Alfred Bastien/Over the Top, Neuville-Vitasse/CWM 19710261-0056/ Beaverbrook Collection of War Art/Canadian War Museum

Over the Top, Neuville-Vitasse, by Alfred Bastien. The 22nd Battalion attacked east of here in late-August 1918. Georges Vanier always maintained that he was the officer holding the pistol in the foreground of the painting.

The Need to Advance: The Battle of Chérisy and the Massacre of Québécois Troops (August 1918)

by Carl Pépin

Carl Pépin *holds a doctorate in history from Université Laval and is a specialist in the history of warfare practices. As such, he has worked with different institutions including Université Laval, Université du Québec à Montréal, Royal Military College of Canada, and Historica Canada. His most recent book, published in 2013 by the Fondation littéraire Fleur de Lys, is entitled* Au *Non* de la Patrie : les relations franco-québécoises pendant la Grande Guerre (1914–1919).

Introduction: The Hundred Days Campaign (1918)

The Canadian Corps was deployed in Picardy in the early days of August 1918. It was included in the order of battle of the British Army and comprised four infantry divisions totalling 48 battalions along with their support units. The Canadians had just arrived from the Battle of Amiens, a victorious engagement that marked the first phase of the Hundred Days Campaign.[1] Under the supreme command of Marshal Ferdinand Foch, the Hundred Days Campaign, for the Allies, consisted of a series of major offensives mounted without interruption until the armistice of November 11. The Battle of Amiens was the first.

The Canadian soldiers were victorious, but exhausted. They had delivered a severe blow to the enemy, but the end of fighting in that sector gave them little respite. By the end of August, the Canadian Corps had been deployed further north, in Arras–Lens–Vimy, a sector with which it was relatively familiar, the troops having fought there in the spring and summer of 1917.

There, the Canadian Corps staff were given a new mission, namely to help take Cambrai, the Allied Forces' next objective in the Pas-de-Calais. The Canadians inherited a particularly difficult line of departure. Positioned to the right of the British First Army, they would ultimately have to attack one of the most formidable sections of the Hindenburg Line, the Drocourt–Quéant Line, named after the two villages that marked its ends. Those positions were considered to be unassailable, since the Germans had had time to build a network of trenches, fortifications and barbed wire as far as the eye could see. For whoever surveyed the German line in those locations, only one word came to mind: impossible. The objective was impregnable.

Of course, the Commander of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie, was perfectly aware of this, but like the

Directorate of History and Heritage

French and British formations in the sector, he knew that he had no choice but to continue the offensive as quickly as possible. By attacking Drocourt–Quéant, he could maintain the advantage, even the pace of battle, over an enemy who was still suffering from the shock of defeat at Amiens a few days earlier. Currie hesitated, as did the British commander, but he had to advance, come what may.[2]

To take Cambrai, the Canadians had to cross no less than three German defensive barriers. Drocourt–Quéant was the last known barrier in the network, and the most heavily fortified. The Drocourt–Quéant defensive barrier alone consisted of a system of four lines of deep trenches connected by cemented tunnels protected by thick entanglements of barbed wire.[3]

"To take Cambrai, the Canadians had to cross no less than three German defensive barriers. Drocourt-Quéant was the last known barrier in the network, and the most heavily fortified."

These were the conditions in which the 22nd Battalion (French Canadian) contributed to the offensive by trying to penetrate one of the sectors of this network facing the village of Chérisy, a hamlet between the Cojeul and Sensée rivers. The first hours of the assault seemed promising, but it ended in disaster for the French-Canadian soldiers and the English-speaking soldiers who were part of the same brigade.[4] This short article will examine the failed offensive more closely.

The Battle of Chérisy in Numbers

What came to be known as the Second Battle of Arras began on 26 August 1918, at 3 o'clock in the morning. The village of Monchy-le-Preux, located on the first line of the enemy's defensive network, was quickly taken. The outcome of the first day of the offensive seemed favourable, and the push was quickly taken up again the next day. The objective was to break through the second line, that at Fresnes-Rouvroy, which was much better protected and to which the Germans had retreated. Unlike the previous day, the element of surprise was no longer a factor, and resistance was fierce.

