

It must have seemed impossible to Canadians 100 years ago that the assassination of a little-known Archduke in far-off Sarajevo on June 28, 1914 would lead to the most horrific war the world had ever seen. Yet, as old alliances increased the tensions already being felt by European powers, that soon became the case. On July 28, 1914, Austria declared war on Serbia. On August 1, Germany, which had pledged its support of Austria, declared war on Russia. Two days later, Germany declared war on France and invaded Belgium to get there. Britain, which had an old treaty promising to protect Belgium, declared war on Germany on August 4. When it did, Canada, as a proud part of the British Empire, automatically found itself at war as well.

By September of 1914, more than 32,000 Canadian volunteers had made their way to a hastily arranged army camp in Valcartier, Quebec. Among the first to arrive were two former hockey teammates from Kingston, Ontario: George Taylor Richardson and Allan “Scotty” Davidson.

Though Taylor and Richardson grew up in the same hometown, it’s unlikely they would ever have met if not for hockey. Taylor was a graduate of Queen’s University, where he’d starred on the ice and on the football field. He then went to work for his wealthy family’s grain brokerage business. Davidson, on the other hand, was from the school of hard knocks. His grandfather was a prison guard at the Kingston Penitentiary and his father worked at the Rockwood Asylum, where the criminally insane were housed. Scotty’s skill in hockey raised him above his station, attracting the attention of his city’s top team, the Kingston 14th Regiment, where Richardson was the star. They played together briefly in 1908–09 before the team was renamed the Frontenacs the following year and Richardson moved into management. Davidson led the Frontenacs to provincial junior championships in 1910 and 1911 before he moved on to

pro hockey. He joined the Toronto Blue Shirts when the team entered the National Hockey Association (forerunner to the NHL) in 1912–13 and captained them to the Stanley Cup in the spring of 1914. Five months later, Davidson was in the army.

Davidson had already spent two years on active militia service with the Princess of Wales Own Regiment (PWOR), the formal name of Kingston's 14th Regiment. Very shortly after the outbreak of the war, George Richardson, who was a captain in the Regiment, formed a contingent of 80 men from the PWOR, including Davidson, who all became part of the 2nd Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF). After spending most of August and September of 1914 training at Valcartier, Davidson and Richardson were among the thousands who sailed for England as part of the huge convey of Canadian ships that departed on October 3. After nearly four months of further training in the miserable cold and wet of Salisbury Plain, the 2nd Battalion left England for France on February 9, 1915. They entered the trenches at Armentières ten days later and saw their first major action near the end of April...

... After the fighting at Festubert [in late May], many of the Canadian troops enjoyed a brief period of respite. The narrow divisional sector under Canadian control required only one brigade in the front line, so the rest were pulled back. [CEF Nicholson] During the nine days the 2nd Canadian Infantry Battalion had spent in the trenches at Festubert, their casualties included two killed and 31 wounded. [WD May 1915 p5] The reward for the survivors was nothing as decadent as a leave in London, but after a fairly quiet day in the trenches on May 31, 1915, the 2nd Battalion returned to their billets near Bethune some eight kilometers west of the front lines.

From there, it was another three kilometers northeast to Essars, where they arrived at 3:30 am on June 1. REST is noted in capital letters as the final entry in the War Diaries that day. [WD June 1915 p4]

On the first full day at Essars on June 2, there was time for an inspection of arms and other equipment. After the wet conditions in the trenches at Festubert, the soldiers also had their feet inspected. Equipment was cleaned the following day. On June 4 and 5, the soldiers themselves got cleaned, as Bathing is the first item of note for both days. [WD June 1915 p4]. It wasn't all R&R however, as there was also physical training and a rifle inspection the first day, followed by more PT and a route march the second. June 6 was a Sunday, and there was Church Parade, with the Church of England at 9:15 am, followed by Roman Catholics at 9:30. [WD June 1915 p4]

While the troops were taking it easy in Essars, personal reports from their first battle in April began to appear in Canadian newspapers.

