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The Battle of Ypres. Painting by Richard Jack.

PORTRAIT OF A BATTALION COMMANDER: LIEUTENANT-COLONEL GEORGE STUART TUXFORD AT THE SECOND BATTLE OF YPRES, APRIL 1915

by Andrew B. Godefroy

While it is an essential component of analysis in military history, the field of biographical studies of senior Canadian military leaders has, unfortunately, been very weak. There are reasons for this state of affairs, not the least of which is a culture of modesty amongst Canadian military leaders, who have seldom left behind memoirs or accounts of their wartime exploits. Added to this is an academic and military community seemingly reluctant to engage in the writing of military biography, and in large measure thus ignoring the significance of the human element in command in battle. Nowhere is this absence more notable than in the biographical study of Canadian senior military leadership in the First World War. Of the 126 generals who served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), only its most senior commander, Sir Arthur Currie, has merited more than a single academic examination of his life. Of the remainder, less than six have received any serious biographical attention at all. One might then ponder the completeness of existing assessments of Canadian operational and tactical effectiveness on the Western Front, given that still so little is known about the men who shaped the Canadian Corps and its components.

Further on down the chain of command of the Canadian Corps, the situation is even worse. The infantry battalion, consisting of approximately one thousand men and commanded by a Lieutenant-Colonel, was the primary unit employed in action in France and Flanders.¹ Yet, nearly a century after 260 battalions were recruited in Canada for service in the Great War, there has yet to appear a single biography of any of the infantry battalion commanders who led the 48 fighting battalions of the Corps.² It is clear that far less is known about the leadership and command of Canada's Great War army than should be the case, let alone how the commanders' skills were tested and proven on the battlefield. The lack of knowledge about the CEF officer corps as an institution, or how these men commanded their forces in the field, has allowed a great many misguided popular assumptions to become accepted as historical fact. These myths can neither be validated nor challenged until greater attention is paid to this field of study.

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GEORGE STUART TUXFORD

This article seeks to shed light on one of these many unknowns, Lieutenant-Colonel (later Brigadier-General) George Stuart Tuxford, CB, CMG, DSO. Appointed as the Commanding Officer of the 5th (Western Cavalry) Battalion in 1914, he later became General Officer Commanding (GOC) of 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade in 1st Canadian Division. An experienced Militia officer who understood leadership by example, Tuxford's distinguished wartime career is reflective of a wider group of senior Canadian officers. Their intelligence, skill, personal courage, and ability to learn at the tactical and operational levels inspired the Canadian Corps to achieve victory after victory in its battles on the Western Front.³

The military career of George Stuart Tuxford provides students of Canadian military history with one of the best Canadian army leadership case studies of the First World War. Tuxford began his service in the CEF as one of only twelve infantry battalion commanding officers assigned to the front line. He was severely tested at the very outset, learning tough lessons in hard-fought actions at the Second Battles of Ypres, and in the fighting at Festubert and Givenchy in the spring and summer of 1915. His tactical competence was rewarded by promotion to Brigadier-General and command of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade in March 1916.⁴ Tuxford held the brigade command position for over three years, earning him the title of the longest serving brigade commander in the Canadian Corps.⁵ While an analysis of his entire wartime career falls beyond the scope of this article, it will address his first experience of leadership and command in combat in April 1915. This experience undoubtedly shaped his later performance as an operational-level commander.

George Tuxford was born in Wales in February 1870.⁶ In the 1890s, he and his young wife immigrated to Canada and settled on a farm in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, eventually maintaining a sizable herd of livestock. In the summer of 1898, he led a herd from his farm in Moose Jaw to Dawson City, Yukon, transporting "fresh meat on the hoof to this booming town" at the height of the Klondike gold rush.⁷ His epic journey across the Canadian Rockies was then the longest cattle drive in Canadian history.

Tuxford began his military service prior to the outbreak of war. He served as an officer with the 16th Mounted Rifles, the first Militia regiment in Saskatchewan, from July 1905 to April 1910. When Militia Headquarters



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Brigadier-General George Stuart Tuxford.

authorized the creation of an independent squadron in Moose Jaw in the summer of 1910, then Major Tuxford was selected directly by the Minister of Militia and Defence, Sam Hughes, to command it. The new unit, originally designated 'D' Squadron of the 16th Mounted Rifles, was soon expanded to regimental size and renamed the 27th Light Horse. Tuxford at that time was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel. He noted in his memoirs: "I was given authority to organize a new Regiment of mounted troops, to consist of 3 Squadrons for a start. The 3 Squadrons were to be located at Moose Jaw, Swift Current, and Maple Creek..."⁸ Tuxford also had cavalry troops based at Moose Jaw, Keeler, Pense, and Morse.