The battles on 27 and 28 August were terrible, and the 2nd Canadian Division suffered such alarming losses that they were forced to stop, and even to retreat in certain places. One of its battalions, the 22nd, was annihilated while attacking Chérisy, a village at the heart of the Hindenburg Line.

The soldiers of the 22nd Battalion, who had just fought at the Battle of Amiens, were ordered to attack on 27 August with the objective of taking Chérisy. However, heavy rain the day before led to countless logistical problems, in particular with respect to assembling the battalions in their attack sectors. Nevertheless, the 22nd Battalion's attack started, albeit late, at 10 o'clock in the morning under a bright sky. The French-Canadian soldiers took their objective, but the next day, a violent counter-barrage of artillery and an enemy infantry attack pushed them back almost to their

original positions. Needless to say, Chérisy was hell on earth for the men of the 22nd Battalion.

Of the 650 men and 23 officers who had launched the attack on 27 August, only 39 remained at the end of the next day. All the officers were killed, injured, or reported missing. In the absence of commanding officers, the 39 survivors who reported for roll call after the battle were put under the command of a company sergeant-major. Subsequent reports established losses for the 22nd Battalion at 53 dead and 108 injured on 27 August, and 52 dead and 92 injured on 28 August.[5]

Analysis of a Massacre

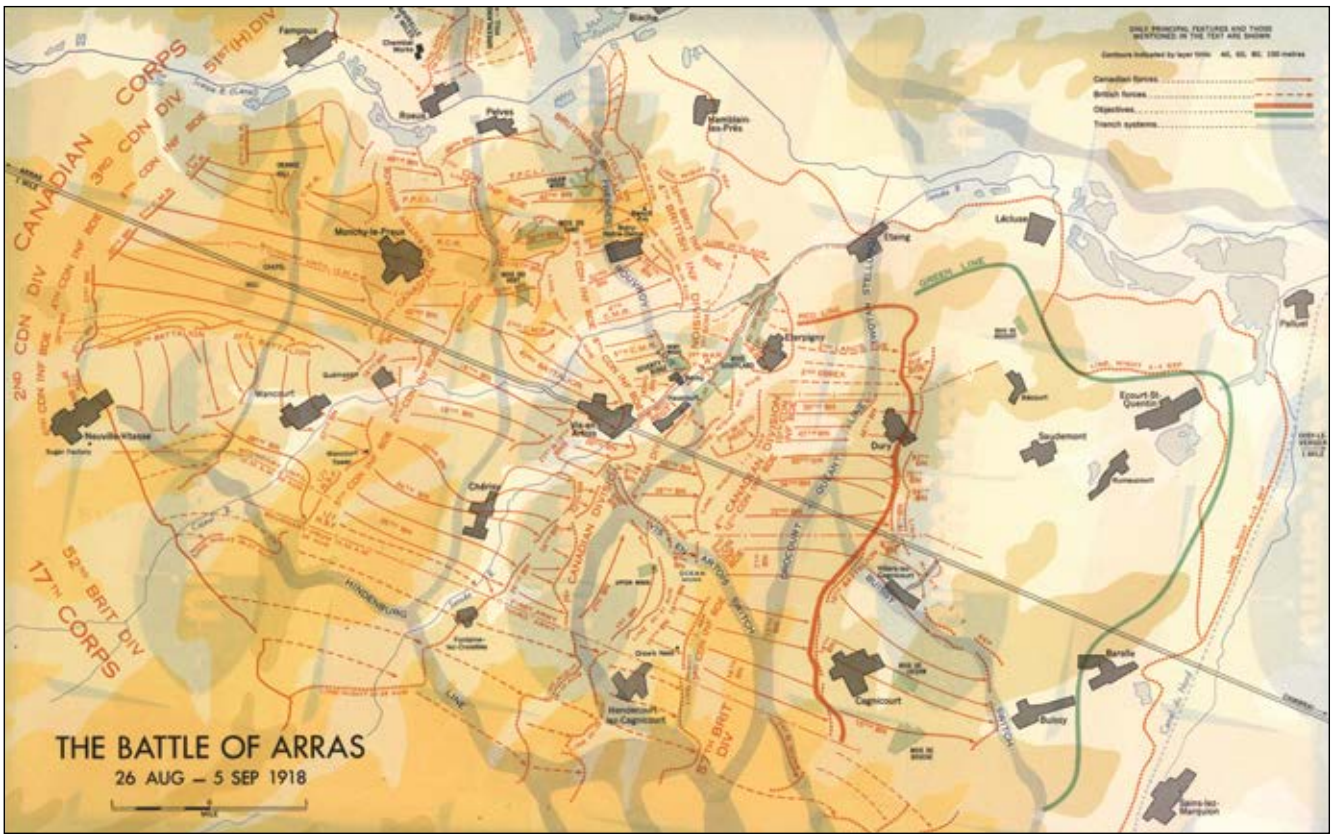
In the light of these gloomy statistics, a number of factors can be put forward to explain why Chérisy was a massacre for the French-Canadian soldiers. First, as mentioned previously, the frenetic pace of the battle and the tactical order in which the Canadian battalions were supposed to take up their departure positions meant that the units of the 5th Infantry Brigade arrived in the sector haphazardly, and, more important, had to launch their offensive in broad daylight at ten o'clock in the morning.[6] A seemingly trivial factor is that the sun rises in the east. In the battles of the 1914–1918 war on the Western Front, that meant that the enemy positioned defensively to the east would be attacked from the west. In other words, the attacker had to advance blinded by the sun.

