



# Sabretache

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## Douglas (Dugless) L. Woods

**63rd Rifles. (Halifax Provisional Battalion)  
2<sup>nd</sup> (Special Service) Battalion,  
Royal Canadian Regiment**

For your viewing pleasure I present to you a pair of medals earned by Private Douglas L Woods. (Note: On his South African enlistment documents his name is spelt as Dugless, I do not know what the proper spelling is yet so until I learn later I will spell his name as the more common Douglas.)

The Pair consist of his Northwest Canada medal and Queens South Africa medal. The Northwest Canada medal is named "Pte D. Woods, 63rd Rifles. (H.P.B.)" engraved in a very stylish contemporary fashion and still mounted on its original suspender. The Queens South Africa medal has two loose

bars for Cape Colony and Paardeberg and is named in the proper impressed style to "8174 Pte D. Woods. RL. CANDN. REGT".

A quick check of the medal roll for this QSA is annotated as having been "Presented by HRH". This may explain why the bars have not been **(CONTINUED PAGE 2)**

This "SHOW AND TELL" was presented and researched by **Member Michael Clare**, Michael is a founding member of the Calgary Military Historical Society and a contributor to this newsletter and several other society's newsletters.

### **SPRING 1943 TRAINING FOR THE ASSAULT AND THE SECRET WEAPON**

In the meantime units of the 1st Canadian Division and of the 1st Army Tank Brigade terminated their long stay in "Sussex by the Sea" and moved northward into Scotland.

In addition to the week at the Combined Training Centre the Canadian battalions, stationed briefly at camps in south-western Scotland, filled their days (and much of their nights) with an intensive programme of specialized training involving work with new types equipment. "No. 1 novelty" (so new as to be still on the secret list)

**(Continued page 5)**

attached to the medal as they were later sent out to some recipients who had their medals presented by the HRH on his tour of Canada in 1902.

I don't know much about his Early life yet but I do know that Douglas Woods was born in 1861 at Halifax Nova Scotia.

The Northwest Rebellion was a result of growing animosity between the aboriginal peoples of Canada's Northwest Territory (including the Metis) and the Federal Government of Canada. The culture of the Plains tribes had been facing eradication since the late 1870's with the near extinction of the plains bison. Many of the tribes could no longer sustain themselves in the way they had previous to this and with the spread of civilization creeping westward felt the figurative noose tightening. For the Metis the animosity had been worsening since the Red River Rebellion of 1870 with no sign of improvement. As a result on March 19th of 1885 the Metis formed a provisional government at Batoche and demanded surrender of the nearby Hudson Bay Company post at Fort Carlton.

Word quickly spread to Ottawa of the uprising and on March 25th the government ordered the mobilization of Canada's militia to deal with this threat. Troops were to be deployed to the Northwest by the Canadian Pacific Railway company. Gaps in the railways however still existed which meant wagon trails were necessary in certain areas as well. By the end of April over 3,000 troops had been transported west to see service.

The Halifax Provisional Battalion was formed in Nova Scotia and was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel James J. Bremner. Consisting of roughly 350 soldiers and it was made up of three companies from the Princess Louise Fusiliers (66th rifles), three companies of the 63rd Halifax Rifles, and two companies of the 1st "Halifax" Brigade of Garrison Artillery, with 32 officers. The battalion left Halifax under orders for the North-West on Saturday, 11 April 1885.

The Battalion was assigned garrison duty along the CPR main line that stretched across the prairies. After a short stay in Winnipeg, the Battalion was separated into four groups and sent to Moose Jaw, Swift Current, Saskatchewan Landing, and Medicine Hat. Soldiers had to remain vigilant due to the possibility of raids on their positions.

The men of the 63rd contingent served primarily at Swift Current, and Saskatchewan landing with one company staying at Moose Jaw.

The battalion reformed in its entirety at Moose Jaw following the cessation of hostilities on July 2nd. The battalion proceeded first to Winnipeg and finally arrived back home in Halifax on July 24th.

For his part in the campaign Douglas L Woods was awarded the Northwest Canada campaign medal. It was presented to him on May 24th 1886 on the Grand Parade by General Lord Russel.

Following the Rebellion Douglas remained in Halifax he married and had two children. He gained employment as a Tinsmith and stayed active with the local militia regiment.

**(From the Canadian War Museum)**

On October 3 1899, with war imminent, the British government suggested that Canada provide several 125-man units for service in South Africa.

The Canadian government sought to assure a strong Canadian identity for the contingent offering a single "regiment of infantry, 1,000 strong." Great Britain agreed to this arrangement later in October and soon 1,019 officers and men, were made into the 2nd (Special Service) Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment of Infantry. Members of the Permanent Force made up about fifteen percent of the total strength of the unit, included the commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel William Dillon Otter.

