



JAMES ERNEST BROWN: SOLDIER FOR HIS TIMES

JOHN BURGE

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Soldier for his times



Private Brown, age 30, shortly after enlistment in early 1916.

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*“Only chain that we can stand
Is the chain of hand to hand
Keep your eyes on the prize, Hold on . . . ”*

-from “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,” the civil rights song;
the lyrics were written by Alice Wine in 1956, but the tune
and the spirit go way back.

Foreword

James Ernest Brown was neither famous nor interested in fame. Avoiding centre stage, he saw himself not as a man apart but as a man among others. If his actions and principles were remarkable, it's because he was remarkable. I hope his qualities come through in these pages.

I became interested in Ern Brown after reading his letters from the First World War and hearing my wife and her mother (his granddaughter and daughter) talk about him. I wanted to find out more about his life, and to hear what others had to say about him. That was in the mid-1980s.

Over the course of a year (1985-1986) I wrote or spoke to his sisters Catherine and Mildred, his daughters Margaret, Doris, and Kathleen (Kay), and his son Merton. I also talked with several of his grandchildren and wrote to organizations and institutions that might have recorded his actions and achievements. The result was a monograph on Ern Brown with the same title as this book but half its length and text-only.

The conversations and correspondence with those who remembered him were the best part of researching that first publication. My thanks to everyone who contributed memories, and a special thanks to Doris Thomson for her keen assistance and support, then and until her death last April.

Two years ago I returned to Ern Brown with renewed interest and the urge to extend and deepen the original narrative. Access to online materials and recent publications inspired additional research into Ern's life during the Great War and, equally, the difficult but socially hopeful decades that followed. A year ago, I published a hard copy edition of *Soldier for his times*. The present electronic version varies from that edition only in that it incorporates a few additions and changes, some suggested by Ern's youngest daughter, Kay Jones.

The following account is fragmentary. Ern Brown left few papers and relatively little record in the social or military accounts of his day. Farmer, soldier, and social democrat, he laboured quietly for his principles. A man of his time and place, he spoke for what he thought just, but drew little attention to himself.

I believe that Ern Brown's social principles were set during the First World War. What he experienced on the Western Front changed the way he thought about social and economic systems, political commitment, and the nature of conflict. The letters he sent home from Europe reveal a man striving to come to terms with national and international issues. If he later committed himself to social redemption, a new local and global order, and full political justice, it was in large part because of the war's indefensible horror.

I believe, above all, that Ern Brown was uncommonly brave and good. In war and peace, he worked unselfishly for the welfare of others. He endured the trenches. He endured poverty. He fought for the best in his world. Soldier for his times, he soldiered on.

J.B., January 2013

Note: this January 2016 revision includes additional material.

Early Years: 1885-1916

James Ernest Brown was born in Foresters Falls, Renfrew County, Ontario, on June 7, 1885. The son of James Brown and Isabella Patterson, he was the third of nine children and the oldest of three boys.

His paternal grandfather and father, both named James, were born in Ireland, the latter in 1856. His mother, of Scots and Irish ancestry, was born in Foresters Falls in 1857. The Browns emigrated from Ireland to Glasgow about 1860, and from Glasgow to Canada in 1865. Ern's grandfather, who had worked as a coastguard in Ireland and weaver in Scotland, became a farmer in Canada. With his English-born wife, Agnes McKelvie, he moved his family from place to place in the Ottawa River Valley: first to Pembroke, Ontario, then Allumette Island, Québec, then Coulonge, Québec, and finally Foresters Falls.

Ern's parents were married in Foresters Falls in 1879. Their first child was born in 1881, their last in 1896.

Not much is known about Ern's childhood, but its general outline and a few details are clear. His sisters Catherine and Mildred, nine and eleven years younger than him, recalled their mother saying that by the age of two and a half, "before he was out of skirts," Ern could tell the time on the family's new clock. His sisters also remembered that he learned to read before starting school.

When Catherine and Mildred were asked what Ern was like as a boy, Catherine replied: "He was a student." He started school at the local one-room schoolhouse the day it opened. In 1965, a few months before his death, he returned to Foresters Falls and wrote on the blackboard that he had been one of the first students almost 75 years earlier.

Mildred said that their father was interested in politics and subscribed to the daily *Ottawa Journal*. She remembered Ern reading the paper from beginning to end

and keeping everyone informed about current events, especially during the Boer War. A constant reader, he had a quick and inquisitive mind and a good memory. At school, mathematics was his best subject. On the farm he excelled at carpentry and repairing machinery.

One of his favourite memories of this time was of walking barefoot to school through sugar maples in the early spring, catching drops of sweet sap and licking them from his fingers. Arriving at the schoolhouse, he would put his shoes on, having saved them wear and tear by carrying them around his neck.

In 1901, Ern finished Grade 10, his last year of high school. After doing farm work for three years – and with financial help from his sister Bertha, a teacher – he moved to Pembroke, 30 miles away, to study bookkeeping. After finishing, he went to work in the lumber business. Mildred and Catherine recalled that he was a bookkeeper for the Shepherd and Maurice Lumber Company and the Roland Grant Company. His daughter Doris said that he also scouted trees for his employers and acted as a medic in the woods. In a letter to her son Barry Thomson (January 16, 1980), she wrote about listening to her father's stories many years later:

In long winters he talked for hours to Uncle Rob [his brother-in-law] about the East. . . . I heard stories of their boyhood and of Dad's years in the lumberwoods on the Mattawa River. How he pulled teeth with pliers for the lumberjacks, bound up axe wounds, straightened and taped noses broken in fights.

In the same letter, Doris wrote that her father's real calling was medicine. However:

When you're the eldest son in a large family on a poor farm . . . you have no money or time for schooling. Dad finished Grade Ten, but only because his father had a weakness for education, and a weakness for Dad, I suspect.

In 1909, convinced that the future held more promise in Western Canada, he moved to Calgary. According to his sisters, he went west “because everyone was going west.”

He got a job as a bookkeeper in Calgary but contracted typhoid fever in 1910 and nearly died. After a slow recovery, his doctor recommended that he not return to office work, the medical view at the time being that “weak lungs” needed fresh air. As a result, in 1911 Ern took a quarter section of raw land near Oyen, Alberta, and started to homestead. By the laws of the day, that quarter section would belong to him in three years provided he pay a fee of ten dollars, build a house, and cultivate ten acres.



Ern and Will.

By this time, the family had followed him west. It appears that he encouraged his brother Will to come out in the spring of 1910, and that Ern’s sister Bertha left Ontario to care for him during his illness later that year. In any case, by 1911 most of the family had gathered on Ern’s father’s new half section at Lauderdale, near the town of Castor. A small house was built, then a larger brick home in 1914. Eventually, Ern’s brothers Hugh and Will started their own farms within two miles of their father’s, as did his sister

Agnes and her husband, Rob Byce. Ern, meanwhile, continued to homestead at Oyen, 125 miles to the south.

Again, we know little about Ern’s life in the years just before the Great War, but we do know that he joined the United Farmers of Alberta (U.F.A.), a farmers’ lobby group created in 1909, and that he met his future wife, Bertha Cates, while bachelor homesteading in Oyen. In her letter, Doris provides background about the Cates family and the circumstances under which Ern and Bertha met:

Grandpa Cates and his eldest son, Merton, had come to Alberta and chosen a homestead at Oyen. They brought the family, household goods, machinery, and stock on the train to Alsask, Saskatchewan, and “trailed” to the homestead. Grandma and the two girls slept in a tent until they raised a shack. The next winter the shack sprouted more rooms and the Cates home became popular with young bachelors.

The two girls may have made some contribution to the popularity, but I'm sure there was also the family feeling which so many of these young men were missing. No drinking, smoking, or card playing entered this Methodist home, but there was a lot of friendship.

By the time Ern went into the army in January 1916, he and Bertha had reached an understanding, but he felt that marriage was out of the question until his safe return from the war. Bertha was prepared to marry before he left, but he felt that wasn't fair to her.



The Olds Agricultural School hockey team, Olds, Alberta, 1916. Bertha (team captain) is seated front row right. Around this time, she bought a camera, began to develop her own film, and learned how to drive.

In 1911, Will had helped Ern break and cultivate the quarter section near Oyen, bringing the necessary horses and machinery south from Lauderdale. After Ern enlisted – while attending the annual U.F.A. convention in Calgary – Will went back to Ern's homestead and helped him haul his grain to Oyen. According to their sister Mildred, it had been impossible to get box cars until Ern's enlistment, but his new military status changed that, and Will finished the loading after Ern reported for training with the 89th Overseas Battalion in Calgary. By then, she said, Ern had two quarter sections. Both were rented to neighbours after he went into the army and were sold while he was away in France.

War Years: 1916-1919

According to his Statement of Service in the Canadian Armed Forces, James Ernest Brown enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force on January 21, 1916. He served in the “theatres” of Canada, Britain, and France, and was honourably discharged in Toronto on May 13, 1919 with the rank of corporal. He was awarded the British War Medal, the Victory Medal, and the Croix de Guerre (Belgium). There are no other remarks on his Statement.

When he enlisted, he declared:

I, James Ernest Brown, do make Oath, that I will be faithful and bear true Allegiance to His Majesty King George the Fifth, His Heirs and Successors, and that I will as in duty bound honestly and faithfully defend His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, in Person, Crown and Dignity, against all enemies, and will observe and obey all orders of His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, and of all the Generals and Officers set over me. So help me God.¹

The portrait photo that follows the front cover of this book shows the recruit looking serious and surprisingly young in his fresh uniform.

There are three other photos from his time with the 89th Battalion in Alberta, the first two dated February 1916. One shows a ten-man guard taken “in quarters in Calgary Quarantine Co Building, 7th and 1st W.” The second shows a casual grouping of Ern and several other soldiers in Bowness Park, Calgary. Meanwhile, a fragment of a letter dated February 12 describes the 89th’s role in keeping order in the city during the “pure craziness” of the riots that erupted there that month. The violent vandalism of Calgary’s mob, mirrored in several other places in Canada, was generally attributed to unruly soldiers, but Ern believed it was “all instigated by German money and spies.”

The third photo is a snapshot taken outside the city. Ern is at the far right of the group, an army squad with eight privates and a noncommissioned officer, in this case the corporal at the left:



The next recorded information is on a postcard, unaddressed and unsigned. Depicting Montreal's Jacques Cartier Monument, it reads:

Tues May 30/16

Left Montreal last night by Intercolonial. Woke this a.m. at Riviere du Loup, Gaspé. Have just passed Rimouski & Father Point where Empress of Ireland went down. Road leaves the St. Lawrence here and crosses to Bay Chaleur. Fishing towns look fine. Very old whitewashed houses and a fine modern brick or stone church in each. First tide water I ever saw. Tide is out just now.

4 p.m. just crossed into N. Brunswick. Has rained all day. We are to sail on the Olympic I hear, but uncertain.

His army discharge papers confirm that he did sail on the Olympic from Halifax.

On June 8, 1916, Private J.E. Brown, regimental number 184205, arrived in Liverpool. In a letter to his sister Marion dated June 27, 1916, he writes that he had been well on the crossing, except for one day when he was a little dizzy. "That was the day Lord Kitchener drowned. The sea was pretty rough. We were around the north coast of Ireland that afternoon. Saw the Giant's Causeway and dimly the coast of Scotland."

In the same letter, he records the pervasive wet and chill, a measles quarantine at his base, inspections, incessant drilling, and trips to Folkestone and Hythe. He

describes roads that were “scarcely wide enough for two rigs to pass,” stone fences, hedges, pretty countryside, and “some very old buildings.” By the time of his next letter to Marion (July 12), boredom had crept in: “We thought we would have been away before now but I guess we have had too much time wasted on inspections, etc.” The high point: “I was just called to the door and found Sid and Dodridge and Affleck there. So we all had a chat. Sid had a Castor Advance for me. Miss Hughes sends it to him. Very thoughtful of her indeed.” Sid was from Castor. Dodridge and Affleck, like Ern, had been bachelor homesteaders near Oyen, and Miss Hughes was the postmistress in Castor.

Eventually, of course, he did get away. His service record indicates that on August 27, 1916, he was transferred from the 89th Battalion to the 7th Canadian Infantry Battalion, part of the 1st Canadian Division’s 2nd Infantry Brigade, and on August 28 he was “taken on strength” in France. He spent the next few weeks at the Canadian base, then joined his unit in the field on September 27 during fighting on the Somme.

Since the first, much shorter version of this book was written in 1986, the full service records of First World War veterans have become available from Library and Archives Canada. From Ern’s record we know that his service from August 1916 until the end of the war was relatively straightforward. With the exception of two leaves (the first in November 1917, the second a year later at the time of the Armistice), he served with the 7th and fought at battles such as the Somme (which dragged on from July to November 1916), Vimy and Arras (April-May 1917), Hill 70 (August 1917), Passchendaele (summer and autumn of 1917), and the Hundred Days Offensive (the series of battles that pushed the German army back beyond the Hindenburg Line and led to Germany’s surrender in November 1918). His leaves were spent in England and Scotland.^{2,3}

By the time Ern reached the Western Front, its contours had been relatively fixed for almost two years. Passing through Belgium and France, and stretching from

the North Sea to Switzerland, the front was now a maze of trenches and support zones on both sides of no man's land.

