52 THE OFFICIALLY AUTHORIZED STORY OF THE FIFTY-SECOND BATTALION 52

ITS RECORD IN FRANCE, BELGIUM AND CANADA

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During the days following the initial stage of the Battle, the Battalion was frequently called on to furnish working parties under the supervision and direction of the Engineers. On one occasion, such a working party, in charge of a subaltern, was starting out to report to the engineers when a soldier wearing the uniform of a sapper, approached the officer in command of the party and asked if this was the working party from the Fifty-Second Battalion. On being informed that it was he stated that he had been sent to guide the squad to the place that was undergoing repairs. This being perfectly in order, the Lieutenant told him to proceed and followed behind him with his men. The sapper led them away from our portion of the trenches and then stepped out into No-Man's Land, walking directly towards the German trenches. Of course the suspicion of the officer was instantly aroused, and he halted his men and demanded the name and unit of the guide. The latter said his name was Sapper Silly, of the Canadian Engineers. Although still in doubt, the man's story that he had been sent to lead them to an enemy sap that was in our hands, and that needed strengthening, seemed so natural, that the Lieutenant decided to follow on a little farther, and it was not until he saw some figures resembling Germans looming up in the dusky gloom ahead, that his suspicions were confirmed, and realizing that he had been led into a trap, he immediately gave the order to about turn and for every man to make his way back on his own as best he could. During the confusion, the German who had so nearly succeeded in tricking him, escaped, and for days to come, Sapper Silly, of the Canadian Engineers, was a sore topic to this guileless subaltern. This incident only shows that coolness and nerve are not characteristics over which the Canadians held an exclusive monopoly, and the idea that all Germans are thick-headed and spineless, so prevalent among many of our unthinking people, is as absurd as it is untrue. It is neither good sportsmanship nor sound tactics to underrate or underestimate the abilities and fighting qualities of one's enemies.

With the completion of the task of re-consolidating the positions taken on the thirteenth of June, all ranks thought that there would be a respite from the heavy shell fire that had been playing so incessantly along our front. The Germans decided otherwise. Not a moment of the day or night passed but they hurled some death-dealing harbinger in our midst. Although men were becoming accustomed to the continual shriek of the high explosives, the tremendous strain that had been imposed upon them in this, their first big contact with war in its cruellest aspect, was beginning to tell upon them, and after thirty-one days of grappling with death and hunger and filth and mud, and after enduring within the short space of one month the concentrated essence of a lifetime of suffering and privation, the remnant of the Fifty-Second Battalion left the line they had shed so much blood to retain and went into billets on the 17th of June.

Mothers, I wish you could have seen your boys that morning. It would have brought an ache to your hearts, and tears to your eyes. But it would have brought something infinitely greater, something inexpressibly nobler. Your boys had overnight doffed the careless habiliments of irresponsible youth and had donned the garb of proven manhood. They had been tried as by fire, and they had not been found wanting. True, they were dirty, unkempt, hollow-eyed; but they had grown in "stature," there was a new light in their eyes, a new purpose in their hearts. They had fought and had won, and henceforth they could look out upon the world with head erect and shoulders squared and claim the recognition due to those who have "fought a good fight, and kept the faith." Yes, mothers, on that morning of June 17th you had lost your "boys" irrevocably, but the loss was only transitional, as you had gained "men."