“The facts in connection with the wounding of Capt. Geo. Richardson, ‘Kingston’s modest hero,’ at Langemarck, have just begun to filter through,” read a story in the *Toronto Star* on June 8.

Richardson had been hit by at least four bullets that tore through his uniform. It appeared that only a single shot had done any damage, the one bullet “ripping its way through his side, but only causing a light wound, which necessitated his being at the dressing station about a half-hour.”

The *Star* story noted that new regulations required officers to carry rifles “so as not to be specially noticeable from the rank and file,” and that another bullet had knocked the rifle

Richardson was carrying right out of his hands. With Richardson coming through so remarkably unscathed, it was easy to joke about the situation. “Capt. Richardson’s friends intimate that the Germans evidently thought he was playing hockey when they stampeded so many hot shots in his direction.”

The same article in the Star reported on a letter that Scotty Davidson had written to friends back home in Kingston. Davidson too was remarkably light-hearted, indicating that he was “enjoying life to the fullest.” In the letter, he provided his friends with a little information about his role as a bomb-thrower – the bombs in question being hand grenades that were used by members of a bombing team to clear enemy trenches. “He carries a special harness to hold the bombs,” reported the newspaper. He also carried 200 rounds of ammunition in his cartridge belt along with a rifle, a spade and handle. In addition, he noted that he also wore “a pair of those d--- heavy English boots” which weighed five pounds. “A fat chance to get out of any German’s way have I!” Davidson joked.

The article concluded by saying that Davidson had also been in the Langemarck affair, but unlike his friend Capt. Richardson, he “came through without a scratch.” [1915-06-08]

After ten days of general cleanup, inspections, route marches and baths at Essars, duty called to the 2nd Battalion once again. “Leave at 6-15 pm for trenches at Givenchy,” note the War Diaries for June 10. [WD June 1915 p4] Just 2.3 kilometers from where they had been fighting at Festerburt, at least the trenches at Givenchy were dry, even near the banks of the La Bassée Canal. [CEF Duguid]

Formally known as Givenchy-les-la-Bassée, the small farming village in the north of France was about 200 kilometers north of Paris, 70 kilometers south of Dunkirk and the English Channel, and just a few kilometers west of the border with Belgium. It had been the scene of fierce fighting by British and Indian troops against the Germans in December of 1914. Asked by the French to launch an assault to push the German line further north, early British gains were quickly lost and the battle from December 18 to 22 ended with the lines almost exactly where they had been before the fighting began. Casualties were high on both sides, but particularly among the British and Indian troops who suffered some 4,000 losses, with frostbite and trench foot affecting many of those not directly hit by the Germans, who suffered 2,000 casualties of their own. The need on both sides to remove the dead and wounded from No Man's Land was one of the reasons for a temporary ceasefire that resulted in the so-called Christmas Truce.

[www.remembrancetrails]

Plans for a new attack on Givenchy involving British and Canadian troops originally called for the assault to begin on June 11, but various delays pushed things back a few days. The War Diaries for the 2nd Battalion on June 11 note that the troops were now settled in the trenches, but that it was "very quiet." The same notation appears on June 12. Soon, though, the action began to heat up. "Heavy shelling by our Artillery," reads the entry on June 13, "also by enemy." A day later, there was "Very heavy bombardment by our Artillery, preparatory to the attack."

Zero hour was set for 6 pm on June 15. At 3 o'clock that afternoon, the 1st Canadian Battalion moved into position just north of an area known as the Duck's Bill, a sharp salient that protruded from the line of the main trenches towards the German line. [2nd p65] From there, the

1st would make the first assault, its four companies aligned to attack in four successive waves.

