. Kittson.



Cottage at Minnicog – 1912

The Beckett family enjoyed their vacations. For several years they went to a cottage in Minnicog, on a channel from the Muskoka Lakes to Georgian Bay. With modern amenities it was relatively civilized, unlike Algonquin Park, the family’s “outpost” venue following their time at Minnicog.

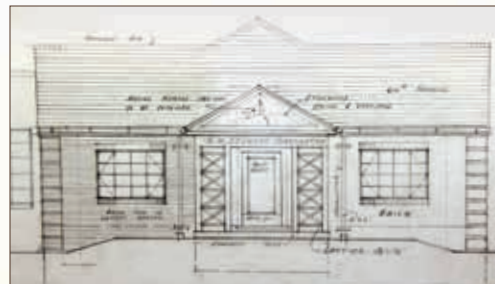
Balancing family fun, the Becketts took church attendance seriously—at least enough so that my cousin Tom (Hubert’s son) related this recurring Sunday morning pageant—Henry’s procession with his six boys:

“They arrived at the Ascension Church. Grandfather lined up his boys at the rear of the church. As the organ sounded Grandfather released Harold, who was dressed in his best, and down the aisle he went to the second pew from the front. Six pew separations and each son was released and paraded to the front. When he ran out of sons, father Beckett with top hat in hand proceeded down the aisle to his proper seat; the image of a proud father in charge of his troops.”



Harold, Hubert, Gerald, Reg, K.C., Jack – 1913

Childhood friendships remained sturdy into adulthood, nurtured by fishing and camping trips, visits during summer vacations—and even business involvements. For a time Hubert assisted Reg in marketing Beckett oil burners in Canada. In the early 1950s, Harold designed the office, plant facilities and gardens of the R.W. Beckett Corporation in North Ridgeville, Ohio.



Harold’s Pencil Drawings of RWB Offices – March 27, 1951

CHAPTER 3

Algonquin Park

For more than a century Algonquin Park has been a refuge for our family. My grandparents first vacationed there within the first decade of the park's opening in 1893, and to this day our current family covets times we can be together each summer on Smoke Lake.

Algonquin Park was the first provincial park in Ontario, developed prior to the automobile. Access to the park was entirely by rail, utilizing tracks, bridges and trains constructed for the logging industry—the Ottawa, Arnprior & Parry Sound Railway (OA&PS), which opened in 1896. Principal stations had been established at Canoe Lake in the town of Mowat, and Cache Lake, where park headquarters were located in 1897. It was Cache Lake that attracted our forebears.

The Beckett family first had a campsite, then a small cabin on Cache with its picturesque islands and rugged shoreline.¹

A main feature, by 1908, was Highland Inn on the north shore of Cache, built and operated by the successor to OA&PS, the Grand Trunk Railway. Highland Inn, considered by many to be a picturesque firetrap, was as close to “high fashion” as Algonquin has ever seen!

Imagine the special times Henry and Edith's family enjoyed in their summer hideaway—swimming, canoeing, fishing, spending time around campfires and venturing up and down the Madawaska River—the same waterway used by the earliest Canadian explorers and fur traders.



Cache Lake Campsite



Cache Lake Station

¹Uncle Jack, in a discussion with two of his nephews in 1984, recalls the Cache Lake property was sold at some point for \$3,000.



Hubert at Algonquin Park

While overseas during WWI, Reg occasionally recalled special memories of Algonquin. A few lines from a poem (in its entirety in Chapter 10) composed on the Western Front in 1918, express the haunting draw of the Beckett's northland retreat:

*O, how I long for the feel of a paddle again,
The sound of the ripples as they gently splash 'gainst the side of our canoe,
The splash of a trout, or a big black bass,
The little camp 'most hidden away—the sizzle of bacon too...*

Just as Algonquin Park helped forge bonds among both John's and Wendy's families, so too did it among earlier generations.



Family Canoe Race on Cache Lake

CHAPTER 4

Active Duty: Camp Petawawa to the Western Front

On July 4, 1916, shortly after graduating from Hamilton Collegiate Institute, Reg Beckett traveled to the nearby town of St. Catharines, entered a recruitment office and filled out a WWI document called an Attestation Paper. His signature affirmed his willingness to serve in the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force and to “be faithful and bear true Allegiance to His Majesty King George the Fifth.” He stated that he belonged to the active militia, the 4th Field Battery, and he had served in the military force known as the 13th Regiment for one and one-half years while he attended high school. He was given soldier number 341914 and assigned to the 71st Overseas Battery CFA (Canadian Field Artillery).

For two months during the spring of 1916, prior to his enlisting, Reg had been in Kingston, Ontario, at the Royal School of Artillery. His senior gunner instructor was Captain Ringwood, later promoted to major and stationed in France. In one of his letters home Reg gave this matter-of-fact assessment of Major Ringwood: “I do not think any other officer could ever come up to him for making things hum.”

Reg received the non-commission rank of sergeant in the Royal Canadian Artillery and was then assigned to Camp Petawawa. He arrived August 26. En route he was granted a final visit home, which was memorialized in a family photo—absent Muriel, apparently away at the time, and Gerald, who was already serving overseas. (photo, next page)

Reg was already familiar with the Petawawa region, for the camp was located on the Ottawa River just east of his now-beloved Algonquin Park. Founded in 1905, Petawawa's first trainees were the Royal Canadian Horse and Garrison Artillery. From December 1914 to May 1916, Petawawa was used as an internment camp for some 750 German and Austrian prisoners of war. Later, through 1918, 10,767 Canadian troops were trained at Petawawa, with most going overseas.

Because of extensive use of horses in WWI, training included horsemanship. The picture of Reg on horseback was taken at Petawawa, as was a postcard inscribed “March past Petawawa war camp.” This card, sent by Reg to his mother on October 16, 1916, notes his location on the photo. “I am the no. 1 of no. 1 gun, the 3rd horse from the right. The little black horse with the white headrope on.”



Camp Petawawa's Bell Tents



Reg at Camp Petawawa – 1916



Postcard – Reg to his mother – Camp Petawawa – 1916



Reg, far left, with family - 1916

Before long, at age nineteen, Reg headed to England and then France, at best only dimly aware of the horrors that lay ahead. A telegram to his parents, dated October 28, 1916, sets the timeline for his travel to the Western Front:

Left Petawawa last night feeling fine—have written you twice—today good accommodation and good meals—arrive in Halifax Sunday night—address mail to Army Post Office, London, England, Fondest love to all, Reggie.

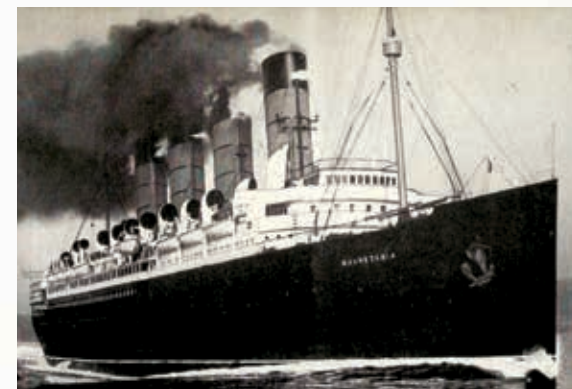
Service records confirm that Reg sailed from Halifax on the S.S. *Mauretania* on November 23, 1916, and arrived at Liverpool, England, on November 30. The *Mauretania*, launched a decade earlier in 1906, was, at the time, the world's fastest ship and largest moving structure ever built. (Her sister ship, the *Lusitania*, had been sunk by a German U-boat on May 7, 1915, a catalyst to bringing the U.S. into the war some two years later.)

Thus two dates are pivotal: Enlistment on July 4, 1916—a date that would shape Reg's next three years with the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force (and, providentially, would be the exact day, twenty-two years later, when Reg and Jean Beckett would welcome their first son into the world). The second was November 23 when Reg headed overseas for further training at Shorncliffe Camp on England's southeast coast.

War records show that Reg arrived in France from England on March 21, 1917, with the Shorncliffe Composite Battery "as reinforcement attached to the 1st C.D.A.C. Field." His first letter from France is dated April 7, 1917. This was a mere two days before the famed Battle of Vimy Ridge, which began the Monday after Easter, April 9, 1917. Was Reg in that battle? As I write, this is a mystery yet to be unlocked.



Reg's telegram to his parents – October 28, 1916



S.S. Mauretania

CHAPTER 5

The Great War

Today is August 4, 2014. Smoke Lake. Civic Holiday. It's a wonderfully quiet, peaceful morning. I look across the room to Dad's Stickley Brothers chair, wonderfully restored by Gilbert Luckasavitch, son of Felix, who, with his brothers Paul and Alex, built our Smoke Lake West Bay cabins in the early fifties. Can you picture Reg sitting in this favorite chair, reading, conversing, gazing out over Algonquin's beauty?

And today—exactly 100 years ago—Great Britain declared war on Germany.

This war would shape the destiny of Canada, the Beckett family and Reg Beckett in profound ways.

It seemed so improbable at the outset. On June 28, 1914, an angry nineteen-year-old Bosnian Serb, Gavrilo Princip, ruthlessly assassinated the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and his wife, Duchess Sophie, while they were motoring through Sarajevo, Serbia. Within weeks, following tepid efforts at diplomacy, Europe erupted into armed conflict.

The sequence of events over the next thirty-eight days would set the course for much of the world for the next four years and beyond:

- ◇ On July 5, Austria-Hungary sought German support for a war against Serbia in case of Russian militarism. Germany gave assurances of support.
- ◇ On July 23, Austria-Hungary sent an ultimatum to Serbia, to which the Serbian response was seen as unsatisfactory.
- ◇ On July 28, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, and Russia mobilized.
- ◇ On July 31, Germany warned Russia to stop mobilizing, and Russia responded by saying it was mobilizing against Austria-Hungary only.
- ◇ On August 1, Germany declared war on Russia, Italy declared its neutrality and Germany and the Ottoman Empire signed a secret alliance treaty.
- ◇ On August 2, Germany invaded Luxembourg.
- ◇ On August 3, Germany declared war on France, and Belgium refused to allow German armies through to the French border.

- ◇ On August 4, Germany invaded Belgium to outflank the French army. Britain protested the violation of Belgium's neutrality, guaranteed by a treaty, to which the German Chancellor Kaiser Wilhelm famously replied that the treaty was just a *chiffon de papier*—a scrap of paper.
- ◇ That same day, Great Britain declared war on Germany.

Oxford University professor of international history Margaret McMillan, in *The War that Ended Peace: The Road to 1914* (2013), says Europe had grown accustomed to peace: "The century since the end of the Napoleonic Wars had been the most peaceful one Europe had known since the Roman Empire." But those who carefully observed underlying forces were not completely surprised. She says, "The outbreak of war in 1914 was a shock but it did not come out of a clear blue sky. The clouds had been gathering in the previous two decades and many Europeans were uneasily aware of that fact. Images of thunderstorms about to break, dams about to burst, avalanches ready to slide, these were quite common in the literature of the time."

With the British Empire at war, Canada, along with other empire nations including Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, were immediately mobilized. In Canada's First Contingent, which embarked from Halifax in October, 1914, more than 32,000 soldiers sailed to Britain aboard thirty passenger liners. The U.S., at least at this point, declared neutrality; that would dramatically change by 1917.

