

THE OFFICIALLY AUTHORIZED STORY OF THE FIFTY-SECOND BATTALION 52 ITS RECORD IN FRANCE, BELGIUM AND CANADA

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Comfortable bunks were assigned to the Battalion, plenty of blankets issued and every step taken to insure the comfort and cleanliness of the men. Sanitary arrangements were splendid, large washhouses, bathhouses and latrines being available close at hand. The food was good, and was plentiful. The Y.M.C.A.'s and Cantrens provided places of amusement and facilities for study, reading, letter writing and recreation. In addition the adjoining towns of Godalming and Guildford afforded distraction after parade hours and not a few found pleasure in the witty badinage of "Little Miss the Sun" so called because she was the outstanding feature of the camp. She dispensed the beer for thruppence a glass to the boys, throwing in her scintillating wit gratis. Other places of evening rendezvous were the "King's Arms" and the "Little George," where old English ale and beer were to be had in abundance, where the "blooming Tommy" met the "Blinkin' Canadian" and where the voices of both blended into exquisite harmony to the melodies of "Bonnie Annie Laurie," "You Were a Chum" or "Tipperary." Sounds a little like dissipation, doesn't it? But when you come to lay aside the narrow provincialism that influences the thought of most of us, you will readily appreciate that this spirit of abandon was the means of promoting a camaraderie among themselves that influenced every one of them towards a better and truer realization of the brotherhood of man, in spite of the disadvantages of cultivating this spirit in such environments.

Before starting on the final spurt of barrack and camp training, all the men were granted six days' landing leave, warrants being issued for any part of the United Kingdom. Although a number of the men went to "London Town," the majority took advantage of this opportunity to visit Scotland, and it is feared that the charming and winsome "Bonnie Scotch Lassies" of Edinburgh and Glasgow made very serious inroads on the affections of the susceptible visitors, to the detriment of their sweethearts across the seas.

After a delightful leave which was all too short, the Battalion, with the exception of the usual "absentees," settled down to its final period of training. Imperial instructors, principally sergeants, who had served over in France, were detailed to instruct the Battalion in the new mode of fighting. Under the tuition of these capable men, the Battalion was rushed through the courses that modern warfare requires a man to be thoroughly equipped with for the scientific and methodical destruction of life. And the work was no child's play either. Bayonet fighting and musketry were specially emphasized, although quite a lot of attention was paid to bomb throwing and trench warfare. In the bayonet fighting, time and time again the men were sent over the top of the dummy trenches and thrown over obstacles and against figures representing the enemy, with the exhortation (to put it mildly) to throw a little more vim and snap into the thrust that might mean life or death to the man who dealt it. The aim of military organization is to impart a unity of thought and action that will be carried out under any and all circumstances and conditions, and one of the fundamental principles governing this unity is the acquisition of an automatic control of all the devices that enter into the conduct of modern warfare. Thus, it is not merely necessary that a man know how to work the bolt of his rifle so as to load and reload the weapon; he must automatically work the bolt when his rifle needs reloading "without having to think about it." He must not only know the positions of "On Guard," and the manner of making the various thrusts, points, and returns; but he must be able to do these things with a lightning-like rapidity born of habit and without telegraphing the action to his opponent, which would be the case were it necessary for him to stop to think each time what he wanted to do. It was with this object in view that the military instructors worked so industriously and with such unflinching and tireless persistency to perfect the men in the handling of their weapons. Of necessity the constant repetition of the various exercises in connection with musketry and bayonet fighting grew very monotonous and the men cursed everything connected with training to their heart's content. Nevertheless, they obeyed instructions and did what they were told in the manner called for, and when they had finally satisfied the dogged men who were there to show them how to use the steel, they acquired a confidence in themselves that, in spite of Fritz's chances, should they ever meet in No-Man's Land in France.