When the battalion arrived in South Africa on 29 November 1899, after an uncomfortable month-long sea voyage, it was still a fighting unit in name only. Lieutenant-Colonel Otter estimated that a third of the battalion was without prior military service, and half the men were no better than recruits. The battalion was able to train during the two months it spent on lines-of-communications duties after it arrived in South Africa. During this period there were a few opportunities to see action, including the assault on Sunnyside kopje on 1 January 1900, in which C Company, and the machine gun section, participated alongside British and Australian troops.

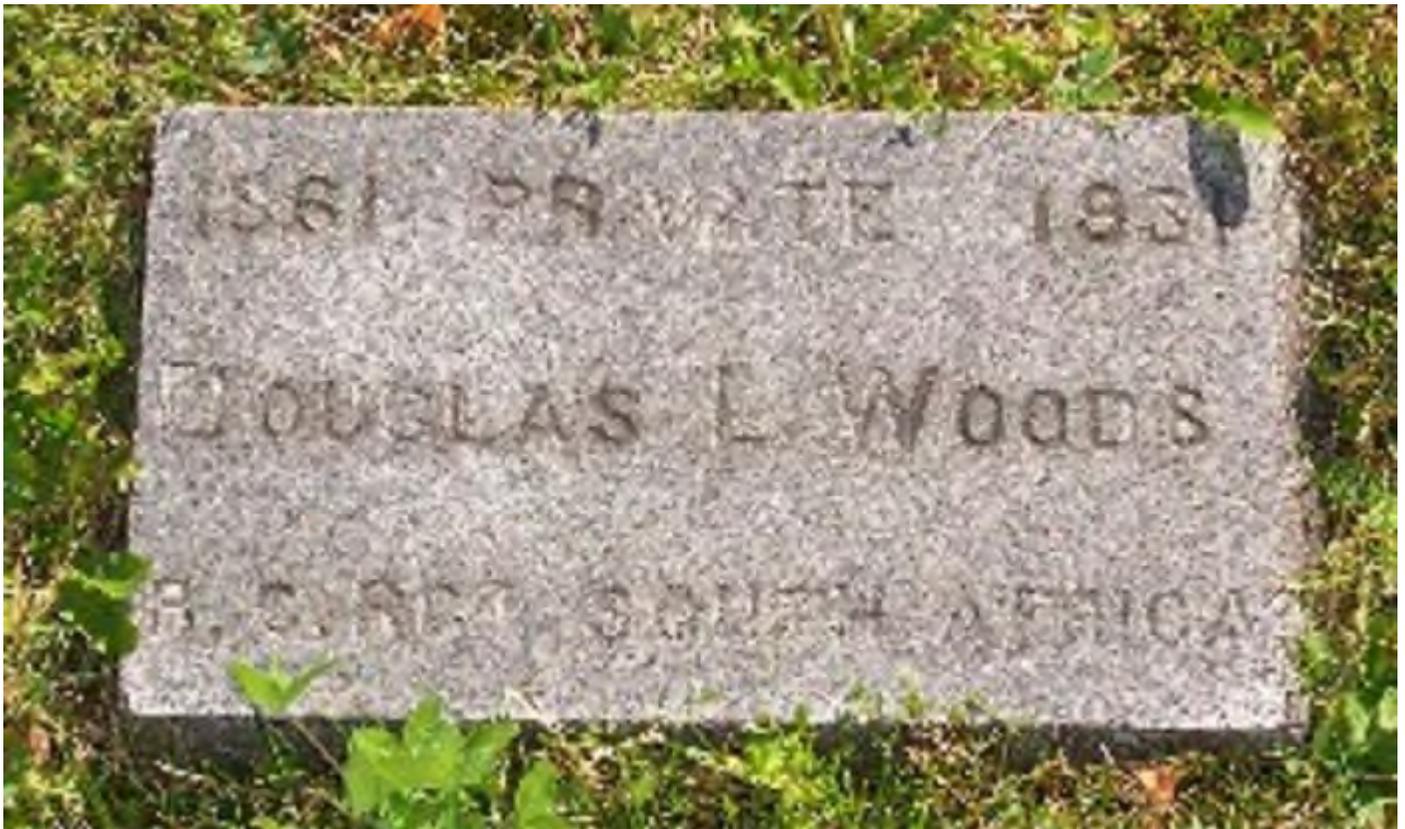
On 12 February 1900, the battalion joined the 19th Brigade to march and fight in the great British offensive aimed at capturing Pretoria, the capital of the Transvaal. The Royal Canadians (as 2 RCRI was often referred to at the time) were soon in action at Paardeberg Drift, suffering heavy casualties on 18 February, and mounting the famous attack that led to the surrender of General Cronje's Boer forces on the 27th. Paardeberg was the first major British victory of the war.