While Lieutenant-Colonel Tuxford had retired from ranching in 1914, the 44-year-old officer remained active with his Militia unit, and he naturally offered it for service with the CEF at the outbreak of war in August. His offer was graciously declined; Colonel Sam Steele, then responsible for forming the cavalry arm of the first Canadian Contingent, informed Tuxford that another regiment had already been chosen for the task. Still, Tuxford's desire to serve Canada was not to be denied. He later wrote on the matter: "I, therefore, got Colonel Steele to wire into Ottawa and ask for permission for the mounted units from the West to come down to Valcartier as dismounted troops, if they so desired...Upon application I was authorized to organize two battalions."⁹

After receiving the unorthodox call to arms from Minister of Militia and Defence Sam Hughes, Tuxford at once moved his ad-hoc unit to Camp Valcartier, Quebec, where it was amalgamated with elements of other Militia cavalry units into the 5th (Western Cavalry) Battalion, part of 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade. Secure in his relationship with Hughes, Lieutenant-Colonel Tuxford was confirmed as the 5th Battalion's first commanding officer and he took the unit first to England and later into action in Flanders.

On the morning of 22 April 1915, the opening day of the battle that would come to be known as the Second Battle of Ypres, the 5th Battalion was in the 1st Canadian Division's front line positions northeast of the town of Ypres. The battalion began the battle with approximately 30 officers and 996 men.¹⁰ Over the next several days,

"These two companies were absolutely the last of the Canadian Division to leave their trenches."

Canadian Army Official Photograph



Brigadier-General Tuxford with the commanding officers and headquarters staff of 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade, 1918.

World War – the first published in 1938 by Col. A.F. Duguid, and the second published in 1962 by Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson – for a general overview and further details on the events surrounding this battle.

TUXFORD'S AFTER ACTION REPORT¹²

“The Fifth Battalion left Steenhorde on the morning of the 14th of April, being taken by buses the first half of the distance, and remaining under cover with the Welsh Regiment till 5 p.m., then continuing the march through Ypres to the trenches which were at the extreme apex of the salient, the 7th, 8th, and 10th in the front line trenches, the 5th in brigade reserve.

the unit fought desperately to hold out against repeated German attacks, artillery bombardments, and the war's latest weapon, chlorine gas. By 10 May, Tuxford's battalion suffered 11 officers and 278 men killed or wounded. Although the 5th Battalion casualties were relatively light in comparison with other Canadian infantry battalions engaged at the Second Battle of Ypres, Tuxford's unit later suffered the brunt of casualties during difficult fighting in the battle at Festubert at the end of May. By the beginning of July, the 5th Battalion had received only enough reinforcements to bring the strength up to 698 men, nearly 300 less than its normal authorized strength.

“The front line trenches taken over from the French were in very poor shape, being nothing more or less than isolated non-bullet-proof barricades, with no connections from trench to trench.