It was not a light-hearted body of men that tramped down the road to billets. Many a comrade was lying asleep beneath the cold, friendless ground; many were enduring the tortures of hell back in the dressing stations behind the line; some would never be able to walk again, and many had met the most dreaded disablement of all, total blindness. Fortunately, the men who held the reins of power had sufficient vision to realize the great strain the troops had undergone, and to take their minds off the horrors they had seen and been subjected to, they were sent to one of the garden spots of France, Steenvoorde, miles away from sight or sound of the deadly Salient. Here the jangled nerves of all were given a chance to calm down. Everything seemed so quiet and peaceful, that it required a vivid stretch of the imagination to conjure up war's unlovely picture. Pretty little farms stretched forth in all their fresh and wholesome lovliness. The skies seemed to exert themselves in their endeavor to look their friendliest. Why is it that we so seldom appreciate the things of beauty that lie within our grasp all through life, and only sigh and ache and long for them when they are denied us. Is it because man is born to eternal discontent, or is it a trait that we develop because of our distorted sense of the true value of things? Whatever the answer may be these men who had always had sunlight and quiet and green fields within their reach, and who had in most cases ignored their blessings heretofore, now reached forth with eagerness and hunger for the quiet friendliness of the country pastures.

The two weeks spent in the beautiful little French community gave all ranks a new lease of life. Men felt rejuvenated, and were again ready to take up the uninterrupted course of conflict. Re-inforcements had been received from England, and Major Thompson, who had been the first officer to go on leave, Colonel Hay having generously yielded his right as Commanding Officer to the Major, now resumed command of the Battalion from Major E. O. Reid, who had taken charge after the death of Colonel Hay.

Shortly after coming out of the Ypres Salient, the famous author of "The Sky Pilot," Major Gordon, addressed the battalion on Church Parade. He preached such a sermon as only a man of his keen insight into life could preach, and the value of his words was augmented by the fact that the men believed, because they had seen him put into action the ideals he stood for, and asked them to accept as theirs. He had been a constant visitor to the trenches, exposed himself to the same danger the rank and file were exposed to, and had never failed to make allowance for the other fellow's viewpoint of life. And it is such men as he, and the other splendid men who, in the name of the Cross, which symbolizes a world's suffering and sacrifice, wound themselves round the heart-strings of the boys "over there" by their absolute unselfishness and Christian charity, that the reverence for the Church, which at times has suffered because of its seeming indifference to the vital issues of life, has been maintained and strengthened. And if it does not savor too much of presumption, the writer would suggest that the only way to reach the majority of the men who have passed through their earthly Gethsemane is for the clergy to adjust themselves to the mental outlook of the returned soldier and try to meet him on the same basis that his chaplain met him in the field; on a basis of mutual understanding and respect for each other's convictions. Although not altogether justified, the average soldier has reiterated the proneness of the average minister to be narrow and intolerant, and if the good work started by the Chaplains in the field is to be kept up, the ministers and the soldiers will have to get together, and the first step must of necessity be taken by the former.

During this period of rest Major W. T. Lawless, later known as Wild Bill, and one of the most popular and well liked officers of the Battalion, and Captain L. T. Sherwood, organized a series of sports that proved a very happy diversion. Teams were trained to take part in a grand Divisional meet, baseball, football and cricket teams started and almost every one in the Battalion was indicted to take some part in livening up the billet life. An exciting cricket match with No. four Company, Imperial Army Service Corps, was won by our men with a score of 65 to 17. Numerous inter-company baseball and football games were played, and everyone displayed the same eager enthusiasm in the field of sport that had been shown on the field of battle. At the Divisional Meet on Dominion Day the Battalion made a very good showing, although it did not carry off a single individual event. The result of this meet demonstrated that the Battalion had been developed as a whole, instead of specializing in any particular individual or event.

The early part of July brought to a close one of the most enjoyable rest periods the Battalion had experienced, and although it was with a tinge of regret that the men prepared to return to the trenches, they felt that the respite had been granted to enable them better to perform the work lying before them. The line was taken over in the Hooge Sector, slightly back of the former trenches, as the tremendous loss of life in trying to hold the old trench had brought about a decision to construct a line a little farther behind, which was less open to direct attack.

Fine opportunities were now open to the Scout section to carry on their interesting, if extremely hazardous work. A detail under Lieutenant H. C. Fryer, popularly known as Hal, who was acting as Scout Officer, started out to learn something of the activities of a German patrol that the Canadian Mounted Rifles had tipped us off was operating in the vicinity of a neighboring thicket. Included in the detail was Sergeant (Later Captain) John W. Strong, a machine gunner and seven scouts and bombers.