[Nicolson p106] The 2nd Battalion fell back about 50 yards to the right, [2nd p66] with the 3rd Battalion stretched out some 600 to 1,500 yards behind the line. [Duguid p487] As the men of the 1st Battalion spent the next three hours awaiting the command to charge, the soldiers sung their chosen songs. “All popular,” Sir Max Aitken (soon to become Lord Beaverbrook) would write in the first volume of *Canada in Flanders* in 1916 “but all unprintable.” [Aitken p132]

The shelling that had been going on for the previous two days was accelerated at 6 am on the morning of the attack and became intense at 5:30 pm. Fifteen minutes later, two 18-pound field guns opened fire near the Duck’s Bill. [Duguid p488]

The fighting at Fesbubert had clearly illustrated the need to neutralize the German’s forward machine guns if the advancing troops were to cross No Man’s Land on anything better than a suicide mission. Eighteen-pound guns with shrapnel shells had already been used since June 8 to try and clear the barbed wire from the German lines. [Duguid p485] Then, on the night of June 14, three more 18-pound guns were secretly pulled through Givenchy by horses. Covered in heavy armour plate, their wheels were silenced as best as possible with rubber tires. Unhooked from the horses, the guns were then dragged into strategic positions and hidden behind parapets of sandbags built to keep them camouflaged until the last possible moment. [Nicolson p106, Aitken 133note1]

At 5:45 on June 15 the sandbags were thrown down in front of the guns, and they commenced firing. At least the two of them positioned at the strongpoint dubbed H.2 nearest the Duck’s Bill did at any rate. The third, some 150 yards to the north near another strategic target dubbed H.3 (and nicknamed Stony Mountain by the Canadians), remained silent. Ruined houses,

shell holes and trenches had made it impossible to sneak a gun close enough to the German line there. The only decent position was behind the ruins of a farmhouse at a distance of some three hundred yards. [Duguid 486] But when the time came to fire and his view was cleared of the sandbag obstruction, the officer in charge of this 18-pounder wasn't convinced his rounds would clear the heads of the Canadian soldiers in the front line trenches. [Nicolson p106, Duguid 488] The situation with the two guns near the Duck's Bill wasn't perfect either.

“The crew of one,” George Richardson would later write in his Officer's report, “was almost immediately put out of action, it is said, by the first shell stripping our own parapet, which had not been sufficiently lowered.” [2nd p66]

With all the shelling and wire-cutting that had been going on over the previous week, the Germans had no doubt an attack was imminent. But until the 18-pound guns were revealed, they wouldn't have known precisely when and where to expect it. Now, a heavy concentration of artillery fell upon the Canadian trenches. There were many casualties, and the guns were soon put out of action, their shields tattered and twisted. [Aiken p133] Before they were destroyed, one gun had fired 80 rounds and the other 40. [Duguid 488]. (Another account claims that a single gun had fire more than 100 rounds. [Aitkenp133]) The German parapet was effectively breached, three German machine guns were knocked out, [Nicholson 106] and the ground was apparently clear of wire. And then, at 5:58 – two minutes before zero hour – the ground exploded.

For weeks, No. 2 Section of the 176th Tunnelling Company, Royal Engineers, had been mining out from the Duck's Bill. The plan had been to place a charge under the German front line at H.2 and blow it up from below. Unfortunately, water discovered beneath No Man's Land

stopped the tunneling short of its target. To compensate, the charge was increased to 3,000 pounds of ammonal, an explosive made up of ammonium nitrate and aluminum powder.

[Nicolson p106-7, Duguid 487-8] The mine explosion did appear to cause much damage to the German front line and to kill many enemy troops. [War Dairies 1st Bn June 15 p26] Canadian troops had been repositioned accordingly, but unfortunately the effects of the mine upon the Canadian trenches were rather serious as well. [Aitkenp134]

“Many casualties among the 1st Battalion,” Richardson would write, “resulted from the men being too close to the minehead at the time of the explosion. There were at least 25 men put out of action, suffering from broken backs, broken legs and arms, besides others who, at a distance, were struck by the falling debris.” [2nd p66] Richardson would later up the devastating tally, reporting that, “as a result of the mine explosion it is estimated that 50 men of the 1st Cdn. Bn. were either killed or wounded.” [2nd p68] The deaths included at least one officer from among the 1st Battalion’s bomb-throwers [War Dairies 1st Bn June 1915 p26] and possibly as many as two other officers. [Duguid 489] There are reports that several bombers were killed as well. [Aitken 134] The War Diaries for the 1st Battalion record eight bombers as being injured. [War Dairies 1st Bn June 1915 p26]

