

En Route to Flanders Fields: The Canadians at Shorncliffe During The Great War

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Abstract

Six hundred thousand Canadian enlisted men and boys flocked to England during the Great War and became an integral part of the English communities in which they lived and trained. This article focuses only on Shorncliffe, the largest of the bases located on the Kent coast and just twenty miles from France. As the transitory home to thousands of soldiers, it was dubbed “a suburb of Toronto”.¹ Sadly, around sixty thousand Canadians never returned and the futility of the conflict was summed up by one Shorncliffe transient, Lt. Colonel John McCrae, who in 1915, wrote ‘In Flanders Field’, one of the most significant war poems of the time. Whilst en route to France and Flanders, the Canadians’ tenure at Shorncliffe is a period of our joint history that has been largely overlooked.

The research for this article suggests—among other things—that the people of Shorncliffe and nearby Folkestone reacted very positively to the arrival of the Canadians on their way to Flanders Fields and elsewhere in Belgium and France and that, despite a number of social problems including disease and crime, relations between the Canadian soldiers and their Kentish neighbours remained extremely good throughout the war.

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The course of world history has been punctuated by catastrophic events amongst which the Great War looms large. Canada was militarily ill-prepared to enter the conflict in 1914 and had no regular army, only a permanent militia force of three thousand men who trained for just sixteen days of the year. Over the next four years the Canadian Corps grew to almost a million serving soldiers. Canada’s willingness to provide such a degree of manpower to assist in a European war became central to its evolution, in developing her own foreign policy and achieving eventual independence from Great Britain. As a British Dominion, Canada did not possess the power to claim neutrality, but could determine the nature and extent of its contribution. In 1900, Prime

Minister Wilfred Laurier defined Canada's status during the Boer War in these terms: "I claim for Canada this, that in the future Canada shall be at liberty to act or not to act, to interfere or not to interfere, to do just as she pleases and that she reserves the right to judge whether or not there is cause for her to act".² His declaration paved the way for subsequent leaders to claim increasing autonomy for determining Canadian policies, especially during times of war.

When Britain gratefully accepted Canada's offer to deploy an Expeditionary Force of twenty thousand men to England within weeks Sam Hughes, the Minister of Militia and Defence, immediately broadcast an appeal to the men of Canada. Hughes was adamant that they should all be volunteers so that: "when the Canadian men meet the enemy—as they are going to do—and vanquish them—as they are going to vanquish them—they are going to do it fighting as free men, as free subjects of his Majesty."³

Thirty-three thousand men from every province streamed into recruitment centres to enlist within two days. Within a few weeks of the outbreak of war in 1914, Hughes had concentrated the First Expeditionary Force at Valcartier Camp, Quebec, where they received the briefest of initial training, before embarking from Gaspé Bay on a ten-day sea voyage to England in a flotilla of thirty-two transport ships.⁴

The soldiers were transferred to a tented camp on Salisbury Plain, where they underwent four months of British warfare training prior to being sent to France. The conditions at Salisbury camp worsened dramatically as winter descended and it rained for eighty-nine out of one hundred and twenty-four days. Eventually, the tents were replaced by single-storey wooden huts each intended to house forty men. Inadequately ventilated, they quickly became breeding grounds for infections. In addition to influenza and chest problems, a fatal strain of meningitis killed twenty-eight soldiers, leaving many more seriously ill. Whilst the First Contingent struggled to undergo sufficient training to help them survive at the Front, Hughes had successfully raised a Second and subsequently a Third, Expeditionary Force.

Forty-thousand Canadian soldiers arrived in Plymouth in February 1915 and boarded trains for Shorncliffe in Kent. Their biggest fear was that the War would be all over by Christmas and before they had personally been given the chance to confront the "hated Hun". There was no perception of the horrors that awaited them within the foul trenches of Flanders or France, nor that the conflict would exact a huge price on a whole generation of Canadian men.

On a whim, 23-year-old British born Private Jack O'Brien from Winnipeg, enlisted into the North Western 28th Battalion as part of the 2nd Contingent. He wrote this account of his first day at Shorncliffe: "...another thing that happened on our first day in camp—a few of us were standing looking across the Channel to France and wondering what was happening there, when boom-boom-boom we heard the guns in Belgium. We could hardly believe our ears, I don't know about the other fellows, but it sent a queer feeling through me to know that only fifty or sixty miles away, our boys were fighting and dying. Before this, the war had seemed very unreal, but the sound of the guns made me realize that it was a grim reality and I wondered how I would face it when the time came."⁵

Shorncliffe was chosen for the Second Expeditionary Force as it was a purpose-built garrison recently vacated by Kitchener's British Army recruits. Initially, the camp was not able to accommodate all the men, so they were put into 'tent cities' with officers billeted in private homes across the towns of Folkestone and Hythe. Meanwhile, wooden huts with corrugated iron roofs were hurriedly constructed and these new "tin towns" were sited amongst the hills around Shorncliffe. With the memory of the epidemic of serious diseases at Salisbury still fresh in the minds of the Army Commanders, all newcomers to Shorncliffe throughout the war were kept in isolation barracks on Dibgate Plain for a period of twenty-eight days after arrival. Following basic training in Canada and the ensuing sea voyage, segregation was considered the only way to protect the other thousands of soldiers already in the camps from exposure to any condition or disease that may have been borne across the Atlantic.