Life in the trenches was grotesque. Another Canadian enlisted man, Private Donald Fraser of Calgary, later wrote:

. . . it may be well to mention what the ordinary infantryman in the firing line has to go through and what his nerves have to stand. Old No Man's Land had an average width of 150 to 250 yds; in many parts of the line it would come as close as 35 to 75 yds. . . . Anyway, besides being liable to be shelled at any moment, the man in the firing line is liable to have bombs, grenades and trench mortar [bombs] thrown at him. Machine-guns may open up and rip the sand bags at pleasure. Clamped rifles go off every now and then, trained at likely spots the infantryman has to pass. Any moment a swarm of Huns may rush him. He is liable to be blown up by a mine tunneled underneath [the trench]. On dark nights the enemy could crawl into his trench without being seen. It is the same when it is foggy. He exists under these conditions, wet or dry, often in mud and slush over the knees and almost frozen with the cold. Sometimes he sleeps on the firing step or in the bottom of the trench with practically no covering or protection. When he gets wet, his clothes have to dry on him – at times he is worked off his feet digging, draining, making dug-outs, carrying timber, corrugated iron, etc. and has to run the gauntlet of being sniped on many occasions. Knowing that any moment he may be hurled into oblivion, his nerves are keyed to a certain pitch and his existence is one of suspense. No wonder the average man's stay in the trenches is a few months.⁴

Like Fraser, Ern spent more than two years at the front.

The trenches did terrible things to men. Many went mad from the bombardment, the remorseless noise, the sight of the recent dead and the long dead, the putrefaction, the ugliness, the lice and rats, the extreme discomfort, the lack of sleep, and the hopelessness. No one was prepared for the filth, the boredom, the sudden terror, or the slow, corrosive fear. Afraid of losing their nerve, some men simply killed themselves. Others managed to get transferred behind the lines. But all had their breaking point. In Lord Moran's words, men wore out "like clothes."⁵

After two or three months as an infantryman, Ern became a “scout,” a member of the battalion’s intelligence section. From Doris’s letter to Barry:

I’ve heard him speak of many horrors. Sleeping on his feet, supported only by his rifle jutting through the sandbags; sleeping in the mud and waking to be told he had rat tracks across his face; hanging his helmet on the leg of a corpse protruding from the trench wall; being holed up for days in a barn in No Man’s Land – periodically being behind enemy lines as the front shifted – with shells passing both ways.

The intelligence section carried out a range of tasks. In 1985, Dr. Reginald Roy, Professor of Military and Strategic Studies at the University of Victoria, wrote that it “might be called upon to do anything from hand out maps, go out on deep patrol, contact units on either flank of their own battalion, [and] keep a visual eye on the enemy.”⁶ The training syllabus for the 7th Battalion’s intelligence section in June and July 1918 lists map reading, field sketching, range finding, taking bearings, judging distances, semaphore and Morse code (“buzzer and flag”), scout signals, “sniper-craft,” and bayonet fighting. Will Bird, another Canadian veteran, wrote:

. . . I awaited a chance and talked with Cave, told him I would like to be a scout. He eyed me as if doubtful of my ability and explained that it was a grim game, requiring special qualities of character and training, strong nerves, keen hearing and a sense of direction in the darkness. A man was often required to play a lone hand in a tight situation, and had to be always prepared for the unexpected.

When Bird did become a scout, he was “initiated into the mysteries of night work, shown how to crawl around without making a sound, how to read a compass and a map, how to make a report.”⁷

Another duty that fell to scouts as well as regular front line soldiers was occupying a “listening post” in no man’s land. Private Fraser, not one to complain, wrote the following:

One of the most disagreeable duties is "Listening Post." Listening Post is in No Man's Land as far forward as is deemed safe. It is either a shell hole position or the end of a small trench running out from the firing line. The idea is to detect an enemy movement and nip an attack by stealth in the bud. From the post to the firing line there is connection by cord or telephone wire. The sentry at "listening post" pulls the cord; according to the number of pulls one, two, or three, the fellow at the other end is made aware of happenings and ready to warn the Company. The signals are few, usually all clear, or small or large hostile parties approaching. The enemy is often aware of these "listening posts" and makes a point of capturing them or bombs the sentry.

Occupying a listening post was one of Ern's most intense memories of the war. By his own account, he was also responsible for sniping, intelligence gathering, and helping medics with the wounded. His children remembered him talking especially about the last.

The 7th Battalion published a newspaper, *The Listening Post*, on a semiregular basis. The battalion published 33 issues between 1915 and 1919, first for itself alone, then for other Canadian units as well. Boasting that it was the "first regimental newspaper to be written, edited, printed and circulated wholly from the fire zone," *The Listening Post* offered the front line soldier frivolous advice, humorous articles, patriotic exhortations and pronouncements, doggerel, stories, jocular advertisements, cartoons, and poetry. In its October 29, 1915 issue, it had this to say about the soldier in a listening post:

As others play with cypher and code, so he has his own private wire. Tied to his little finger or toe according to taste.

One Pull. The Boots.

Two Pulls. The Chambermaid.

Three Pulls. The Bell Hop.

Four Pulls. Send up the drinks.

Five Pulls. And more.⁹

In the same vein, the following image is a detail from a small souvenir plate that belonged to Ern and Bertha. The cartoon, famous during the war, is by Captain Bruce Bairnsfather, veteran of the Ypres Salient:



Among Ern's mementos are two photos of the intelligence section, both intended as postcards. On the back of the first photo, he wrote "Feby 10/17, Intelligence section 7th Can Inf Bn. Taken at Fosse Dix." Ern is standing in the second row from the top, third from the left. There is an X on the image of the man behind him, and another on the man to his left.



On the second postcard, he wrote “May 23/17, Maisnil les Ruitz.” He is seated, bottom left. Note the crossed telescopes in the foreground.



On March 1, 1917, after the first photograph was taken but before the second, Ern wrote to Marion: “I have started my seventh month out here. The time goes fast, especially in the trenches. After the first day in, a fellow gets all mixed up in days . . . and there doesn’t seem to be much difference between a week and a day.”

Thanks to his letters and postcards – and to information available in military histories and the 7th Battalion’s daily war diary – we know that Ern served up and down the line in France and on the Ypres Salient in Belgium. He was gassed at least twice and hospitalized for influenza in England in 1919. In April 1918, he wrote Marion: “I have had a bad cough . . . almost like whooping cough; it is caused by gas and several of the other boys have had it too; some can scarcely speak. It will be alright in a few days so don’t worry and don’t tell them at home. . . . I have been affected before but not quite so bad.”

Three weeks after his March 1917 letter to Marion, his service record states that he received a gunshot wound to the scalp and was hospitalized for three days. A bullet had creased his skull and knocked his helmet off from inside. Had he fastened his chin strap, he said, he might have died. Discharged from hospital to CBD (Canadian Base Details), he spent a week and a half assigned to light duties. It was now

early April, and the final preparations for the assault on Vimy Ridge were on. The record shows that Ern left the base for his battalion on April 7, though rejoining it may have taken a while.

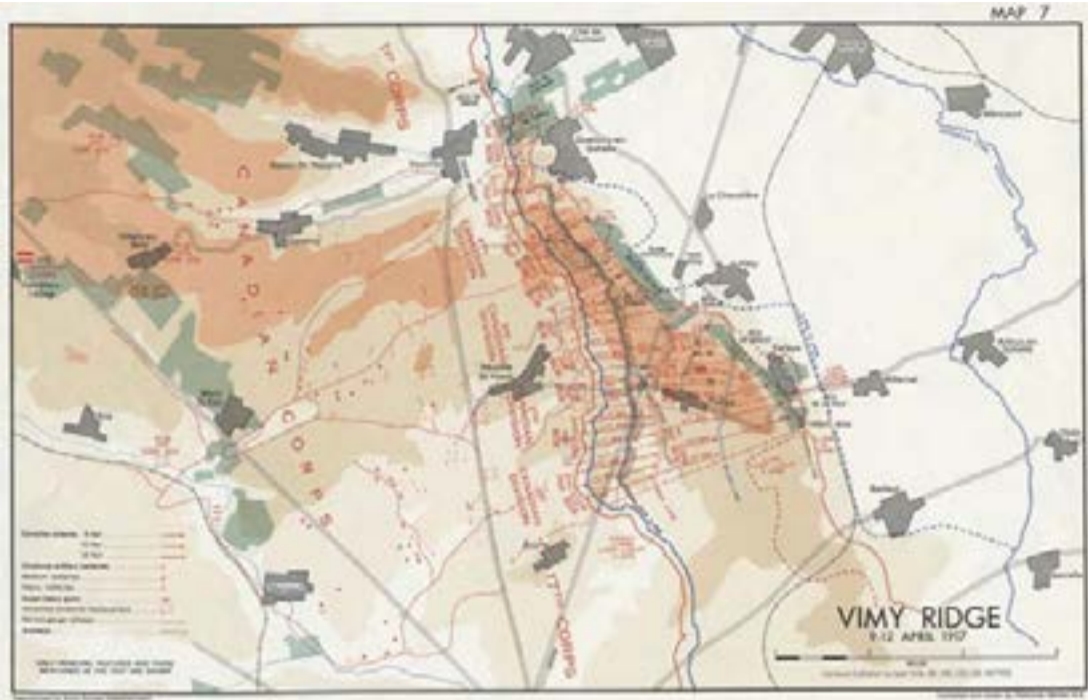
The Battle of Vimy Ridge lasted from April 9 to 12, but for the 7th Battalion that action, part of the much larger Battle of Arras, lasted from April 9 to the night of April 15/16, in two stages:

The first stage: the battalion was in the initial assault on the morning of April 9, suffered heavy losses, and was relieved (withdrawn from the front line and placed in reserve) that afternoon. As Pierre Berton wrote in *Vimy*, the 7th Battalion was “in the vanguard of the forward brigades” and lost 364 men that day.¹⁰ Major David Philpot, commanding the 7th at the time, wrote in the battalion’s war diary that the rest of April 9 was spent clearing and evacuating the wounded, and April 10 and 11 burying the dead and re-equipping and re-organizing.¹¹

The second stage: in the late afternoon of April 12, the 7th, having “rested,” was moved up to relieve the 1st Battalion at Farbus and the Brown Line on the far side of Vimy Ridge and stayed until relieved on the night of the 15th/16th. Major Philpot summarized that period’s advances, scouting patrols, shelling, and heavy casualties. An excerpt from the war diary: “During the whole of the night 12th/13th our positions were heavily shelled . . . and many casualties suffered.” In the preceding four days, during the principal action at Vimy Ridge, 11 officers and 448 other ranks had been killed, wounded, or reported missing. On April 9, 21 officers and 752 other ranks had gone into action.

In none of Ern’s surviving letters – and there is a four month gap between his March letter to Marion and the next letter, written almost three months after April 9 – does he refer to the Battle of Vimy Ridge. However, among his memorabilia, there is a German two mark note on which he has penciled “Apr -9 -17.” And in a letter he wrote to his sister Bertha on July 6 – the only letter still in the family’s possession not written to Marion or his mother – he compared the severity of the Battle of Arleux (Arleux-en-Gohelle) that took place three weeks later (April 28-29) to that of “Easter Monday,” April 9.¹² (See endnote 12 for Ern’s observations

on the Battle of Arleux, and the death at Arleux of a very young soldier Bertha Brown had known.)



A map of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, with the four Canadian divisions lined up. The 1st Division was the farthest from its objective: Farbus, at the eastern edge of the shaded area to the right. Arleux-en-Gohelle, referred to above, is directly east of Farbus on the Douai Plain. Source: [The Canadian War Museum](#).



“After we came out from Hill 70.” Ern is at the far right.

A posed photograph taken several months later, just after Hill 70 (“the roughest corner I ever was in”), shows Ern and seven other men “fresh from battle.” Published in *The London Daily Mail* and *The Vancouver Province*, the picture shows Ern with muddy puttees and a torn sleeve.

The battalion’s war diary for Hill 70 concludes with the following remarks about the intelligence section: “They went forward with the assaulting troops and established observation posts which they maintained under very heavy fire. . . . They also cheerfully responded to the call for runners and guides when occasions required.”