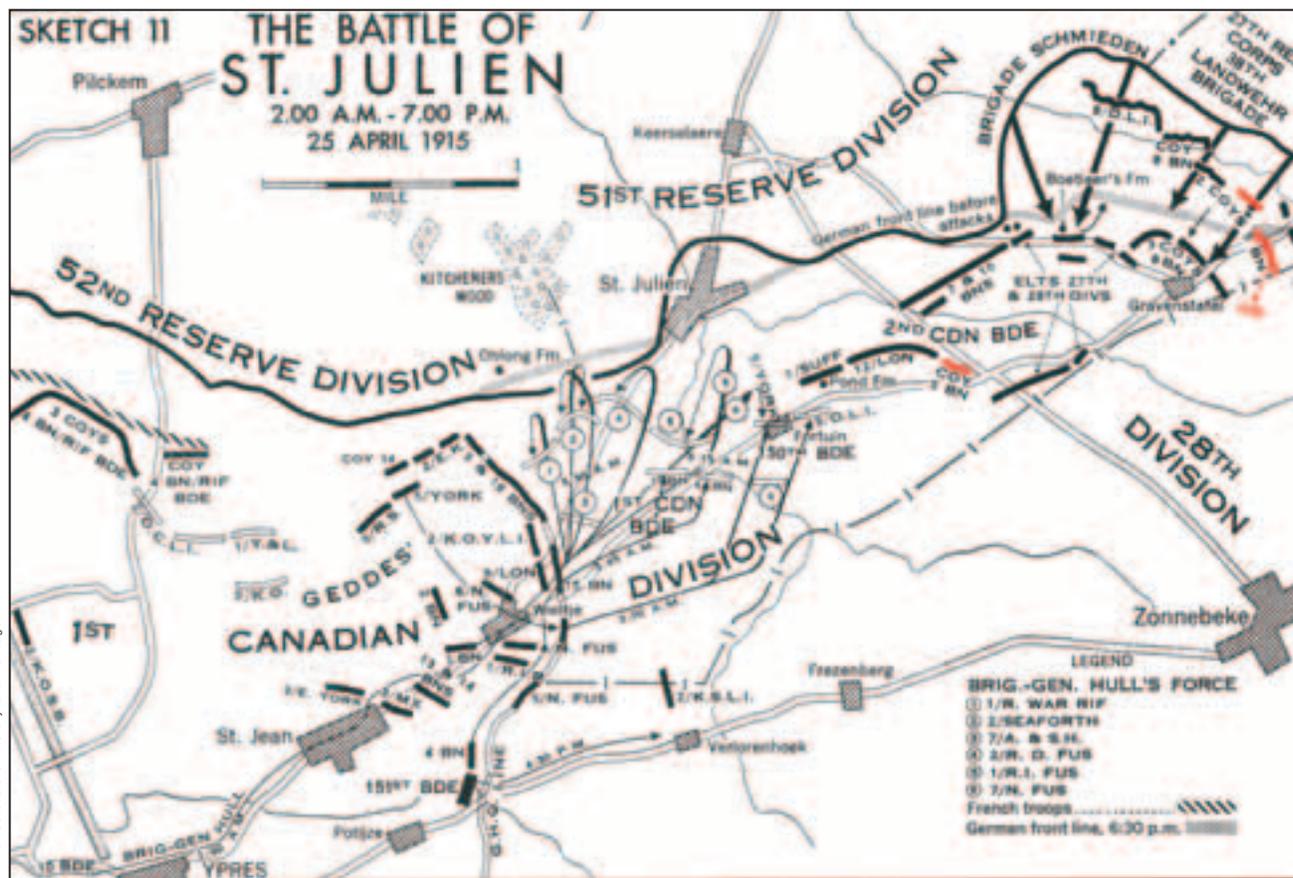
“The succeeding few days were energetically spent in improving these trenches. The 5th Battalion moved up to the front line trenches, relieving the 10th on the night of the 19th. The 8th Battalion moved over on the left, the 7th in brigade reserve, the 10th in Divisional reserve. The 5th held

Less than a year after Second Ypres Tuxford, by then a Brigadier-General in command of the 3rd Brigade, completed an ‘After Action Report’ that provided candid and at times brutally frank personal observations of various events during that battle. His assessment also gave a personal critique of his own performance during the engagement, providing an invaluable reference to where he was at various times and what he could see. More important perhaps, it provided a detailed account of what he knew and when, and of the decisions he made based on that knowledge and intelligence. From the point of later assessment, his report on the actions of himself and his unit at the Second Battle of Ypres is a critical document in assessing Canadian combat leadership and command during this fighting. It is an assessment that is generally lacking in contemporary literature on the Canadian Corps on the Western Front.¹¹

Lieutenant-Colonel Tuxford's After Action Report on Second Ypres, dated 10 March 1916, is reproduced here in its entirety. Readers may wish to consult either of the two Canadian official histories of the First



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the extreme right of the Canadian Division with the Royal Fusiliers on their right.

“Several German attacks were made on different parts of the line during the next two or three days, but were in all cases repulsed. On the 22nd, however, the Germans first threw over gas at the Algerians and Turcos, then holding on the left of the Canadian Division, breaking through and advancing towards St. Julien. During all this time our transports had to run the gauntlet, bringing up rations, and first brought news to the front trenches of the retirement of the Algerians and Turcos.