According to the recollections of soldier Private Harold Innis—"One of the most desirable places in Shorncliffe camp was the quarantine. A guard with a rusty rifle paced up and down in front, at the rate of 140 paces per minute. He paid compliments to officers which was his chief duty and stopped the men from going out at the front of the quarantine. As a result, the men went out the back of the quarantine and every place was accessible to its inmates. Only four were allowed in the tent in contrast to the usual eight. There were no parades, the food was of the best and all one had to do was to enjoy oneself".⁶ Once cleared from quarantine, the men were granted a short leave and an opportunity to explore the surrounding towns and villages or travel to London for a short visit.

The chain of command for Canada's troops became a major, divisive and complex issue. It was a bone of contention among the Canadian officers and involved Lord Kitchener, the British Secretary for War. From the outset,

the British military assumed that Canadian soldiers of the First Division would automatically be brought under the auspices of British Officers and Commanders, being subordinate to British command and dispersed as reinforcements amongst the British regiments. However, Hughes, Prime Minister Borden and his Canadian government had vastly different ideas especially with the Second and subsequent contingents. They were not prepared to acquiesce to the British expectations and allow their forces to simply underpin a shortfall in numbers for the British regiments stating that: “more importantly, Canadian volunteers had been attested under Canadian Authority and Canada was bearing the full cost of her force”⁷. As it was a situation that had neither been discussed nor clarified between the two countries, it would take another two years before a London based Canadian Ministry of Overseas Military Forces, would assume full control of the Canadian troops. The message strongly communicated to Kitchener with the arrival of their soldiers at Shorncliffe was: “the Canadian Government was determined that its forces would be led by Canadians”⁸.

Clearly, there was no single shared motivation for entering the war that linked the politicians with commanding officers or soldiers. Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden, set out his plans for greater Canadian autonomy from Britain, shortly after taking office. In a speech before the Canadian House of Commons on December 5th 1912, he spoke about “the increasing power and influence of Canada within Europe” and went on to add that British Dominions must be permitted to share the responsibility for foreign policy decisions.⁹ The onset of the Great War provided Borden with the catalyst for Canada’s eventual full independence.

For many of the officers who would go on to command the Canadian Expeditionary Forces there was to be an element of nostalgia for the glory and success experienced in the Boer War. For instance, the onset of World War One elevated the already rampant and abrasive Sam Hughes into a dominant and central figure in the political arena, with Hughes lusting for battle in the days before the outbreak of war. In fact, Hughes raged that he thought Britain would not stand up to Germany and was delighted when the declaration of war was issued.¹⁰ As Minister of the Militia since 1911, Hughes could with great relish, expand his domestic force into a large scale and national Canadian army.

For the volunteers flooding into the enlistment centres, it is easy to conclude that their only motivation was a ‘call to duty’. However, the life of a British immigrant was not easy. For many, there was perhaps, a wish to escape from the realities of unemployment, family commitments and social deprivation.

With a dash of cynicism, they may have considered it an opportunity to visit family and friends in England, at the expense of the Canadian Government. Without doubt there was also the lure of taking part in a collective and exciting adventure.

In spite of being sixty-six years old, General Sam Steele the former Winnipeg Militia Commander, was given control of the Second Expeditionary Force at Shorncliffe, on the understanding he would remain in England and not see active service. However, the position of Commander for all Canadian troops in England had already been unilaterally assumed by Brigadier-General James MacDougall, who claimed authority over Steele. Colonel John Wallace Carson, the acting agent of the Canadian Militia in England, resolved the situation in a letter to Steele: “McDougall would have entire command of his Training Division and you would have entire command of your Second Division without possible conflict or question between you as to standing, seniority or anything else.”¹¹ MacDougall was also to take command of all other Canadians scattered throughout England, in such places as Aldershot, Bramshott and Seaford.

The British military considered the Canadian soldiers to be undisciplined amateurs when they landed in England. After just a few weeks cursory training at Valcartier before embarkation, the second Canadian Expeditionary Force arrived at Shorncliffe with minimal soldiering experience. However, the newcomers proudly wore their uniforms and carried a full soldiers kit, including two heavy army blankets, mess tin, a trenching shovel and a Ross rifle complete with bayonet.¹² By the time they had completed their training and were ready to depart for Europe, almost all their Canadian equipment had been replaced by its superior British-made equivalent. “The tight fitting Canadian tunics with stand-up collars gave way to the looser, more comfortable and better made, British jackets.”¹³ Commonly considered to be made of brown paper, their Canadian-made boots disintegrated in wet conditions and were also replaced. Private Louis Keene recalls that many soldiers wore the new British tunics at night because they were warm and comfortable and offered an amusing anecdote about being issued with the new British boots: “we have been given new black boots, magnificent things huge, heavy ammunition boots and the wonderful thing is they don’t let water in. They are very big and look like punts, but its dry feet now.”¹⁴

