



# Sabretache

THE OFFICIAL  
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September 2016

## THE RAILWAY MEN OF WW1

Railways were not particularly important in the war's early events. However, by December 1914, both sides realized that the conflict would not be quickly resolved and now faced the challenge of moving large quantities of supplies to the millions of men fighting along the Western Front. The quantity of goods required was staggering. The British Army, for example, provided each soldier with 1 1/2 lb. of fresh rations daily, in addition to standard-issued tins of hard tack crackers and 'bully beef'. Animal fodder, ammunition, petroleum oil and lubricants also had to be transported to the battle zone. The average horse consumed ten times as much as a soldier. By 1915, British troops and animals were consuming an astonishing 4400 tons of food and fodder daily!

It was soon apparent that an efficient transportation system behind the front lines was vital to winning the war, and the railway gradually emerged as the most effective solution. Canada was particularly suited to a lead role in building an effective wartime railway system in Europe. In the years before the war's outbreak, Canadians built more railway lines than any other part of the British Empire. In fact, as early as October 1914, the Canadian government considered the inclusion of 'railway troops' as part of its 'Second Contingent' of troops, but British authorities politely rejected the suggestion.

By the end of 1914, however, events along the Western Front forced Britain to reconsider. The French government initially assumed responsibility for construction and maintenance of all railway lines in France and Belgium. In the aftermath of the first battle of the Marne, in which Allied forces recaptured territory lost to German forces, the challenges faced by France quickly became apparent. A significant gap existed between rail connections and the front lines, and the French government realized that it lacked both the manpower and expertise to quickly resolve the problem. The crisis led Britain to request the formation of a Canadian contingent of men skilled in railway construction and willing to enlist for the duration of the war.

The Canadian government quickly responded with the creation of a railway construction unit - the Canadian Overseas Railway Construction Corps

(CORCC) - on February 22, 1915. Initial recruits were drawn from the Canadian Pacific Railroad's (CPR) experienced labor pool and placed under the command of Lt.-Colonel C. W. P. Ramsay, the company's chief construction engineer.

On August 24, 1915, CORCC arrived in France and was attached to the Belgian army, where it immediately began work on building small gauge rail lines, concrete machine gun emplacements and other engineering projects. In March 1916, a new British policy called for the construction of 60 cm narrow gauge lines. The existing railhead were 10—12 miles from the front. It was decided to move railhead closer by June 1916 (Battle Of the Somme) to within 3 miles from the trenches via narrow gauge lines. The tonnages of supplies and ammo needed became massive.

Horrible ground conditions made 3 miles still not close enough and it was decided to install tramways to move supplies even further forward, sometimes right to the rear trenches. Tramways were narrow gauge tracks that could be laid and repaired quickly. Locomotion was provided either mechanically or by animal or human power.

The Canadian Corps became a leader in this type of tramway building. Small steel lines were laid right up to the assembly areas of the attack and then, after success, forward into the new positions. Casualties and prisoners were moved quickly back. One of the biggest problems became the German harassing artillery fire causing up to 100 breaks in the light railway system every day.



Crews building narrow gauge lines at the front.

### CMHS Meeting

The next CMHS meeting will be held on

**Tuesday,  
September  
20th,  
2016**

**7:00 pm**

At the  
Petty Officers' Mess  
HCMS Tecumseh

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The  
CALGARY MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

is a non-profit registered society  
which fosters the study of the  
military and the police, and the heritage of  
Canada, the British Empire, and the world  
as well as the preservation of military  
artifacts and records.

The CMHS meets once every calendar month  
at: Petty Officers' Mess  
HMCS Tecumseh  
1820 - 24th Street SW  
Calgary AB T2T 0G6

## Notice of Next Meeting

The next CMHS meeting will be held on  
**Tuesday, September 20, 2016,**  
**19:00 (7:00 pm)**

At the Petty Officers' Mess, HMCS Tecumseh.

Members are reminded that an offering of foodstuffs for the Legion Food Bank is considered your unofficial entrance fee to our regular scheduled meetings.