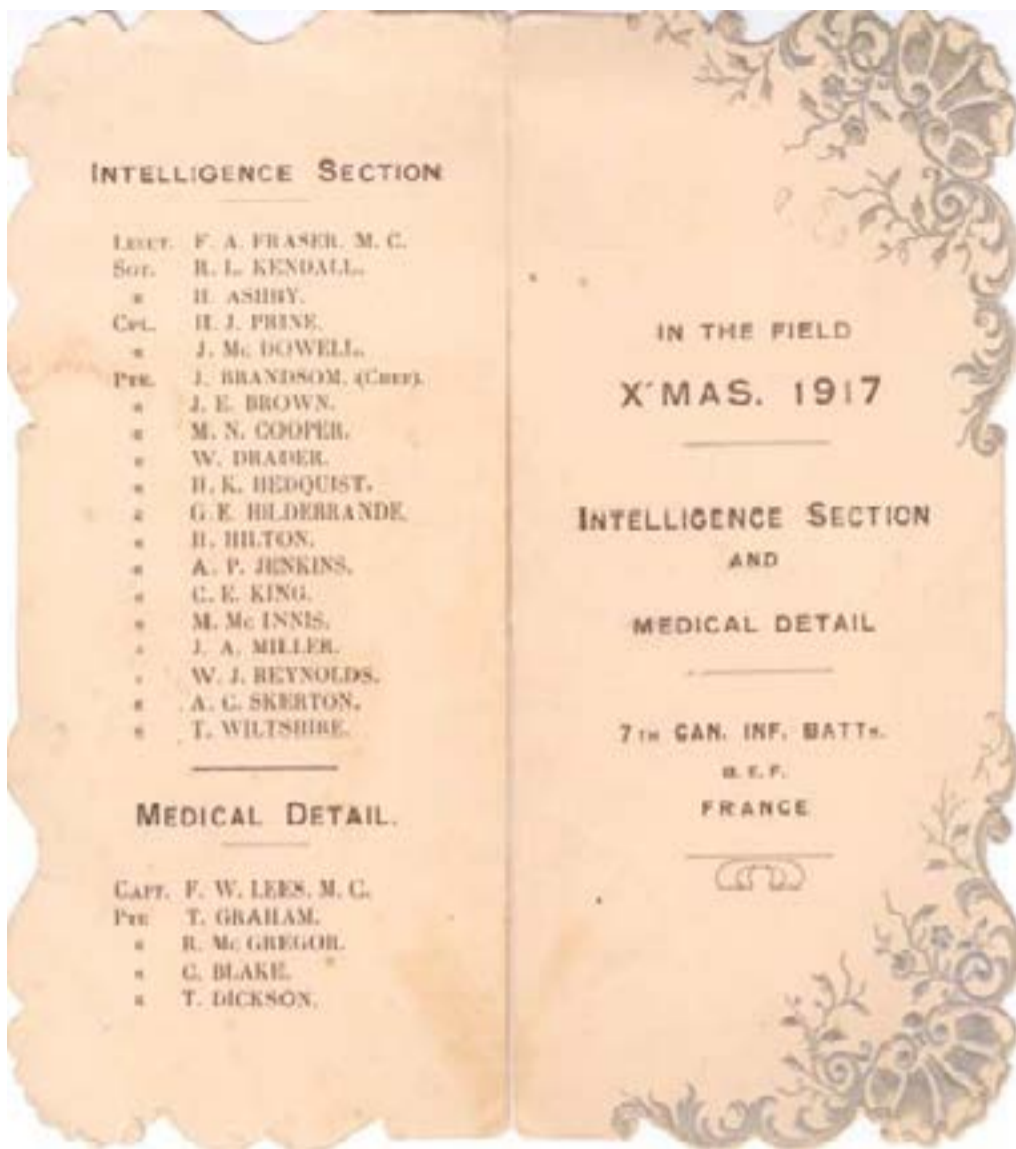
In Edinburgh on his first leave, Ern wrote the following to Marion (November 20, 1917). This excerpt gives a fair account of his life at the front:

. . . I don't mind naming a few of the places I have been. Le Havre, Rouen, Amiens, Abbeville, Etaples, Boulogne, Calais, St. Omer, Cassel, Poperinghe, Ypres, Lillers, Bethune . . . Bruay, Houdain, Aubigny, Lievin, Lens (part of it only), Arleux, Vimy, Neuville St. Vaast, Albert, St. Paul Bonneville, and a host of small places along the line. I have seen quite a lot of France on foot. I was not in this last attack at Passchendaele as my leave came just when we were moving into the front line. I expect we will be back at Lens when I go back on the 25th.

I had Xmas dinner at Bruay a year ago. Wonder where it will be this year. As for my work, I do any of three things: patrol, observe, and snipe. On patrols we investigate anything new or suspicious looking . . . and listen for work parties, try to locate machine guns and dugouts and get as much information as possible. All this at night. Also covering or protecting wiring parties.

Observing consists of preparing a well-disguised post anywhere from no man's land to quite a distance behind the line, wherever a good view can be had, watching for movements and gun emplacements, and reporting on everything which might be of any use. This part is very interesting as we are equipped with powerful telescopes, and, with the map system we have, exact locations of anything can be given. . . . In observing we get to know the trenches he [the enemy] uses most and where he can be seen from. When we get all the information possible from identification of badges and so on, we are supposed to snipe. But information is our main object.

The 7th's war diary reports that the battalion spent a second Christmas at Bruay in 1917. Thanks to one of Ern's souvenirs, we know that the intelligence section spent part of that Christmas dining with the battalion's medical detail. The souvenir is an ornate menu from dinner "in the field, X'MAS, 1917," the outside of which is shown below. Exquisitely printed and contrasting bizarrely with life in the trenches, it lists the names of the men serving with the intelligence section and medical detail at the time.



The inside of this small folded menu lists the evening's dishes: roasts (turkey, goose), vegetables (potatoes, cabbage, cauliflower, carrots), dessert (plum pudding, apple pie, mince pie, nuts, fruit, and "good things from home"). Tea, coffee, and liqueurs were served, and toasts were offered to "The King," "This Year's Toll," "Our Wounded," and "The Folks at Home." God Save The King, the card concludes.



Souvenir embroidery: flowers and flags. Intended as a postcard, there is writing on the back, now worn away and illegible.

Those living through the First World War couldn't know how it would turn out. Reading Ern's letters 95 years after they were written – in a terrible place and time – it's clear that he was alternately confident and fearful about the war's outcome. In August 1917, he writes Marion: "I believe there is some further good news in the papers today, in addition to yesterday's.

Hope it is soon over." But several months later: "The end does not seem to be in sight. In fact things look worse than they did, but it may be the dark hours before the dawn."

As late as April 1, 1918, he writes his sister: "I suppose you are anxiously reading the papers these days. So are we when we get them, which is rare. Altho Fritz has advanced a long distance, we are not beaten by a long piece. . . . It is very hard to predict the turn events may take in the next few days." And two weeks later: "We know we are not beaten yet."

A month later, on May 16, he wrote an almost pastoral letter to Marion from France: "We are having midsummer weather these days. It is very hot and everything is growing fast. I am sitting out in a woods under a tree and have my feet undressed. It is a great relief from those big heavy clogs we always wear. I bot a pair of boots when on leave and they done me until a week or so ago."¹³

Then the exhaustion and uncertainty show: "It takes quite a while to write a letter. It is so hard to think of anything to write. . . . I know you must be anxious these days, but that does not do any good, so what is the use. Someway I don't think the war will last a great while now; at least I hope not. I would like to get home by fall at any rate. Besides the idea of another winter out here don't look good even six months off. . . . This will have to do this time as I am run down. As Ever, J E Brown."

And then, with the Hundred Days Offensive, the war turned in the Allies' favour and was soon over. Ern was in Edinburgh when the Armistice was signed on November 11.

After returning from his second leave in late November, he and the 7th marched 325 kilometres before Christmas. The last of the remaining letters, dated December 19, 1918, was sent from Overath, Germany, near Cologne. It closes with "wish I could say I was coming home soon." Two weeks earlier, he had written to his mother: "I don't know when I will get home but feel I am entitled to go near the first, so will see. But don't send any more parcels. I must try to get home in time for spring at any rate."

And he did, though a further delay made it late spring. After several months in Germany, the 7th left for England in March 1919 and sailed for Canada in April,

but Ern, hospitalized with influenza in March, sailed several weeks later. Finally, on May 13, he signed his discharge papers in Toronto. They describe him as 33 years of age, 5 feet 6 inches tall, with blue eyes, fair hair, sandy complexion, and scars on his face and left arm. Family members say he had dark hair and was two or three inches under five feet six.

According to the 7th Battalion's war diary, the Belgian Croix de Guerre was awarded Acting Corporal J.E. Brown and Sergeant J.C. Maynard in Borset, Belgium, January 24, 1919. And the diary for February 11, 1919 reads:

Weather: Fine and clear.

Presentation of the Belgian CROIX DE GUERRE by Lieut.-General Sir A. Orth, K.C.M.G. Chief of the Belgian Mission G.H.Q. at Huy, at which the following Other Ranks were decorated:

184205 Pte. J.E. BROWN

467050 Sgt. J.C. MAYNARD.

Lecture by the Rev. GOODCHILD on "The Baghdad Railway" in the Entertainment Hall at VAUX-BORSET.

Football at 1400 hours 7th vs. 10th Battalions at VAUX-BORSET. Result 7th. 6 Goals. 10th. 1 goal.¹⁴

As far as we know, no record remains of the reason for the decoration. "His Majesty the King of the Belgians" conferred a number of medals on Canadian officers and other ranks. Ern's medal was published in the *London Gazette* of April 5, 1919 (L.G. issue 31275), and the record appears to end there.¹⁵

Dorling's book on ribbons and medals says the following about the Belgian Croix de Guerre (1914-1918): "This decoration was established in 1915 for those mentioned in despatches, in much the same way as its French counterpart, for acts of courage on the field of battle; or for long service at the front."¹⁶ The Canadian historian Desmond Morton writes: "Batches of decorations such as the Belgian Croix de Guerre were usually handed out to the good, solid soldiers whose fundamental

worth had somehow never been associated with one of those episodes, real or fictional, for which decorations were given.”¹⁷



Ern's Belgian Croix de Guerre ribbon.

In Ern's case, long and outstanding service may account for the decoration, though Merton remembered his father saying that he “got that one for getting a gimp out of a tight spot,” a gimp being, in all likelihood, someone crippled or unable to walk without help. Whatever the reason – whether the medal was awarded for sustained, meritorious conduct, or for conspicuous bravery, or for both – it attests to Ern's service and the opinion others held of him.

Memoirs of the war often state that experienced soldiers had greater respect for the man who endured quietly, steadily, and without drawing attention to himself than for the man credited with spectacular but isolated acts of daring. Lord Moran wrote that “as the war dragged on, as the wear and tear of the trench life told, we came to think less of the gaudy act performed on the spur of the moment, to value more the worth of the man who was prepared to see the thing through.”¹⁸

Seeing the thing through meant enduring conditions horrible beyond description. It also meant resisting spiritual despair and political cynicism. The longer the war lasted, the more difficult it was for soldiers to accept the civilian and military leadership that ruled their lives at the front. Veterans later spoke of an erosion of faith in authority, a loss of conviction that those set above them knew what they were doing or how to proceed. With notable exceptions, politicians and senior military

officers – as well as many front line officers in positions of command – lost credibility. As a consequence, many junior officers and other ranks, their strength taxed to the limit, found it difficult to carry on.

At the same time, they discovered that the enemy was human. Led to believe he was monstrous, they saw instead that he was pretty much like them: just as afraid, just as vulnerable, just as subject to the “awfulness of everything.”¹⁹ Moreover, he too was led by officers and politicians apparently indifferent to his well-being. Gradually, without losing fear and distrust, many developed a respect and uneasy sympathy for their counterparts. Soldiers in both armies recognized a shared experience unfathomable to people at home or behind the line. Some continued to hate. Some enjoyed killing. But most seem to have recognized, if hesitantly, a commonality of interest.

A great deal hinged on the degree of danger: when the enemy attacked or resisted, he was killed; when he surrendered, he was spared; when he was wounded, he was treated with compassion. And, in a curious way, as many soldiers on opposing sides grew estranged from their own leaders and countrymen, they grew closer to each other.

Meanwhile, propagandists and the tame press presented a sanitized and simplistic view of the war. People at home had no idea what the front was like, and the soldiers knew they never would. “Oh Jesus, . . . don’t they make it sound like a Sunday school picnic,” says Christie in Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners*, when he reads the official narrative of his regiment after the war.²⁰ Only those who had served at the front would ever understand it. Not wives, not brothers, not parents, children, friends, or future employers. A select group of men had formed, men with the same knowledge and nightmares, unable to share their experience except with each other.