Once in Shorncliffe, any man with even the most minimal militia experience, was sent to one of the many British military schools for training.¹⁵ They received instruction in using the rifle, bayonet and grenade as well as methods

for trench warfare. Emerging as non-ranking leaders, they instructed new recruits under their command in the skills they had just learned a few weeks before. Allan Hager, 5th Field Artillery, wrote to his sister from Shorncliffe on 12th November 1915: “they have made a musketry instructor out of me. It is no joke to lecture them for six hours every day and then take them to the ranges and have the responsibility of them shooting at the targets and watching to see they don’t shoot themselves.”¹⁶ Soldiers fortunate enough to have enlisted into the Second Canadian division, underwent their training in the Kent countryside around the garrison. However, there was constant pressure on commanders to supply fresh troops to replace tired and depleted units on the front lines. Because of this demand, the training programmes were at best, merely adequate and progressively condensed in length as the war continued.

Even just a year into the war, Private Donald Fraser’s diary entry for September 17th 1915 reflected: “after four months training in Kent, England, where we had a very enjoyable time, first at Dibgate in the vicinity of Shorncliffe, then at Lydd where we had rushed shooting practice...we were considered fit and skilled in the art of warfare, ready to meet the hated Hun. When I think of it, our training was decidedly amateurish and impractical. It consisted mainly of route marches and alignment movements. Our musketry course amounted to nothing; we had only half an idea about the handling of bombs. We were perfectly ignorant regarding rifle grenades.”¹⁷

Special instruction was offered to every man, in machine gunnery, signaling or bombing. Private O’Brien describes his bombing course, which he admits to volunteering for simply to get out of fatigue duty: “in our six week course, we learned to handle the ‘Mills’ bomb, ‘hair-brush’ and the ‘jam tin’. There was just enough danger to make it exciting. For instance the ‘jam tin’ bomb is made by the men from a real jam tin packed with explosives.”¹⁸ To hone the soldiers’ aim, the bombs were targeted at the recently dug trenches, much to the chagrin of the men who had constructed them. However, a number of the trenches dug by Canadians around Shorncliffe still survive to the present day.

When not engaged in specific warfare training, the army provided these thousands of young men with extensive outlets for their energies. From reveille at 5.30am, their day was structured until lights out at around 10 pm. It incorporated physical drills, parades, training and marches, punctuated with meal times. The army also needed to nurture a high level of morale in preparation for the day when the men would be called to board the ships which would take them across the Channel to the trenches. From many of the primary accounts of their experiences, most Canadians appear to have enjoyed their

training period, with little thought to what lay ahead of them once they joined the front lines. When their embarkation date was close, they were confined to barracks and then marched the few miles to Folkestone Harbour, laden with full kit necessary for survival in the field. Leading down from 'The Leas' into the harbour, was a short road named 'Church Slope Road.' These few hundred metres were the last that soldiers would see of England and relative safety. "So close was Folkestone to the front lines, that it was the case that a soldier could eat his breakfast in Folkestone and be fighting in the trenches by lunchtime."¹⁹

Visits by dignitaries such as Prime Minister Borden and Sam Hughes, provided real excitement at Shorncliffe. After the troops demonstrated their military skills to the visitors, there was a full review of marching ranks, the mounted cavalry, heavy guns and columns of motorised vehicles. In a letter home to his sister, Captain Wilbert Gilroy describes an occasion in August 1915: "we had been preparing for it for some time. The men were all fussed up, clothes pressed and brushed, rifles cleaned and shining and all things in readiness. Our Brigade was marching to the reviewing point at the Canadian hospital at Dibgate, about 4 miles, when it started to rain. As usual, the men had to wait about two hours for the inspection and looked like drowned rats. When they were not standing to attention, they romped around in front of the lines and played leap frog and such games to keep from catching cold."²⁰

However, the biggest thrill for the men was the arrival of King George V, accompanied by Lord Kitchener in September 1915. The King's message to the troops was one of gratitude when he said: "the past weeks at Shorncliffe have been for you a period of severe and rigorous training... History will never forget the loyalty and readiness with which you rallied to the aid of your Mother Country in the hour of danger. My thoughts will be with you. May God bless you and bring you victory"²¹

With no precise timetable for their departure, the soldiers involved themselves in the many activities which Shorncliffe provided. A central feature of camp life was the Young Men's Christian Association which took an active interest in soldier welfare in both peace and war, offering a wide range of interests and facilities. As the Canadian and British organizations were entirely separate, the British YMCA had set up a base at Shorncliffe and all other camps across England and Scotland before the first Canadian contingent arrived. The canteen huts became clubhouses for troops to meet, enjoy food and drinks, as well as supplying necessities such as shoe polish, books and magazines at greatly reduced prices. As the war intensified, the Canadian YMCA took over

responsibility for their own troops. Eventually they accompanied the soldiers across to the front lines and provided an oasis where fighting men could receive free sustenance, comfort and help. The ‘Y’, as it was affectionately known, also ensured that there was always a plentiful supply of notepaper and pencils for writing letters to family and friends back home in Canada. In addition, they helped soldiers write their battlefield wills.