The explosion of the mine also detonated many of the bombs the 1st Battalion held in reserve and buried many others [Nicholson 107/ War Dairies 1st Bn June 1915 p26] along with a number of men. [Duguid 489] Debris from the eruption was still falling when 6 o’clock struck, but Company 4 of the 1st Battalion was out of the trenches and advancing through the dust to lead the charge across No Man’s Land. Company 3 followed immediately. [War Dairies 1st Bn June 1915 p26]

The British 7th Division led the charge on H.3 but struggled to advance under a hail of machine gun fire. This would soon play havoc with the Canadians who were moving smartly on H.2. The Germans had pulled back from their front trench there, and the first wave from the 1st Battalion reached it quickly. Company 3 set up two machine guns and by 6:10 Company 2 had advanced to control the trench. By then, Company 4 and Company 3 had continued toward their main objective, which was the German second line. Once there, the bomb-throwers of the 1st Battalion began clearing the way to the left and the right. [Nicholson 107 Duguid 489]

A blue flag was carried by one of the men accompanying the assault. It flew from a staff long enough to be visible above the top of the trenches and was used to indicate progressively the points achieved by the assaulting unit. “The blue flag,” wrote Richardson, “advanced about 70 yards to the right, gained in about 10 minutes time. Here it halted, and for some minutes bombers of both sides could be seen engaged. The Germans, it appeared, employed gas bombs and soon the flag began to retire and was steadily withdrawn until it reached the place where entrance was first forced.” [2nd p66-67]

Other accounts of the action make no mention of gas, but it’s clear the assault bogged down. By the time darkness fell near 10 o’clock on this mid June night, both sides would essentially be back to where they had been before the attack began. In the end, Givenchy would come to be described as a “gallant through fruitless action.” Sir Arthur Currie, who would become the first Canadian to reach the rank of general, the first Canadian to command the Canadian Corps, and the mastermind behind the nation-building victory at Vimy Ridge, would remember Givenchy best for the future lessons learned there. “This was the day when we had no real dug-outs,” Currie recalled, “and had not learned yet the lesson of ‘mopping-up’ before going

on with an attack.” As Currie remembered it, the 1st Battalion penetrated as far as the third German line of trenches (though the War Diaries have them going no further than the second) [War Diaries 1st BN June 1915p6], but owing to the enemy concealing themselves in dug-outs in the first trench, the enemy troops hidden there were overlooked. This proved fatal when the advancing Canadians were caught between two fires. [1933-06-16 Currie_Givenchy] The 1st Battalion suffered 366 casualties during the fighting, including 20 officers [Nicolson 107] of whom 10 were killed, eight were wounded and two were missing. There were at least 58 men killed from other ranks and 218 wounded. [War Dairies 1st Bn June 1915 p30]

The inability of the British to take H.3 under the heavy machine gun fire on the night of June 15, 1915, had meant more trouble for the Canadians. The Germans were able to reposition their machine guns at H.3 to sweep across No Man’s Land as far south as the Duck’s Bill. This made it difficult for the third and fourth waves from the 1st Battalion to advance. The German machine guns – along with others that had been pulled back from the front lines near the Duck Bill – could also cover the enemy attempt to re-take their trenches. [Nicholson 107]

To meet the fierce German counter-attack after the Canadians reached the second-line trench, Lieutenant Frederick William Campbell brought forward one of the two machine guns that had been set up at the German front line. Campbell was a farmer from Mount Forest, Ontario who served as the 1st Battalion’s machine gun officer. He was a Boer War veteran and the great-grandson of a soldier from the War of 1812. June 15 was Campbell’s birthday, and he was either 46 or 48 years old – he had listed his year of birth as 1867 when enlisting for the Boer War in 1899, but his Attestation Papers for World War I stated 1869.