Three things stand out in memoirs of trench warfare: the horror, the disillusionment, and the comradeship. Writing about the aftermath of the Somme, A.J.P. Taylor said:

*Idealism perished on the Somme. The enthusiastic volunteers were enthusiastic no longer. They had lost faith in their cause, in their leaders, in everything except loyalty to their fighting comrades. The war ceased to have a purpose. It went on for its own sake, as a contest in endurance.*²¹

Increasingly cynical and tired, soldiers found it harder and harder to hold on to discipline or to control their thoughts and behaviour. Succumbing to stress, exhaustion, and uncertainty, many went to pieces:

*Sassoon observed that the effect of war could be traced in weeks and months, though differences of age and rank affected the precise timing. Graves pinned the thing down more precisely. He thought three weeks sufficient to learn the rules of safety and degrees of danger, with peak efficiency reached in three months. Thereafter there would be rapid decline. Aldington concluded that after six months most line troops were off their heads, horribly afraid of seeming afraid.*²²

Contrary to the image presented by the press, “some endured, more broke entirely, the majority ceased to fight except in a shadow-boxing way after a few months in the front line.”²³

Many of those who kept going were sustained by the fear of letting their comrades down. Life in the trenches forged bonds inconceivable elsewhere. Enlisted men ate together, shared packages from home, slept side by side for warmth and companionship, and supported each other in a manner sometimes rough, sometimes surprisingly gentle. The following passage by Frederick Manning, novelist and veteran of the Somme, describes humanity in the trenches:

*These apparently rude and brutal natures comforted, encouraged and reconciled each other to fate, with a tenderness and tact which was more moving than anything in life. They had nothing, not even their own bodies, which had become mere implements of warfare. They turned from the wreckage and misery of life to an empty heaven, and from an empty heaven to the silence of their own hearts. They had been brought to the last extremity of hope, and yet they put their hands on each other's shoulders and said with a passionate conviction that it would be all right, though they had faith in nothing, but in themselves and in each other.*²⁴

If the war was unutterably vicious and disillusioning, it was also a time when the “chief prop was mates”²⁵ and men learned to rely on each other. Memoirists speak of comrades in terms of kindness, generosity, and “patient selfless stoicism.”^{26,27} They reveal a solidarity based on collective need, “the battalion spirit,” the persistent external threat, and the growth of pity, gratitude, affection, responsibility, and conscience. Small wonder that many men had mixed feelings about demobilization: “I hated to leave the army, the crowd. It was the crowd I was with, the comradeship, excellent comradeship. I felt awful lonesome leaving it when I got out of the army. I was just as lonesome as could be, because for so long you had always been with the gang, day and night. Come what may, bad or good, you always had your gang around you.”²⁸

Sir Arthur Currie, Commander of the Canadian Corps in France, acknowledged what was gained in the trenches:

*Men have learned here the value of, and the good that springs from, mutual support, mutual confidence, self-sacrifice, and co-operation; and it will be a good thing not only for ourselves but the country that bred us if these qualities are perpetuated.*²⁹

The other loyalty that kept men going was loyalty to country. Despite growing anger with their nation’s policies, the ineptitude of its leaders, and those at home who “shirked their duty,” the men at the front cared passionately for the places they came from. As Denis Winter wrote: the “men stood by their country as they might have stood by a pal whose luck was out.”³⁰ No one wanted to stay at the front, but few felt they could abandon the homeland’s cause. Notions of fidelity and constancy, learned when young and reinforced at the front, underpinned the “steadfast courage, discipline”³¹ that bound men to country and comrade.

Letters from the front tended to be circumspect. Heavily censored, they rarely contained topical information. Instead they favoured the mundane, the conversational, the hearty, and the nonchalant. Moreover, self-censorship curbed expression. Every soldier, Lyn Macdonald wrote, hoped “the womenfolk at home would never

know the full horror of the carnage.”³² Soldiers did not want to transmit their suffering to loved ones, or cause them pointless worry. Unfortunately, this concern for family and friends increased the distance between them, a distance all the more obvious when soldiers returned home.

Ern Brown’s letters are surprisingly frank, expressive, and angry, and they contain interesting bits of information. We learn, for example, that he helped an old farmer with whom he was billeted repair a Massey Harris binder; that he would probably have been promoted to platoon sergeant had he stayed with the infantry company instead of transferring to Intelligence; and that he preferred to remain a private with the latter. “I like it much better than the company work, especially when I can get worthwhile information such as big gun installations or that a relief is taking place.” (From the letter to Marion, November 20, 1917.)

As we have seen, the letters also provide insight into Ern’s life at war. However, one of these letters – written to Ern’s mother – makes the point that there is no use trying to describe the front “as it would be hard enough to do it talking to you.” In another, Ern tells Marion that there is no use trying to picture “vivid scenes of what it is like. You are never likely to know.”



Ern with the 1st Division patch on his left shoulder and the permanent part from the bullet wound.

The most interesting thing about the letters, however, is the image they present of a man struggling to grasp new ideas and a new world. Though he is often cut off from newspapers and civilian sources of information, his letters show him trying to establish his position on the global problems played out at the front.

In a sense, it is like watching a nineteenth century man come to terms with the twentieth.

Many conventional images and phrases are still there: “carrying on,” “paid the price,”

“duty done,” “playing the game.” At the same time, the soldier writing home to Alberta is searching for a new vocabulary, a revised set of words and ideas to express a new vision.

Like most soldiers at the front, Ern despised “shirkers” and “slackers,” the men unwilling to volunteer or, if they were in uniform, to leave a safe post. Especially in his early letters, he raged against them. On November 23, 1916, he wrote to his mother:

But I know you would not want me to shirk my duty for safety's sake. So far I can clearly say I have shirked nothing and I would detest myself, and would deserve to be detested by all my friends, if I had stayed in England or Canada on a bomb proof job as so many who enlist do. It is much better to die a man than live a conquered coward, and when I go back I want to be able to look any man in the face and say I have done my duty at all times.

There is nothing I detest more than the men who enlist and look for safety first jobs. It would be much more manly for them to not enlist at all than to sail under false colors. I despise them as I do young able bodied men who act as batmen.

And in two letters written in 1917 he lays into men resisting conscription as well as those who, though in France, are noncombatants and a burden to the fighting man. Of the former he wrote: “The man who is physically fit and not tied down . . . will have a hard time when we get back. . . . I cannot understand this creature. He is not a man who still holds back at this stage of the game.” And of the latter:

The average person in Canada would be thunderstruck if he knew how few actual soldiers he has, and if our work doesn't always come up to what he expects, it is not the fault of that few but of the bulk who deceive their people into believing they are brave heroes fighting for their country. They are having the name without the game. I could give approximate figures but won't in case a submarine gets this.

Responsibility is straightforward and unquestionable, and Ern holds to a rigid standard. Again, there is righteous anger, frustration, and bitterness in some of the letters, and he expresses his contempt not for the enemy or for senior command's

sometimes incompetent and callous leadership, but for unattached men at home who avoid real service.³³

At the same time, the letters reveal an attempt to sort out conflicting beliefs about the war. It must be fought. He is certain of this. And it must be fought until brought to a satisfactory conclusion. As he says on August 18, 1918: “the only way to meet force is with force.” And: “the war *must* not end until Germany is willing to disarm.” On the other hand, war is liable to destroy civilization, “civilized warfare is a myth,” and war must never happen again.

Ern never refers harshly or crudely to the Germans. They are Fritz or the enemy, never the Hun or any of the other derogatory terms employed at the time. A month after the war’s end, in the letter from Overath, he wrote:

The Germans use us very well but there is an inclination on the part of some of our chaps to treat them as we are told they treated the Belgians. In fact, a few disgraceful acts have been done already, and it makes one wonder whether we are really any better than the Germans.

. . . The only hopeful sign is seeing how unpopular these acts have been with the majority. But was it not in most cases the irresponsible individual who committed the crimes placed to Germany’s credit?

Incompatible thoughts run through the letters. On one hand: “If a modern battlefield could be shown to every individual in the civilized world, war would be no more during our lifetime.” On the other: “Of course there is only one way for civilization to hold its own against warfare and that is to fight it.” And again: “But the more a man sees of war and its results, the less he wants to see of it and the more he feels that we have got to win and put an end to the idiotic delusion that war is a method of settling disputes.”

It was a puzzle, a problem with fundamental contradictions, and he spent two and a half years trying to solve it. In the end, he believed the only reasonable answer lay in universal demobilization and disarmament, a demythologizing of war and soldiering, and an end to militarism. In his letter from Overath, he wrote:

It appears now that so far as England is concerned, all they have accomplished by the war is to crush this cursed militarism in Germania and adopt it at home. Let us hope they are saved from that fate. Otherwise we have indeed lost the war. Any peace which does not call for a worldwide demobilization and reduction to a necessary police footing of all armies and navies will be a failure.

Four months earlier he had written:

But war is inevitable so long as there are armies, and there will be armies so long as there are men foolish enough to allow themselves to be used by other fools to satisfy their wish for pomp and show. . . . We have produced a great many men who have attained and now exert a power they never dreamed of before the war. Many of these men are serving well; others are impediments. But to all, militarism has been so kind that they are carried away by the glamour of it and will insist on carrying on after the war. These men we must watch. If we force Germany to discard militarism we must discard it ourselves as soon as it is safe. For so long as we allow ourselves to think of might, even as a last resort, as a way of enforcing right, we are laying the foundations of another war. We must therefore learn the lesson ourselves, as well as teach it to Germany. We must not allow ourselves to listen to those who preach "let us not be caught unprepared again." Peace, when it comes, must be such that there will be no nation armed against us. Then we must disarm ourselves It is only those who have seen war who know what a calamity it is. . . . I don't think I make my meaning very clear, but there has got to be a world-wide change in national thought as well as a political house cleaning in Canada if we are to reap the full benefit of the war.

Like many soldiers, Ern fought to put an end to militarism. Now, as the conflict drew to a close, he feared the Allies "were laying the foundations of another war."

With what new perceptions, feelings, and convictions did he return to Canada? Perhaps – given the national spirit fostered by the Canadian Corps and its achievements at the front – he went home with a greater sense of himself as a Canadian and with a clearer perception of Canada as a nation in its own right.³⁴ Certainly he



Back in Canada, after the war. Undated.

returned with an awareness that “rational civilization” had “foundered in the Great War,”³⁵ and with an overriding belief in the international character of contemporary life: a belief that nations must co-exist, that people are more or less the same the world over, and that peace and mutual survival depend on cooperation within and between nations.

In any case, the end of the war was not, for him, the end of the struggle. As we shall see, he carried on throughout the 1920s and 1930s as an agrarian activist, moderate socialist, and internationalist, with political justice as his goal.

Apostle of Co-operation

After demobilization, Ern returned to Lauderdale. At his father's request, he bought and took responsibility for the "home place" – the half section and its brick, Ontario-style house – enabling his parents to retire to the town of Castor.



On October 15, 1919, he married Bertha Cates at the Oyen Methodist Church, and they began their married lives at Lauderdale, 125 miles north of Bertha's family.

One year later to the day, Merton, their first child, was born. Three more children, Margaret, Doris, and Kay, were born in 1922, 1925, and 1931. A 1925 family photo shows Merton, Doris, and Margaret posing with their parents by a car.

Adjustment to civilian life was gradual and difficult. Catherine and Mildred recalled that their brother returned gaunt and ill. The war "took a lot out of him." He was "in very poor shape, very tired, skeletal," and his nerves were bad. The first year or two, he lost his temper frequently, had recurring nightmares, was often depressed, and had difficulty sleeping. He didn't talk much about the war, but when he did he became anxious and irritable. Sleep came only if he avoided thinking about the front. "It took him many years to recover."

To make matters worse, illness and poison gas had further weakened his lungs. Now seriously asthmatic, he suffered from extreme shortness of breath, especially in winter and after physical exertion. He was changed in other ways as well. "He



had a different philosophy when he came back,” his sisters said. He had been a patriot, a man with views typical of his time, but he returned “very skeptical.”

Some friends did not return at all. In July 1917, after hearing that Fred

Townsend from home had been reported missing, he wrote: “the Oyen bunch have been unusually hard strafed now.” Still other friends had been badly wounded and needed care. His friend Tom had been discharged with a bad leg and a paralyzed arm, and another friend, Pete, needed extensive hospital care and was never, Doris said, really well again. In his August 1918 letter to his mother, Ern refers to a third wounded veteran from home. “It is too bad about Young,” he wrote: “his life is lived while he is not yet much over twenty.” Then: “It is up to those for whom they fought to make life as interesting and pleasant as possible for such as he and Pete.”

After the war, Ern was a charter member of the Castor branch of the Canadian Legion and served as its president in 1939, 1940, and 1943. The branch’s records were lost years ago, but it’s likely that the Legion gave Ern another chance to serve, this time on behalf of returned soldiers and their families.³⁶

The immediate post-war era was a time of vigorous internationalism. There was a recognition that the world had become a single economic and political system, and that its survival depended on international peace and justice. It was also a time when Empire’s bonds were weakening, and, above all, when men and women called for a new social order, radical political change, and a civilization based on social and economic equality for working people. Many of those most committed to change were returned veterans:

*The heaviest burden of the war had fallen upon the young manhood of all the belligerent nations, who, on a scale never before known in history, had been torn from their ordinary occupations, and forced to endure the long misery of the trenches. . . . The manhood of the nations came back glad, no doubt, to return to the old ways; but a vast number of them had lost the habit of taking things for granted, were ready to claim a recompense for what they had suffered, and returned with a vague resolve that the political system which seemed to have produced these miseries, and the social system which made the mass of men mere tools in the hands of their masters, should be replaced by something better.*³⁷

In his November 23, 1916 letter to his mother, Ern had written: “If we come thru this safely, we will be much wiser men.” Many veterans were wiser, no doubt, and no longer willing to take things for granted or to be taken for granted.

In Western Canada, the time was especially ripe for political change. The war had reinforced the West’s regional identity and pride while strengthening government’s role in social and economic matters. At the same time, it had eliminated none of the West’s traditional grievances: in particular, the system by which Prairie grain was stored, shipped, and marketed to the East; and the system by which Eastern goods and materials were shipped and sold to Western farmers.