The Canadian Salvation Army and other denominational representatives, worked alongside the ‘Y’ at Shorncliffe, offering regular opportunities for soldiers to attend services held in the YMCA huts that doubled as churches or Bible study meeting rooms. The same facility was extended to Roman Catholic priests, providing a sanctuary for confession or Holy Communion. The YMCA truly excelled in the provision of physical and entertainment outlets. In the pamphlet entitled ‘Achievements Of The YMCA In The Great War’, it states that in excess of one million dollars was spent in these two fields alone.²² Athletic equipment for a variety of sports activities was provided for the men to use freely. Professional trainers were hired to provide tuition expertise and plan programmes. As no entrance charges were ever made, theatrical and cinematic entertainment in the YMCA huts became a major leisure pursuit for the soldiers at Shorncliffe. Frequent Concert Parties were held and often featured a popular group called “The Dumbells”, who were all men from the Third Division. Two of the troupe were female impersonators and sang in high falsetto voices, with the rest of the group acting in skits and playing musical numbers. The Dumbells travelled to other Canadian camps and visited the front line troops whenever possible to boost morale.²³

Shorncliffe was also used as the headquarters for a Government welfare agency administered by the women of Canada. Organised by the Militia Department, the ‘Canadian Field Comforts Commission’ set up its headquarters at Moore Barracks shortly after the First Contingent had arrived in England. This Agency supplied extra comforts and little luxuries to all soldiers, especially to those at the front. Women in Canada collected donations of money, as well as items including socks, gloves, underwear, and cigarettes. These commodities were shipped to warehouses in Britain and transported free of charge by rail, to Shorncliffe. Then, an army of female helpers would sort, pack and dispatch packages to regiments, for further distribution to individuals. Several thank-you notes from the front, appeared in the first issue of their magazine called ‘Field Comforts’ in October 1915.

Produced by the soldiers, Regimental Trench Newspapers were a popular form of communication and a further source of entertainment or interest for

soldiers in their free time. These newspapers, with innovative titles such as the 'The Fortyniner' or 'The Dead Horse Corner Gazette', were printed at Shorncliffe Garrison and enabled the men of a particular regiment to keep in touch with each other, whether they were in the trenches at Flanders or relaxing at a YMCA rest camp in Folkestone. With the choice of anonymity they gave the other ranks a golden opportunity to poke fun at the commanding officers through hand drawn cartoons, witty anecdotes and stories. The trench papers usually included obituaries for those who had died in battle or from illness, balanced by notices of weddings or the occasional birth.

However, perhaps the most outstanding innovation for war-time soldiers was the educational institution known as the "Khaki University". Set up in 1917 it was managed jointly by the Canadian YMCA and the Chaplain services of the Canadian Army. Considerable thought was given to the future of the soldiers when they returned to Canada after the war. The majority of young enlisted soldiers had either cut short their education or were completely illiterate. The war had already caused a severe shortage of skilled workers across Canada, a situation that would only be compounded by a prolonged conflict and a high death toll. Although jobs such as teaching were being taken up by women, it was realised that there would be a drastic shortfall of manual and professional workers, damaging the economy for years to come.

Responding to a request by the YMCA to help with the setting up of educational facilities for Canadians in England, Dr Henry Marshall Tory, President of Alberta University, toured all the CEF camps in Britain and Europe to gauge interest for such a unique venture. His overwhelming opinion was that "Khaki Colleges", under the aegis of a "Khaki University", would be welcomed for two main reasons. Firstly, that the troops were no longer motivated by the opportunity to fight. Secondly, they were growing tired of their mundane camp duties and the facilities on offer.²⁴ Courses were offered to all soldiers, from men with no education at all, to those who had begun university before the war. Practical courses in farming, bricklaying and motor mechanics were extremely popular, as were mathematics, bible study and basic literacy skills.²⁵

By 1918, the scheme had attracted government funding for the eleven Khaki Colleges already in place, including one at Shorncliffe headed by Toronto University historian, Major William Wallace. Even across the battlefields of Europe, basic education classes were offered to Front Line soldiers and held in make-shift YMCA shelters. The Khaki University helped injured soldiers plan for their future and it was hoped that even those men residing in the segregated

venereal disease hospital at Folkestone, would be encouraged towards more intellectual pursuits.²⁶