Picking its way with the utmost care and caution, the party arrived in the wood without having encountered anything of a suspicious nature. However, Lieutenant Fryer was too good a soldier and tactician to take any innecessary chances. He placed a machine gunner with his L.M.G. into a position covering all the open ground in front and commanding all the approaches, with the rest of the party covering the flanks in extended order. Lieutenant Fryer felt certain that no Germans could get through without coming into contact with his party, and he was already speculating as to the number of prisoners he would march back to the lines. The night was unusually quiet, nothing but a little desultory rifle fire going on, with an occasional flare illuminating the shadowy night. After waiting what seemed like an interminable period, Lieutenant Fryer decided to make a personal reconnaissance as far as the enemy's barbed wire entanglements, but on mentioning the project to Sergeant Strong, the latter insisted on accompanying his officer.

The two had barely gone a hundred yards from their position when, thanks to a sudden flare, and the carelessness of the party which continued moving, Fryer and his companion discovered the German patrol sneaking toward the wood. At the same time the machine gunner discovered the patrol, but dared not turn loose for fear of hitting the two men who had just left. He kept the enemy covered, but waited anxiously for some sign from the two scouts. The Germans suddenly veered back towards their own lines, and our boys were beginning to feel anxious over the fate of Lieutenant Fryer and Sergeant Strong, when they heard the latter's voice ordering, in no uncertain terms, the patrol to surrender. The Germans must have though that they had run into a whole raiding party, for they immediately rushed for cover, and it was not until the two reckless scouts made a dash for their own position that Fritzie realized he had been tricked, and a volley of shots was sent after the two Canadians. Lieutenant Fryer, now gave the order for the machine gun to turn loose, and for a few minutes hell was popping. The range was point blank, and even in the uncertain light it was not very difficult to find the target. The balance of our party also opened up and a lively serenade was played in that particular piece of wood. The staccato reports of the machine gun and the rifle fire breaking out suddenly on the still night roused the entire German line, and flares were sent up to locate the cause of the disturbance. A large party was despatched by the Germans to come to the assistance of their small patrol, and in the face of this superior reinforcement, Lieutenant Fryer decided it was time to take to the tall timbers. As soon as he and his men had regained the safety of our lines, a deadly stream of machine gun bullets was played along the whole area of the midnight encounter. The following night the scouting party revisited the scene of the previous evening's action and returned with some of the bodies as proof of their work, the Commanding Officer having been undecided as to whether or not to accept Lieutenant Fryer's report on the action with the enemy patrol. For their splendid results in this encounter Lieutenant Fryer was recommended for the Distinguished Service Order and awarded the Military Cross, Sergeant Strong being recommended for the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

One of the very important features of trench warfare, with its absence of accurate information, was the institution of raiding expeditions. These served a double purpose. If successful, and they usually were, they seriously impaired the morale of the raided troops, and if prisoners were also captured, valuable information was obtained, both as to the disposition of the enemy's divisions, this being obtained by their distinctive markings or badges, and other facts brought out by questioning the prisoners. While the International rules of warfare prohibit the forcing of information other than their names and units from prisoners, as a usual thing many captured men are willing, for the purpose of receiving more favored treatment at the hands of their captors, to give information above which they are actually compelled to impart, and the inquisitors of our Intelligence Department were so skillful in their methods of interrogation, that much valuable knowledge of the enemy's movements, dispositions and intentions was obtained in this manner. Consequently, during the early period of the Somme drive, which was going on about this time, orders were received to carry on raids as often as practicable, so as to harass the enemy and prevent him from sending any additional troops to augment his forces on the Somme, as well as to learn all about his dispositions.