After Paardeberg the battalion fought in the British advance on the Boer capitals of Bloemfontein and Pretoria, gaining in experience and reputation all the while. By the time 2 RCRI marched past Lord Roberts in Pretoria on 5 June 1900, it was considered by many observers as good as any battalion in the British Army. Unfortunately, Canadian arrangements to replace losses from battle and disease were totally inadequate and by this time the battalion was at less than half strength. With the Transvaal capital in British hands, and the war seemingly won, the RCRI took up lines-of-communications duties once again. The unit spent the rest of its tour of operations on this assignment, except for an interlude spent with a column of infantry chasing mounted Boer War Forces.

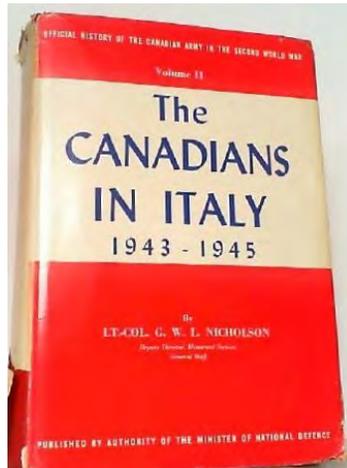
Douglas Woods enlisted into 2 RCRI on October 24th at Halifax and served in South Africa until he was invalided to England on the 13th of August 1900. He received his discharge in England on August 31st and returned home to Halifax. For his service in South Africa he was awarded the Queens South Africa medal with bars for Paardeberg and Cape Colony.

Following his return to Halifax Douglas took up employment as a clerk and added a third child to his brood.

Douglas L Woods passed away in 1931 and is interred at Mount Olivet Cemetery Halifax Nova Scotia. He was the last surviving member of the regiment who served in North West Canada 1885.



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## Training for the Assault (Excerpts from "the Canadians in Italy")

In the meantime units of the 1st Canadian Division and of the 1st Army Tank Brigade terminated their long stay in "Sussex by the Sea" and moved northward into Scotland. During the past winter, as we have seen, the three infantry brigades had completed basic training in combined operations; a final period of advanced training was now needed to fit them for what a War Office directive styled "(a) an opposed landing, (b) subsequent land operations including mountainous country." At Inveraray on the rugged Argyllshire coast each brigade in turn underwent a rigorous eight-day "refresher" course designed to put officers and men in tip-top physical condition and to practise them in the highly specialized technique of assault landing. A strenuous programme of forced route marches, cross-country runs, hill-scaling, rope-climbing and exercise with scramble nets achieved its purpose, rawing from one brigade diarist the comment, "the men are stiff but have stamina and carry very well their hardening".

Under the skilled direction of specialist instructors in combined training units carried out day and night assault landings along the Ayrshire coast on "hostile" beaches "defended" by troops of a Royal Marine commando acting as enemy. With the keen and critical eye of the Royal Navy upon them, prairie lads, born and raised a thousand miles from the sea, mastered the niceties of transferring themselves from the decks of transport into small landing craft pitching on the choppy waters of a Scottish loch. In addition to the week at the Combined Training Centre the Canadian battalions, stationed briefly at camps in south-western Scotland, filled their days (and much of their nights) with an intensive programme of specialized training involving work with new types of equipment. **"No. 1 novelty" (so new as to be still on the secret list)** was an anti-tank weapon which was destined to achieve wide repute—the **PIAT (Projector, Infantry, Anti-Tank)**.



### (Page 97 & 98) Canadian Army's 1st Use

Dawn found Battalion Headquarters and "B" and "D" Companies on the heights less than a mile south of Valguarnera, looking over the ravine through which the road winds steeply up into the town; the remaining companies had lost contact during the night. On their right front a circular

knoll, terraced with olive trees, rose 300 feet above the floor of the valley, dominating the road which bent around its northern base, although itself overlooked by the superior height of the town and the surrounding hills. From a nearby hill a solitary enemy machine-gun post checked further movement by the Hastings. On his own initiative a platoon sergeant of "D" Company, Sergeant W.J.R. McKnight (who was later awarded the D.C.M. for his bravery), accompanied by another non-commissioned officer, crawled across the intervening valley and assaulted the position with grenade, rifle and bayonet, killing its ten defenders.