“After the 22nd it was impossible to get any rations up. On the 23rd [the] Germans gassed and apparently broke through the 3rd Brigade. On the 24th Major Hilliam, my adjutant, called me out about 4 o’clock in the morning to witness a huge wall of greeny, yellow smoke that was rolling up the hillside. We had no idea what it was, but thought it

might have something to do with the reported gas attacks of the preceding day. We were not long left in doubt. I immediately rang up Colonel Lipsett on our left for information and he replied personally, choking and gasping in such a manner that I thought he was done for.

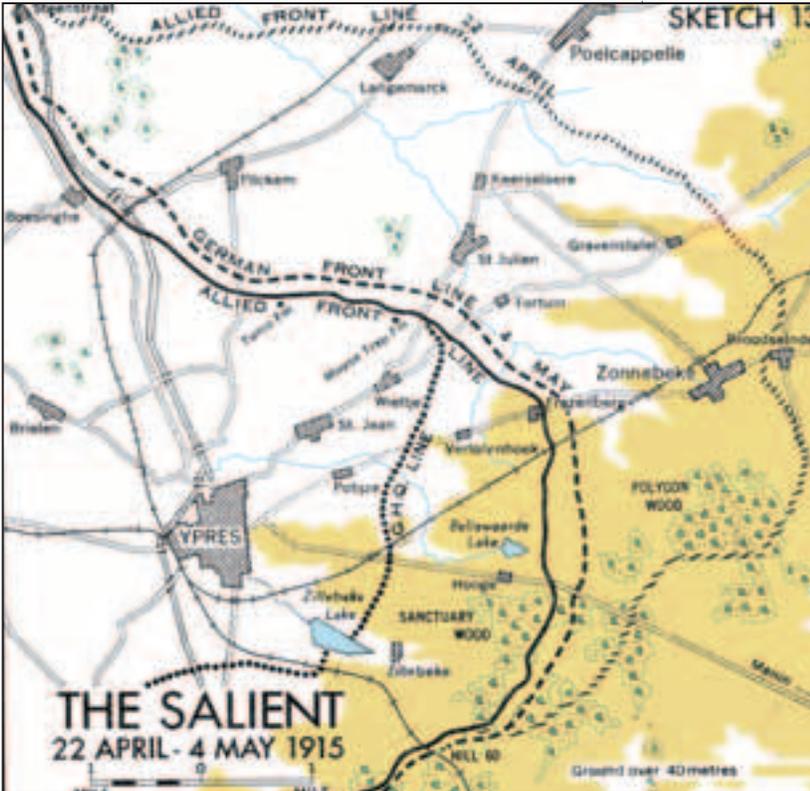
“This gas rolled over the 8th Battalion front, part of the 5th Battalion front, and both headquarters, being followed up by heavy German attacks in mass, more particularly on the 8th Battalion front.

“On the 23rd my reserve company at the bombarded crossroads had been absorbed by Brigade for tactical purposes.

“During the morning of the 24th Colonel Lipsett sent me an S.O.S. call, and upon his declaring it as serious, I sent him three platoons of my spare company, retaining one platoon to hold the hill. Again, later in the morning, under a further S.O.S. call I sent him the remaining platoon, thus leaving me nothing but two companies in the front line holding 1100 yards of trench. During this day some 100 to 200 Germans with machine guns broke through on the left of the 8th [Battalion] and took up a position in some cottages about 400 yards away, mid distant from the 5th and 8th headquarters, and started to dig themselves in.

“During the night of the 24th Colonel Lipsett and I traveled three times back and forth to the Headquarters of the Royal Fusiliers on our right, asking them to get their brigade headquarters to send up sufficient troops, if possible,

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“On the road over I met Major Dyer, my second in command, who brought news up that a heavy British attack was going to go through at daybreak, on our left. Naturally, having decided to hold on, we were intensely pleased. However, in the course of events, no British attack eventuated.

“Just before daylight Brigadier General Currie, commanding the Brigade, arrived; and at that time, feeling rather pleased, we made preparations for a good breakfast. General Currie could not believe that we really had Germans immediately in our rear, but a practical demonstration of their machine gun fire soon convinced him. About 1 p.m. a number of the Durhams, who were freshly out – unable to stand the intense artillery fire – which had been continuous all these days, came running past my headquarters with their rifles thrown away. They were ordered into trenches on top of the ridge, and Captain Ash, my signaling officer, was given instructions to shoot the first man who broke off afresh.

to relieve both the 8th and the 5th, who were exhausted, as they had now been fighting [for three days] without rations and water, and had endured the gas.