However, despite all the activities provided for them during their time at Shorncliffe, the concentration of so many soldiers into one region, inevitably led to a high degree of crime and disorder in the area. Although the local Folkestone and Hythe police forces were called upon to deal with incidences in the towns, the full responsibility for the soldiers fell to the Military Police Units at Shorncliffe. Private Edward Hamilton who had a prior criminal record in Manitoba, appeared before the magistrates charged with “Feloniously entering a dwelling house in Sandgate, to wit 2 Granville Road”.²⁷ After being found guilty of the offence, he was discharged on payment of a fine of thirty-four shillings in settlement for damages caused at the house. The attending Canadian Officer advised the Magistrates that Hamilton would be returned to his unit and sent on the first draft back to France. However, Hamilton refused to pay the fine and made himself very objectionable towards the Magistrate. He was sentenced to one month’s hard labour in jail. With the wisdom of hindsight, it would appear from the account that Hamilton possibly acted in the full knowledge that he could delay his return to the Front Line. The incident is indicative of the many problems that the local population experienced during the four years the Canadians were at Shorncliffe.

As thousands of Canadian troops moved into the camps around Folkestone, the locality was transformed from a seaside holiday destination into an expanded garrison town with a mixture of North American and regional British accents. The local people willingly accepted the troops into their lives and homes, especially those whose own family members were already fighting on the Front Lines. During the summer months, residents of Hythe were moved by the spectacle of the early morning daily march by six thousand Canadians, heading for the beach for a bathe. Sadly, at least one soldier, Private Arthur Gruchy, died in a rough sea during one bathing party. At the jury inquest, a verdict of ‘death by misadventure’ was returned, with the recommendation that in future, a competent officer should be present on beaches to decide if the sea was safe enough for swimming.²⁸

There was an almost familial urge to look after the soldiers. Several examples of this were reported in the Hythe Reporter and other local newspapers. For instance, an unlit set of steps in Church Hill, Hythe, were considered dangerous to the Canadians. Unaware of their exact location, several of the men fell down them in the dark. Mrs Kitchin, an old lady who resided in the adjacent Almshouses, was so nervous of the soldiers injuring themselves,

that she risked prosecution by leaving a light in her window, in spite of the blackout regulations. “She declared that she did not mind being fined if her light prevented people having a nasty fall which might end fatally”.²⁹ She did not receive a fine on that occasion, but the steps continued to be a problem for the soldiers.

For their part, the Canadians embraced Kentish life, becoming an integral part of the local neighbourhoods. Local newspapers contain numerous reports of the symbiotic relationship between the military and civilian population throughout the war years. Soldiers became welcome members of local churches of all denominations, often singing in their choirs or performing solos during the services. Sergeant Dickson of the 18th Battalion Canadian Infantry was, until enlistment, a pastor at the Methodist Episcopal Church in Cleveland City, Ohio and was invited to lead a service from the pulpit in the Grace Hill Wesleyan Church, Folkestone.³⁰ Shorncliffe Garrison provided the local residents with frequent military displays and sports days in Radnor Park. It stationed a resident band at ‘The Leas’ promenade to provide music and cheer to the people at particular times throughout the weekdays, with a proper concert each Sunday. A fun Beauty Show was held on Victoria Pier to the delight of the mixed audience as all the contestants were Canadian soldiers. After parading around the stage to whistles and catcalls, the declared winner was Drum-Major W Morley from Winnipeg, whose prize was two pounds, ten shillings.³¹ Clearly there was a good relationship between the residents and soldiers throughout the whole of the four years of the war. But perhaps inevitably, there were those Canadians who committed varying degrees of crimes, including desertion, bigamy, embezzlement, drug offences, selling stolen army alcohol, tobacco and drink.

Sunday entertainment prompted ongoing and fractious public discussions between the clergy, the community and the Borough Councils. Perhaps surprisingly, the Councils generally supported the military stance and frequently were at odds with proponents of a strict Sabbath. The controversy rumbled on throughout the war, with the non-conformist ministers citing the presence of the Canadians. Although the holding of Sunday theatre concerts, recitals and social teas caused no angst amongst the clergy, the matter of Sunday sports and cinema opened a whole ‘Pandora’s Box’. Early standard-bearers for the opposition were the redoubtable Reverend Carlile from Folkestone and Reverend Lloyd of Hythe. Both men used local newspapers to condemn the advent of Sunday events. Reverend Carlile launched a vitriolic attack on the owners of Victoria Pier Cinema. He accused them of shedding morality in

pursuit of profit and insisted Sunday cinema did nothing to reduce the number of soldiers found drunk most weeks on the streets of Folkestone.³²

The case for the defence was substantial and came from all sections of the local population. Appearing in the same newspaper issue as Reverend Carlile, one resident wrote in response to the jibe about profit with, “Is it true that men out for profit on a Sunday can have no good intention?” and maintains that the continued opening of Sunday picture houses would in time, “decrease the number of those walking aimlessly about the streets”. Writing in the *Hythe Reporter*, Reverend Lloyd raged against Sunday sport, “I wish to enter my protest against the Sunday baseball match. I say again that it is unfitting, inexpedient and unnecessary to take the hours of the one day sacred to worship and devote them to town sports”. He finished his diatribe with an appeal for every man to lift his voice up against “this iniquity”.³³