War historians, even now, debate culpability, but all agree that no one could possibly have imagined what lay ahead. The war's conclusion would be more than four years away with a toll that would exceed 9 million soldiers lost and another 15 million wounded.

By war's end, the entire map of Europe and the Middle East was altered. Says Canadian historian J.L. Granatstein, author of *The Greatest Victory: Canada's Hundred Days, 1918*, "Empires that existed disappeared, new countries arose. Russia, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the German Empire, and you have new nations (such as) Czechoslovakia, etc." (*Toronto Star*, 8/3/14). The "etc.," by the

way, included the end of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Israel—with no small implications for issues playing out in these regions today. It is stunning to look at maps of Europe and the Middle East pre- and post-WWI—yet the radically altered landscape was but one measure of the war's impact.

Canada's population at the time was 8 million. During the war, more than 628,000 joined the armed forces, with two-thirds serving overseas, some 420,000. Of these, 60,000 died, and more than 170,000 were wounded, representing over half of those who fought on foreign soil. At the end of the war, Granatstein says, "There was scarcely a home in English-Canada that did not have somebody who was in the war and it came out badly. We know all about PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) now. Nobody knew what it was then, but there must have been huge numbers of people who were totally broken by the war, and nobody knew quite what to do with them or how to deal with them."



English marine artist Norman Wilkinson painted Canada's First Contingent. Over 32,000 soldiers sailed to Britain in 30 passenger liners in October 1914.



Courtesy of In the Footsteps of the Canadian Corps, Canadian infantrymen fixing bayonets in trench near Moquet Farm in 1916. (CWM, 19830277-005)



WWI Recruitment Poster – 1915

With the war's devastating impact on Canada it is remarkable that, at the outset, this was totally unanticipated. Recruiting offices were jammed with exuberant, patriotic, yet sadly naïve young men. Wayne Reeves, chief curator for City of Toronto Museums and Heritage Services, comments on the photographs of August, September, October and November 1914: "That incredible enthusiasm...everyone was going to be home by Christmas...let's get in early otherwise I won't be able to embark on this great adventure."

As noted earlier, Reg was sixteen when war fever swept the nation. Withstanding the wild enthusiasm, and even though many fudged their age to get in, he would complete high school before enlisting at age eighteen. Yet at one point, years later, writing from the front, he wondered whether he should have gone in earlier. Two older brothers did enlist. Gerald, older than Reg by sixteen months, enlisted in October 1914 and was overseas by June 1915. By January 1916 he was in the trenches in France, attached to the Fourth Battalion, First Infantry Brigade. He returned in November that same year, having been mustard gassed, "shell-shocked" and otherwise sufficiently disabled that he was in a total of four hospitals in England before coming home. Ironically, his return to Hamilton coincided almost exactly with Reg's overseas departure from Halifax to England—"brothers passing in the night." Harold, Reg's oldest brother, enlisted in October 1915 at age twenty-five and received a commission as an officer with the 120th Canadian Regiment. Later he was discharged due to a medical condition and never served overseas.

So this is the war-related backdrop to Reg Beckett's enlisting in mid-1916, the remarkable outworking of which unfolds in the next section, Part II.

PART II

CHAPTER 6

The War Letters

A strong inducement to write this biography of my father's early years was, as mentioned earlier, the discovery of a remarkable collection of letters written by him from the Western Front. The earliest was dated April 7, 1917, from France, the final on December 2, 1918, from Nimy, a suburb of Mons, Belgium, where he was stationed on Armistice Day.

Part II covers Reg's two years in Europe through his return home. I follow the chronology of the letters, some 60 pages in all, focusing on my dad's extraordinary experiences and his development as a soldier and as a man in the caldron of war.

These letters have altered some of my understandings and assumptions. For example, the gas mask and carbine rifle he brought back were actually German souvenirs, not his own—his would have been returned to the military. And, the letters add much new detail, such as how and when he obtained our historic hundred-year-old Canadian Ensign with European

cities and post-Armistice dates marked on its white border. We even learn how little dogs adopted him on two different occasions.

As I carefully read Dad's letters I had several observations, which follow. These may help add cohesion to this narrative and will assist any who wish to delve into the letters themselves in greater detail.

- ◇ The letters make virtually no mention of specific battles or locations other than the country he was in, generally France, occasionally Belgium. Letters were subject to strict guidelines and censorship. Stepping outside prescribed boundaries could be punishable, even resulting in court martial.
- ◇ In a few cases the handwritten letters, as sent by Dad, are excerpted by Grandfather and grouped into a single transmittal as he typed and distributed them to others in the family. He always kept dates intact.
- ◇ We see only one side of the communications, Reg's letters, except for copies of two letters from his father to Reg. We know letters were frequently sent from home, especially from his parents but also siblings and friends.
- ◇ Remarkably, H.C. Beckett's numbered letters total at least 170, and parcels sent from home totaled at least 155. This equates to either a letter or package on average every other day for nearly two years!
- ◇ The lifeline to home and family was vital. Terms of endearment and gratitude flowed both ways. Reg knew he was loved, his service admired and appreciated, and he returned his affection in nearly every letter.

- ◇ Reg's letters are consistently upbeat. Several times he states his chief concern is that those at home (especially his mother) worry too much about him. This may be the main reason he says little about the strain of being a soldier in a terrible war or the horrors of battle. In letters sent to his brother Harold, Reg is more transparent about difficulties, and, not surprisingly, we see more banter.
- ◇ Reg wanted to fly. The prospect of a transfer to flight school and the Flying Corps was one he pursued from every angle including having his father lobby some senior military personnel on his behalf. The transfer never came. Over the years I've understood that Grandfather, rather than promoting the idea, may

have actually impeded it, for indeed air casualties in the First World War were not the exception but the rule. One less worry for Edith, Reg's mother!

That we have these letters is a great gift, one that is likely uncommon with many WWI families. They are a testimony to exceptional devotion between father, son and family. Without them, we would know very little of Gunner Reginald W. Beckett's years as soldier #341914 in the Great War.



I follow the chronology of the letters, some 60 pages in all, focusing on my dad's extraordinary experiences and his development as a soldier and as a man in the caldron of war.



Vimy Memorial – 2008

*“The aeroplanes
around here are as
thick as mosquitoes in
summer and sound
about the same.”*

CHAPTER 7

Vimy Ridge

The Battle of Vimy Ridge was a World War I watershed, especially in Canadian military history. As one soldier put it years later in a CBC Radio broadcast, “From Vimy on we were invincible. Nothing could stop us.”

At Vimy, for the first time, all four Canadian divisions were mobilized for a single battle. Having learned much from previous and very costly encounters—Ypres and The Somme being the two largest—the assault for control of Vimy Ridge was meticulously planned and masterfully executed. Where allied forces, the British and French, had been unsuccessful in previous attempts, over four days beginning Easter Monday, April 9, 1917, the Canadian army prevailed. In victory, they pushed back heavily entrenched German positions some 4,500 yards along a 7,000-yard front. Four thousand German soldiers were taken prisoner but at enormous cost to the Canadians: 10,602 casualties including nearly 3,600 killed. Today, a magnificent memorial marks the high point on the ridge. In 2008, Wendy and I visited Vimy and were sobered to see firsthand where so many had given so much.

For years I’ve been under the impression Reg was in that battle. As I read background on the war and study his letters and war records, I’m less sure. The mystery is quite intriguing and may never become fully clear.

Join me in trying to unravel this perplexing question. Here are some pieces to the puzzle:

- ◇ Reg Beckett, trained as a gunner, arrived in France in mid-March 1917, following nine months of additional training in Canada and England.
- ◇ He went to England, then to France, assigned to what was called a “Composite Battery.” It was apparently a rather disorganized unit and came to be known as a “Comical Battery” among the troops. He remained attached to this battery, with a brief exception, for several months following deployment to Europe.
- ◇ Reg’s most telling letter during this period was written April 7, 1917, two days before the Vimy battle began. Dad’s writing is punctuated by a “whew!”—as a German shell landed “a little ways off from us.” He was clearly in a war zone. In the same letter he speaks of a change of command of the Composite Battery and says, “I do not know whether we

are to return to the Composite Battery or not.” In this letter he provides his address as: “C” Echelon, 1st Canadian D.A.C., B.E.F., France.” D.A.C. is an abbreviation for “Divisional Artillery Column,” a unit that delivered ammunition to the artillery guns and at this point was assigned to the Canadian First Division.

- ◇ In the April 7 letter he comments further on the military activity surrounding him: “The aeroplanes around here are as thick as mosquitoes in summer and sound about the same.” He adds, “The other night we brought down two of Fritzie’s observation balloons. Just one streak of fire.” He closes the letter: “The censorship is very strict and if we deviate at all our letters are withheld.” If he were at Vimy and knew a major battle was imminent, would he want to be sure this letter, perhaps his last, would reach his parents—yet without the slightest indication of his being at this location?
- ◇ Among the souvenirs Reg sent home was a small butter spreader made from a shell cartridge with the inscription: Vimy

Ridge, April 9, 1917, Reg. Would he have sent this had he not been in the battle?

- ◇ Reg’s medical records show he was admitted to a hospital April 20, 1917, for erythema (redness of the skin, the result of skin injury, infection or inflammation), rejoining his unit later the same day.
- ◇ By May 1, the date of the next letter, Reg provides his address as: c/o Composite Battery, 1st Canadian D.A.C., B.E.F. So, to his earlier question, he was assigned back to the composite unit. Then, on July 14, he was transferred to the Eighth Army Brigade A.C., B.E.F. He remained with the Eighth Army Brigade through the end of the war and his discharge on April 8, 1919. In every battle the Eighth Canadian Brigade was assigned to the Third Canadian Division.
- ◇ Field Artillery was key in the war effort. Positioned well behind the lines (and the infamous trenches), gun placements were categorized as either divisional artillery batteries, medium batteries or heavy batteries. Well back were super heavy guns.

Perhaps someday we’ll have proof positive of whether Reg was at Vimy. My hunch is that he was. Why? Because the Vimy offensive, involving all four Canadian divisions, was so strategic, so fully in the hands of the Canadians, it is likely every able-bodied soldier was there. Never mind that he had just moved onto European soil or that his “comical battery” was still in turmoil and transition. None of the “hard data” to date precludes his involvement. For me, now, the question will have to rest as one of many I wish he and I had discussed.



*Souvenir butter spreader from
The Battle of Vimy Ridge – 1917*

CHAPTER 8

The Balance of 1917



*Courtesy of In the Footsteps of the Canadian Corps,
Soldiers moving trench mats (duckboards) into the
line at Passchendaele. (NAC, PA-002084)*

Subsequent to the April 7, 1917, letter, written just prior to Easter, we have five additional letters home from Reg from May 1 to December 10. We know there were many more. We also have copies of two letters to Reg from his father, dated August 27 and 28.

Reg obviously thrived on correspondence and newspapers from Canada. On May 1, he cites no less than thirteen letters he'd received over a four-week period from parents and family. And there were the parcels. His father, in one of his letters, provides a checklist of the contents. Remember, he was a wholesale grocer! The manifest included tins of milk, beefsteak and onions, veal loaf, condensed coffee, pork and beans, soda biscuits, Vienna sausage, raisins, spaghetti, spearmint gum, cocoa, dates and strawberry jam—even lobsters on occasion.