“Major Johnson, commanding the Fusiliers was quite in line with this, but it was impossible to supply the troops. We succeeded however, in gathering up details – Cheshires, 8th Durham Light Infantry, Northumberland Fusiliers, and men from one or two other units, amounting to about 1000 men, which we threw onto the left in the darkness, as well as possible, also relieving two or three companies of the 8th.

“Upon returning to Lipsett’s headquarters the last time, word was brought up, that there were two British Divisions along the Zonnebeck road, waiting only to be got up. It was midnight, pitch dark, with the exception of flares going up, and nobody knew the way. The position was extremely critical – dead and wounded men lying everywhere. As I have a good general bump of the direction, born of the prairies, I went down by myself to within a quarter of a mile of Zonnebeck but there was not a soul there. Upon returning, we thrashed out the matter of holding on for another twenty-four hours in the hope that relief would be sent, and decided that if we had to retire it would be impossible to do so in daylight and must be carried out at night.

“Having done all we could, I then got Lipsett to give me a few men to hold my own line. [H]e offered 150; I took 50. We took these men from the hedges under which they were resting, in a heavy rain, and put them in front trenches on the right of my line. The young officer commanding them was killed before night.

“About 2 p.m. General Currie wrote me the order, transmitted from high authority, to retire and dig in half way to the bombarded cross-roads, which were half a mile in our rear, on the reverse slope. I asked, “When?” – he replied, “Now.” I suggested it was impossible in daylight, but the order had to be carried out. Major Hilliam, my adjutant, wrote the order to the two companies holding the front line, and I signed them.

“Our telephone lines, which had been continually shot away and repaired, were now taken out completely by a shell, and it was necessary to take these orders down by messenger. Hilliam started with them and Dyer grabbed them, claiming his seniority as entitling him to carry them.

“Far less is known about the leadership and command of Canada’s Great War army than should be the case, or how the commanders’ skills were tested and proven on the battlefield.”

“To solve the question I gave the orders to the right company to Dyer and the left to Hilliam. They immediately started out, got clear of the artillery zone, which was extremely heavy, but further down the slope both were shot down, Hilliam through the lung, Dyer within an inch of the heart. Dyer, however, managed to struggle within 10 yards of the trenches, where he was hauled in by the men and the message was delivered.

“About this time I persuaded General Currie, who had been in consultation with Colonel Lipsett, to retire, which he

did, running the gauntlet of the machine guns of the Germans in the cottages in our rear. Colonel Lipsett and I had arranged, in the event of retirement, that we should do so in succession of companies from the left. However, what was left of the men in the front trenches came out almost as a whole, leaving my A. and B. companies still holding their line. I now started to send my staff away with orders to stop at a position on the Zonnebeck road, keeping clear of the enemy machine gun in the rear. They went one at a time, running the gauntlet of the intense artillery fire, which was now sweeping the reverse slopes of the Gravenstafel ridge.

"I was now left by myself for some twenty minutes, with the buildings toppling around like a pack of cards. I noticed that the men of the 8th, 7th, and 10th, to the number of some 300, streaming down the river slope, instead of stopping half way to the crossroads to dig in, were carrying on down to the crossroads themselves. This left absolutely no help to my two companies, who had not yet commenced to retire. "A" Company under Major Tenaille, "B" Company under Major Edgar.

"I ran down myself to the crossroads and actually found 40 men across the road and heading for Ypres, now in comparative safety. These men I got back across the road and told them all we were going up the hill again to help the two companies of the 5th Battalion in their retirement.

"These two companies were absolutely the last of the Canadian Division to leave their trenches. I found Lt. McLeod of the 8th [Battalion], who helped most energetically at this time. The German machine guns, which now opened a heavy enfilading fire from the cottages at 400 yards, seemed to take about a minute to change belts, so that the men laid down whilst the machine guns were firing, and continued immediately [when] they ceased.

"About half way up the hill, the enemy machine gun fire ceased, and looking around I saw the cottage in which the gun was placed, blown to pieces. This was one of those lucky circumstances which sometimes occur in war. After I had sent my Regimental S[ergeant] M[ajor] with the rest of the staff from Headquarters, he an old artillery man, made directly for a couple of British batteries on our right rear, and although he could not see the actual cottages, directed their fire by map.