The unofficial agenda of this meeting will be:

Introduction of guests, Minutes of last meeting Correspondence, Membership report Treasurer's report, Old business / New business Break, Show & Tell  
The President, **Kevin Roberts** would like to invite everyone to remain after the meeting for an informal time of fellowship.

In early 1917, the British government formally requested the creation of a Canadian railway contingent. In response, the Canadian government organized the **Canadian Railways Troops (CRT)**, launching a national recruitment campaign that produced five units for overseas service by the end of February 1917. An additional seven units arrived at the front between April 1917 and March 1918. Upon arrival, the CRT immediately assumed responsibility for building, operating, maintaining and repairing all standard- and light-gauge railway lines within the British sector in France.

### POST CARD

The Daily Mirror  
Canadian Official Series  
*(Photograph passed by Censor)*



Unlike regular Canadian infantry, **CRT** enlistments were not part of the Canadian Corps. Rather, they were placed under the command of Brigadier (later Major-General) John William Stewart, a native of Scotland who had immigrated to Vancouver, British Columbia before the war. Stewart was appointed Deputy-Director of General Transportation (Construction) at British General Headquarters in January 1917. Under his direction, the CRT established a Depot at Purfleet, England, where the original units and later reinforcements underwent initial training before departing for the European continent. Unlike their infantry counterparts, CRT recruits received no weapons or trench warfare training. Rather, they were recruited solely because of their knowledge and experience in railway construction and operation.

In July 1917, 2nd Battalion CRT opened a training camp at Wanou, several kilometres east of Ypres, Belgium, where its



personnel explored ways to improve light railway construction. Their work resulted in the adoption of a streamlined construction process: grading, bridging and culvert construction, followed by rail section and plate layers, and finally trains carrying rails, sleepers, ballast and construction supplies. After training, CRT units were capable of laying up to 2 1/2 miles of track - including 4 bridges and 16 culverts - in a 16-hour day. Infantry soldiers, 'pioneer' units and 'labor' battalions from the Canadian Corps provided the 'muscle' required to build the rail lines.

Canadian troops and German prisoners send the wounded back from Vimy on the light tramway rails. Premade replacement sections are stacked nearby to rapidly replace destroyed sections.

## Minutes of the last meeting

### Minutes of the meeting of the Calgary Military Historical Society

#### Meeting held on June 16th, 2015 at the Petty Officer's Mess, HMCS Tecumseh

Meeting called to order by President Kevin R. at 7:06 PM 19 members in attendance. No Guests present.

**Minutes** of previous meeting. Discussed and call for approval by Mikey C. Seconded by Susaan E..

**Newsletter.** Discussion of story

**Correspondence**—none

**Membership.** Report by the noble Floyd S.. Membership totals 49 members.

**Treasures Report.** Provided by our esteemed treasurer Mr. Floyd S. Lists of monies collected from book auctions, donations etc. Listing of expenditures. Treasure Floyd S. . moves that his report be accepted as reported. Seconded by Member Barry E. Unanimous

#### Old Business

Pres. Kevin R asks for report on attending the Military Museum to see display by Vic. Tabokia Member Alan M. reports that he has been unsuccessful in getting the people at the museum to arrange the visit. After discussion it was decided that should try some other time.

#### New Business.

Barry E. reports. **Thomcliffe Gun show** is to be held on **September 17th**. Also the Olds Gun show is on Aug 22nd weekend

Gary E.—asks about clubs goals and finances. Wonders what the club is doing in the future and what plans can be made. Discussion among many members follows.

Herb J-raises these issues and points out what other clubs do. Discussion amongst many members follows.

Gary E.-discusses whether club would get together with MCCofC and put on a event. Discussion amongst members follows.

Pres. Kevin R.-Suggests that concerned members make up a concrete proposal if they wish and present it to the members.