In addition to the poor visibility for the attackers, another factor that probably had an impact on the cohesiveness of the 22nd Battalion as a tactical unit is the fact that the French Canadians had just fought at the Battle of Amiens two weeks earlier. During that successful attack, the battalion lost more than a quarter of its strength (approximately 250 men), and the reinforcements who arrived for the Battle of Arras included a good number of conscripts.[7] These were men who had enrolled against their will as a result of the passing of the *Conscription Act* by the Canadian Parliament in the summer of 1917, an Act that was being enforced more rigorously by the authorities in early 1918.[8]

Which raises the question: do conscripts fight less effectively? Certainly not, especially since the first conscripts were men who had complied with the *Conscription Act* and had received proper training. The problem was that these men arrived in a unit already weary from years of armed struggle, which had gradually reduced the ranks of experienced commanding officers. To put it plainly, for a number of reasons related to morale, available personnel, experience, tactics and existing military technology, the 22nd Battalion that fought at Chérisy in 1918 was quite different from the one that had, for example, led the charge at Courcelette in 1916.

As historian Bill Rawling points out, the lessons learned at Amiens, essentially the ideas of tank–infantry co-operation followed by platoon-centred tactical advances (one platoon advanced while the one next to it covered the first one, and vice versa), were relevant, but the Canadians did not have enough time to fully assimilate them and use them two weeks later.[9] In addition, in order for the advance to be possible while maintaining suppression fire at the enemy, the infantry, which made up the main body, would have had to be able to rely on fire support from elements such as tanks and auxiliary troops, especially trench mortar and machine gun gunners.