"A German shell made a direct hit on one gun of this battery, putting it out of action and killing the crew. Their O.C. whilst wounded and lying on the ground, with his telephone carried away, yelled directions to the other gun, with the result as stated above.

"Half way up the hill I found Colonel Lipsett and Major Monroe, his second in command, and we proceeded to the top under a most intense artillery fire. I, however, distinctly remember, during the last hundred yards or so, when the noise was so intense that you had to shout to be heard, and the artillery fire was most incessant, looking over to my right and seeing my cook – Private Purvis – marching jauntily along with his cap stuck aslant over

one eye, and grinning at me in a most cheerful manner. My interpreter, who followed me like a dog, escaped with a bullet through the center of his hat.

"I saw Colonel Lipsett lying on the ground and shouted to him to go further up the ridge as I knew they had the absolute range of that particular point.

"I now want to lay stress on the magnificent morale of these men, some 5th, some 7th, some 8th, and some 10th. They had retired into relative safety, and, upon being ordered, immediately advanced up this half mile slope under heavy machine gun fire at 400 yards, and then under most intense artillery fire, shrapnel, and H.E., and as soon as I had put them in the trenches on the top of the hill and had personally told all N.C.O.s that we were going to hold the ridge till our two companies had retired and until they had arrived when we would then retire altogether, these men immediately snapped their bayonets in and said, "Just tell us what to do sir, and we will do it.", as cheerful as can be.

"I now began to look for Colonel Lipsett and went three times over the ground where I had last seen him under this artillery fire, being convinced that he must have been wounded. I could find no trace of him. His batman who was following him was hit where I had last seen him lying a longside him, and he had helped him down to the dressing station just in our rear.

"A and B Companies now began to appear. A. on our right, B. on our left, as had been ordered; and I want to say here that during this retirement, with the Germans yelling behind them, beating drums, and calling out – "We have got you Canadians now" – I never saw a man quicken his step. I ran out on the right and gathered Tenaille's company, forming up a line in continuation of our right, one man per yard, B Company simultaneously doing the same on our left. I posted Sergeant Bowie and six men on our left flank to guard a rise of ground over which I thought the Germans might possibly appear. This rise was some 80 yards distant. About 150 Germans suddenly appeared over this rise and Bowie could not tell whether they were Germans, British, or French, but immediately challenged. They replied at once, "Do not shoot, ve vas French". Bowie's reply was – "Fire" – and he took off 14 himself and stopped the rush.

"The Germans were now advancing and yelling, and I expected a charge, and ordered rapid fire, completely stopping the rush. Dark was almost on hand and I felt that we had control of the situation. However, it would have been madness to have remained there as we should only have been outflanked and cut off.

"I want to say here that the wonderful retirement of A and B companies, pursued by the German hordes, was greatly assisted by the Royal Fusiliers on our right who still held their trenches, they claiming they had no orders to retire and refusing to do so.

"I now arranged with Major Munroe, of the 8th [Battalion] to commence our own retirement, falling back

in parties covered by the remaining [men] till about 2 o'clock on the ridge. Upon the commencement of the retirement I started down to find General Currie and explain the situation, but not finding him kept on going till I found the two British batteries on our left rear and warned them of what was happening, of which they were entirely ignorant. Continuing, I found the Brigade headquarters to which the Royal Fusiliers belonged, and advised them of the situation.

"They were entirely in the dark as to what was happening. Picking up my Sergeant Major we finally made our Brigade headquarters at St. Jean. What was left of the Brigade arrived, about 400, in the morning, dead beat, gassed, starved, and short of water.

"At 7 a.m., four hours later, the remnants of the Brigade were marched up towards Fontuin to restore the line. Here we laid in support of the British line that day and night, and the succeeding day under a most intense shell fire and losing heavily, and on the night of the 27th retired through Potijze and Ypres to about two miles to the rear of the canal, moving into huts. We woke next morning with shrapnel bullets breaking through the roofs of the huts.

"I immediately got the men out into the fields, where we all laid till the night of the 29th. On the night of the 29th the Brigade again then marched to the canal, the 5th and 10th occupying sectors of the canal, the 7th and 8th in reserve. Here I had to guard some 500 yards of canal

adjoining Ypres on the North, with two bridges, No. 1 and 2, the blowing up of which I was responsible for.