However, publicans and cinema owners were not the only groups to profit from the Canadians. The billeting of officers within private homes was a welcome source of income for many property owners. Mrs Whithall of 6 Clifton Gardens, Folkestone, offered her completely furnished, twenty-one bedroomed house in a letter to the Quartermaster at Shorncliffe Headquarters. The amount of income she would receive was three shillings per week for each officer who occupied a room. The housing of other ranks, including those requiring convalescent care was set at two shillings and three pence per man.³⁴ A husband and wife team, Mr & Mrs Bullman, of 4 Cherry Gardens, Folkestone, billeted fourteen soldiers throughout the duration of the war, providing a good living for themselves and their young daughter.

As the soldiers were considered to be well off, some of the local population were guilty of trying to exploit the Canadians by way of overcharging them for goods and services. Pricing in some Folkestone shops and restaurants became a bone of contention and generated hostility between soldiers and proprietors. After the soldiers had simply transferred their patronage to Ashford and Canterbury, the matter was eventually resolved by the Mayor of Folkestone, Stephen Penfold, who issued a disapproving warning to all businesses.³⁵ However, the debate escalated when General Sam Steele wrote to the Council to complain that he was being overcharged for: “the leasing of the offices now occupied by the D.R. and O. The original asking price for this building was 300 guineas, but the lessee had accepted 130 guineas for the duration of the war”. The owner of the property at Earls Avenue, Folkestone, was attempting to increase the rent from the agreed one hundred and thirty guineas, to two hundred and ten. The matter was settled when the woman

lessee magnanimously “desired to do her duty and take her share of the burdens of the War”.³⁶

One of the unseen effects of the Great War on the Canadian soldiers at Shorncliffe was the high incidence of service-unrelated deaths that were investigated by the local civilian police in the first instance. Notices in the newspapers across the four years of the Canadian tenure record the names, circumstances and methods by which soldiers of all ranks died. Several tragic accidents occurred, involving horses, trains, cars, buses or lorries, with the occasional drowning. The verdict on most victims was suicide whilst temporarily insane but in spite of the stigma, they are all buried in Shorncliffe Military Cemetery. Although the reasons for taking such drastic action can only be a matter of speculation, it perhaps reflects the awful conditions found at the Front. It is understandable how the fear, the noise of gunfire and the constant shelling of the trenches would cause already badly traumatised soldiers to choose death in preference to returning to the battlefields. The constant sound of gunfire from across the Channel was also a daily reminder of the horror which awaited every soldier.

On Friday 25th May 1917, Shorncliffe, Folkestone and Hythe suffered a calamitous and sudden air raid by German aeroplanes. Eighteen soldiers, seventeen of them Canadians, were also killed, with a further ninety injured at Shorncliffe Camp. The early evening raid caught everyone by surprise and caused the deaths of seventy-nine civilians, a high proportion of whom were women and children. Although Folkestone was close to the Front, the town and military camps had not been in the firing line during the first three years of war. “The squadron of German Gotha bombers had approached from the west, attacking Hythe and Sandgate and then the army camps before swooping over Folkestone town centre where the majority of their high explosive bombs were dropped. The attack was the most devastating of the war and it cut a swathe of death and destruction”.³⁷

London had been the prime target for this bombing operation. However, because of thick cloud as they approached the City, the aeroplanes turned south into Kent instead. The inhabitants made no attempt to find cover, being familiar with military sounds and distant explosions. No air raid warning had been forthcoming and none of the towns had hooters or sirens in place. The attack caused the population to demand why no warnings had been issued and what protection they would be afforded in the future. The Folkestone Town Council sent a deputation to London to voice the concerns of the people to Lord French, the Commander in Chief of Home Forces. Folkestone decided

to purchase a siren for its own use, as it was considered unwise to place total reliance upon the government.³⁸

All of the seventeen Canadians killed that day are buried in Shorncliffe Military Cemetery. Ironically, within a few days of the raid, the first Canada Day flower ceremony took place at the Cemetery. This event was the inspiration of Edward Palmer, the founder-editor of the Hythe Reporter newspaper. He continued to organise it until his death in 1927. Although there was no religious service, brief speeches were given by two Canadian officers, the Folkestone Mayor Stephen Penfold and the Vicar of Hythe, Reverend H Dale. One thousand five hundred local school children assembled to lay flowers on the graves, accompanied by the Band of the Canadian Artillery playing "The Maple Leaf".³⁹ This annual tribute to Canadians was held until the outbreak of World War Two. It was re-inaugurated in 1952 and continues to the present day. Prior to 1917, the Canadians held a Dominion Day parade in Folkestone, with massed bands marching through streets lined with people waving Union Jack and Maple Leaf flags, climaxing with a military tattoo in Radnor Park.