Although artillery was playing such a prominent part in the fighting on the various fronts, the military authorities realized that the ultimate decision would be made by the infantryman with his rifle and bayonet, and in consequence most of the time was spent in perfecting the men in the use of the rifle. The instructors patiently explained the intricate mechanism of the "soldier's friend," (with apologies to Plunkett's "Pink Polishing Paste") and men who had never before been aware of the existence of such a subject as elementary physics (this does not refer to the M.O.'s favorite prescription) learned all about Newton's Laws of gravity and banded about such expressions as "trajectory" and "culminating point" with a blase sophistication that bespoke the secret pride they felt in their newly acquired knowledge.

Marches were, of course, a necessary part of the day's training and the various country roads and lanes for which Surrey is so justly famed were traversed time and time again by the Battalion. However, I hardly think the beauties of nature were the most outstanding features of these marches, as the men were usually thinking of how soon they would get back to camp again and throw their packs off, instead of the effect produced by the undulating hills against the sky line.

Quite a bit of ingenuity was displayed in the manufacture of "Dummy" bombs, which were thrown from improvised trenches over a high bar erected about a dozen yards from the trench, in order to insure the proper altitude for the throwing of these bombs and grenades. It was not very long before the men became quite proficient in the art of hitting a square box placed some thirty yards from the throwing point. Bomb throwing would appear to the spectators to be quite a simple accomplishment, but if you had occasion to throw one of these objects a distance of thirty or forty yards with the object of hitting a given point, you would find that it is far from the simple undertaking it might appear. In fact all conditions that might be met with in France were well simulated in the large training area at Bramshot Camp. Altogether the two weeks preceding the Xmas holidays were, from the military point of view, very profitably spent, and when the holidays arrived all ranks felt they had earned a hard-won rest.

With advent of Xmas, big dinners were provided throughout the various units in camp. Many of our boys had found friends and relatives in the cities surrounding Witley Camp, and more than fifty per cent of them received invitations for Xmas dinners with their friends. Those who were not fortunate enough to have acquired friends in the neighborhood, sat down to the best dinner it was possible to furnish under war conditions. On the morning of Dec. 25th, Colonel Hay personally visited every hut in the Bat-

alion, and shook hands with each man there, not only wishing all a very merry Xmas and happy New Year, but reminding them that this was the first Xmas they had spent away from home. A more substantial evidence of his good wishes was the presentation by the Colonel of a large keg of beer to each hut, the entire cost being defrayed by himself.

The holidays were very much enjoyed by all ranks, and when the New Year dawned every one breathed a sigh of regret at the passing of days filled with so many pleasant recollections.

The finishing touches of training and equipping the Battalion went forward with great rapidity. Two Companies were sent to Camp Borden to fire the musketry course and shortly afterwards the remainder of the Battalion was ordered to report to Bramshot, the men firing on the range being instructed to report to the Battalion at that camp when they had completed their G.C.M.'s.

All the troops in Bramshot at this time were Canadians. Conditions were not as ideal, or as favorable, both as regards sanitation and comfort, as was the case in Witley. Mud abounded. It rained practically every day. The reaction following the holidays and the steady grind of training demanded from all ranks, became very monotonous. Every moment of the day was a repetition of drill, route-marches, manoeuvres, fatigues, and more drill. The messing arrangements were not quite as satisfactory as the men had been heretofore accustomed to, although at no time was there any shortage. Fatigue details were constantly in demand, particularly road building parties, as the roads in and around the camp were all in a frightful condition.

The Battalion was inspected twice while in Bramshot, once by General Sir Archibald Hunter, General Officer Commanding the Aldershot district. The other occasion was an inspection by General Lessard, who, it will be remembered, inspected the Battalion before leaving Canada. Both officers commented very favorably, both on the appearance and the execution of manoeuvres by the unit.