On one occasion a raiding party was organized under the command of Lieutenant William Dougal, the Scout Officer, with Sergeant Strong to assist him. The latter was a particularly valuable and efficient Non-commissioned Officer, being very dependable in an emergency. A machine gunner, who later won his commission in the Battalion, also accompanied the party. Arrangements had been made for artillery support just prior to the actual attack. The party was particularly impressed with the necessity of obtaining some prisoners if possible.

The night was dark enough to insure the proper secrecy, and about twelve o'clock the party stepped out into the open and began to make its way very cautiously towards the enemy's line. When it arrived within seventy-five yards of their trenches, the party halted, just as our artillery opened up a lively barrage for about ten minutes. When the curtain of fire lifted, the raiders went forward with a rush, but found themselves blocked by a thickly woven barricade of wire, which the shell fire had failed to demolish. Immediate action was necessary, as with the lifting of the barrage, the Germans would come out of their dugouts prepared for a night attack. Lieutenant Dougal and Sergeant Strong went forward trying to locate a break in the wire entanglement, and after a few minutes search found an opening that gave promise of access to the trenches. However, Sergeant Strong thought it would be advisable for someone to first penetrate a little way into the wire to be sure that the opening extended all the way through, and that there was no trap back of it. He volunteered to do this himself, and knowing his dependability, the lieutenant told him to go ahead. Sergeant Strong had wormed his way through the winding labyrinth for a short distance when he came out into an opening clear of any wire. His training taught him that this was too obviously a trap, and he decided to make his way back to where he had left the officer when he discovered a Fritzie partly concealed in a pit a short distance away. Whatever may have been his feelings at the moment, he didn't hesitate as to his course. He promptly covered the midnight prowler with his gun and gave him to understand by an unmistakeable sign that his presence was urgently required elsewhere. In spite of the fact that Heine had a companion in the pit, he shambled out of the hole with considerable speed, closely followed by his sheepish companion. Strong marched the two back towards his party, and Lieutenant Dougal was almost jarred out of his wits by the sight of the two prisoners crawling out of the wire with Strong bringing up the rear. Realizing that too much time had already been spent in looking for an opening and that it would be suicidal to attempt the raid with the Germans fully prepared, Dougal wisely decided to return with the two prisoners. The party had barely started back when the Huns began to make things lively, and in the ensuing barage, two of the party were seriously wounded.

Although the primary object of the expedition had been to raid the enemy trenches, Lieutenant Dougal took advantage of the opportunity to make a reconnaissance that later proved of considerable value, and for the work performed that night he was awarded the Military Cross. Sergeant Strong, who had a few days before been recommended for the Distinguished Conduct Medal, following the patrolling expedition under Lieutenant Fryer, was again recommended for the decoration, receiving the Military Medal in recognition of his exceptional service on both occasions.

The Battalion left the line for a rest, billeting in Steenvoorde. Rumors were floating around to the effect that a move would be made by the entire Canadian Corps from Flanders to the Somme, and everyone made the most of the opportunities for recreation while in billets, as the reports that came in from time to time indicated that the fighting on the Somme was very severe. Although it was predicted that the move would take place early in August, the month was well advanced before the first battalions of the corps were transferred to the new fighting area.

Two more trips were made into the line before the Fifty-Second finally left the Salient that had taken such a terrible toll in lives. Another trip was made into Hill 60, the Battalion taking over a frontage that had formerly been held by an entire Brigade. Naturally this entailed a greater responsibility, but the situation was met with every forethought and care. The enemy was kept constantly on the jump by raiding parties, which were sent against him with increasing frequency. On the other hand he gave us a considerable straffing with his heavy trench mortars, the concussion of these projectiles inflicting severe casualties among our men. Our own trench mortar battery, the Ninth, composed of details from each of the four Battalions in the Brigade, came in for quite a considerable amount of attention at his hands, and on one occasion an entire detail was wiped out, the only uninjured person being Corporal LeMoyne, of the Fifty-Second, although none of the mortars were lost. During these final tours in the line three of our most valuable officers lost their lives in action, Captain A. L. Saunders, Lieutenant A. N. P. Service, a brother of the celebrated Canadian writer, and Lieutenant F. M. Hetherington, the latter two having fallen victims to the enemy's sniping fire.