**Break** then auction and draw for books.

#### Show and Tell

Garry L.-Leather flight helmet. Canadian WW2 model

Mike C.-Medals Riel Rebellion and Boer war to Douglas Hoods 63rd Rifles Halifax (RCRs). Boer war meal presentation with every bar available on it. Only 12 were made to display.

Bob McP.-1957 Hungarian Medal “workers”. 200year old Medal Serbian Commanders grade.

Darrel—Harrington and Richards flare launcher. Discusses various ones available. Compass pouch Pattern 37, 1918 US canteen, bayonets and WW2 helmets.

Alan McK.— Indian reversed swastika “Good Luck”

Indra and Al R.— Cap Badge Display from all over the world including souvenir badge from Maginot Line.

WW1 badges, pay book pins. CEF Cap badges from 119th and 213th.

Barry E. Picture of 3 soldiers WW1. Canadian WW1 uniform from machine gun corp. and helmet.

Floyd S.-Grande German Cross with sash and presentation box. Type handed out as a diplomatic order by Hitler.

David G. Discusses 1915 Pattern equipment . Ammo pouches made out of leather. One made in Ontario and the other made by Riley and McCormick, Calgary

Kevin R.— pocket pistol Civil war type . Pond 1862 engraved revolver with pearl handle.

**Motion to Adjourn.** At 8:44 PM By Barry e. and seconded by Mike C.



The emergence of an efficient transportation system provided crucial support to several 1917 offensives, the first of which was launched in the Arras sector. To support an attack at **Vimy Ridge**, the CRT laid rail to within a short distance of front lines, where the Canadian Corps' was preparing to attack. As the offensive commenced, railway troops transported munitions and supplies to the front trenches on standard and narrow gauge lines and evacuated wounded soldiers to field ambulance stations. Within five hours of the battle's commencement, CRT soldiers constructed a spur line to supply shells to a British battery near the ridge. Narrow gauge lines reached the top of the Ridge within one week of its capture, with spurs extending to supply dumps on the Douai plain beyond the Ridge by



month's end. CRT units built a total of 60 miles of narrow gauge line in the area during that time.

The support provided at **Vimy** was only the first of several instances in which rail systems provided crucial support to an infantry attack. During the June 1917 assault on the Messines Ridge, Belgium, railway operation was so efficient that the number of trains assigned to move munitions to the front was actually reduced as the operation proceeded. Light gauge railways played a similar role in supporting the attack at Passchendaele in October-November 1917. For the duration of the war, the elaborate system constructed and maintained by CRT was critical in supporting infantry attacks along the Western Front.

While CRT personnel were not routinely involved in combat, their assignment nevertheless placed them at considerable risk. Working with heavy equipment and engaging in physically demanding labor inevitably resulted in injuries on the job. Many CRT recruits were older and not in the same physical condition as infantry recruits, factors that also contributed to injury. As railway lines pushed closer to front lines, artillery shelling was a common occurrence. Troops were also exposed to bombing from the air, machine gun and rifle fire while working. In total, CRT units suffered 1,977 deaths during service, in addition to 1,382 'non-fatal' battle casualties and 1,087 'work' injuries requiring medical treatment. The fact that 490 CRT personnel received honours and decorations in recognition of their service reinforces the fact that their work was both vital and dangerous.

At war's end, CRT ranks contained 19,000 personnel - 16,000 working in France and Belgium, with the remainder in England. It was second in size only to the massive Canadian Corps of infantry battalions. From the inception of the CORCC in early 1915 until the November 1918 Armistice, Canadian railway soldiers constructed all light railways in areas occupied by the five British Armies, and 60 % of the standard gauge lines connecting the channel ports to the front lines. In total, Canadians built 1880 kilometres (1169 miles) of broad gauge railway line and 2275 kilometres (1414) miles of narrow gauge line during their wartime service.

Sadly, after CRT units demobilized as their members returned to Canada, none were perpetuated in the military units maintained during peacetime. As a result, their crucial contribution to the Allied war effort has often been overlooked. Their record of service bears testimony to the vital role played by Canadian railway expertise during World War I.



Tramway rail section destroyed in battle