Photographs from home were especially prized: “I have got quite a collection now...and they are one of my most valued possessions.”

Reg reiterates constraints on what he reports: “There is much doing around here, dears, but of course I cannot give you any news. The main thing is for you not to worry.”

Subsequent to Reg receiving his permanent assignment, the Eighth Army Brigade headed by a Captain McKee, his address became:

#341914, Gunner R.W. Beckett
8th Army Brigade Ammunition Column
Canadian Field Artillery, B.E.F., France

While it was no doubt good to be out of the “comical brigade,” transfer to the Royal Flying Corps (R.F.C.), was never far from Reg’s mind and ambitions. By August, we see efforts underway to achieve such transfer. His father outwardly supported the idea, collaborating with a friend named Major Field in Hamilton but, in fact, may have been quietly impeding the process.

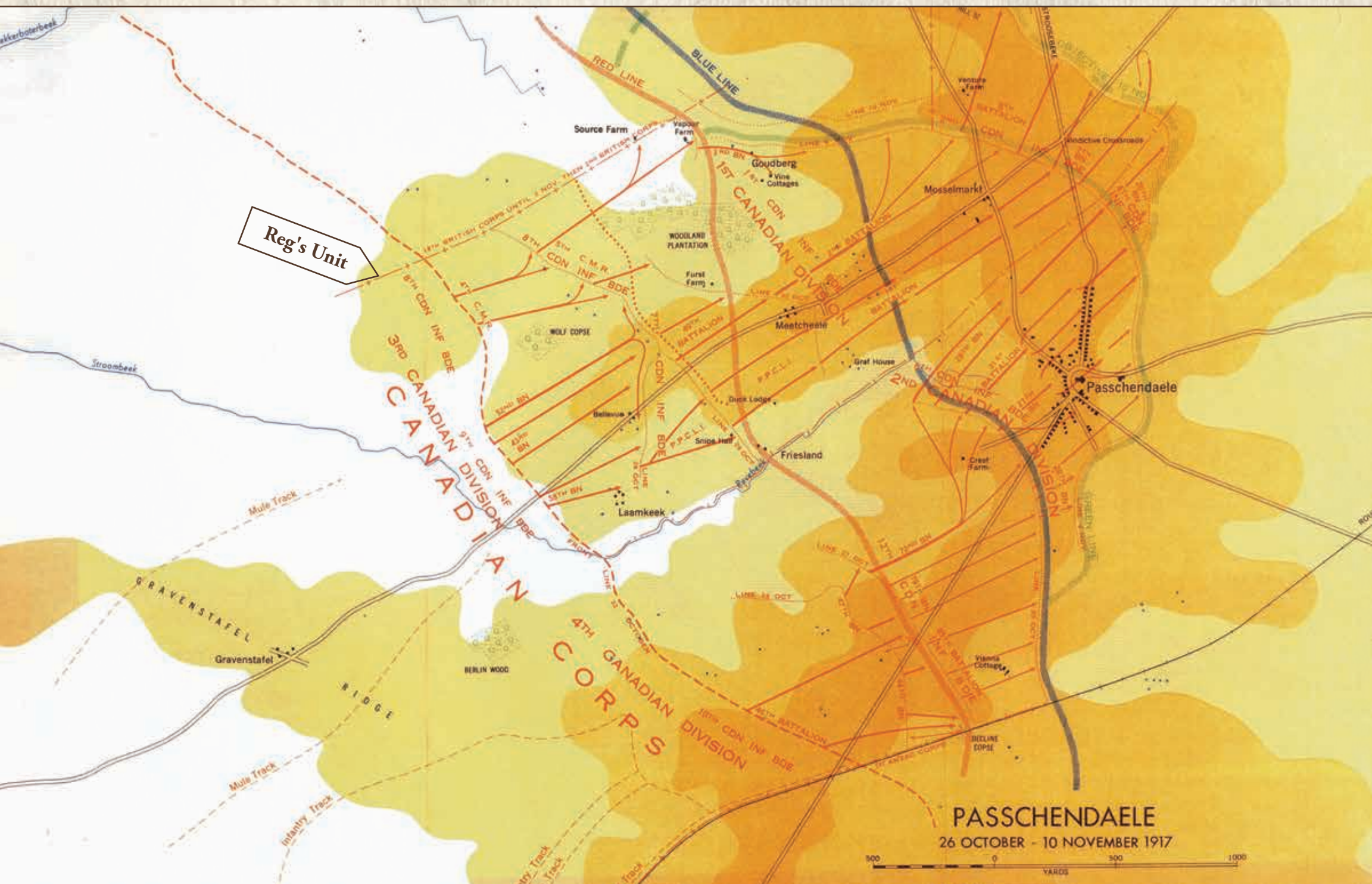
In one of Reg's next letters he remembers his father's upcoming birthday on December 12 and says how much he would love to be with him "to shake you by the hand." Yet, in the same breath, he notes: "this is the only place for us to be at such a critical time, and even now that I have been here since March and away from home for over a year, I really feel ashamed that I was not one of the first. But at least I did not wait for conscription, and no one will ever be able to say that the Beckett family did not do their part, for there was not an eligible who did not attempt to do their part."

With winter's cold coming, Reg thanks his mother for socks, vest, armlets and helmets. Of the two knitted helmets, Reg wore the larger when it was cold at night, the smaller under his "tin lizzie." He asks for his "British warm" that he left in his bedroom cupboard. The British warm he describes as "a short coat worn by soldiers instead of a greatcoat and in the artillery are issued instead of greatcoats, because they are better for riding, and do not catch the mud the same way." Later he received, and was so very grateful for, rubber boots and a raincoat—"two articles that give more comfort than anything else," and later still, Palmer boots—better than any boots available in the army.

In another letter, Reg explains what feeling "jake" means—"that you are feeling so good, and so strong that you feel as though you could clean up about a division of Fritzies in about five minutes, or just as a little appetizer before breakfast. And that is just the way I feel now."

In the final letter of the year, dated December 10, he returns to his desire to be an aviator, noting, "I feel that I could be of more service in that than here for the reason that the country is calling more aviators and at any stage in the game, an aviator is of more value and service to his country than one man in any other branch of the service. And then again, this war is not yet over, and I think its ultimate conclusion will be due a great deal to the Allies mastery of the air."

Reg reiterates constraints on what he reports: "There is much doing around here, dears, but of course I cannot give you any news. The main thing is for you not to worry."



Courtesy DND Directorate of History and Heritage,
and In the Footsteps of the Canadian Corps

CHAPTER 9

1918 – Through April



General Arthur W. Currie

By the end of 1918 the four-year war would be over. This was not apparent during the first half of the year, though Reg, perhaps prophetically, said in April that he anticipated “the Germans will be yielding to superior British troops by year end.” Later, in June, he was less optimistic, saying he expected the war to be over the following spring.

Reg was granted a two-week leave to Paris in February 1918—no doubt welcome, following Passchendaele, and now feasible because of relative quiet for at least some of the Canadian forces.

Beginning in March, letters came more frequently—twelve through the end of July. Some of these, in March and April, are more detailed. I would shortchange you, dear reader, to not pass along some of Reg’s descriptions of activity from this period.

For context, during the first half of 1918 the Canadian Corps, stationed around Lens in France, was relatively disengaged as a unit. Not that overall fighting for the Allies had subsided. Russia had bowed out of its battles on the Eastern Front by late 1917, the result of its internal revolution by the Bolsheviks. This enabled the Germans to redeploy to the west many of the divisions no longer needed in the east.

The French army faced serious mutinies within their ranks, mainly due to excessive offensive action along their front, especially at Verdun. They needed to recover and reorganize. (British forces minimized this problem by employing more systematic rotation of their soldiers to the front.)

The Canadian command had its own difficulties, as the British were quite willing to detach Canadian infantry divisions from the Canadian Corps to reinforce beleaguered British formations. Canadian Corps commander Gen. Currie pushed back against this denuding of its troops, arguing that his Corps would fight best as a unified entity. Eventually, with the influence of Canadian government representatives in the U.K., the Corps was reunited by May—all four divisions, 100,000 strong—the same as a year earlier. Still, from March through July, Canadians suffered nearly 9,000 casualties.

Reg's letters during this period assure nothing is mundane in a war zone, but he does remind his parents there are such basics as washing clothes, a process that wasn't helped by France's poor mid-March weather. Dad provides this whimsical insight: "The weather lately has been rather miserable and I will be glad to see the sun again. I have been trying to dry a little washing out for about a week and it is just as wet now as when I started. Have got to dry it outside because at present we are living in an old Fritz dugout, about thirty or forty feet under the surface of mother earth, and such a place is no place to dry out clothes!"

The letter concludes with a flurry of greetings—"to all the boys, sister, little Edith, Nannie, Uncle Bill, Uncle Walter, Grandmother Moore, Aunt Jessie"...and finally, an oft-repeated special best-of-love greeting to "the dearest little mother and father in all the world."¹

In April, Reg notes he's attached to headquarters for brigade work, "still in the runner's job." He describes this assignment as circulating messages by foot to "all the batteries and the British Artillery Column," a round-trip from headquarters and back of some twenty-five to thirty kilometers. But the route wasn't intended to be on foot! Rather, he is "dismounted through necessity." He expects he will soon have his "moke" (donkey) back again. (I recall Dad would occasionally use the term "shanks' ponies"—quite descriptive of the use here of soldier legs, not pony legs.)

Perhaps with a little more time to write home, Reg, still unflinching in his commitment to being in the Canadian Infantry, comments on the war scene and the futility of what he was encountering. From April 4, 1918:

- ◇ "I think that Fritz has found us a pretty hard nut to crack, and although we have of course had casualties, these were inevitable. I would hate to think of the hell that he went through before he ever captured any ground from the British...and [where that occurred] it was when our guns and machine guns were so hot that they could not fire any more."

¹"Nannie" is likely his Grandmother Champ; Bill and Walter were Champs, brothers to Reg's mother, Edith; Grandmother Moore was Reg's grandfather Charles's wife who married George H. Moore after Charles died in his mid-30s; Jessie was the wife of Walter Champ.

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ing clothes, a process
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*Courtesy of In the Footsteps of the Canadian Corps,
Soldiers walking across the crater-ridden battlefield at
Passchendaele. (NAC, PA-002367)*

- ◇ He viewed the ground they'd contested as valueless, yet "it has been the scene of some of the greatest battles the world has ever seen, and all during the last three or four years." He says, you can "picture such a piece of country honeycombed with trenches, and dug-outs, shell holes, and huge mine craters so big some of them that when you look down you think, 'well, that's one way of getting to China in a hurry.'"
- ◇ A soldier, when not in the heat of battle, has a chance to reflect: "Where there was once a beautiful little forest, with perhaps a little stream running through it, you will most likely see now, perhaps, half a dozen or a dozen trunks of trees left, with the ragged stumps of the limbs lost, and in the locality where there was once the little stream, there most likely you will find plenty of shell holes with water in them."
- ◇ "If you knew that part of the country before the war, and you were acquainted or knew of a little town with its little church and school house, it would be practically impossible for you to locate either. I give you my word that it is quite possible to pass through a village and not know it, for all that remains is a few stones or bricks."
- ◇ He felt a sense of futility at the devastation: "It is after seeing such a country as this that you ask if it is possible that God could allow such a thing, or if this is really and truly part of a once-civilized country."
- ◇ And in trying to understand the German's intransigence: "Fritz has had to make a showing to his people, and he has done this at a huge sacrifice of life. He has more objectives that he has failed to obtain than he has obtained. To camouflage his defeat before the eyes of his people he has been shipping thousands upon thousands of his wounded (away from the front) to Belgium."
- ◇ He concludes, "I think that ere long he will throw down his last card, which will be his navy. The Kaiser has spent millions on his navy and you can depend on it that all that is not for nothing. (Already, perhaps in desperation) he has taken a great many of his long range guns off his ships."