"There was practically no protection in the rear of the canal, and we lay for six days and six nights under most incessant artillery bombardment, losing heavily each day, and were relieved on the night of the 5th by the Essex.

"We now marched 17 miles to billets at Outersteen, the other side of Bailleul, arriving about 11 a.m. on the 6th in all stages of exhaustion. Here we were visited by General Smith-Dorrien."

"I want to lay stress on the magnificent morale of these men.... They had retired into relative safety, and, upon being ordered, immediately advanced up this half mile slope under heavy machine gun fire at 400 yards, and then under most intense artillery fire, shrapnel, and H.E...."

CONCLUSION

Lieutenant Colonel Tuxford was one of only twelve infantry commanding officers who served at the Second Battle of Ypres, but only one of dozens of officers who commanded forces in that battle. It is thus surprising that nearly a century after this engagement a serious analysis of Canadian leadership and command at the Second Battle of Ypres has yet to appear. Tuxford's report serves as but a single piece of evidence for that analysis, the full assessment still awaiting the attention of serious scholarship from Canada's military historians. It is to be hoped that this article and others after it will encourage a new beginning.



NOTES

1. CEF battalions were recruited at home to a strength of just over 1000 men, but units engaged in fighting on the Western Front were never at full strength because of continual casualties both in and out of action.
2. The notable exceptions were obituaries that appeared in *Canadian Defence Quarterly* in the 1920s and 30s, and biographical sketches of some general officers who started out as battalion commanders. See, for example, M. Foran, "W.A. 'Billy' Griesbach and World War One" in *Alberta History*, Vol. 32:3 (Summer 1984), pp. 1-8. It should be noted that most of the infantry battalions recruited for the CEF were broken up in England to provide reinforcements for units already serving with the 48 battalions in the Canadian divisions in France and Flanders. Their commanding officers were often assigned to staff positions in England, contributing to a large surplus of Canadian senior officers without useful work in the United Kingdom.
3. The study of leadership and command in the Canadian Expeditionary Force is a largely untouched field with most existing studies dating back several decades. The best detailed institutional studies of the CEF officer corps remain K.C. Eyre, "Staff and Command in the Canadian Corps: The Canadian Militia 1896-1914 as a Source of Senior Officers", (unpublished MA thesis, Duke University, 1967), and A.M.J. Hyatt, "Canadian Generals of the First World War and the Popular View of Military Leadership", *Histoire Sociale - Social History*, 24 (November 1979), pp. 418-430.
4. Of the twelve infantry battalion commanders in action at Second Ypres, three were killed.
5. Brigadier General Victor W. Odlum, CB, CMG, DSO was the second longest serving Brigade Commander, leading 11th Canadian Infantry Brigade (4th Canadian Division) from July 1916 to June 1919. Odlum commanded the 7th (British Columbia) Battalion during the latter half of the Second Battles of Ypres after the original CO had been killed, and held the battalion command until his promotion to command 11th Brigade in July 1916.
6. National Archives of Canada [NAC], Record Group [RG] 24, CEF Personnel Record for Brigadier General George Stuart Tuxford, 5th Battalion and 3rd Brigade, 1st Canadian Division.
7. Daniel G. Dancocks, *Welcome to Flanders Fields: The First Canadian Battle of the Great War - Ypres, 1915*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988), p. 23.
8. Cited from the History of the Saskatchewan Dragoons web site, at URL <<http://www.sask.ca/27Light.htm>>
9. *Ibid*. The first battalion raised by Tuxford consisted of men from the 12th, 16th, 27th, 29th, 30th, 31st and 35th Light Horse, and the Corps of Guides. He expected to form a second, all-mounted battalion sometime later. However, the situation changed and the opportunity never arrived.
10. Colonel A.F. Duguid, *Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War 1914-1919*. (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1938), Appendix 226. Battalion strength as of 10 February 1915.
11. Critics might argue that Tuxford wished to cast himself in as positive a light as possible for posterity, but as his report shows he was not afraid to criticize himself or his organization during the action. For example, Tuxford admits that mistakes were made and that the enemy was able to penetrate behind his position, something that may have been considered embarrassing to leaders less sure of their abilities.
12. NAC. RG24, Vol.1825 File GAQ 5-61, Narrative of Brigadier General Tuxford, CMG, written 10 March 1916.