Convinced that the East’s protective tariffs and exploitative commercial system were causing the rural depopulation of the West, agrarian activists began to organize politically. Agitating for economic change, the new farmers’ parties made enormous gains during the depression of 1920-23. By the federal election of 1921, the Progressive Party, the voice of organized farmers in Ottawa, had won 65 seats and 23 percent of the national vote. The same year, the U.F.A. won the Alberta provincial election and formed the new government. Animated in part by the era’s radical Social Gospel movement, the agrarian movement called for a new economic order, a new set of political values, and a new principle of social organization: co-operation. In practice, this often took the form of “unifying the farm people in support of producer and consumer co-operatives.”³⁸

In 1920, William Irvine, a Labour M.P. allied with the farm-oriented Progressive Party of Canada, wrote:

*The farmer, in reality, combines in his own profession the two antagonists. He is both capitalist and laborer. He knows that production is not furthered when war is going on between the two. He sees also the hopeless deadlock between organized capital and organized labor in the world of industry and commerce, and is thus led to the discovery of cooperation as the synthesis without which progress cannot be made. In this way the United Farmers have become the apostles of co-operation: they have captured the imagination of the nation by combining true radicalism with scientific moderation, and it is safe to say that they are the most hopeful factor in Canadian national life today.*³⁹

By 1925, however, the initial promise of the Progressive Party had faded, and Irvine ceased to support it. At this point, he and his Labour Party leader, J.S. Woodsworth, “formed the ‘Ginger group’ with the more advanced Progressive members, which helped form the nucleus of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (C.C.F.) in the 1930s.”⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the U.F.A. remained firmly in power in Alberta.

Founded as a non-political farm organization, the U.F.A. became a political force only after the war, and not without resistance from some of its leaders and members. Henry Wise Wood, the organization’s president from 1916 to 1931, opposed its entrance into agrarian political action and tried to keep it out of politics as long as he could. By the time the U.F.A. swept Alberta in the provincial election of 1921, however, it was very much a political organization.

The U.F.A. held power from 1921 until 1935, the year it was defeated by William Aberhart’s Social Credit Party. During its 14 years in power, it represented the interests of Alberta farmers and the rural electorate. The U.F.A. was both a political party with elected members in the provincial legislature and a farm organization committed to the interests and goals of rural people. As a farm organization, it comprised rank-and-file members, a board of directors, and an executive.

During the 1920s, Ern served as a U.F.A. farmer representative from the Castor area. By 1929 (and possibly earlier), he was a member of the board of directors, and group photographs of the board taken between 1929 and 1937 record his membership throughout. By the mid-1930s, when the Depression seemed most hopeless and the U.F.A.'s political future most bleak, he had become a member of the executive.

By the late 1920s, social action and political commitment were at the centre of Ern's life. By then a moderate socialist intensely opposed to war and injustice, he studied the world at large while working for progress in Alberta. Committed to the Wheat Pool, the United Grain Growers, the U.F.A., and in due course the C.C.F., he worked for a fair and just deal for all.



Board of Directors, United Farmers of Alberta, 1929. Ern is seated bottom row, far right.

Influenced by his mentor, Henry Wise Wood, and by William Irvine, Ern worked from a social philosophy that was neither as cautious as the former's nor as mercurial as the latter's. Throughout, he believed in the co-operative and democratic process espoused by Wood. Like Wood, Ern believed that the key to social progress was group co-operation, a steady and systematic approach to change, and, above all, organization. As Wood said, in "organization alone there is strength."⁴¹

At the same time, Ern shared Irvine's faith in political action. In Ern's view, politics could do little about the Depression's grasshoppers, drought, and hail, but the Eastern-based financial system and corporate interests, which profited from farmers' misfortune, had to be opposed by political means.

The record shows that in 1933 Ern was a member of the U.F.A. board's educational committee. Excerpts from an article signed by three members of the committee, including J.E. Brown, provide insight into the prevailing U.F.A. social philosophy. Entitled "Competitive Philosophy 'Weighed in Balance and Found Wanting,'" this article reads in part:

If we have found our competitive philosophy to be a failure and unfitted to present day conditions, it is reasonable that we should give a fair trial to the alternative procedure viz., the co-operative one. If the motive of profit has failed to supply the present needs of our citizens, or paint their future with hope, then we will be obliged to substitute another motive for the stimulation of human activity. . . .

Your Educational Committee do therefore recommend that the motive of service be substituted for that of profit in the thinking of our youth; that our educational course should be reshaped with this end in view; that the schooling of youth should be given a more adequate realization of the increasing interdependence of individuals in modern society. That their desire to "do their bit" in that complex organism be more definitely stimulated. . . .

As an illustration of what your Committee has in mind in its mention of reshaping the education course, we will take the subject of arithmetic. Many of the problems to be worked out by the pupil are those of interest and profit. Since the interest and profit system has proved itself such a failure, we recommend that such problems be partially eliminated and such other problems substituted as will stimulate the development of the youthful mind along lines that are not anti-social.⁴²

These were Irvine's "apostles of co-operation . . . combining true radicalism with scientific moderation." Many were also Sir Arthur Currie's veterans, who had learned at war "the value of, and the good that springs from, mutual support, mutual confidence, self-sacrifice, and cooperation."

Political involvement with the U.F.A. meant long January conventions in Calgary, and meetings throughout central Alberta at other times. Every year, Ern would leave for the Calgary convention wearing his only suit. Doris remembered her mother working many hours to patch the seat of his pants. “Don’t bend over,” she told Ern, “and try to stand with your back to a wall.”

The bulk of Ern’s work entailed speaking at meetings around the district. On poor roads, in unpredictable weather, he drove long distances to present the U.F.A.’s message and to promote the cause of social democracy. He did so despite criticism from friends and relatives that he neglected his farm in favour of “running all over the country to political meetings.” Active through the worst of the Depression, he spoke on behalf of the U.F.A. and its political candidates but declined to seek political office. At the January 1934 U.F.A. convention, his was one of the names put forward for the presidency, but he withdrew it after Robert Gardiner “made a brief statement as to the conditions under which he was accepting the nomination.”⁴²

Ern’s activism came at a price. As Doris said: “In a way, Mother was the real hero of those times, although I didn’t realize it then. She lived through my father’s recurring nightmares and extreme moods from his years in the trenches, as well as the much later ‘nervous breakdown,’ as it was called then. And it was she who kept the home fires burning during his political years as he so often went to speak at meetings and attend the annual week-long January conventions. Keeping the home fires burning in those days meant shoveling the coal into the furnace and cleaning the ashes out, as well as doing the milking and other daily chores with the help of reluctant kids.”⁴³

Among Ern’s mementos is a pamphlet entitled “Monkey Sense.” Written by Mack Cryland and illustrated by Art Gonon, it was published in Canada in 1933 by a left-wing press in Ottawa. In his brief foreword, Cryland writes: “Believing that interest can be aroused easily by simple analogy, we have undertaken to draw attention, by means of elementary verse and illustration, to a few of the imperfections of our present foolish method of production for profit instead of for use, . . .”

Through a tale told in text and images, Cryland and Gonon depict a monkey culture moving from an idyllic life of plenty (in the form of nuts, equally available to all) through the introduction and intensification of capitalist exploitation and misery for all but a few. In this case the few consist of a selfish but enterprising monkey and his wife, and the key to their power lies in controlling the means of production. The pamphlet ends with a kind of nonviolent revolt and the restoration of economic equality and social justice based on the foundation of a “cooperative community nut supply store house.” The final page introduces three human characters (a thin and hungry-looking husband, wife, and child standing outside a full storage elevator) and ends with a final four-line stanza: “And so ‘tis said that, some day, men/May follow in the lead/Of monkeys, and produce for use/And not for personal greed.”⁴⁴

By the early 1930s, the stage had been set for the creation of a new federal socialist party. On August 1, 1932, a conference of left-wing groups – organizations committed to “a new social order based on production for use and not for profit”⁴⁵ – was held in Calgary at the U.F.A.’s invitation, and the C.C.F. was born.⁴⁶ Endorsed by the U.F.A. executive, the C.C.F. called for “a transformation of the economic order” and for “fundamental social reconstruction.”⁴⁷ A year later, after the C.C.F.’s first national convention in Regina, the United Farmers organization became, for the first time, “part of a national radical movement allied with urban labor.”⁴⁸

At the same time, however, the U.F.A. began to lose its political authority. By 1935, unable to counter the effects of the Depression, and criticized for a mediocre administrative record, the U.F.A. government was defeated by Aberhart. Social Credit candidates talked about “dividends” for the people of Alberta. Ern said: “I’ll trade every dividend I ever get for an all-day sucker today.”

Nineteen thirty-five marked the end of the U.F.A.’s legislative tenure, but the organization continued to stand for the farmer’s interests in Alberta, and Ern remained a loyal member.

Among Ern's remaining papers is half a sheet of U.F.A. letterhead. It was stored in a box of souvenirs from the war, including postcards, a catalogue from Madame Tussaud's in London, the remnants of a London bus schedule, a ration book, intelligence maps, and a soldier's songbook with the lyrics for tunes such as "Dixie," "The Maple Leaf," "Three Blind Mice," and "Jingle Bells."

The curious thing about this sheet of paper – dating from the 1930s and listing J.E. Brown as a member of the executive – is the jottings on its back, penciled calculations of the number of infantrymen, machine guns ("including Lewis Guns"), cavalrymen, 3-inch field guns, heavy guns, and tanks for every 100 yards on the Western Front. Finally, Ern noted the average number of inches, feet, or yards of front for each of these men or weapons:

1 Infantry man to every 8 1/2"

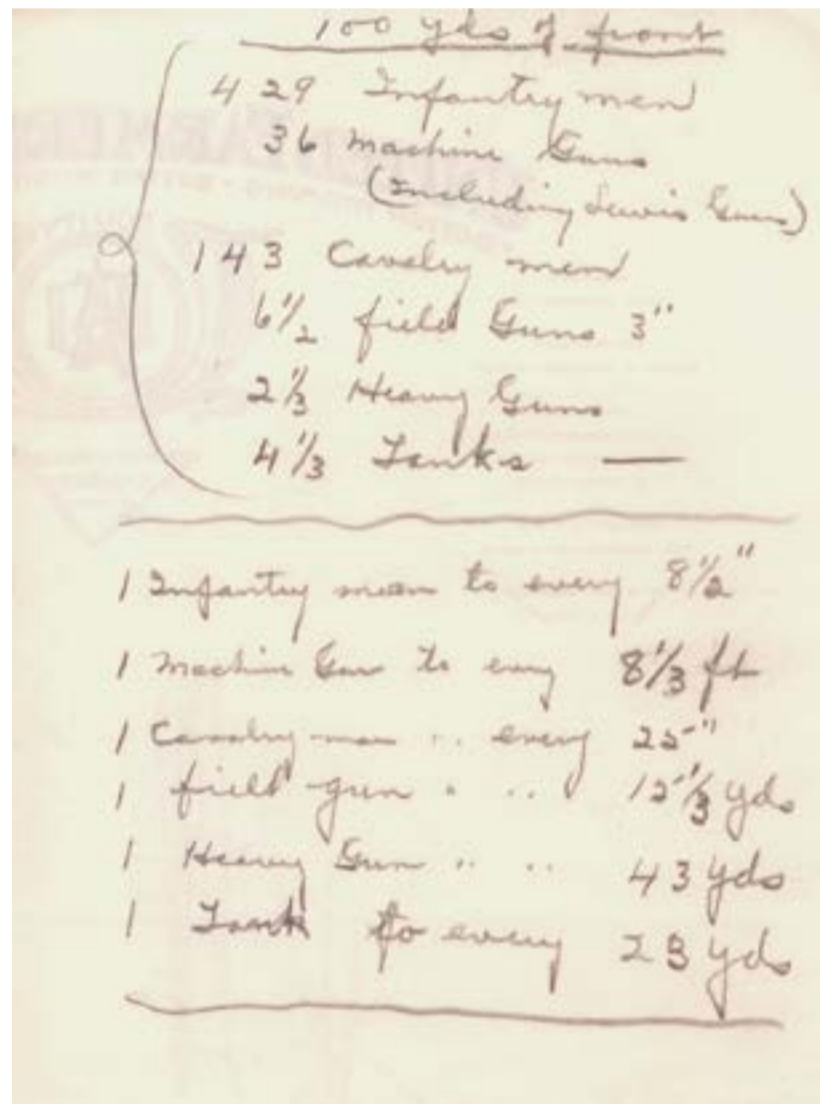
1 Machine gun to every 8 1/3 ft

1 Cavalry man " every 25"

1 field gun " " 15 1/3 yds

1 Heavy gun " " 43 yds

1 Tank to every 23 yds



The war was over but not forgotten.

Though politics claimed much of Ern's attention during the 1920s and 1930s, farm work claimed most of his time. And while he enjoyed carpentry and working on machinery – repairing his own cars, tractors, and large field equipment – he did not enjoy working with the horses and livestock and sometimes seemed to be interested in everything but farming. Still he persisted, working hard to make a living for his family from the half section. Spending long days on the tractor, he fought boredom by thinking about mathematical and political problems. At one

point, he calculated the number of barrels of water a farmer would have to haul to give his half section the equivalent of a half inch of rain.

Guests were valued for their conversation and vitality. Tommy Douglas visited, and William Irvine and Robert Gardiner (the latter a federal M.P. as well as U.F.A. president) were frequent guests.⁵⁰

Old army friends came by. When they did, the talk was often about the war and shared experiences at the front, though Bertha disapproved. When she failed to change the subject, she removed the children from the room by suggesting chores or other activities. Bertha hated talk about the war for the children's sake and because it left Ern unable to sleep.