In late April, sensing his parents' concerns about the reports they are getting, Reg urges them, as he has before, not to worry, "for two very important reasons—one being that there is absolutely nothing to worry about, and the other because life is far too short to worry about anything which you cannot help and is unavoidable." He then describes the fury of the enemy (and I wonder if this helped his parents to not worry!): "...His infantry coming over in wave after wave in close formation, in some places sixteen or seventeen waves." In counter, he describes the Allied guns, "ranging in size from our eighteen pounders and the French 'seventy-fives' up to the immense naval guns of twelve to fifteen inch caliber—in addition to thousands of machine gun bullets, then airplanes dropping bombs and sweeping and mowing down the German troops with their machine gun fire."

In contrast to the German army, assessed by Reg as dwindling, exhausted and "fed-up," he describes Allied troops as "still comparatively fresh...with reinforcements pouring in all the time." He asks, "Can German and Austrian troops be classed for one moment with ours? No, absolutely. And I think that before the year is out he will have that more firmly impressed on him than ever."

You will smile at the close of one April letter: "Now, my dear parents, for the present must say Au Revoir, or 'Olive Oil' as I have often heard it pronounced."

"P.S. Am feeling fine. Don't work too hard, Dad."

*"If you knew that
part of the country
before the war, and
you were acquainted
or knew of a little
town with its
little church and
school house, it
would be practically
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locate either."*

CHAPTER 10

1918 – May through July



Courtesy of The Great War: The Persuasive Power of Photography. James Francis "Frank" Hurly, Western Front.

While not all was quiet on the Western Front for the Canadians, the troops were able to hold secure the area around Lens with minimal direct action. By May, all four divisions were reunited, about 100,000 strong, and the Corps was relieved from its positions near Lens and moved to a reserve position until July. Gratefully for us, this reduced casualties and afforded some extra time for letters. Other than the letters Reg wrote to his parents, we have only a few to Harold, seven years his senior, and with whom Dad seemed to have a particularly close relationship.

In one, dated May 11, he comments to Harold on the war being in the eighth inning of the World Series and that it seemed to him, "Old Heine is trying to run up a score the Allies will not be able to beat in the ninth," but "we will give the old son-of-a-gun a run for his money yet." Continuing the metaphor, he writes, "The only thing that worries us very much is that in the ninth inning we will all be moving so fast we will have to sleep in a different place every night, but anyway it will likely be nice and warm then and we will be able to have a swim in the Rhine (over the German border) on the evening of the fifth day after we start. Take it from me, old socks, we have got Fritzie beaten to a frazzle."

Then, uncharacteristically, a poetic stream comes forth, as Reg ponders how much he will miss the annual Algonquin Park outing with his brothers.

*O, how I long for the feel of a paddle again,
The sound of the ripples as they gently splash 'gainst the side of our canoe,
The splash of a trout, or a big black bass,
The little camp 'most hidden away—the sizzle of bacon too.
Back to nature, when there's naught to break one's sleep—
The sound of the guns, or an S.O.S., or a duty to be done right away.
And nature's not marred by the hell of those guns, the havoc of modern war,
But God's own land, and the Peace that He grants
To a country we call our own.
At night, when all seems still, the scratch of a mouse*



Jack and K.C.

*Or the bark of a wolf, the hoot of an owl to its mate.
The beautiful sun, as it tops o'er the trees
And smiles on a day just begun—a day we can call our own.
But there's work to be done—we're to beat the damned Hun
Until the vict'ry's won, 'tis but our only thought
Of the battles unfought, and the fight that is yet to come.
But we'll see it thru, if the world'll wake up
And send us munitions and men, the goods to see us thru,
And after that, when the battle's fought, the boys'll be home again.*

A few days later, Dad relays another endearing episode, this involving a little dog he named Spot. Spot had been with Dad nearly all the time during this period. After moving to six different dugouts, the troops were living in the cellar of an old house—the house gone but the cellar intact. Here, we learn that “poor old Spot” and Dad had become separated. Spot was likely out hunting rats during one of the moves from dugout to dugout, and when he returned “home” he found the place vacated. “I missed him a lot, though, for a while. That is the trouble with having a dog...in case of a hurried move he is liable to be left behind.”

Reg was careful to avoid passing along the difficulties he witnessed—no doubt the newspapers of the time conveyed much in graphic detail—but he was stirred to relay this incident: “I very seldom touch on the tragedy of war because I hate to do so, but I do not think there is any harm in telling you that I saw a shell land in an old French house the other day, some distance behind the line, which killed one old French woman about 89 years old who had, they say, 46 grandchildren, so she has certainly done her part in the world.”

Reg mentions, for the first time in his letters, this in early June, a particular battlefield well away from where the Eighth Brigade was stationed: “Old Heine has started his new offensive in the Aisne front again.” This area was at the southerly end of the Western Front, and in the March-July timeframe the Allied front line was pushed back, as much as twenty-five miles below the Aisne River. But significant hope lay in a new development. “I expect that

*“I missed him a lot,
though, for a while.
That is the trouble
with having a dog...
in case of a hurried
move he is liable to
be left behind.”*

the U.S. have quite a bunch of troops over here now. No doubt soon the world will witness a real battle.” Within a few weeks, Reg’s estimate of U.S. involvement was further quantified: “There are over half a million U.S. troops now on the line and they are coming over steadily at a rate of about a quarter of a million per month.” For the U.S., as mentioned earlier, the sinking of the *Lusitania* off the coast of Ireland in May 1915 was the final straw in Germany’s provocations, and mobilization began shortly after. Once committed, the involvement and impact were profound.

Dad speculates that the Germans were avoiding confrontation with the Canadians. “Old Heine has not come up against the Canadians as a whole yet in his advances, i.e., in his largest attacks. He seems to fight shy of the Canadians for some reason or other, although we all wish that we could be in the thickest of it all.” Yet there was no shortage of taunts, such as, “It has taken a hell of a lot of boats to bring us all over, but that when he is through with us what is left will be able to go home in a rowboat.” Reg assured his parents that “the enemy had not begun to fulfill that statement yet.”

Never far from warm thoughts about his return, he anticipates time around the breakfast table at Charlton Avenue, the repast prepared by Lizzie, the cook, and served by Nellie (Geer): “It will certainly be home when I can sit down to a table with a tablecloth on it and be able to say, ‘Encore porridge, Nellie,’ or ‘Encore toast, S’il vous plait’ and Nellie will look at me with a very incredulous look on her face and then she will smile and say, ‘My, Mr. Reggie but you did contract an awful appetite out there, didn’t you?’ And then the dearest dad in all the world will come down and the first thing he will say will be, ‘Good morning Nellie, New York Times come yet?’ ‘Yes, Mr. Beckett, will you have eggs for breakfast or just bacon?’ O, I see it all so plainly and yet we have but to live in hope.”

At times, Dad wonders what he will do when he returns. To Harold, he says, “I guess I will be much too old to take up my studies again.” Then to his parents: “I do not think that after three or four years of open air life I could ever settle down to school life again—at any rate, I guess I would be much too old and too backward in my studies.” But a month later, in

regard to his “Après la guerre,” he is much more willing to challenge himself and his future: “I have always fancied I would love to be an engineer of some description, to be able to do great and wonderful things, big things.” Keeping his mind sharp had become a major motivation in his passion to join the flying corps. “At least I will be learning something, and my think-tank will not be steadily growing stagnant just for want of a little exercise. I think it is a pretty safe wager that for every year a man puts in out here...where their brain is not in the least overtaxed, he is not only put back in that year in his life, but anywhere from six to twelve months in addition.”

By the end of July, Reg senses the war effort is about to move into high gear, but he is still in his runner’s position, which is growing old. “When you have to walk 25 or 30 kilometers a day, and perhaps more, it is no joke, and I have been doing that now for seven months, a great deal longer than any of the other runners have ever stuck it out.” He then asks for a pair of Palmer boots and a slicker for the wet and cold weather that he anticipates over the coming months.

CHAPTER 11

The Hundred Days Begins: Amiens

The stirrings Reg referred to at the end of July were actually the beginnings of major counteroffensives, coordinated under the new supreme commander, the French Marechal Ferdinand Foch. The Canadian Corps received orders to move to the area of Amiens in the first week of August. Amiens is an area along the Somme River and was toward the most westerly portion of the Front.

An account of the undertaking is well described in the valuable resource, *In the Footsteps of the Canadian Corps*, published in 2006 (now out of print), which Wendy and I obtained during our visit to Vimy.

This (deployment of the Canadian Corps to the area of Amiens) was done with utmost secrecy under the cover of both darkness and an elaborate deception plan that indicated the Canadians would be employed (well north) in the Ypres area. By now German intelligence had learned to watch Canadian activities closely. They were able to detect only the disappearance of the Corps from their front and not an exact new destination. Two battalions of infantry plus medical and signal

units were sent north to the Mount Kemmel area south of Ypres. Their mission was to be obvious and mislead the enemy about the actual destination of the Corps. The ruse was partly successful but, more to the point, it was an indication of the interest generated among enemy intelligence wherever the Canadians went.

The actual battle, the Battle of Amiens, commenced at 3:40 a.m. on a moonless night on August 8, and concluded ten days later. The weather was favorable, with some mist lingering in the low areas. The Eighth Brigade, Third Canadian Division, was stationed at the southern flank of the Canadian Corps, about mid-point along the deployment of troops.

We have letters that bookend this very significant battle, dated August 5, just before it began, and August 18, the day it ended. It is fascinating to link Reg's commentary, now somewhat freer with regard to military activity, with what we know from historical accounts of the actual battle and its results.

From Reg to his parents, August 5, 1918:

As you may no doubt guess we were called rather suddenly. You will have some idea of how busy we have been when I tell you that it was three days before most of us could either wash or shave and of course we are still on the go. I am mighty glad I am back with the boys now (vs. the runners position attached to the divisional headquarters), for I stand a better chance of seeing a little fun. According to present indications the swim in the Rhine that I told you we all expected to have soon, may come sooner than you expect. Am feeling fine, though, in every way, and am certainly glad I am here now.



Courtesy of The Great War: The Persuasive Power of Photography. William Ivor Castle, Canadian Troops Loading Ammunition.

The battle:

Three Canadian divisions moved south-east in a line abreast formation. The leading divisions...each had 42 tanks in support. Infantry often preceded them across obstacles and a number (of tanks) were lost due to mechanical or mobility problems in the marshy ground in intervening river valleys, particularly on the south flank in the Third Division area (where Reg was).