The machine gun Campbell had commandeered had a broken tripod, but the only other surviving member of the detachment, Private Howard Vincent of Bracebridge, supported the weapon on his back. Campbell and Vincent managed to hold off the German counter attack for some time as Campbell fired over 1,000 rounds before eventually taking a bullet through the hip from a German sharpshooter. He crawled from the trench until he was met by stretcher bearers who carried him to safety behind the Canadian line. Two days later Campbell was taken to the No. 7 Stationary Hospital at Boulogne, but he would die of his wounds on June 19. He later received the Victoria Cross. Vincent, a former lumber camp cook, survived the ordeal and received the Distinguished Conduct Medal. He had managed to cut the cartridge belt from the Colt machine gun and dragged it to safety because it was too hot to carry. [Aitken p136-37, Nicholson 107, Duguid, 491, also see Sources_Web Sites]

Campbell and Vincent were far from the only heroes on this night. A Private Smith of Southampton, Ontario, was among those of the 1st Battalion that were buried when the mine exploded. By the time he dug himself out, his rifle had been hopelessly lost. He was not a bomb-thrower, but he understood how devastating the loss of so many bombs would be. So he began to collect the bombs from the dead and wounded bomb-throwers around him. Five times he crawled across No Man's Land to deliver what he could to the bomb-throwers fighting in the German trenches. His uniform was literally shot into rags, but he himself came through all but untouched. "I kept moving," he explained. [Aitken p138]

Even so, the depleted bomb reserves of the 1st Battalion meant their bomber-throwers ran short of their supply and they were not able to clear the German trenches as effectively as hoped. One wounded man was seen standing on the parapet of the German front-line trench weeping

with rage. He had thrown every bomb he carried and hurled bricks and stones at the advancing enemy until he met his end. [Aitken 139]

The 2nd Battalion spent most of the evening of June 15 in a supporting role. “Every other man was on sentry duty during the night,” George Richardson would write. “Two hours on and two hours off.” [2nd p65] Three machine guns of the 2nd Battalion helped to keep the German front line trench clear in their area and to strafe the German communication trench. [2nd p67] For most, though, the night was spent assisting wounded men back across No Man’s Land. However, just before 8 o’clock – perhaps due to the loss of bombs in the 1st Battalion – the bomb-throwers of the 2nd Battalion were called upon to support the right flank of the attacking units.

Before he went into action, Scotty Davidson sought out his friend and captain George Richardson. He handed him his bayonet, his watch, and a few other valuables.

“George,” he said, “I may never come back, but those Germans are going to catch blazes before morning.”

Davidson then went out with his unit and crawled up to within a few feet of the German trenches. He hurled bomb after bomb, and even when two of his companions retreated, he kept pulling the pin and tossing his grenades until only one remained. Finally, he was captured and ordered to surrender. Davidson refused and crashed his last hand grenade against the body of a German officer, blowing him to pieces.

“We found Scotty’s body the next morning,” Richardson wrote to friends back home in Kingston, “riddled with bullets and jabbed with bayonets, but he had kept his promise, and it was apparent that his death cost the enemy dearly.”

“He was,” said Richardson, “absolutely fearless in the face of the greatest danger.” [1915_12_07 Regina_acct of death] ...

...Despite Richardson’s rather bloodthirsty account for friends back home in Kingston (and others like it that hockey writers would pen over the years), Davidson was actually killed when a shell fell on his trench. Another *Toronto Star* story on July 5 quoted a letter from a fellow soldier saying Davidson had been killed by the accidental discharge of friendly fire, although official records only list an exploding shell with no mention of sides. As for Richardson, he was beloved by his men from all accounts. A biographical entry from Queen’s University states: “Richardson was known as a man who would never give an order he would not readily obey himself. He often used his own money to buy extra supplies, such as warm boots, gas masks, and cigarettes for his troops.” But he too paid the ultimate price when he was killed in action on February 9, 1916.

The death of the two great Kingston hockey stars hit their hometown hard. James Sutherland had coached both men. As a longtime militia member himself, he had also helped to indoctrinate them with a patriotic zeal for King and Country. After the war, Sutherland would donate the Memorial Cup as a tribute to Davidson, Richardson and the many other great Canadian athletes who gave their lives in battle.