Conversation turned to politics as well. As Europe rearmed and prepared for another war, Ern's opposition to militarism grew. He acknowledged the need for an armed international peace-keeping force but felt that traditional military organizations were no longer acceptable. He disapproved of guns in general, even toy guns for children, and said that no guns smaller than a rifle should be manufactured. No hand guns, in other words.

One of Ern's books is a worn and stained copy of Robert Service's *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man*, dedicated to the memory of the poet's brother, Albert, killed in action with the Canadian infantry in France. Published in 1916, it may have been with Ern in the trenches. A number of passages about the war are underscored, including "And I wonder too if in God's sight/War ever, ever can be right." Also underscored are the final words in the last several lines of Service's "The Song of the Pacifist":

*Then, and then only, our Dead shall know that they have not fall'n in vain.
When our children's children shall talk of War as a madness that may not be;
When we thank our God for our grief to-day, and blazon from sea to sea
In the name of the Dead the banner of Peace . . .
that will be Victory.⁵¹*

Ern said that more wisdom about social and political reform had been voiced in the trenches than in any house of parliament.

Having been to war, where he'd met German soldiers and civilians and discovered that they were ordinary human beings, he was shaken by the eventual failure of the peace for which he and his comrades had fought both in and out of uniform. As the 1930s wore on, propagating fear, cynicism, and raw aggression, he watched the major powers edge toward a second grand inferno.

The nervous breakdown Doris referred to happened in early 1936. The principal causes were the Depression, the drought, the political situation locally and internationally, his father's decline, and his own poor health. By the mid-1930s, a succession of bad crops had resulted in relentless poverty: in 1936, Ern had only 60 bushels of wheat to sell after saving his seed, grain for the cattle, and flour for the family. Doris said he received 50 cents a bushel for what he sold.

Tiredness and worry gave way to depression and prolonged spells of quietness. In the late winter and spring of 1936, during the worst of his breakdown, Ern spent several weeks in bed, then a few months unable to work. That year his son Merton, 15, sowed and harvested the crop, and the rest of the family put in long hours to keep the farm running. By the fall, however, Ern was well enough to help out. Doris writes: "Dad gradually returned to his place in the family. Although Mert also took off the crop that fall Dad was able to repair the machinery and prepare the threshing machine – a job only he could do as his brothers didn't have his



Bertha and Ern outside the red brick house at Lauderdale, 1940.

mechanical ability. He more or less supervised the threshing although he had to work short hours."

Toward the end of his life, Ern's father lived at Lauderdale with Ern, Bertha, and the children. Ern continued to farm what had been his father's half



And with Kay, circa 1942.



In Lauderdale during the war.

section and made sure that Mr. Brown had money for medicine and personal expenses. Family say that as he neared death in January 1937, Mr. Brown called repeatedly for Ern, and Ern was always there when needed.

The outbreak of the Second World War confirmed Ern's fears. His children said that his face turned grey when war was declared. By now, however, though still convinced the war was "insane," he agreed that it had to be fought. Kay recalls that throughout the war he kept a large map of the battle zones above the family radio.

She says that he followed the war's progress "with an attitude of compassion for the servicemen" and an awareness of the horror they faced. He accepted Mert's decision to join the air force, though he asked him to finish university first.

In January 1945, Ern and Bertha decided to try living in Vancouver. Ern's asthma had become steadily worse and the prairie winters were now impossible. Taking a few household and personal possessions, they rented out the farm and left to spend several months on the West Coast.

Vancouver's climate turned out to be good for Ern's health, and he and Bertha sold the farm and bought a lot on 22nd Street in West Vancouver. A year or so after

arriving in British Columbia, Ern was strong enough – in his early 60s – to clear the lot himself and help build a house on it, even, on occasion, carrying wood on his shoulder from a lumberyard a mile away.

Living on the coast worked out well. Ern enjoyed the ocean, the flowers, and the freighters. Grandchildren came along, Ern and Bertha became active in their local church, and they made new friends. Ern continued to attend political meetings, if less often, and remained interested in national and international affairs, writing frequently – as he always had – to newspapers and government officials. He took on carpentry jobs. Kay recalls that he usually undercharged for his work, then refrained from asking for his wages until they were pressed on him. In fact, she says, people often had to force him to take his pay.

Some home repair and renovation jobs involved working with another man, a friend and fellow veteran of the intelligence section: A.C. Skerton. (Skerton is seated on the left in the photo of the three soldiers in the Additional Images at the end of this book.) Doris said that the two men worked on houses below Marine Drive in West Vancouver, and they and their wives sometimes vacationed together on Bowen Island, near Vancouver. Her father said that he'd learned a lot from Skerton and sought his advice about the house on 22nd Street.



Bertha and Ern, Vancouver.

Ern also became a problem-solver for the church. In addition to counting and depositing the collection each week, he did small jobs for the minister. At Ern's funeral, the minister said that he'd once complained of dead flies falling onto his head from the dome above the pulpit. Ern had fixed that by climbing a 40-foot ladder to the dome and drilling holes to let the flies escape. The minister told this story to illustrate Ern's practical side.

He remained active until the day he died. Kay remembers him picking cherries at 77, climbing with his grandchildren from a ladder on the carport roof to the high branches of a cherry tree.

In June 1965, Ern celebrated his eightieth birthday – joyously – surrounded by family. In December, he died suddenly of a heart attack, a letter to the Prime Minister's Office in his typewriter.

What did he believe in? What were his primary values and convictions? What made his quiet example compelling?

As far as religion was concerned, he expressed few if any strong beliefs. Opinions vary on his religious convictions, but everyone agrees that on the whole he found the church an influence for good in the world. He wasn't an atheist – agnostic might be a better term, he said – but he stated that he didn't concern himself with the possibility of an afterlife. On the other hand, one of his favourite books was a volume on world religions, and he was always interested in the faiths of other peoples. There was no bible reading at home, but, out of respect for Bertha's wishes, grace was said before meals.

His social convictions were clear. He believed, as we have seen, in political justice, a fair economic system, and social democracy. He was an agrarian activist, and, after the First World War, a moderate socialist. He stood for progress based on co-operation, shared responsibility, and an economy based on need not greed.

He believed in education. With only a half section of land, he provided each of his children with education beyond high school: Mert completed an honours degree in agriculture at the University of Alberta, Marg trained as a nurse, Doris received teacher training, and Kay attended Mt. Royal College in Calgary. Sacrifices were made year after year to pay for their education. Kay recalls collecting bones and scrap metal with her father to buy Marg a watch during her nurses training, and Doris remembered being given five dollars to buy a dress for the graduation ceremony her parents couldn't afford to attend.

Ern's commitment to education motivated him to start and maintain a small local high school in Lauderdale. With the co-operation of family members and a neighbour, he helped build the school; that done, he served as its handyman, supplied it with coal, and worked long and hard to persuade the Alberta Department of Education to send it a teacher.

His own subjects were politics, philosophy, and sociology, and his favourite section in the newspaper was the editorial page. Doris remembered him reading books such as *The Great Religions of the World*, Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, and H.G. Wells's *The History of the World*. He liked biographies and historical nonfiction, as well as the poetry of Tennyson, Longfellow, Robert Service, Norman Priestley, and William Henry Drummond. Late in life he read Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* and condemned its philosophy.

Having picked up a fair amount of French in the Mattawa lumber camps and France, he often spoke French with his children. Doris remembered him counting stairs with her in French, and Kay recalls him speaking French at the dinner table. She says he stopped after he got dentures: he said he couldn't make the right sounds anymore.

He was a man of simple tastes and habits. His favourite foods were corn on the cob, apple pie, and potatoes and gravy. He ate little meat, never hunted or fished, and disliked butchering. He had smoked on occasion and drunk alcohol in the trenches – he never refused the rum ration, he said – but he accepted Bertha's disap-

proval of liquor and tobacco, and while he accepted drinks on farms or ranches where drinking was expected, he didn't drink or smoke at home. He was reserved, but he liked to tease, joke with, and play gentle pranks on people, including the young teachers who came to Lauderdale.

He loved and was extraordinarily patient with children. Kay recalls digging around in his mouth as a child, playing with his gold fillings. She also remembers giving him a hairdo in church and putting a handkerchief on his head while he slept through sermons. He taught almost all his grandchildren to tie their shoelaces, and his grandchildren, as adults, remember him as warm and gentle.

In the end, we're left with the image of a man who carried on with humility, quiet humour, and patience. Through war and peace he did what he thought right to the best of his ability. He was mild-mannered, compassionate, conscientious,



Ern and Bertha on Ern's 80th birthday in June 1965. The cherry tree is in the background. Bertha stayed in the house after Ern's death, joined in 1967 by her sister, Mildred. Bertha and Mildred later moved to a retirement residence, then, in 1975, to a seniors' lodge in Castor, Alberta, to be closer to Bertha's daughter, Marg. Bertha died in 1988.

and kind. He believed in the essential equality of all human beings, and he repudiated prejudice. He was a good soldier, content to serve.

Above all, he was a man who put others before himself and spent his life working for their sake. He loved his wife, his family, and his fellows.

To a remarkable extent, Ern Brown's life was lived for other people, but it was a life lived fully, with quiet pride, intelligence, great heart, and profound humanity.

Afterword

This e-version of *James Ernest Brown, Soldier for his times* is, aside from a few changes, corrections, and additions, the same as the expanded print edition of December 2011. Doris provided a careful reading of that edition – with its new material, editorial changes, corrections, and scanned images – and her kids (Bruce, Linda, Barry, and Murray Thomson) were helpful and encouraging throughout. It was a pleasure discussing this project with them, and, of course, spending another year or two with Ern Brown and his times.

Sometimes reading about the past lets us escape the present, and that's fine. It's good to get away. Sometimes, however, it's about other things. Perhaps we read about history to prevent reliving it. Or we elect to read about exemplary men and women from the past because we need to feel closer to individuals we admire. Their exceptional qualities help us keep the faith. And the fact that their world was different from ours reminds us that the future can be different, too. The things that trouble us about our world are not inevitable, and it's very possible that our efforts, if sound, will bring constructive, progressive change. For this we look for inspiration to the past, to people like James Ernest Brown.

Notes

For the sake of clarity, I've made minor spelling and grammatical changes to Ern's quoted letters. No changes alter their substance or tone. Seventeen letters survive – not including the fragment cited on page 7 and addressed to “Bertie” – and all but one were written to Ern's sister Marion, training as a nurse in Edmonton, or to their mother in Lauderdale. Marion and her mother saved these letters, and, after the latter died, Marion kept them until her own death, at which point they came to Doris. Eventually, the originals were donated to the Glenbow Museum in Calgary.

The following notes provide additional comments, as well as references to archival sources, Internet sites, essays, memoirs, scholarly works, and other print materials.

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1. Attestation Paper, Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force.
 2. A souvenir of Ern's leave in London: a worn and stained catalogue for Madame Tussaud's Exhibition, price sixpence. The catalogue (“now abridged owing to the War”) includes ads: “Always use Bumsted's Salt which is pure salt,” “Tamar Indien Grillon for Constipation, Haemorrhoids, Bile, Headache, Loss of Appetite, Gastric and Intestinal Troubles. A laxative and refreshing fruit lozenge. Most agreeable to take.” And so on.

There are also a number of photo postcards from Ern's leaves in England and Scotland. There is a black and white of Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey, dated 12/11/17 and sent to Miss Catherine Brown in Castor. There are four tinted and two black and white photo postcards of Edinburgh, and a black and white of the Forth Bridge. The most intriguing postcard, however, is an artist's colour rendering of Loch Etive in Scotland, a peaceful, almost dreamlike scene. On the back, Ern wrote that he was in Glasgow; it had rained hard and he'd be

returning to Edinburgh and London – and the war of course – without seeing Loch Lomond. It was addressed to his mother, but there's no sign of a stamp.

There's also the postcard of the Jacques Cartier monument in Montreal, and a stapled set of black and white photo postcards of Bruay, France, with tissues between each. Three tissues bear handwritten notes, one of which reads: "This is taken from a theatre where I have mentioned being several times last Xmas and again this fall just before leaving for Passchendaele." (A number of these images are included at the end of this book.)

3. We also know that on October 25, 1916, four weeks after joining his unit, he was "sentenced to 2 days F.P. [Field Punishment] No. 1 for appearing on Parade unshaved." According to Douglas E. Harker in his 1974 regimental history – *The Dukes: The story of the men who have served in Peace and War with the British Columbia Regiment (D.C.O.) 1883-1973* – the battalion had recently returned from the Somme's front line northeast of Courcelette. Harker cites the battalion war diary with respect to mid-October, the point at which Ern was introduced to trench warfare: "Entire area under heavy bombardment . . . holding the line . . . counter-attack repelled . . . bombing attack to clear up location at map reference . . . very heavy casualties . . ." (Harker, page 100.)
4. Reginald H. Roy, ed., *The Journal of Private Fraser* (Victoria, British Columbia: Sono Nis Press, 1985), pages 43-44.
5. Lord Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage* (London: Constable and Company Ltd, 1945), page 64.
6. Letter from Reginald Roy to the author, Oct. 1, 1985. About the intelligence section, Dr. Roy wrote: "If I remember correctly, the Intelligence section was also responsible for collecting Prisoners-of-War brought in and, if possible, interrogating them, sorting them out, and bringing them back to the brigade or divisional collection cage for prisoners."