Canadian infantry often overran German units in their dugouts, so violent was the artillery preparation and so rapid the infantry advance. By the end of the first day, and for a cost of less than 4000 casualties, the Canadian Corps advanced eight miles. The Australians on the northern flank advanced seven. Other French and British formations moved between two and five miles ahead. German units had a stunning 27,000 casualties.

From Reg to his parents, August 18, at the close of the battle:

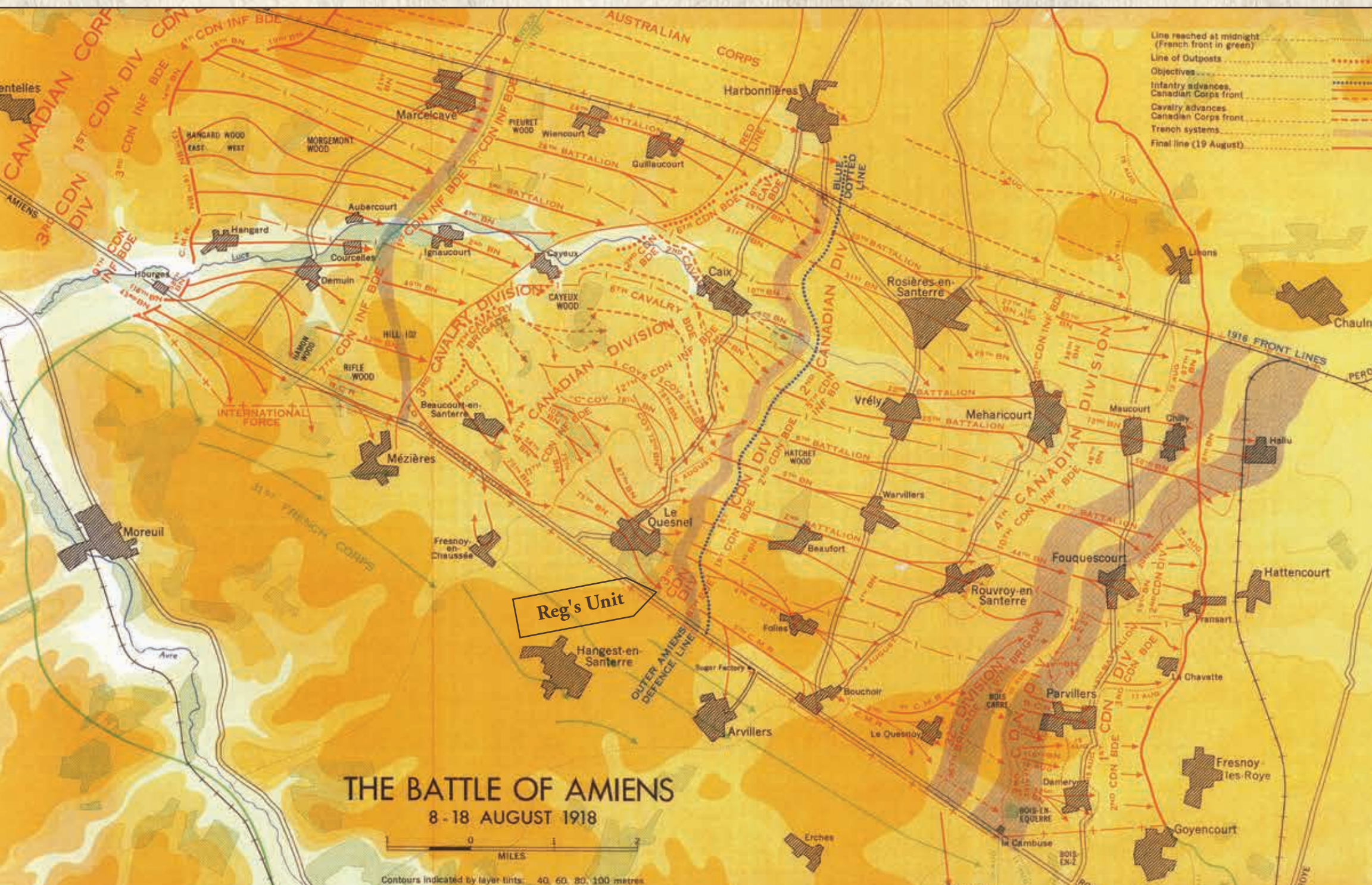
Since writing you last, as you know great things have been happening out here. Heine has again had a little demonstration of how we can do things when we like. Rest assured my dear parents although I have been through a lot I am still feeling better than ever.

I have seen many very gruesome sights in the last advance of course, but I think that when all is said we have had very, very light casualties in proportion to the size of the battle. The wonderful advance which we made, and also Heine's casualties, both in killed, wounded and prisoners. We certainly took an awful mob of prisoners but I think they were all pretty glad to be out of it.

As you will no doubt have seen by the papers, the French were on our right and the Australians on our left, which

I think made a pretty good combination. In a small little town on our right, which the French captured, they took quite a number of German prisoners. A French infantryman was telling me that when Heine found that they were surrounded they all threw up their hands and yelled, "Merci, comrade, Vive la Republique Allemande, vive la Republique Allemande," so I guess there is quite a feeling under the surface in the German army.

We would understand from these prisoners that they were not in favor of a Germany under the rule of Kaiser Wilhelm II but, rather, as a free German Republic.



Courtesy DND Directorate of History and Heritage,
 and In the Footsteps of the Canadian Corps



Painting of German P.O.W.'s titled "Aftermath" August 8, 1918, Battle of Amiens by Will Longstaff.

The battle:

German General Eric Ludendorff described August 8 as the "Black Day" of the German army. His recommendation two days later to the Kaiser was to commence negotiations for peace. On August 9, the Fourth Canadian Division was committed to battle to overcome resistance that was stiffening. A lull fell over the fighting on August 12 and further operations in the next week were minor by comparison, mostly to establish a new front line by August 19.

The final tally was impressive. The Canadian Corps had met and bettered 15 German divisions. Penetration into enemy territory encompassed a depth of 14 miles on a front of just under six miles. More than 9,000 prisoners had been taken along with guns and mortars. The Canadians had sustained 11,822 casualties. "The Hundred Days" refers to the period between August 8 and the armistice on November 11. The Battle of Amiens, August 8-18, 1918 was the beginning of the end.

I trust you find it fascinating, as I do, to compare the account of war historians nearly one hundred years after a battle is fought, with all the advantage of resources available to them, to the account of a soldier whose knowledge was limited to on-the-ground action immediately around him.

Reg to his parents, August 18, continuing:

Two or three of my friends have been wounded, some slightly, some seriously, but, all told, the B.A.C. (Brigade Ammunition Column) has been remarkably lucky so far. The weather since the first day of the drive has been perfect, not too hot, but sunny and warm, with the result that we have been able to get roads through and everything has gone like clockwork, no confusion or excitement as one might expect.



Canadian Troops Celebrating Victory at Amiens – 1918

Reg refers to his mother's letter of July 15:

You seem, dear, to worry a great deal about me. I would not worry too much dear, for it really does not pay. As I have said before I worry far more about the dear ones at home worrying about me than I ever worry about myself.

You would be surprised dear, to know how really hardened we all are now to the various conditions of the weather and different modes of living. I can remember a time when if most of us were to go for a little while only with wet feet we would most assuredly have a bad cold afterwards. Or, if we were soaked to the skin and had damp blankets to sleep in we would probably have worse than a cold. But a soldier becomes enured to all these hardships, to the rain, the cold and the sun, and although he may growl and grouse, which after all is a soldier's only privilege, he will get there just the same, and that is the main thing. Of course, as usual, the spirit of the troops, during this drive, has been wonderful and everyone has done his duty to the best of his ability.

Reg concludes his August 18 letter at the close of the Amiens offensive thanking his father for the very welcome cigarettes he would send, usually a few packs in every parcel. I barely recall my father smoking, primarily because he quit, cold turkey, in the early fifties as concerns surfaced about tobacco's impact on health. He began smoking during the war, I remember him telling me, because it was a way to mask the stench of death he so often encountered around him. His father smoked, and the rapport around favorite brands became a topic of conversation in the letters—maybe a way of calming nerves at home! To his father: "Do you still smoke Tuckett's Special yourself dear? They are sure some cigarettes." Even his mother, ever imagining the reunion, spoke of the day when father and his four eldest boys would sit together and "have a smoke and a chat." And all hoped it would be very, very soon.

"I would not worry too much dear, for it really does not pay. As I have said before I worry far more about the dear ones at home worrying about me than I ever worry about myself."

CHAPTER 12

Amiens to Cambrai

On August 19, 1918, the day after the successful Battle of Amiens, Reg Beckett celebrated his twenty-first birthday—his third while in the army, “although,” he said, “it seems as though it was about my 50th.” But the Canadians were now fully engaged, with little rest before the next battle.

From *In the Footsteps*:

Events began to move quickly for the Canadian Corps as the Allies continued to press the German army. By the last week in August...the Corps received orders to attack along the Arras-Cambrai road, another old straight Roman road. The official history calls this the Battle of Arras, but it is commonly known as the fight for the Drocourt-Queant Switch, so named for the change in angle of the orientation of the German defense lines.

From Reg’s perspective, “We have again been hard at the game trying to pound a little sense into Heine’s square head.” And from a September 9 letter, “You will no doubt have received news of the work the Canadians have been doing lately. It is just a little over a month now since we went into the Amiens push, only to pull out of

that scrap into another. I have quite a few souvenirs of both battles, which I will send home soon.”

What Reg termed another scrap was actually a major offensive. Historians tell us the Drocourt-Queant Switch was one of the pivotal enemy positions on the Western Front. “With a combination of heavy artillery preparation and simultaneous maneuvering of battalions, the Second and Third Canadian Divisions (including Reg’s Eighth Battalion) pushed off on August 26 along each side of the highway. The Corps practiced what was now quickly becoming the Canadian (and also Allied) way of war—to seize limited and attainable objectives rather than conduct massive offensives across the whole front.”

Further from Reg’s assessment following this most recent battle: “The war news certainly looks very encouraging and I know from what personal contact I have had with the Fritzies that they have lost all morale and courage. They are absolutely fed up with the war, they know they are beaten and it is no use of them sacrificing their lives for a useless cause, for we have got them beat to a frazzle.”

A principal way in which Reg gauged the war effort was from conversations with German prisoners.

I was talking with one Fritzie prisoner whom we took in the last push who used to live in Milwaukee. He belonged to the Prussian Guards and had been in the army for four years. I asked him if he had any idea how many Americans were in France now. He said that their officers told them there were not more than 50,000, then added, “I read the English newspapers and I know that is not true.” On inquiring as to where he got the English newspapers, he replied, “Oh, they come over—airplanes—drop—just the same bombs. Lots bombs,” he said shuddering, so I guess our superior air service is beginning to tell.

The prisoner continued, saying he would typically be granted a week's leave every six months, but then related he would rather be taken captive by the Allies. His officers told the troops that if taken, they would be killed right away. "But of course," the prisoner added, "I know different. I know the British, and the Canadians and Americans would not do that. I have been in America and I know the people."

"So you see, dears," Reg concludes, "how low the morale of the German soldier is, and things are rapidly coming to a climax over here now, so that the end is plainly in view."