The patriotic desire of the people of Folkestone to welcome and care for the troops, needed to be finely balanced with the disruption that the massive influx of so many Canadians caused over four years. In choosing to place the bulk of Canadians at Shorncliffe after the debacle of Salisbury Plain, the War Office probably gave little consideration to the ability of the local community to cope with a mammoth expansion of an established garrison which spilled out into the surrounding villages, hills and farmlands. So how did Folkestone cope with the sudden influx of soldiers? Folkestone and Hythe were established tourist resorts and were experienced in providing full services for visitors. Whilst the council members worried about the loss of tourism, the local people simply accepted the Canadians into their midst as replacement guests. The infrastructure for board and lodging, entertainment, eating and drinking was already in place which allowed for a fairly seamless transition from a civilian to military clientele. Traditional experience in the hospitality industry across the region meant that long-established businesses continued uninterrupted for the duration of the war, with many others diversifying into leasing large properties for officer accommodation hostels, hospitals and rest camp facilities.

Local residents were quick to adapt and grasp the new economic opportunities to make money which were brought about by the outbreak of the Great War. In the post-war account by the prominent local Borough Councillor, John Jones records how the fear of food shortages in 1914 resulted in substantial

increases in the cost of locally produced basic foodstuffs including potatoes, despite the good harvest that had been yielded that year. “The prices of nearly everything doubled long before taxation was increased and before legislation took place in this regard. We seemed to forget that the enemy was, so to speak, within a stone’s throw of Folkestone. We could hear the guns, we could see the fleet and the search lights and occasionally we heard of a ship being sunk within a few miles. Yet we still ‘played the ostrich’ burying our heads in the sand and went on grabbing money and enjoying ourselves. The ‘foreign drill’ which Folkestone had experienced for fifty or sixty years, rendered the people of the town the most docile and best disciplined of the whole country. From my experience of other places, I think that Folkestone excelled the rest of the Kingdom in tameness and servility”.⁴⁰ Later, a similar entrepreneurial motivation was evident in the previously noted attempts to overcharge the Canadians for accommodation, goods and services.

The local Borough Councils had to bear most of the responsibility for maintaining the infrastructure which was adversely affected. Problems included the adequate supply of water to all the camps, repairing roads damaged by the volume of military traffic and stopping the unauthorised use of private farmland. The Councils were determined that the post-war holiday-resort status of the area would not be compromised. By welcoming the Canadians into their homes and families, the local population came to realise and accept that at times, the soldiers would behave badly and act anti-socially.

Motivated by a depth of patriotism which is hard to recognise ninety years later, there was a measure of parochial indulgence and a certain forbearance towards minor misdemeanours, which were excused as stresses of war. But neither did the criminal acts frequently reported in the newspapers attract significant condemnation from local people. The major exception was the high incidence of venereal disease, which offended the deeply entrenched Victorian moral values that were at the core of Folkestone society. The soldiers found support from a network of church groups, YMCA and women’s clubs, who advertised their frequent and entry-free teas and concerts and clearly, efforts were made to steer the men away from unsavoury women in the area. At one stage it was under serious consideration to use the provisions of the Defence Of The Realm Act (1914) to forcibly remove the prostitutes from the district.

Paradoxically, the Canadians’ time at Shorncliffe could realistically be compared to a ‘holiday camp’, when set against the brutal conditions in Flanders and France. From their arrival and during their training, the incessant sound

of gunfire clearly heard across the Channel constantly reminded them of the dangers which awaited them. When soldiers arrived back in England for short rotating respites from the fighting, they took every opportunity to enjoy themselves and relax away from the stresses of battle. Several rest camps for soldiers had been set up in Folkestone, to facilitate the resumption of their familiar leisure pursuits for all too soon, they would be back on the Front Line.

There were soldiers, such as Lt-Colonel John McCrae, whose legacy is everlasting. Initially entitled 'We Shall Not Sleep', his poem 'In Flanders Field' continues to be recited year on year, by many Canadian school children on Remembrance Day. In the battle fields of Flanders, where thousands of men were trying to make sense of why they were there at all, "the soldiers copied it, quoted it and even discussed it in the humid chill of the trenches. For many, it was a source of strength, embraving them with the determination to carry on fighting".⁴¹ Seventy Canadian servicemen were awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery, but other soldiers found it too much to bear and simply walked away from the noise, fear and daily carnage. During the Great War, twenty-two Canadians were 'shot-at-dawn' for desertion, with one other executed for cowardice. Coincidentally, five out of the twenty-three were members of one regiment, the 22nd Battalion, 5th Brigade, 2nd Canadian Infantry Division (Quebec Regiment), some of whom had trained at Shorncliffe. On December 11th 2001, the Veteran Affairs Minister, Dr Ron Duhamel, announced to the Canadian House of Commons, that the twenty-three volunteers, executed eighty-five years before, were finally pardoned and their names entered into the First World War Book of Remembrance.