In a later letter, Dr. Roy wrote: “I am a veteran of the Second World War, and all I can say is thank God I missed the First World War.”

7. Will R. Bird, *Ghosts Have Warm Hands* (Toronto and Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin & Company Limited, 1968). The first quote is from pages 29-30, the second from pages 46-47.

Among Ern’s mementos is a souvenir of his intelligence gathering, a printed and very detailed 16” x 13” map entitled Leek Wood, which delineates local Allied and German trenches. Someone has penciled in additional lines and noted what seems to be the time needed to move from point to point. Scale 1:20.000. “Trenches corrected to 20-8-18.” Printed on the map’s back is a typed form with spaces for messages such as “Am held up by (a) M.G., (b) Wire at . . .” It ends with: “(a) Carry no maps or papers which may be of value to the enemy. (b) Give no information if captured, except the following which you are bound to give : Name and Rank. (c) Collect all captured maps and papers and send them in at once.” The map and message form date from the 7th Battalion’s participation in the Hundred Days Offensive, which effectively ended the war.

On August 8, 1918, the Offensive began with the Battle of Amiens, said to be “the greatest day for our Regiment, . . . where the 7th led with the 10th Bn and gained 14 miles in one of the fiercest actions of the war.” (From the website of The British Columbia Regiment.) Other major engagements involving the 7th Battalion during the Offensive included the battles of Drocourt-Quéant, Canal du Nord, and Sensée Canal. Casualties were very heavy.

8. Roy, pages 75-76.
9. L/Cpl H. Maylor, *The Listening Post*, October 29, 1915.
10. Pierre Berton, *Vimy* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), page 227. And on page 215: “Arthur Currie’s veteran 1st Division held the extreme right of

the line and had the longest advance of all – four thousand yards to its final objective of Farbus Wood, the small forest just below the eastern slope of the ridge, where so many of the big German guns were hidden.”

11. Major Philpot’s “Report on Operations 9th to 16th April 1917” is on pages 161-165 of the 7th Battalion’s war diary for April 1917.

The diary and supplementary material can be searched at [Collections Canada](#). “This database contains the digitised War Diaries of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) units. From the start of the First World War, CEF units were required to maintain a daily account of their ‘Actions in the Field.’ This log was called a War Diary. The War Diaries are not personal diaries, rather they are a historical record of a unit’s administration, operations and activities during the First World War.” (Library and Archives Canada)

A sample diary entry for the battalion: September 24, 1916: “Shelled continuously – Fine – ” (referring to the weather). And three days later: “Day spent in consolidating and evacuating wounded. Casualties for tour 5 officers and 218 OR. Relieved by 2nd C.M.R. and moved to billets in Albert.”

12. Now largely forgotten, the Battle of Arleux took place on April 28 and 29, 1917. Intended to strengthen a weak flank in the Allied position after Vimy Ridge, this battle was, from Ern’s point of view, a key action. In his July 6, 1917 letter to his sister, Bertha Brown, he wrote: “It is one of the times I will never forget. . . . The work I was on gave me a good view of what took place.” He describes how, from a distance, he saw “our boys going over,” how they walked without wavering through mud, machine gun fire, and heavy artillery bombardment. “One other thing that impressed me was how human nerves could be controlled and made to face it.” About this engagement, he wrote: “You will doubtless know all about it after the war . . . one of the hardest fought battles and best victories yet fought by this brigade.”

Ern may have been tasked with assessing enemy activity and the battle’s progress. If so, that would explain his “good view.” Then, too, the 7th was “in support”

at Arleux; according to an appendix to its war diary, its role was limited largely to carrying parties for the other battalions in the Second Brigade, including the 10th, which suffered very heavy casualties. The 7th and the 10th often fought side by side.

Something that stands out in Ern's unusually long letter to Bertha is his interest in a 10th Battalion soldier named Archie Brown, no relation, who was killed at Arleux on April 29 at the age of 20. According to his Attestation Paper, he was a bank clerk from Brownfield, Alberta, who, at 18, enlisted in the 89th Battalion, three weeks before Ern signed up. It's not known how well they knew each other, if at all, but Bertha knew the family: her husband's family farmed not far from Brownfield.

Ern begins the letter: "I went down this evening to enquire about Archie Brown. Sorry I could not do it sooner, but this was my first opportunity. I talked with his platoon sergeant and several others. The sergeant told me that he was killed instantly, and also where he was buried. . . . He was a lance corporal in charge of an advanced bombing post. The shell that killed him wounded several others. . . . From what the sergeant told me, I was probably about five hundred yds from him at the time. I am going to see his battalion padre as I think he can probably give me some further particulars, and if he were to write, he would undoubtedly be able to take more liberties with the censor. . . . This is about all I can say except that I will see what has been done, and can be done, to mark the grave."

There must have been some confusion. Archie's name is inscribed at the Vimy Monument (as Lance Corporal D.A. Brown), which means he was one of the Canadian dead in France with no known grave.

Toward the end of the letter, Ern returns to Archie Brown and his mother: "If Mrs Brown has lost her breadwinner, she can proudly look to the future knowing that her welfare has been well paid for in advance." And: "I am sure any mother would sooner have their son die as Archie Brown did than live a slacker at home in Canada.

“ . . . There is always a great satisfaction in knowing we have played the game, and to a mother it must be some comfort to know it was her influence that made us equal to it.”

13. Overall, the spelling in the letters is excellent. Ern got the hard words right, even as the war dragged on and his strength diminished. Punctuation and grammar might slide, words might go missing, and apostrophes were expendable, but his spelling was first rate. “Bot” is an exception and was doubtless intentional.

14. The 7th Canadian Infantry Battalion War Diary, National Archives, Ottawa; entry for February 11, 1919. After the war, the 7th Battalion was perpetuated as the British Columbia Regiment (Duke of Connaught’s Own). From the regiment’s website: “Almost six thousand men had served in the battalion of which 1,440 were killed and 3,294 wounded.”

Note, too, Douglas E. Harker’s regimental history *The Dukes* (see above, endnote 3).

15. Letter from Reginald Roy, October 1, 1985. About Ern’s Belgian Croix de Guerre, Dr. Roy wrote: “The custom was for a certain number of foreign medals to be awarded to a division or brigade, and these would be divided up among the battalions, and the commanding officer of the unit would select several officers or men in the unit who may not have won a military cross or military medal but nevertheless were deserving of some recognition.”

16. Captain H. Taprell Dorling, *Ribbons and Medals* (London: George Philip & Son, Ltd, 1956), page 177.

17. Letter from Prof. Desmond Morton to the author, April 8, 1986.

18. Lord Moran, page 70.

19. Bird, page 73.

20. Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1974), page 90.
21. A.J.P. Taylor, *The First World War: An Illustrated History* (Penguin Books, 1963), page 140.
22. Denis Winter, *Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War* (Penguin, 1978), page 133.
23. *Ibid.*, page 140.
24. Frederick Manning, as quoted in Peter Vansittart, *Voices from the Great War* (Penguin, 1981), page 216. The Battle for Hill 70 (mid-August 1917) epitomized the utter awfulness of everything. According to the battalion's Report on Operations after Hill 70, 13 of its 22 officers were killed or wounded, and 429 of its 639 other ranks. Of the battalion's 16 stretcher-bearers, 13 were killed or wounded; one who survived was 39-year-old Private M.J. O'Rourke, awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery.
- From an earlier Report on Operations (April 21-May 4, 1917), the period during which Arleux was captured: "Medical services appeared to be very satisfactory. The Battn. received an additional 12 stretchers prior to the action. These proved of great use."
25. Winter, page 137.
26. Siegfried Sassoon, *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston* (Faber and Faber Limited, 1937), page 510.
27. After the Second World War, Robert Graves, another veteran of the First, wrote: "Myself, I valued the Kaiser's war as having given me not only an unsurpassable standard of danger, discomfort and horror by which to judge more recent troubles, but a confidence in the golden-heartedness and iron endurance of my fellow countrymen (proved again during Hitler's war), which even the laxity of this new plastic age cannot disturb." Quoted in Vansittart, page 262.

28. Robert Franklin, as quoted in *The Great War and Canadian Society: An Oral History*, Daphne Read, ed. (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1978), page 205.
29. Sir Arthur Currie, as quoted in John Swettenham, *To Seize the Victory: The Canadian Corps in World War I* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1965), page 240.
30. Winter, page 234.
31. In June 1917, Major-General Archibald Cameron Macdonell (known both as “Fighting Mac” and “Batty Mac”) assumed command of the 1st Canadian Division, of which the 7th Battalion was a part. In 1919, in his “Final Order of the Day,” which Ern saved, General Macdonell wrote a farewell message to his troops. This surprising document reads in part: “I cannot view the breaking up of my beautiful 1st Canadian Division, the men of the ‘Old Red Patch,’ with equanimity. It breaks me up too. That is the truth. . . . I shall soon only be a memory to you. It will, however, I trust, be the pleasant memory of a Canadian General who believed in you, trusted you, cared for you, gloried in your steadfast courage, discipline, and truly wonderful achievements, and who hopes none of you will be the worse for being ‘Macdonell’s Men.’” The front cover of the Final Order is reproduced at the end of this book.

Two years earlier, when Macdonell left the 7th Brigade to command the 1st Division, he prepared a speech to deliver to his men. Will Bird was there: “We had had quite a day back at Chateau de la Haie when Brigadier A.C. Macdonell came to say goodbye, . . . Everyone had a good word for him and stories of his decisions and actions were legion. All hands and the cook were shined up to say farewell when the brigade presented arms, but the old fire-eater seemed overcome with emotion. He put his horse to the gallop and left without saying a word.” (Bird, page 56.)

An original copy of this speech is at Library and Archives Canada. On it, Macdonell has written: “This address was not delivered. I simply couldn’t. So galloped off.”

For a closer look at this extraordinary man, see Ian McCulloch's "Batty Mac': Portrait of a Brigade Commander of the Great War, 1915-17," published in *Canadian Military History*, Volume 7, Number 4, Autumn 1998, pages 11-28. The quote from Macdonell is drawn from this article, page 27.

32. Lyn Macdonald, *They Called it Passchendaele* (London: Macmillan, 1978), pages 168-9. See as well Macdonald's other books on the war, including *The Roses of No Man's Land*, an account of the nurses and other medical personnel who had their own time in hell. After the war, many nurses, Macdonald, wrote, "were not content to return to the old life of busy idleness, even if circumstances had made it possible." Instead, they "set out to carve themselves a place in what was still a man's world." (*Roses*, pages 11-12.)
33. Doris said that during the Second World War, a young man from the Castor area asked Ern to advise him on the safest possible post in the armed services. After that, she said, her father had no use for him. When conscription was introduced in 1944, the young man became a "Zombie," a conscripted soldier who resisted overseas assignment.
34. In 1967, Gregory Clark wrote this about the Battle of Vimy Ridge: "As far as I could see, south, north, along the miles of Ridge, there were the Canadians. And I experienced my first full sense of nationhood." Quoted in William D. Mathieson, *My Grandfather's War: Canadians Remember the First World War, 1914-1918* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1981), page 321.
35. Anthony Burgess, "The Literature of Natural Man," *The New York Times Book Review*, July 14, 1985, page 31. For a thorough treatment of the war's impact on "rational civilization," see Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford University Press, 1975). See also Modris Eksteins's *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (1989); Chapter 5 (Reason in Madness) is especially good on the theme of duty.

36. Special thanks to Kay, Ray Marquart of Castor, Kevin James (Ern's grandson), and Canadian Legion staff in Ottawa and Alberta for information about the Castor branch and Ern's Legion involvement. (Kay, who suggested I follow up on this, recalls her father – suddenly a “crisp soldier” again – marching with pride on Armistice Day.)
37. Ramsay Muir, *Political Consequences of the Great War* (London: Thornton Butterworth Ltd, 1930), pages 98-99.
38. From the January 1936 “Addresses and Reports to the U.F.A. Convention.” Robert Gardiner was president at the time, Norman F. Priestley vice-president, and Ern a member of the executive. If cooperatives were a practical application of the U.F.A. philosophy, its spirit was rooted in what Ursula Franklin calls a perceived “communality of souls,” a sense that individuals belong to a “larger structure.” (See Michael Valpy's interview with Ursula Franklin in *The Globe and Mail*, November 25, 2006.)
39. William Irvine, *The Farmers in Politics* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), pages 101-102; originally published in 1920.
40. Ibid., Reginald Whitaker's introduction, page xxv.
41. William Kirby Rolph, *Henry Wise Wood of Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), page 17.
42. Douglas E. Cass of the Glenbow Museum in Calgary sent a photocopy of this article in 1985. In the summer of 2011, Mr. Cass, Director, Library and Archives, kindly provided a link to the Glenbow's digitized U.F.A. materials at [Glenbow Collections](#).