By mid-September Reg notes that his unit has been in reserve for a short time, apparently to the south of the earlier battle at Amiens—"The first our brigade has been out since last Christmas, (but all the same) we have been as busy as bees." Not that the accommodations were anything to write home about—but he did: "We are living the open life now—that is, we are living in a hole in the ground covered by a small tarpaulin with about five holes to every square inch."

Reg makes the point that his ear isn't bothering him further and assures his parents there is nothing to worry about. But we know shells that exploded near him left at least some damage or possibly exacerbated an earlier condition. I recall from evening walks he and I took in our Elyria neighborhood that Dad would always have me walk on his right side where his hearing was better.

During this period Reg wrote his brother Harold, whom he described elsewhere as "one of the finest boys anyone could meet any place." Harold had apparently expressed his regret that he wasn't with Reg on the front, to which Reg replied with a frankness that we generally don't see with his parents, "I am glad your physical condition made it unable for you to come over, one is enough, for this is a hell of a war and one cannot help being pretty well fed up at times, but there is only one side to look at, and that is the bright side of everything."



*Courtesy of The Illustrated History of World War I.
British troops ready their weapons for advance
during the Battle of Cambrai.*

By September 27, the Eighth Battalion was once again in the thick of battle. This offensive was termed the “Canal du Nord and Cambrai.” From *In the Footsteps*: “Strong trench positions, barbed wire and machine guns covered every inch of territory over which the Canadian troops would have to traverse to move further east.” In spite of the resistance, by October 11, Cambrai was captured but at great cost. The Canadians, since August 22, had sustained great losses: more than 31,000 killed, wounded and missing in action. In return, the Germans had suffered the defeat of about thirty divisions, and some 18,000 had been taken prisoner.

It stretches our imagination to picture the complexity of moving several divisions into and forward in a WWI battle. Reg helps his parents understand some of the logistical challenges, emphasizing the role weather plays:

Old Foch (Allied Commander) seems to know just when to make his drives, for every big scrap that we have been in since August 8th we have had good

weather. Of course you can understand why good weather is so absolutely necessary for a big advance. New roads have to be built, the guns have to be taken up, railroads made, and if you could see the endless line of ammunition wagons and supply lorries moving forward, you would then realize how necessary it is to have favorable weather for the cross-country and roads, so that ammunition can be supplied to the guns with ammunition limbers (two-wheeled, horse-drawn vehicles used to tow a field gun), for otherwise they would have to be packed (by horses or mules).

Noting the pounding the enemy is taking, Reg comments that they can tell by the country they have just captured that “Heine has had no picnic—guns out of action, direct hits on dugouts, and all kinds of dead Huns.” Yet they are never far from the enemy’s taunts:

Just a few days before our attack he sent over some propaganda in which he said, “Is it you or your government that does not want peace? If it is you we

are waiting for you on the Hindenburg Line, which is impregnable. You cannot break through. Why sacrifice your life?” Our answer was that we would put him out of there so fast that he would think he had never been there at all, and, well, you know the result.

Reg’s early October letter closes by saying that apart from what was happening on his particular front, they hear very little news, mostly vague rumors, but he believed it was increasingly clear that they were closer than ever to the wind-up.

As we now know, that indeed would be the case—just a month hence.

CHAPTER 13

The Final Push to Peace

Reg's final letter before the armistice is dated October 12. Historians tell us that on the previous day, October 11, the Canadian Corps was relieved, coming out of the line. One can almost sense the growing relief, even levity, as the pressure is temporarily lifted and the end is more clearly in sight. He refers to a belt that he would be sending to his father, one that we have in his memorabilia.

I was with a party not far behind the infantry, in what was "No man's Land," and that is how I was fortunate enough to get this belt. It was worn by one of the Prussian Guards, and as they are not issued to them any more, they are eagerly sought after by all the boys. The motto on the buckle, "Gott mit uns," ("God with us") recalls a rather amusing incident which I saw a while ago. Fritz put up a sign which could be seen by our boys, which read "Gott Mit Uns." One of our boys, not to be outdone, put up a sign that Fritz could see, which read, "We got mittens too, so you've got nothing on us Heine." A great percentage of the German soldiers can both read and talk English so I guess they had no trouble to interpret this."

Dad continues his humorous observations, telling of a sign at the main crossroads in a town they had recently captured. The sign pointed to the road one would take to the front with the words: "Zur front....." This had been changed by one of the boys to "This wa-Zur front..."

As to the accommodations, Reg is, for the moment, upgraded: "At the present time we are living in an old French house, which Fritz quite recently occupied. It has not been hit direct by a shell, but most of the tiles are off the roof on account of the concussion, but nevertheless we have established ourselves very comfortably and it is quite a pleasant change from sleeping in a hole in the ground with a bit of leaky tarpaulin overhead." He adds that although he is surrounded on this advance by much damage from shells, "we do not shell a town unless it is absolutely necessary."



German belt buckle – mailed home by Reg



Reg Beckett's next letter home would be written from Nimy on that very special day in history—the day the whole world had been praying and hoping would arrive soon.

It was written November 11, 1918.

As the Allied troops advanced, the German front went quiet, and it soon became clear a general withdrawal was underway. The advance from Cambrai to Mons, begun October 12, involved a new, open kind of warfare, starkly in contrast to the previous static trench warfare.

From *In the Footsteps*:

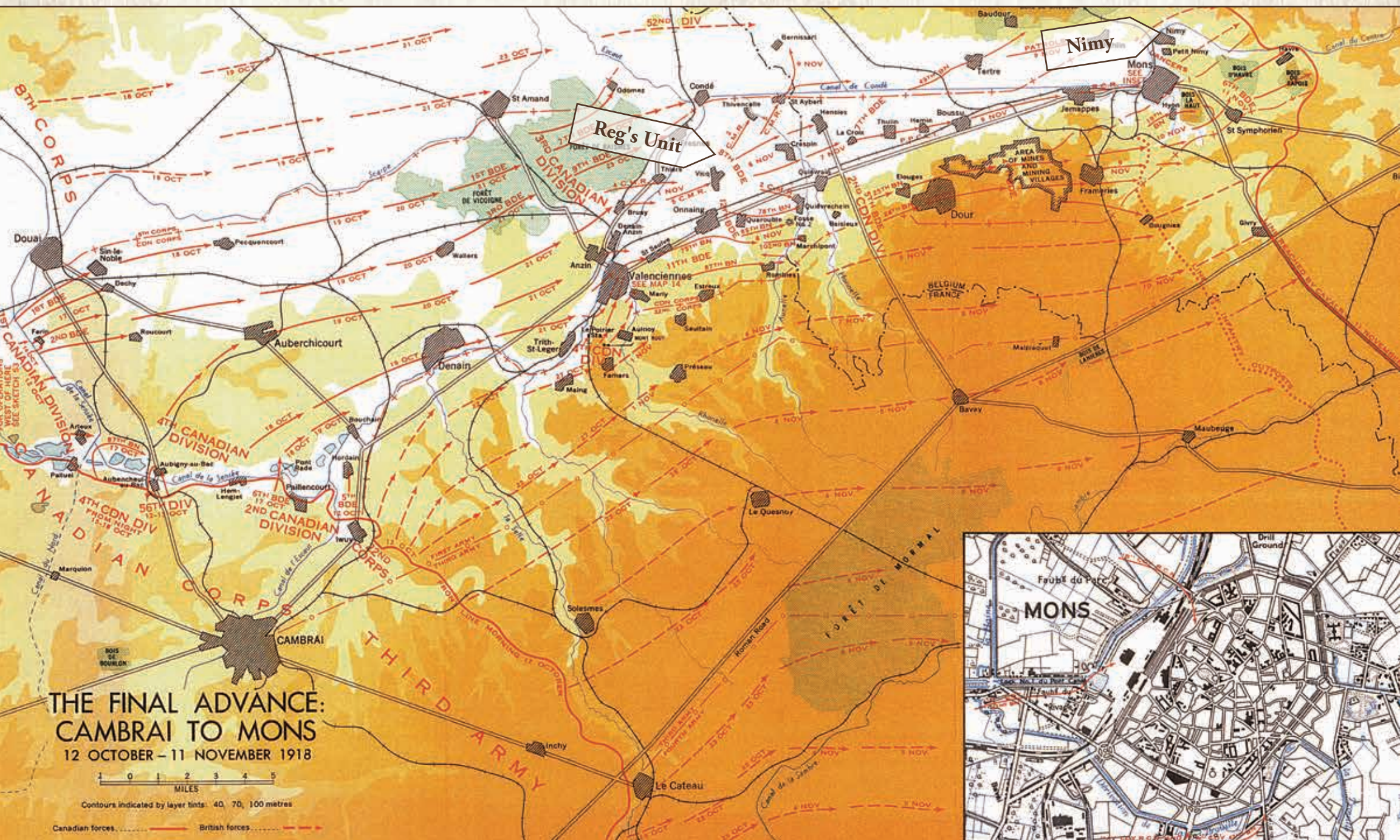
As more and more Allied troops pushed the Germans back, the front began to narrow and the Canadian Corps' next mission became defined. By October 22, forward troops were at the St. Amand-Valenciennes road. It was obvious that the town of Valenciennes and the large forested area to its north would be the next attack objectives. The Third Division assumed the vanguard of the Corps from the First Division and cleared the forest, some 7,000 yards of wooded area by October 23.

We know from a war map that the Third Canadian Division's Eighth Brigade was east of Valenciennes in the town of Vicq by November 6. Though they moved quickly, they had significant challenges.

From war historians:

Roads were cratered, bridges demolished and booby-traps and mines were planted by the retreating troops. In some places, various units carried out a very credible defense from strong positions. The towns of Vicq and Quaroube, among others, posed serious obstacles to the Canadian battalions pushing forward. By November 7, the Canadian Corps had passed into Belgium and continued on either side of the main Cambrai road toward Mons. Throughout November 10 and into the night, the closer the Canadians got to Mons, the more intense became the reply for forward movement or probing patrols from German defenders. But by dawn on November 11, the city was generally in Canadian hands.

Nimy is a suburb in the near north of Mons, Belgium. With irony that war can bring, it was near Mons that the war began in August, 1914. Reg Beckett's next letter home would be written from Nimy on that very special day in history—the day the whole world had been praying and hoping would arrive soon. It was written November 11, 1918.



Courtesy DND Directorate of History and Heritage,
and In the Footsteps of the Canadian Corps

CHAPTER 14

Armistice and Home



Celebration in Paris



*Courtesy of In the Footsteps of the Canadian Corps,
November 11th celebration in Mons.
(CWM, CEF Album 5, 3618)*

On November 11, 1918, silence descended on the battlefield as the guns stopped for the first time in four years. Historians record that the general mood of the troops was one of weary reflection, a distinct contrast to the celebrations that sent crowds spilling into the streets in cities farther behind the lines and throughout much of the world.

Reg writes home from Nimy, near Mons, Belgium, on that welcome day, confirming the general mood among the troops.

The news today seems almost too good to be true, but hostilities ceased at eleven o'clock this morning, and if they do not start again I guess it means we will have peace at last. Oh, dears, it is almost impossible to believe the war is over, but I expect we will know positively within a day or so. It will take about a week of inactivity before we are convinced that we have cleaned Heine up sufficiently for him to accept the terms of the armistice.