However, the losses of tanks at Amiens had been so heavy that at Arras, Canadian commanders used tanks sparingly. As for auxiliary infantry troops, the more difficult terrain and the



Directorate of History and Heritage

problem of replacing their own losses at Amiens meant that they were not able to provide proper fire support. Such fire support, by definition very local since it was intended to support a small unit as it would a battalion, was essential, especially when the inevitable enemy counter-attack came. All things considered, these elements were lacking for a good number of Canadian battalions, including the 22nd Battalion.[10]

Moreover, it is important to note that the problem of artillery (heavy and field) following the tempo of the attack infantry was a recurring one. In other words, in addition to the steep, muddy terrain of Drocourt–Quéant, the Canadians had another difficulty, which they had been able to handle the previous year at Vimy: the art of counter-battery fire.[11] In the sector that interests us, that of the 22nd Battalion and the 5th Brigade, that meant that Canadian artillery had trouble locating and neutralizing the German batteries in the woods a few kilometres east of Chérisy—Upton Wood, as it was known according to the military toponomy of the day. It was precisely that effective counter-battery fire that mowed down dozens of 22nd Battalion infantrymen who were hiding in the ruins of Chérisy and on the opposite slope just west of the Sensée River. The French Canadians had to endure this horrendous fire continuously for some 24 hours.

"There were not only very heavy losses, but also many acts of heroism whose exact nature we will probably never know."

Chérisy: Sangfroid, Discipline and Heroism

There were not only very heavy losses, but also many acts of heroism whose exact nature we will probably never know. A few examples of soldiers who won renown at Chérisy will suffice. Major Georges Vanier, future Governor General of Canada, lost his right leg, and the soldier who tried to help him was killed. The battalion medical officer, Dr. Albéric Marin, went so far as to remove his Red Cross badge and run to the front line to take command of what remained of the 'officerless' 22nd Battalion. He was also injured. From his command post, Brigadier-General Thomas-Louis Tremblay, who had commanded the 22nd Battalion for two and a half years, was leading the brigade in which that unit was operating. He watched helplessly as his former battalion was decimated before his eyes.

That brings us to another—still tactical—problem for the Canadians and Tremblay, among others: how one battalion should take over from another in the heat of battle. At that moment, on 28 August 1918, it was clear that the 22nd Battalion was in serious difficulty in Chérisy. It was being subjected to shelling from enemy artillery counter-batteries, as mentioned, and also effective fire from snipers and machine gunners on its flanks.

That raised the question of relief for the other brigade formations, which often had to quickly replace front-line units precisely when the enemy was mounting a counter-attack. It was this sudden concentration of troops in a specific location that made the enemy counter-battery so deadly, because relief was difficult to execute in numerous locations during the battle. Again, as Bill Rawling shows, discipline and the experience of the troops had a direct effect on a unit's capacity to provide relief.[12] In short, on this issue, the Canadian military machine in the Drocourt–Quéant sector had 'sand in the gears.'

The 'sand' also spread to battlefield communications. Generally speaking, during the 1914–1918 war, the three principal means of communication were runners, pigeons, and the telephone. But either the runners, like the pigeons, were killed, or the telephone lines were constantly severed by enemy fire. How then to assess the situation correctly and respond with clear orders?

The Right Honourable Georges Philias Vanier as Governor General of Canada, 1959–1967.

That is what Lieutenant-Colonel William Clark-Kennedy, Commanding Officer of the adjacent 24th Battalion (Victoria Rifles of Montreal), had to do when faced with the gravity of the situation. His unit, which was initially to the left of the 22nd Battalion as an attack battalion, had to move off to the right. Clark-Kennedy himself rushed to the 22nd Battalion's positions to rally, one by one, the survivors of the officerless French-Canadian battalion. His plan was to maintain a front slightly to the west of Chérisy in spite of the withdrawal of the 22nd Battalion, and to improvise a new mixed French-speaking and English-speaking battalion.

Knowing full well that progress was no longer possible at this stage of the battle at the end of the day on 28 August, and concluding that the 25th and 26th Battalions of the brigade would eventually arrive to provide support, Clark-Kennedy took the risk of stretching his own front to include the rest of the 22nd Battalion, which was then about the size of a platoon. Clark-Kennedy was awarded the Victoria Cross for having maintained his front.[13]

The mixed front of the 22nd and 24th Battalions constitutes the apogee of the Canadian sacrifice during this battle, because it was imperative to hold fast in front of Chérisy, if it was impossible to take the village. Then, what else could be done but order the men to dig in to protect themselves and gain time for the artillery and support units to reach the front line, while hoping that the superior commanders would finally get a clearer idea of the situation?