One of the few unsuccessful raids attempted was made by Lieutenant Oxenham with a party of scouts, including Private Millar, who wrote a very interesting account of this expedition in his exceptionally fine story of the Fifty-Second "From Thunder Bay Through Ypres." The expedition was more in the nature of a scouting reconnaissance than a raid, although the Battalion records show it as the latter. Reports had been received that a German party had been noticed on several occasions in the vicinity of the Menin Road, and Lieutenant Oxenham was directed to take a party of scouts and ascertain the truth of the report and to obtain all possible in formation, with instructions to attack or not as the circumstances might warrant. Lieutenant Oxenham reported his intended expedition to Lieutenant Burns-McKenzie, who was in charge of the trench mortar battery at a point called the Culvert, well in advance of our line, so that care might be taken that the scouts were not fired upon. Farther along the Menin Road another post was manned by a section of bombers, this being our most advanced position, and as there was little likelihood of encountering any of the enemy before passing this post, the party advanced along the road rather carelessly, believing they had not yet passed the position. One of the men, who was fairly familiar with the location of the advanced post suggested to the Non-commissioned Officer in charge that he believed the point had been passed but the Sergeant disagreed, and the advance was continued on his recommendation, Lieutenant Oxenham depending almost entirely on the N.C.O's. discretion, having newly arrived in the Battalin and naturally feeling that the Sergeant would be better informed. After passing a sudden turn in the road, the party ran into a wire obstruction placed across it. Still believing they were in the security of their own ground, the Officer and the two N.C.O's. of the party passed through the wire, going forward slowly, but still walking erect. The remainder of the party had halted a short distance back, feeling sure that they were running into a trap. Seeing the officer was intent on going forward, they decided to catch up with him and warn him that they believed he was deliberately sacrificing himself and those with him. They had barely reached the wire obstruction when the Germans, who had been lying low all the time waiting for the party to walk into the trap, opened fire, seriously wounding the Sergeant and one of the privates, Lieutenant Oxenham receiving a bullet in his arm. Had the Germans taken advantage of the situation, they could have captured the entire detail, but the way the three men had openly penetrated the wire led them to believe that a large force was following them, so having inflicted all the damage they could, they turned and made their way back to their own lines. This gave our men a chance to return to the post at the Culvert, where one of the men succumbed to his wound. The other casualties were sent back to the dressing station as soon as possible.

A few nights later another raid was made by a party under the able leadership of Lieutenant Hal Fryer, who had distinguished himself some time before. A preliminary reconnaissance of the position to be attacked, Post 7 and 8, was successfully carried out by Corporal Robert Murray Clark, who not only brought back a complete and accurate report of the entire lay of the ground, but made various suggestions as to the method of the attack which proved of the utmost value to the Officer in command. He also took part in the raid the following night. For his exceptional coolness, courage and initiative he was awarded the Military Medal.

With a party of forty-six selected men, Lieutenant Fryer again ventured out into No-Man's Land to penetrate Fritzie's trench and give him a little taste of hell. The Germans must have done some scouting of their own, for they evidently seemed to have been warned of the impending raid. They withdrew from the advanced trenches and directed a galling fire on the advancing raiders, causing some casualties. Lieutenant Fryer kept plugging steadily on and reached the line, only to find the trench deserted. He remained there long enough to get all the information available, and then withdrew his force with only slight casualties. His action again brought him a recommendation for the award of The Distinguished Service Order, this, as in the case of Sergeant Strong, being the second recommendation for honors within the short space of six days.

(To Be Continued.)

NOTE—This story of the Fifty-Second Battalion, with illustrations, will be published shortly in book form and may be purchased at the usual places.