Later, on receiving a letter from his father written the same day, Reg comments, "I guess it was some old celebration you had at home. I would have liked to have been there too. You would be surprised if you knew how quietly it was accepted by all the soldiers. Of course we were all very happy and glad, but at the same time there were no grand demonstrations."

In contrast to the restraint among the troops, Dad's good friend Barney was on leave in Paris when the war ended. "He says the people there were almost nuts. Of course, the French are a very excitable people anyway, and the armistice was a real excuse for them to go off their beans."

The remaining letters we have from Reg are all from Nimy. At one point he expected he would be heading to Germany, but as it turned out elements of the First and Second Divisions moved toward the Rhine, some 250 miles away, where they would share occupation duties in Germany. The others remained in Belgium into December, not an unhappy alternative for Reg.

The conditions are not so bad now for this life, because we have good billets and sleep in civilian houses, we are in a more civilized country, and the Belgians think the world and all of us. I have not been well for the last few days, my stomach has been giving me a little trouble, but I am feeling better now, so you do not need to worry. I expect it will be some months before we are all home. However, here's hoping.

While the war front was quiet, there was dissatisfaction in the ranks. "The boys have all been raising quite a kick about going to Germany. It is such a tremendous long march. Personally, I cannot see that it is necessary to make the Colonials march all that way there when they have done so much towards ending the war as fast as possible."

We see a near complete absence of complaint from Reg throughout his war involvement, though he had his frustrations especially in regard to his desire to transfer to the Air Corps. Here, though, he vents a bit about the difficulty he and others have had getting leave. "I have been in France now just 20 months and have had 14 days leave in all that time (Paris in February earlier in the year). Many of the boys are in the same position. There has been considerable trouble in some of the infantry battalions, perhaps you have heard nothing of it, but when we get home again you will hear a few tales that will open your eyes."

In his next package home, Reg encloses a souvenir given to him by a little Belgian girl. This is likely the small broach with a picture of a young girl, the one that we found with Dad's memorabilia and may have been worn on his uniform. He also mailed a box containing, "one Heine gas mask, one Heine belt, one brass spike off a helmet, and one tassel off a French trumpet."



Broach from little Belgian girl

“I have seen quite a bit of scrapping and there have been times, dears, I must confess, when I thought my chances of coming through were pretty slim. I have never tried to sidestep the issue, but somehow I realized that all would be good.”

In the final few letters that we have, Dad becomes reflective of all his family has meant. From November 26:

I have been away from home so long now, and during that time you have done everything that was possible to make my mission in this country as pleasant as possible, and you will never be able to realize how thankful I have been. The latest news is that we are to be here for Christmas. However, nothing is definite. We are just as liable to move off in a day or two as we are to stay here a month.

Later, in a December 2 letter, and the final that we have, Reg reflects further on family and his service.

You have given us all a good start to life, everything that we wanted, and now it is up to us to make good your trust and return at least in part to the best of our ability, all that has been so generously given to us. For my part I will always labor to that end.

I have been away from home now for over two years, but during that time I have not forgotten for one minute what you always did for me. I have seen quite a bit of scrapping and there have been times, dears, I must confess, when I thought my chances of coming through were pretty slim. I have never tried to sidestep the issue, but somehow I realized that all would be good.

Evidently God has heard your prayers and he has granted that I might be one of the fortunate ones to come through unscathed, and so it has been. I have never been sorry for one minute that I enlisted when I did, but rather have kicked myself for not coming out here sooner, for we have been fighting a good cause. We have seen poor France and Belgium, and their poor people, and we have realized what a narrow escape the rest of the world has had.

The following day, December 3, Reg would experience one of many inspections, but this a special one, by King George: “therefore beaucoup cleaning up.” A few days earlier, the King of the Belgians was in Mons, accompanied by the Queen and Prince and his staff. “The Belgians sure do think a lot of their king. Almost everyone was out to see him, the streets were just packed.”

In one of the final packages Reg’s father sent to him, he included a Canadian flag. Reg replied, “Was especially glad to receive the *drapeau* (flag), father dear. I will do as you say, mark the names and date (on the white part of the flag) of the towns we go through from here.”

Of course this is the Canadian Ensign, worn with age and a few moth holes, now mounted and framed. It grows in significance as we understand more of the context surrounding it. The towns and dates are our only indication of the route Dad and his unit took in the final weeks after leaving Mons.

Wavre, December 18
Charleroi, December 31
Boulogne, January 3 (1919)
Calais, January 23
Cöln, January 30
Bruxelles, February 1



It is telling, mapping this route, that there was no shortage of crisscrossing northern Europe in the final weeks. While Wavre, Charleroi and Boulogne were not far from Mons, Calais was well to the west, then Cöln (Cologne) back east into Germany. Bruxelles (Brussels) was likely the final stop before returning to England. (Apart from official war records we have no knowledge of a second leave, but one is noted beginning January 4 for fourteen days).

We don't know if Reg was able to return with a little dog that adopted him.

You will be glad to know that I have another little dog. She is as good as gold, and pretty as a picture, and always by my side, very affectionate, and knowing. All the other soldiers like the dog and she likes the soldiers, but she will not go with them but follows me around everywhere. Yesterday (Dec. 1) a photographer took a photograph of about 25 of us. The dog is in the picture so you will see her. If possible, I am going to bring her home with me as a souvenir of France.

We have this picture, the little dog by Dad's feet. It is dated December 1, 1918, and had it not been for the December 2 letter, we would have never known the story of the little dog.

Reg returned to England March 7, then to Witley Camp, near London, on March 19, for medical assessment. He sailed home from Liverpool to Halifax on the *H.M.T. (His Majesty's Troopship) Northland* on March 27, 1919, arriving April 5. Aboard were 28 officers and 740 men of the Eighth Army Brigade Field Artillery under Colonel J.C. Steward. He was formally discharged on April 8, 1919, in Hamilton.

And finally we know, though the date is uncertain, that a family filled with gratitude was soon to welcome him home. What a reunion that must have been!



GUNNER BECKETT **Arrived Home Last Night After** **Long Service in France**

After an absence overseas for more than three years, (*overseas portion over two years*) Gunner Reg. W. Beckett, third son (*actually fourth*) of H.C. and Mrs. Beckett, 116 Charlton Avenue West, returned to the city late last night, and was greeted with a display of fireworks set off in front of his home. Gunner Beckett enlisted as a sergeant with the 71st battery, and after arrival in France was transferred to the 8th Army Brigade, C.F.A. with which he served continuously until after the armistice was signed. Despite the fact that Reg was in the thick of it for more than two years, he came back to his old hometown without a scratch, and enjoying the best of health. He was with his unit in Mons when hostilities ceased, and later proceeded to Germany with the remainder of the Canadians. His two brothers, Gerald and Harold, also served with the colors for some considerable time, and brought honors home to their patriotic family.

— *Hamilton Spectator*



Troops with Reg and little dog at his feet – far left. Dec. 1, 1918

So Reg began the process of integration into civilian life. He told me once that he couldn't sleep on a mattress at his home for a while—it was too soft—so he slept on the floor beside his bed.

His earlier musings about becoming an engineer someday took form, and he looked toward a program at “Poor School,” as the Department of Engineering at the University of Toronto was termed. He completed his undergraduate studies in Electrical Engineering in three years, graduating in the spring of 1923.

Reg's father was in his late fifties when Reg came home, and passed away two years later on November 28, 1921, at age sixty-one, following an extended and difficult illness, diagnosed in his death report as spleno myelogenous leukemia. Edith, his mother, some four years younger than Henry, succumbed to hypertensive heart disease in Hamilton on August 17, 1936, at age seventy-one. In no small coincidence, her service was conducted by Bishop R.J. Renison, then Rector of St.

Paul's Anglican Church in Toronto and under whom Wendy's father, Rev. Leslie P. Hunt, served as assistant.

Henry C. Beckett took an unusual and endearing step just a few weeks before he passed away. He wrote a handwritten letter to his wife and family with instructions on the envelope, “To be opened after it pleased God to call me home.” His letter begins with words from the Doxology: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.” He continues:

I feel that God in his infinite mercy has forgiven me of my sins of omission and commission and wonderfully poured his blessings upon us. My protracted illness has been a blessing in that it has brought us through prayer nearer to God. My feelings of thankfulness for the manifold blessings which God in his mercy has been pleased to shower upon us all cannot find expression in words.

I can only imagine that Dad, on reading his father's letter, immediately thought back to the hundreds of earlier letters

and parcels he'd received from his father, expressions of love and care, that sustained him during the war years. He would then reflect, with gratitude, that amidst his loss, for his part, he had taken every opportunity to write home, expressing his love “to the dearest little mother and father in all the world.”

Telling this story has been a gift to me. I trust it will be of value to friends, family and future generations. I have always considered it a privilege to be Dad's son. Now I know more fully why. The War Letters have been the key, revealing how perseverance, hope, cheerfulness, honor, devotion and wisdom were forged, amidst great adversity, in the life of young Reg Beckett—
A Canadian Soldier in the Great War.

APPENDIX

The Family Tree

The term “family tree” is aptly named. As with a natural tree, there are many roots and branches. Once into the tree it can resemble a whole forest!

Over the months since this project began, twigs have budded and limbs have spread in a variety of directions. The challenge is where and when to call a halt to the research. My conclusion is to provide herein the basic but somewhat complex lineage of Grandfather and Grandmother Beckett as far back as we are reasonably certain. (A separate, more extensive summary is also available.)

The Beckett line:

Grandfather, Henry Charles (H.C.) Beckett, was born December 12, 1860, in Hamilton, Ontario. He had an older sister, Annie Maria (1859-1939), a younger sister, Harriet Emily (1862-1946) and younger brother, Frederick William, or “Uncle Will” (1864-1953)—the only relative I knew from this generation. In fact, Uncle Will and his wife, Maud “Aunt Maudie” lived in our Elyria home, then in an Elyria apartment, for a while in the 1940s.

Uncle Will, I’ve been told, had a design role with the massive Panama Canal project in the early 1900s. He took a position with General Electric in Schenectady, New York, at a time when the famed engineer Charles Steinmetz was also at the company. (Reg Beckett, following university graduation in May 1923, also moved to Schenectady, worked for G.E., and lived with his Uncle Will and Aunt Maudie.) I have in my possession some of Uncle Will’s small drafting and metalworking tools, stamped FWB, as well as what I believe was his wooden workbench.

Henry’s parents were Charles Beckett and Harriet Emily Gillard, my great-grandparents. Charles was born July 6, 1834, in Cheshire, England. Cheshire is in the north near Manchester. Charles had four siblings, also born in Cheshire: Frederick Garner Beckett (1831-1898), Henry Jr. (1833-1914), Maria Garner (1837-1843), who died as a young girl, and Samuel Allen (1846-1889).



Uncle Will and Aunt Maud – late 1940s



Uncle Will's metalworking tools



F.G. Beckett & Co.



Painting of Beckett Drive by H.N. McEvoy – 1906

Charles and his siblings were the children of Henry Beckett (1802-1884) and Anne Garner (1806-1894), both born in Cheshire. Anne Garner was the daughter of William and Maria Garner and had four siblings: Elizabeth, Samuel, Hannah and Sarah. Henry, who was a cabinetmaker by trade, and Anne, along with two of their children, Charles and Samuel, came to Hamilton via New York, arriving on the ship *Minvesse* on June 21, 1855. Fredrick Garner and Henry Jr. were already in Hamilton.