Department of National Defence/Library and Archives Canada PA-004284

Brigadier-General Thomas-Louis Tremblay

The same question arises as for Lieutenant-Colonel Clark-Kennedy: when and to what extent did Brigadier-General Tremblay understand that the 22nd Battalion was being annihilated at Chérisy? Probably the moment he heard the German batteries in Upton Wood open fire on the village. However—and this is the heart of the matter—when did Tremblay realize that the commanding officer of the 24th Battalion was setting up a very thin front facing the enemy to gain time and create the illusion that the Canadians were holding the line?

It is difficult to answer that question precisely, and Brigadier-General Tremblay had little to say on the matter, at least judging by his war memoirs published several decades after his death.[14] However, the heart of the drama of Chérisy is that exact moment on 28 August when Lieutenant-Colonel Clark-Kennedy understood that he had to do all he could to maintain a front, however thin, facing the enemy, to allow reinforcements to arrive.

It was the sacrifice of the 22nd and 24th Battalions that enabled the other formations of the 5th Brigade and those of the 2nd Division to launch the final attack on the Drocourt–Quéant line on 2 September 1918. Contrary to expectation, German resistance on this third line was weaker. The Canadian attackers managed to break through the Drocourt–Quéant network, and the German army retreated behind the Canal du Nord.

Conclusion: The Need to Advance

This short article merely sketches an explanation for the tragedy that was the Battle of Chérisy, a tragedy that paradoxically made it possible to maintain pressure on the enemy so that it found itself weakened when faced with subsequent Canadian attacks. In the end, the final taking of the Drocourt–Quéant line marked the end of the Second Battle of Arras. It must be remembered that since 26 August, the Canadian Corps had made headway towards the east over nearly eight kilometres and had taken 3000 prisoners. The losses from 26 to 29 August amounted to 6000 men.[15]

The Canadians were hit hard on the way from Arras to Cambrai. Many battalions were in a pitiful state, and troops consisting of an increasing number of conscripts had had to be brought in immediately from England. This had already begun after the Battle of Amiens, but the number of conscript soldiers in the

Musée Royal 22e Régiment, Ph-172-647

Lieutenant-Colonel William Hew Clark-Kennedy (left), commander of the 24th Battalion, and Lieutenant-Colonel Henri DesRosiers (right), commander of the 22nd Battalion, aboard the ship *Olympic* for their return to Canada at the end of the Great War, 1919.

Library and Archives Canada/Acc. No. 1983-28-590

In a patriotic period war poster, soldiers ride down a road paved with money from the Dominion of Canada, raised from patriotic citizens to hasten the return of their native sons to Canada.

Canadian battalions continued to increase right up to the end of the hostilities.

In the field, one of the battalions at Chérisy, the 22nd Battalion, tried to temporarily rebuild itself with English-speaking reinforcements in the two weeks following the battle, and then with French-speaking troops, most of whom were conscripts. Thus, two weeks after the battle, the 22nd Battalion returned to the line with reinforcements who had little battle experience, and other soldiers who still had physical injuries but had to return. The good news for the 22nd Battalion, under the circumstances, was that it was getting a new, experienced commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Henri DesRosiers, who would lead the unit until the armistice and the occupation of Germany in 1919.

William Rider-Rider/Department of National Defence/ Library and Archives Canada/ PA-003145

Canadian troops advancing through a German barrage east of Arras.

Further east, Cambrai was still in the hands of the Germans. The city was behind the Canal du Nord, where the enemy was strongly entrenched. The troops had no time to pause and even less to feel sorry for themselves because of the drama that had just unfolded. The Hundred Days Campaign was marked by this rapid, incessant pace of attacks, where 'resting' battalions had to, in fact, use the time to deploy for the following advance.