During the frequent route marches that took place, the rapid stride of the Battalion was very noticeable, and on one occasion sent to the attention of the higher authorities. An order was sent to the Colonel directing him to reduce the pace and stride to the requirement of the Infantry field regulations. While this order was complied with at the time, the habit had become so ineradicable that the Colonel unconsciously increased the stride and pace when away from the supervision of superior officers.

All men who had not yet completed their musketry courses were now sent to Longmore ranges, as it was the desire of the G.O.C. to have every one in readiness to go to France, should a sudden call arise.

The Battalion had by this time made such a splendid showing that the Commanding Officer was informed that it would go to France as a unit, and would be brigaded with the Forty-Third, Fifty-Eighth, and Sixtieth Battalions, the four units forming the Ninth Canadian Infantry Brigade, with General Hill as the G.O.C. New web equipment, gas helmets, transport vehicles, horses and mules, field kitchens, ammunition and all the other accessories that comprise a Battalion's outfit were now issued, and on February 19th, 1915, the Battalion stood fully equipped, trained, and ready for France.

CHAPTER IV. FRANCE.

Secret orders were received that evening that the Battalion would be leaving as part of the Ninth Brigade, for France. The Battalion proceeded to Liphook Station, about three and a half miles from camp, where it entrained in two sections, for Southampton. The unit was kept under the shed in Southampton all day following its arrival, and at nine o'clock that night marched aboard the transport that was to take it to France. In the early watches of the morning, with a hazy grey fog hanging over the waters, the troop ship drew in to the harbor that in a measure marked a new epoch in the life of the men who comprised the Fifty-Second Battalion. Just before leaving La Havre, a catastrophe was narrowly averted, when a French pilot boat came out without lights, almost ramming the transport amidship.

Later in the morning, disembarkation took place, and the march was commenced towards billets some half dozed miles away. True to the traditions of the past, a heavy snow began to fall, and in the face of the driving blizzard, and with a long stretch of up-hill ground before it, the Battalion plodded on to the camp that was designated as its resting point. About dark, the wet, cold and weary men arrived in the tented city, and wearily threw themselves on the ground, first pilfing arms. By one of the peculiar ironies that have governed the history of the Battalion, it was our misfortune to find that all the tent doors were facing the wind, and as the Battalion that had previously occupied these tents failed to close the flaps before vacating the tents, we found them carpeted with a three or four inch thickness of snow. The weather was bitterly cold, and every one was chilled to the bone.

Colonel Hay immediately took steps to secure an issue of rum for the men, and he was so successful that every man who cared for it was able to get enough of the stimulating liquor to drive away the chills. This was the Battalion's first issue of rum, and it certainly performed a very valuable and much needed service. While waiting for supper, the men went to the various canteens and Y.M.C.A.'s, where they tried to get hot tea and something to eat. Later in the evening, when the men were getting ready to retire, some of the tents were crammed so full that a few of the men decided to try to secure sleeping accommodations elsewhere. Some of them went into the Y.M.C.A. and asked permission to sleep on the floor near the stove, but the man in charge refused to permit them to do so, stating that it was against his orders.

There is no desire upon the part of the writer to give the impression that the Y.M.C.A. has done other than the very best work possible for the comfort, convenience and amusement of the troops. As a matter of fact, he himself has received untold favors at the hands of this organization and knows that it has done magnificent work along the lines above referred to. But unfortunately it has had a few men acting as secretaries who have not been the highest type of men required for this class of work, and who have failed at times to rise to emergencies on their own initiative. Certainly we can appreciate the fact that subordinates are bound largely by red tape and regulations. But we think that under the circumstances, any man filling a position requiring tact and judgment, should have been broad-minded enough to have seen the advisability of overriding long-ance, a rule that was only intended to protect the military service itself, and to prevent unprincipled men who may have slipped into the Y.M.C.A. personnel, from exploiting the soldiers. Again I should like to call attention to the fact that the mention of this incident is in no way a reflection upon the general good work performed by this organization.

(To Be Continued.)