Several quotes in *Soldier for his times* are drawn from documents stored on this site. They reveal a movement both pragmatic and determinedly idealistic in which men and women imagined a future based on social justice, equality, tolerance, and co-operation. Behind their economic viewpoint and proposals

lay an intense humanism. Having lived through the war and the hard times that followed – and motivated not by naïveté but sober realism and anxiety about the future – they laboured to lay the foundation for a better world. At the U.F.A.’s 1932 Annual Convention, Amy Warr, president of the United Farm Women of Alberta, the women’s section of the U.F.A., reported:

“Our women continue to stress education, health and child welfare, three fundamental assets of a nation. If we would be assured of possessing a sturdy, intelligent population, filled with the highest ideals of citizenship, we must provide adequate facilities for the intellectual, moral and physical development of our youth; imbuing within them those qualities of character that denote courage, honesty and justice to others. In this way, and this way only, can we be assured of a future citizenry who will carry out that old biblical injunction: ‘Love thy neighbor as thyself,’ upon which the hope of future civilization rests.”

The U.F.A. endorsed women’s suffrage in 1912, several years before it was enacted in Alberta and elsewhere in Canada. (Source: *Alberta Online Encyclopedia*.)

43. Minutes of the January 1934 U.F.A. Convention, page 15.

44. Doris Thomson in an e-mail message, August 1, 2011.

45. “Monkey Sense,” written by Mack Cryland and illustrated by Art Gonon, Labour Publishing Company, Ottawa, 1933. Other titles from the same press included two publications by William Irvine: “Co-operative Government” (“an essay on fundamental principles of democratic government”) and “Co-operation or Catastrophe” (“an interpretation of C.C.F. principles”). Two other titles were by J.S. Woodsworth, including “Socialism in the House of Commons.”

Doris said that her father’s reading on the farm included the federal *Hansard*, the transcript of parliamentary debates in Ottawa.

46. Seymour Martin Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism: The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in Saskatchewan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959), page 87.

47. The *Alberta Online Encyclopedia* re the U.F.A.'s farm organization: "In 1932, they adopted a ten-point program mandating broad economic changes to relieve Canadians from poverty. They agreed that the UFA must cooperate with other people's organizations across Canada to achieve these reforms. . . . The UFA invited these other organizations to a meeting in Calgary on August 1 to discuss their platform. At the meeting, the Political Labour Parties of Canada decided to unite with the UFA under the CCF banner. The following year, the group met in Regina to adopt a platform similar to the UFA's. The Regina Manifesto, as it became known, guided the CCF for the next twenty-three years."

In a piece entitled "The Calgary Conference and Its Outcome," J.S. Woodsworth, M.P., President of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, wrote: "At last we can present a united front to the powerful capitalistic system; at last we can make an effective Dominion-wide appeal to the electorate; at last we are getting into a position where the common people can make a bid for political power. . . . Can it be that at last politics are ceasing to be a party game and are becoming vital? Is it possible that at last our public policies are to be solidly based on sound morals and enlightened economic understanding? Is it possible that at last we are on the eve of a great crusade – a fight against entrenched injustice; a struggle for the economic emancipation of the great masses of our people; the laying of abiding foundations for a social structure in which our children may have a chance that they are now denied?" (From the September 1932 issue of *The U.F.A.*)

48. From a pamphlet reprinted from the August 1932 issue of *The U.F.A.* The cover reads:

A Call to the People of Canada

The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (Farmer – Labor – Socialist)

A description of the inception, objects and plans of the new Canadian political movement launched at Calgary, Alberta, August 1st, 1932.

The pamphlet states that the intention is “to challenge the existing social order and to lay the foundations of the Co-operative Commonwealth, . . .” The executive of the U.F.A. was present “in full strength.” Robert Gardiner, president at the time: “The hope of civilization rests upon human ability to build a co-operative commonwealth.”

49. Lipset, page 87.

50. Doris once spoke to Tommy Douglas at a political meeting. After introducing herself as Ernie Brown’s daughter, she said that he, Douglas, had sat her on his knee when she was several years old. Douglas said he didn’t recall the occasion but would certainly have remembered had she been older at the time.

In the 1920s and early 1930s, Robert Gardiner (U.F.A. M.P.) and William Irvine (Labour M.P.) were members of the Ginger Group in Parliament. The Canadian Encyclopedia states that the Ginger Group was “named after the Tory M.P.s who in 1917 opposed the Military Service Act.”

Wikipedia provides a richer and more colourful explanation: “The Ginger Group was not a formal political party in Canada, but a faction of radical Progressive and Labour Members of Parliament who advocated socialism. The group is said to have taken its name from Ginger Goodwin, a United Mine Workers organizer. Ginger was shot dead outside Cumberland, British Columbia, by company-hired private policemen on July 27, 1918. His murder sparked Canada’s first general strike.” See [Ginger Group](#).

Both sources agree that members of the Ginger Group later played a significant role in the formation of the C.C.F. under J.S. Woodsworth, himself a former Labour M.P. and member of the Ginger Group.

51. Robert Service, *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, Ltd, 1916), pages 9-10 and 160-1. Doris said that one of her father's favourite lines was from "A Song of the Sandbag," also published in *Rhymes*: "If them as made it 'ad to fight, there wouldn't be no war."

Additional images



The one-room schoolhouse near Foresters Falls, Ontario, 1965. A few months before his death, Ern visited the school and wrote on the blackboard that he'd been one of its first students more than 70 years earlier.

France Edinburgh, Scotland,
20-11-17

Dear Marion -

I have not done much writing since I came on leave but I have sent quite a lot of Post Cards. I sent you one yesterday from Glasgow. In your last letter you wanted me to write and tell you many things and never mind the Censor well that would hardly be right and besides it would not go. I went round many a few of the places I have been in. Le Harve Rouen Amiens Abbeville Etaples Boulouge Calais St Omer Cassel Poperinge Ypres Lillers Bethune (where Gordon is buried) Brumay Houdain Aubigny Lievin Lens (part of it only) Arleux, King. Heuville St Vast Albert St Paul Bonneville - and a host of small places along the line. I have seen quite a lot of France on foot. I was not in this last attack at Passchendaele as my leave came just when we were moving in to the front line, I had been up in support for a couple of days. I expect we will be back at Lens when I go back on the 23rd. I had Xmas dinner at Brumay a year ago wonder where it will be this year. As for my work, I do any of three things patrol observe and snipe. On Patrol we investigate anything new or suspicious looking in (no mans land) and listen for work parties try to locate

The first page of the letter in which Ern lists the places he's been. France has been crossed out and replaced with Edinburgh, Scotland. Again, the original letters were donated to the Glenbow Museum in Calgary. As of January 2013, most of Ern's photographs and souvenirs are with Linda Thomson, Doris's daughter, in Toronto.



“... just before leaving for Passchendaele.” Unsent postcard from Bruay, France, 1917.



“Germans.” Le Fort de Loncin, Liège. A postcard from Ern’s memorabilia.

Two more postcards. The first, from Albert, France, has been censored, the location blacked out.



The second postcard is from Loch Etive, Scotland. See endnote 2.





Arras Guerre 1914-1918
85 — ~~Intérieur de la Basilique~~ — Intérieur de la Basilique
Les Grandes Orgues — Interior of Basilica - The Great Organ
Après le Bombardement - After the bombardment.

A photo of the ruined basilica at Arras in France. Intended as a postcard, it was addressed to Miss Bertha Cates of Oyen, Alberta. Again, the location has been redacted.



VISÉ. — Rue Haute.

From a set of black and white reproductions Ern brought back. Visé is in the Walloon area of Belgium,



This photo was taken by Captain Donald H. Macfarlane, M.C. in 1916. Captain Macfarlane was a signals officer with the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisional Signal Companies, serving overseas from 1915 to 1919. About this photo, he said that it recorded the recent "Grave of Lt. Harry Hutton Scott, son of Canon Scott, killed in October 1916. Buried near Albert-Bapaume Rd. on Tara Hill."



Also taken by Capt. Macfarlane: "Anywhere in the Passchendaele Area in 1917 with numerous tanks either mired or shot up. Remains of Boche light railway in the foreground also remains of line of barbed wire as indicated by posts. Shell bursting in the distance."

I met Mr. Macfarlane through his daughter, Rose McIntyre, and spoke with him for an hour or so in 1984 or 1985. Born in Sherbrooke, Quebec in 1894, this kind gentleman received the M.B.E. in 1946 and spent much of his career in the aviation industry. He passed away in Toronto in 1985.



Jack Cross was a friend of Ern's from home. In a postscript to a letter to his mother, August 1918, Ern wrote: "Had a letter from Katie last night, and a card from Jack Cross. He was just leaving for Canada."

Three pages of photos of other members of the 7th Battalion's intelligence section, stored with Ern's mementos.



Sergeant R.L. (Dutch) Kendall.



Corporal H.J. (Bert) Prine and his "Mrs."



Sergeant J. (Johnny) McDowell, another intelligence section NCO.



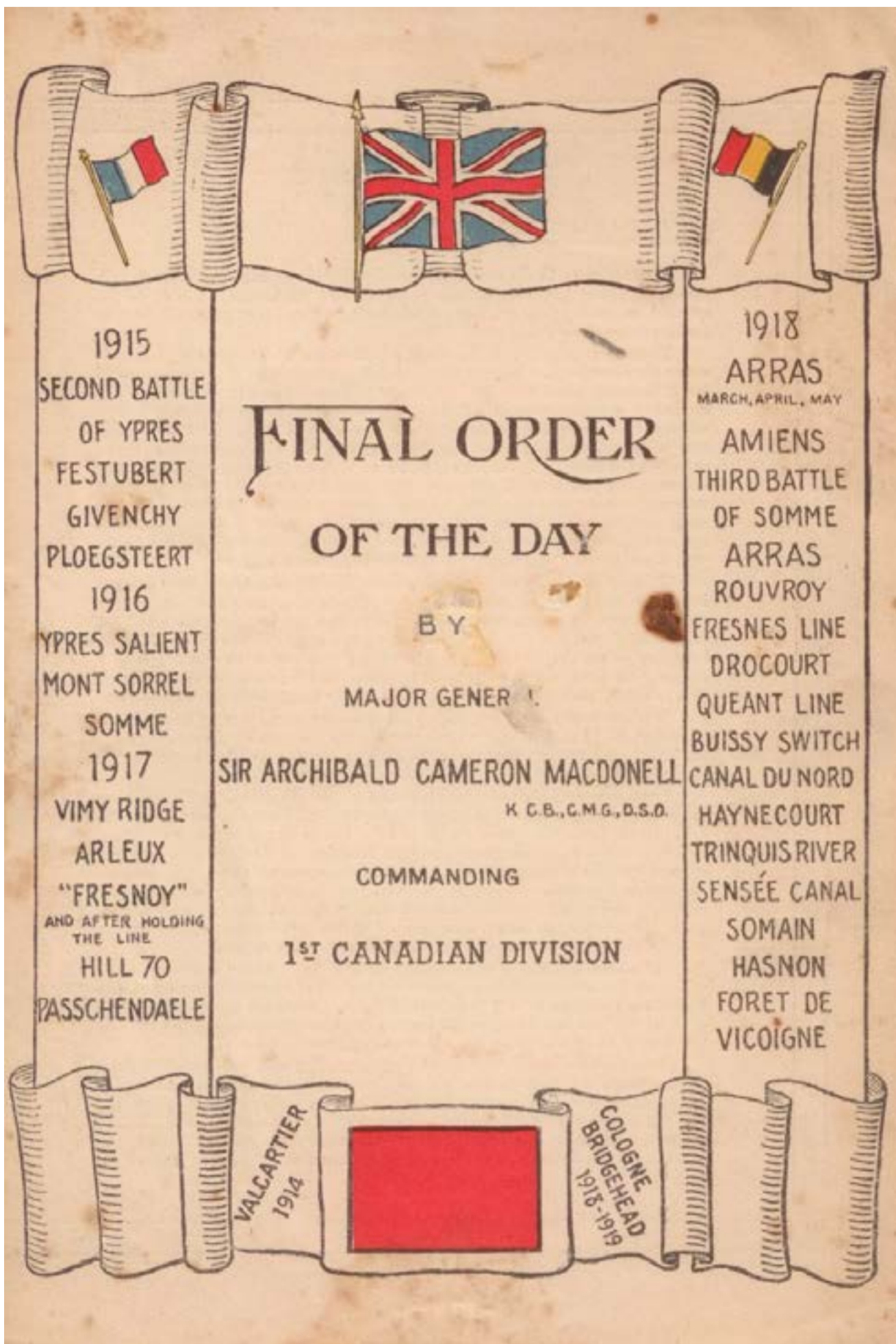
Privates A.C. Skerton, H.K. Hedquist, and G.E. Hildebrande.



A studio photograph of Private H.K. ("Happy") Hedquist, M.M., taken in Edinburgh. A small photo mounted on a stiff backing and enveloped in a thick grey stock, it has front flaps that cover and protect it.



Corporal (later Sergeant) Johnny McDowell stands with his hand on another man's shoulder. On the back, Ern has written: "Pte E.F. Seed (Killed Nov 10 /17)." November 10 is the day Ern referred to in his letter from Scotland when he wrote: "I was not in this last attack at Passchendaele as my leave came just when we were moving into the front line."



Final Order of the Day: the front cover of the farewell pamphlet Macdonell wrote for his 1st Division troops in 1919, listing the Division's battles. Note the Old Red Patch.