First World War executions were accepted in the British Army as a means of deterring further deserters and the Canadian officers subscribed to identical military discipline. However, whilst Australia refused to allow their troops to be executed in this manner, Canada, South Africa and New Zealand made no such protest.

Once the Great War had ended, the Canadians waited impatiently for their demobilisation papers. In January 1919, they were fearful that they could succumb to the influenza pandemic that was raging across Britain and Europe which claimed the life of Sir Sam Steele before the end of the month. Motivated by sheer frustration, the soldiers marched through the streets and congregated in front of the Folkestone Town Hall, demanding immediate shipment back to their homes. In the report of the disturbance, one unnamed soldier said, "We have been in the war from the start. Our grievance is that men who have only been in the army three or four months have been discharged,

whereas we are still kept in khaki".⁴² After promising that they would do all they could to speed their return home to Canada, Stephen Penfold and the Town Commandant, Lt-Colonel the Hon E. J. Mills DSO, persuaded the men to return to their camps. The London based Canadian Overseas Ministry had failed to administer a 'first in, first out' policy, allowing many soldiers who had never even left England to be the first to return home to Canada.⁴³

After four years of fighting, the Canadian Corps had evolved into a resourceful, tough and well trained military force. No longer naïve or viewing the spectacle of war as excitement, the battle weary men who enlisted in 1914, were returning home. The success of the campaign for Vimy Ridge in April 1917 helped to seal Canada's international reputation as an indomitable fighting force. A three thousand-strong domestic militia in 1914 had been transformed into a national military machine. But did giving even basic educational opportunities to serving men during the war cause them to question the old values espoused by the political and military authorities, or cause a re-evaluation of their own motivations for enlisting? It is indeed possible that the war itself fostered a whole new sense of Canadian identity or that their deployment as separate regiments rather than as just part of the British Army, helped to promote a burgeoning loyalty towards their adopted country.

Whilst the majority returned to Canada to begin new lives, twenty thousand chose to remain in England after demobilisation.⁴⁴ Many of the soldiers who had taken advantage of the wartime Khaki College opportunities were able to return to school in Canada to continue their basic education, whilst others entered university to resume their progression into professional lives as a lawyers, teachers or doctors. For thousands of repatriated soldiers, the farming and mechanical skills they had acquired, allowed them to start their own businesses through the 'Soldier Settlement Scheme', or to find work on farms or in factories. However, harsh domestic realities faced tens of thousands of war veterans: "they found broken marriages, children who had forgotten them and families who had already heard more than enough about the war".⁴⁵ Sadly for many returning immigrants, the war years had not enhanced their prospects for a profitable new life in Canada.

There was a wish by the local people of Folkestone and Hythe to remember the Canadians in a symbolic way. On the 30th January, 1923, the Folkestone Council Highways Committee, recommended that 'Church Slope Road' should be renamed the 'Road of Remembrance' as a lasting memorial. The obelisk at the top reads:

“1914—Road of Remembrance—1918
During the Great War, tens of thousands of
British Soldiers passed along this Road on
Their way to and from the battlefields of Europe.
At the going down of the sun, we will remember them.”

In analysing this account of events at Shorncliffe ninety years on, it demonstrates how the local populations of Folkestone and Hythe readily accepted and welcomed the presence of thousands of Canadian soldiers in spite of the inherent problems they brought with them. However, it must also be acknowledged that Shorncliffe had been a permanent garrison since 1790. In common with most garrison towns and cities in Britain local people simply accepted the soldiers in their midst as each new wave of newcomers was absorbed. As a holiday resort area which previously had a fairly narrow season confined to the summer months, the Canadian presence extended it into a year-round business opportunity to make money.

Folkestone local historian Mike George supports the view that the Canadians were largely welcomed because “there was a great deal of morale boosting community work by the Canadians, which created a positive interaction with the people”.⁴⁶ One other important factor in this analysis is the gratitude the local population felt towards them in helping Britain to fight a world war. Research for this article included an exhaustive examination of both the Minutes of the five Borough Councils and various local newspapers for the period 1914 to early 1919. As the only public forum for gauging the opinions of ordinary residents, the ‘Letters to the Editor’ were scrutinised in both the Hythe Reporter and the Folkestone, Hythe, Cheriton and Sandgate Herald for conflicting views of the Canadians for the whole of 1917. Both papers contained an overwhelmingly preponderance of support for the soldiers with not a single letter of complaint against them. Even the most ardent critic of some aspects of the Canadian tenure, the Reverend John Carlile wrote, “Folkestone became completely Canadianised. The town took the boys to its heart immediately and during the years the Canadian Troops were stationed here, the warmest possible feeling existed between them and the townspeople. The Canadians have taught us a much needed lesson in patriotism and loyalty. In the hearts of all there will be treasured memories of friendships formed during the War and in Folkestone and in many a Dominion city, stories will be told of the wonderful days when the boys from the Maple Leaf Land were on the fringe of the sea in the Garden of England, pioneers of the mighty host that went to France to win Freedom for civilization”.⁴⁷

Endnotes

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