Lt.-Col. Sutcliffe now directed the building of a road-block, from behind which one company successfully engaged a number of enemy vehicles coming up the winding route from Grottacalda. The prize hit was that scored by a **PIAT bomb** on an ammunition truck which was carrying several enemy troops. It killed all the occupants and immobilized an 88-millimetre gun which the vehicle had in tow. This may well have been the initial Canadian success for the new infantry anti-tank weapon.

**(Page 99) 1st Failures** Lt.-Col. Crowe then directed a two-company attack against the enemy on the knoll ahead. As his men advanced well deployed down the open hillside in the face of brisk fire from mortar and machine-guns, the battalion commander himself walked at their head, "eager to keep the action rolling." There was some spirited fighting before the enemy, who had apparently relied on advantage of position to compensate for his inferiority of numbers, withdrew, leaving the Canadians in positions from which they could overlook the entrance to Valguarnera half a mile to the north.

Three German tanks guarding these approaches now opened fire, and Major Pope went forward with six men to engage them. By extreme misfortune three bombs fired from a PIAT failed to explode.\* A hail of bullets from the tanks' machine-guns forced the patrol to retire; Major Pope was killed.

**\*Reports of other instances of the failure of the PIAT bomb to detonate unless striking the target squarely were fairly common. The adoption, early in 1944, of a "graze" fuse (which was actuated by the deceleration produced when the bomb struck an object, even obliquely) increased the proportion of detonations, thereby considerably improving the weapon's performance against tanks**

The **PIAT**, or **Projector, Infantry, Anti-Tank**, was the answer to an urgent problem: how to give the lightly-armed foot soldier a fighting chance against enemy armoured vehicles.

The **Boys anti-tank rifle**, the British infantry platoon's standard anti-tank weapon at the start of the war, had been quickly rendered obsolete as tank armour thickness increased. A new weapon that allowed him to engage enemy armour at a relatively safe distance was needed.

**Colonel L.V.S. Blacker** was an inventor who was fascinated by the potential of **spigot mortars**. His interest would eventually lead to the **Blacker Bombard**, a low-cost anti-tank weapon rushed into production in anticipation of a German invasion of Great Britain.

**Millis Jefferis**, a British Army sapper and commander of the weapons development department, MD1, played an equally important role developing his own design from Blacker's ideas. Prototypes from both Blacker and Jefferis were taken by scientists and engineers at Imperial Chemical Industries, who combined features from both and perfected the PIAT into a viable weapon of war.



The PIAT fired 2.5-pound projectile containing a shaped charge capable of penetrating armour up to 100 mm or 4 inches. The most common misconception about the PIAT is that the bomb was propelled by the weapon's powerful mainspring. In reality, it was launched by a small but potent cartridge located in the base of the projectile using the spigot mortar principal. The spring's main task was to soak up the formidable recoil of the weapon so that it could be fired from a soldier's shoulder and to propel the PIAT's spigot forward to detonate and launch the bomb.



The PIAT entered service in 1943 seeing action for the first time in Tunisia and later in Sicily. Its users had to wait until their target was within the PIAT's 100-yard effective range before firing. The bravery of these men becomes immediately obvious when reading reports and medal citations for the many actions that led to the award of Victoria Crosses, Military Medals and Distinguished Conduct Medals.

Despite the challenges of using it in action, the PIAT proved itself to be extremely effective against Axis armoured fighting vehicles. Major Robert Cain of the 2nd South Staffords destroyed several German vehicles during the fighting in Oosterbeek during Operation Market Garden. In October 1944, **Private Ernest Smith** of the **Canadian Seaforth Highlanders** knocked out a Panther and **Rifleman Ganju Lama of the 7th Gurkha Rifles** single-handedly defeated several Japanese tanks during the **Battle of Imphal**. All were awarded Victoria Crosses for their bravery. In total, no fewer than six VCs were bestowed for actions involving the PIAT along with dozens of other medals and mentions in dispatches.

The PIAT enjoyed a divisive reputation among soldiers with some adamant its recoil could break a man's shoulder. Despite its shortcomings the PIAT was a surprisingly versatile weapon. Its secondary role as a light mortar was found to be extremely useful. During urban fighting it could also be used in what the manual described as the "housebreaking" role: blowing holes in the walls of buildings.

While the PIAT became increasingly obsolete after the war it continued to see action. During the 1947–49 Arab-Israeli war, they represented one of the Jewish **Hagenah's** few infantry anti-tank weapons. Dutch forces used them in **Indonesian War of Independence** and some saw action with French troops during the First Indochina War. By the early 1950s, however, the PIAT had largely been replaced by recoilless rifles with better range and the increasingly effective rocket launcher. In 1956, the British Army finally declared the PIAT obsolete

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The 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:

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