In 1854, the year prior to the arrival of other family members, F.G. Beckett, likely with the help of his younger brother Henry Jr., founded a manufacturing business in Hamilton, F.G. Beckett & Co. On their arrival, Fredrick's father, Henry Sr. and younger brother Samuel joined the company. (This is the company Grandfather began working for at age sixteen.) Great-grandfather Charles, meanwhile, became a professor of music and organist at Christ Church Cathedral in Hamilton.

Fredrick had community interests beyond his company. A landmark in Hamilton to this day is Beckett Drive, built at his initiative and officially opened July 14, 1894. The road, used initially by horse-drawn carriages, connects Hamilton proper with communities on the southerly elevated bluff called Hamilton Mountain.

The Gillard line:

Charles's wife, as noted, was Harriet Emily Gillard. She was born in Challacombe, a small town in Devonshire in the south of England, on August 24, 1835. The two were married on May 27, 1858, in Hamilton, Ontario. Harriet Emily had three younger siblings: William Henry (1837-1901), James John (1839-1856) and John (1841-1893). James tragically drowned in Burlington Bay, adjacent to Hamilton, at age seventeen. Harriet Emily's brother William (W.H.) began a wholesale grocery business in Hamilton, the W.H. Gillard Company, in 1879, a business that would play a key role in our family for decades.

The parents of Harriet Emily Gillard and her siblings were Henry Gillard (1810-1891) and Maria Dallyn Gillard (1810-1893), both born in Devon. Henry and Maria, along with their children, came to Canada from Barnstable, Devon, England, in 1855, sailing from Plymouth to Quebec, then traveling on to Hamilton, arriving on October 12. (There is no indication the Becketts and Gillards knew each other in England.)

Back to the Becketts:

Now let's go back still further on the Beckett side, though it becomes more difficult to be certain of this thread of our genealogy. To recall, Henry Beckett Sr. was my great-great-grandfather, father to my great-grandfather Charles. We believe Henry Beckett Sr.'s father was Samuel Beckett, born in Cheshire in 1772, and his mother was Elizabeth Hardy, born in 1782. The two were married in 1797 and had nine children. Samuel Beckett's father, also a Samuel Beckett, was born in Cheshire in 1743, and married Ann Gerrard in 1767. They had eight children. Samuel's father was John Beckett who was born in Cheshire in 1711. He married Mary Johnson in 1737, and they also had eight children.

Beyond John and Mary, we have little to go on. However one of the more intriguing possibilities, ripe for speculation and perhaps further research, is whether Grandfather Beckett's roots trace to Thomas à Becket, the famed Archbishop of Canterbury from 1162 until his murder in 1170—a story memorialized by T.S. Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral* and the 1964 film *Becket*, with Richard Burton as Becket and Peter O'Toole as King Henry II (based on Jean Anouilh's play *Becket*). According to my Uncle Jack, F.G. Beckett's daughter Lillian "obtained by means of considerable effort a copy of the Beckett family tree, showing a direct descendancy from Thomas à Becket." Perhaps someday that or an equivalent tree will emerge!

At any rate, it seems our roots from the Becketts and Gillards are firmly planted in Cheshire and Devon, England, respectively, and it's quite likely that a study would show earlier ancestors were likewise from these areas. Folks weren't terribly mobile back then!



Thomas à Beckett – window in Canterbury Cathedral



Edith Maude Champ Beckett

The Champ/Hillman lines:

Grandfather Henry (H.C.) married Edith Maud Champ on April 28, 1886. Now we will look at the Champ/Hillman lines. Edith Maud Champ was born in Hamilton on January 7, 1865.

Her parents had married a year earlier, in 1864, in Lincoln, Ontario. Edith's father, William Sagittary Champ, was born February 3, 1837, in Hertfordshire, England. Once in Canada, he worked with the Great Western Railway as a cashier and paymaster. Edith's mother was Sarah Emily Mitchell Hillman, born in Toronto on March 9, 1845.

William Sagittary Champ's parents were Sagittary Champ (b-1808) and Jannet Taylor (b-1806), both from Hertfordshire, England. Sarah Emily's parents were Thomas Hillman, born about 1812, in Worthing, Sussex, and Sarah Bushby, born in 1823, in West Tarring, Sussex. Thomas Hillman was a wine merchant in England.

Edith's siblings were Harry H. Champ (b-1867), Emily Louise Champ (b-1869), William S. Champ (b-1870), Ernest Oliver Champ (b-1873), Walter B. Champ (b-1874) and Ethel Florence Champ (b-1876). The Champ family is memorialized in a very early picture, taken after the passing of William Sagittary Champ in 1894.



*The Champ Family: Sarah Emily Mitchell Champ and children –
left to right – Edith, William, Ethel, Harry, Walter, Emily and Oliver.*



Caspar Olevian (1536 - 1587)

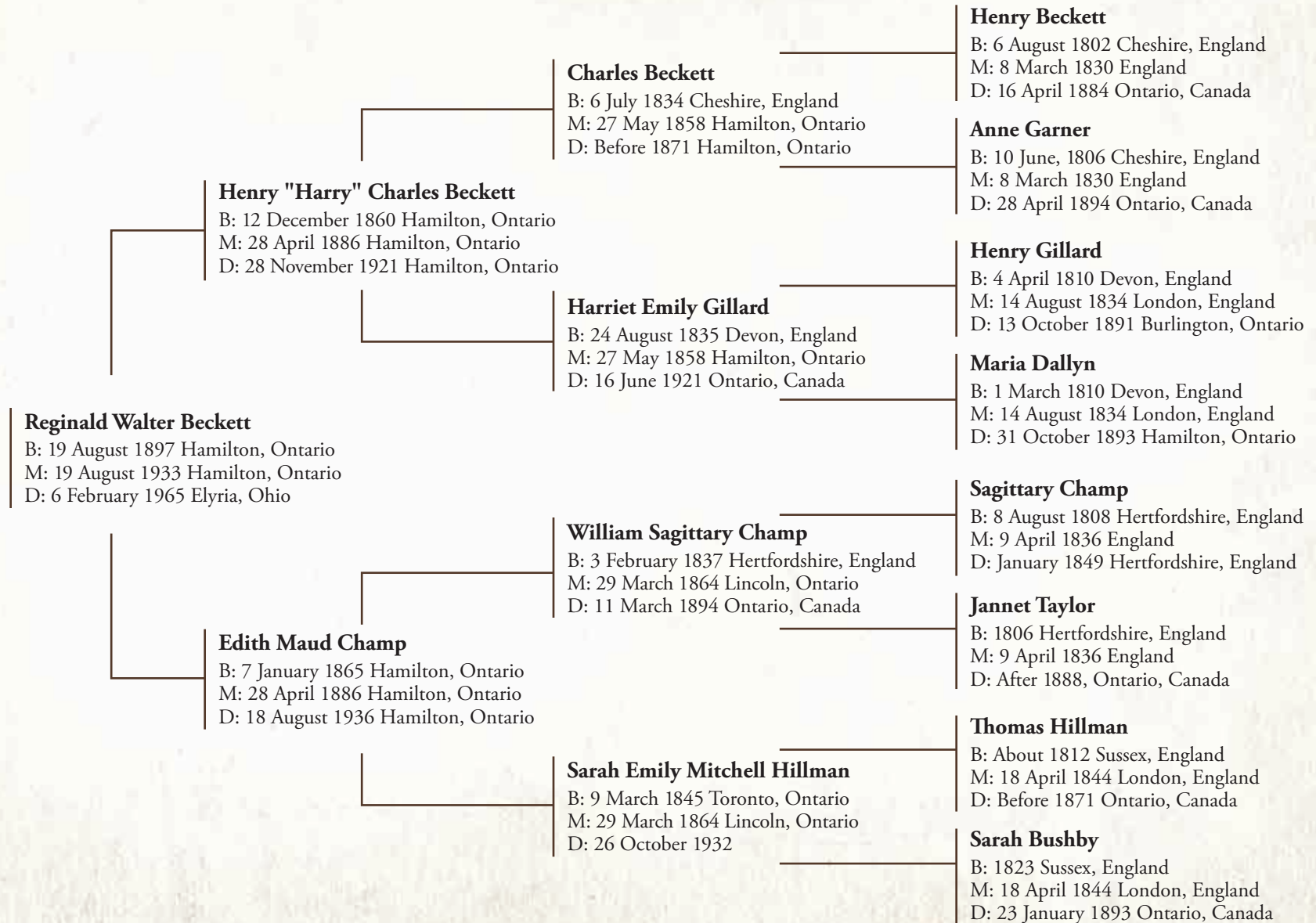
The Champs have fascinating roots. I'll touch on just a few highlights. In some wonderful research undertaken by Mrs. Kevin (Linda) Donovan, she established that my ninth great-grandfather was Caspar Olevian (1536-1587). Olevian was a significant German Reformed theologian during the Protestant Reformation. An author, he wrote books on the Covenant of Grace and commentaries on several of the Apostle Paul's letters as well as on the Apostle's Creed. He was a pastor, a university professor at Heidelberg and a major contributor to the Heidelberg Catechism (1563).

The grandson of Olevian, Joachim Schutze, came into possession of Olevian's seal ring and bequeathed it to his son, Daniel Sagittary, my sixth great-grandfather. Daniel, born in 1671, a graduate of Oxford University, was Rector of Winterbourne Steepleton, Dorset, for sixty years. Dorset is a lovely county in Southwest England on the English Channel. The Schutze name was changed to Sagittary when the family came to England in the mid-1600s.

Mrs. Richard (Tutti) Farmer, granddaughter (through marriage) of H.H. Champ, told me the Champ name was originally de la Champ in France. The de la Champs were Huguenots, or French Protestants. When they came to England, no doubt fleeing persecution, they changed the name to Champ. From the marriage of William Champ and Frances Sagittary in 1736 in Dorset, four generations later in 1837, William Sagittary Champ was born—Edith Champ's father and my great-grandfather.

Now I warned you. Once into the tree it can resemble a whole forest! To help sort it out a diagram of four generations follows—the branches that brought forth my dad, Reginald Walter Beckett on a warm sunny day, August 19, 1897.

Reg Beckett's parents, grandparents and great grandparents



*The prophet Joel
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their children to the
next generation."*

Conclusion

In conclusion, quite a cast of characters and complex of events have gone into weaving the Beckett story. From a German theologian whose descendants emigrated to Britain, to an adventuresome British cabinetmaker who emigrated to Canada, and from those fleeing persecution in the south of France, to a Canadian soldier fighting Germans in the north of France, the tale is all quite incredible.

The Beckett story is a tale that isn't finished. More threads and story lines will appear, more characters will enter stage right, or is it left?

The prophet Joel said, "Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation."

I know you, children and grandchildren, will be part of the ongoing process, recounting yesterday's stories, but also producing tomorrow's. Do it well!

My best wishes toward that end.

John D. Beckett

Elyria, Ohio

February 2015



John & Wendy with 17 Grandchildren – Christmas 2014