That is how the 22nd Battalion (French Canadian) got caught up in the whirlwind of rapid advances with the loss of many men, rearguard battles against a formidable enemy, and the integration of reinforcements for the next attack.

In that sense, the experience of the French-Canadian soldiers, as the Chérisy case study shows, was similar to that of the English-speaking infantry formations of the Canadian Corps at the end of the war.

CMJ

NOTES

1. For more on the participation of the Canadian Corps in the Hundred Days Campaign in 1918, here are a few suggestions: Tim Cook, "Bloody Victory: The Canadian Corps in the Hundred Days Campaign," in Ashley Ekins (ed.), *1918, Year of Victory: The End of the Great War and the Shaping of History* (Auckland, N.Z.: Exisle Publishing Limited, 2010), pp. 161–181; Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War. 1917-1918. Volume Two* (Toronto: Penguin Group (Canada), 2008), p. 727; Shane B. Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire: The Canadian Corps in the Last 100 Days of the Great War* (St. Catharines, ON: Vanwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), p. 164.
2. David Stevenson, *With Our Backs to the Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 127.
3. Niall J.A. Barr, "The Elusive Victory: The BEF and the Operational Level of War, September 1918," in Geoffrey Jensen and Andrew Wiest, *War in the Age of Technology* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2001), pp. 222–223.
4. During the Great War, the 22nd Battalion (French Canadian) belonged to the 5th Infantry Brigade, which was part of the battle order of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division. The 5th Brigade was made up of the following units in addition to the 22nd Battalion: 24th Battalion (Victoria Rifles), 25th Battalion (Nova Scotia Regiment), and 26th Battalion (New Brunswick Regiment).
5. With respect to the official list of soldiers of the 22nd Battalion (French Canadian) who died at Chérisy, the author compiled these few statistics from the unit's War Diary, which is available at the National Archives of Canada and the Archives of the Royal 22e Régiment at *http://www.ameriquefrancaise.org/media-3716/cimetiere_quebec_annexe1.pdf*
6. Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas-Louis Tremblay, Commanding Officer of the 22nd Battalion from February 1916 to August 1918, was promoted to brigadier-general and officially took command of the 5th Brigade two weeks before the Battle of Chérisy.
7. Archives of the Royal 22e Régiment, *War Diary. 22nd Battalion. CEF*. According to the 22nd Battalion's war diary, the exact number of losses from 8 to 10 August 1918 was 234 men of all ranks.
8. Alan Gordon, "Lest We Forget: Two Solitudes in War and Memory," in Norman Hillmer and Adam Chapnick (eds.), *Canadas of the Mind: The Making and Unmaking of Canadian Nationalisms of the Twentieth Century* (Montreal and Toronto: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), p. 162.
9. Bill Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps, 1914–1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), p. 217.
10. For a detailed analysis of the tactical support fire problems within the Canadian Corps in the summer of 1918, we refer the reader to Bill Rawling's study, *Ibid.*, pp. 205–208.
11. On the perfecting of the Canadian artillery's counter-battery fire during the Battle of Vimy, see Tim Cook, "The Gunners at Vimy: 'We are Hammering Fritz to Pieces,'" in Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci and Mike Bechthold, *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), pp. 105–124.
12. Rawling, pp. 205–208.
13. On the citation for the Victoria Cross awarded to Lieutenant-Colonel William Hew Clark-Kennedy, see http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/gal/vcg-gcv/bio/clark-kennedy-wh-eng.asp. Accessed 22 October 2013.
14. Thomas-Louis Tremblay (Major-General), *Journal de guerre (1915–1918)* (Montreal: Athéna éditions, "Histoire militaire" collection, 2006), p. 329. Unpublished text, recorded and annotated by Marcelle Cinq-Mars.
15. G.W.L. Nicholson (Colonel), *Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War. Canadian Expeditionary Force. 1914–1919* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1962), p. 432.