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How the Canadian Contingent withstood the First Poison Gas and Held the Line that Saved Calais and Christendom

FIRST HAND ACCOUNT OF THE GREATEST DEFENCE IN THE HISTORY OF WAR, TOLD BY ONE OF THE SURVIVORS

(Reprinted from the account by Private Harold R. Peat, Third Battalion, 1st Canadian Expeditionary Force.)

CANADIANS—THAT'S ALL

Less than three months before this we were raw recruits. We were considered greenhorns and absolutely undisciplined. We had had little of trench experience. At Neuve Chapelle we had "stood by." At Hill 60 we had watched the fun. But our discipline, our real mettle, had not yet been put to the test.

That evening of the twenty-second of April when we marched out from Ypres, little did any of us realize that within the next twenty-four hours more than one-half of our total effectives were to be no more.

I feel sure that our commanders must have been nervous. They must have wondered and asked themselves, "Will the boys stand it?" "How will they come out of the test?"

We were about to be thrown into the fiercest and bitterest battle of the war. There were no other troops within several days' march of us. There was no one to back us up. There was no one else, should we fail, to take our place. "Canadians! It's up to you!"

I could tell of several stirring things that happened to other battalions during that night, but I am only telling of what I saw myself, and it will suffice to write of one most stirring thing which befell the Third.

INTO THE MOUTH OF HELL

As we crossed the Yser Canal we marched in a dogged and resolute silence. No man can tell what were the thoughts of his comrade. We have no bands, no bugles, nor music when marching into action. We dare not even smoke. In dark and quiet we pass steadily ahead. There is only the continued muffled tramp—tramp—of hundreds of feet encased in heavy boots.

To the far right of us and to the far left shells were falling, bursting and brilliantly lighting up the heavens for a lurid moment. In our immediate sector there were no shells. It was all the more dark and all the more silent, for the noise and uproar and blazing flame to right and left.

We were on rising ground now. Up and up steadily we went. We reached the top of the grade, when suddenly from out of the pit of darkness ahead of us there came a high explosive shell. It dropped in the middle of our battalion. It struck where the machine gun section was placed, and annihilated them almost to a man.

Then it was that our mettle stood the test. Then it was that we proved the words Canadian and Man synonymous.

Not one of us wavered; not one of us swerved to right or left, to front or back. We kept on. There was hardly one who lost in step. The commanders whispered in the darkness, "Close up the ranks." The men behind those who had fallen jumped across the bodies of their comrades lying prone, and joined in immediately behind those in the forward rows.

The dead and wounded lay stretched where they had fallen. Coming behind us were the stretcher-bearers and the hospital corps. We knew our comrades would have attention. This was a grim business. We pressed on.

There was a supreme test of discipline. It was our weighing time in the balance of the world war, and we proved ourselves not wanting. We were Canadians—that all.

That afternoon the gas came over on us. The Germans put gas across on us because they hated us most. It is a compliment to be hated by the Germans. Extreme hatred from a German in the field shows that the hated are the most effective. They hated the French most at first, they hated the Imperial British, they hated us; they have hated the English again; soon, when the United States comes to her full effectiveness, she will take her place in the front rank of the hated.

We Canadians were a puzzle to them. When we went into the trenches at first, the enemy would call across the line to us, "What have you come over here to fight us for? What business is it of yours? Why did you not stay back home in Canada and attend to your own affairs, and not butt into something that does not concern you? If you had stayed at home in your own country WHEN WE CAME OVER AND TOOK CANADA, we would have treated you all right. Now that you have interfered, we are going to get you some day and get you right."

Yes; when they came over and took Canada. That was the very reason we were fighting. We wanted to keep our own part of the empire for ourselves. It is ours absolutely, and we had no intention that Germany should own it. We know exactly what the Hohenzollern planned to do. If France were subdued, if England were beaten on her own ground, then Canada would be a prize of war. We preferred to fight overseas, in a country which already had been devastated, rather than carry ruin and devastation into our own land, where alone we would not have had the slightest chance in the world for beating