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Brothers in arms

A new exhibition offers tribute to Canada's involvement in the First World War



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During the First World War, many Canadian soldiers crossed the Atlantic to defend Belgium's freedom, others joined in search of adventure; but as a new exhibition at the In Flanders Fields Museum in Ypres shows, a great number of them paid the ultimate price

Theodore Linscott Glasgow was born on 25 May 1898 in Montreal, Canada, the eldest son of Robert and Louise Glasgow. A bright boy, he studied at the University of Toronto and the Royal Military College in Kingston.

In August 1916, at the age of 18, Glasgow was recruited by the British Royal Naval Air Service, the predecessor of the current Royal Air Force. The following summer, after almost a year's training, he was sent with the 10th Squadron to the Western front in Flanders.

One month later, on 19 August 1917, the young flight sub-lieutenant was killed in action over Ypres and buried in Mendinghem Military Cemetery in Poperinge. He was 19 years old.

Glasgow was far from the only young Canadian to lose his life in Flanders. As the new exhibition at Ypres' In Flanders Fields Museum shows, by the time the Armistice was signed, over 60,000 of his compatriots had been killed during the course of the First World War.

When Britain went to war on 4 August 1914, all colonies and dominions of the British Empire, such as Canada, were automatically at war, too. The man in charge of the Canadian war effort was Sam Hughes, the Minister of Militia and Defence. He acted quickly and decisively. The day after the British declaration of war, Hughes announced that Canada would send an infantry division of 25,000.

Most, but by no means all, Canadians greeted the outbreak of war with enthusiasm; there was much marching and singing in the streets. Those who opposed the war largely stayed silent. Even in Quebec, where pro-British sentiment was traditionally low, there was little apparent hostility to the country's war effort.

Consequently, thousands showed up at their local recruiting stations eager to "do their bit". Many of them had been born in Britain, or had strong emotional ties to the country. The first contingent was 70% British-born, although many had lived in Canada for years and considered themselves Canadian.

The percentage of native-born Canadians would increase throughout the war until, by 1918, more than half of the Canadian Expeditionary Force would be Canadian-born.

Their reasons for signing up were much the same as those of

Brothers in arms

Canada in Flanders tells the story of arduous journey and ultimate sacrifice

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INFLANDERSFIELDS.BE

soldiers from the UK or anywhere else. Many Canadians were shocked by Germany's brutal invasion of Belgium. Others saw war as a romantic adventure, an opportunity to escape the monotony of work – or the economic recession that Canada was experiencing.

Recruits were given basic training at the hastily built camp at Valcartier, Quebec. Only two months after the outbreak of war, on 3 October 1914, the first 32,000-strong contingent of the Canadian Expeditionary Force sailed for the UK. The journey across the Atlantic took two weeks. After arriving at Plymouth, the soldiers disembarked and boarded trains for Salisbury Plain in the southwest of England. Here, the Canadians trained for four months, most of it in terrible mud, as England was experiencing one of its wettest winters in decades. Little did they know that this was nothing compared to the mud of Flanders in which they would soon be mired.

The haste to send forces had unfortunate consequences. The soldiers' boots, for instance, proved unable to withstand the UK's wet weather. "Our nice soft Canadian brown shoes quickly took on the appearance of soggy moccasins," recalled William Peden of the 8th Battalion. Backpacks were dumped because they were uncomfortable and could not carry enough ammunition. The trucks brought over were scrapped because spares could not be found. The horse-drawn wagons were found to be too flimsy.

Re-equipped with British Army's equipment, by February 1915 the Canadian Expeditionary Force – organised into combat formations, the largest of which was the Canadian Corps – had taken up positions along the Western front in France and Belgium. They were soon called into action.

In April 1915, the 1st Canadian Division fought in the Second Battle of Ypres. The outnumbered Canadians faced not only the German guns but also a newly released weapon: chlorine gas. Ypres was the site of the first mass use of this chemical as a battlefield agent.

Lieutenant-Colonel George Nasmith, a Canadian chemist charged with testing drinking water, was the first to identify the cloud of greenish-yellow gas rolling towards the Canadian positions. He told the men around him to urinate on their cotton handkerchiefs and hold them over their noses. It wasn't particularly effective, but it was probably better than nothing.

As the battle progressed, a third of the force – 6,000 soldiers – were killed, wounded or captured. But the Canadians kept the Germans from breaking through.



© Courtesy In Flanders Fields Museum

St Julien Canadian Memorial, also known as the Brooding Soldier, at Vancouver Corner, Ypres Salient

By October 1916, with the Canadian government ensuring a steady stream of soldiers crossing the Atlantic, the Canadian Corps had grown to four infantry divisions supported by strong artillery, cavalry, engineers and auxiliary forces. There was a total of more than 80,000 men.

In the autumn of 1917, Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie led the Canadian Corps during the Battle of Passchendaele. Canadian troops played a key role in the battle, although they suffered huge losses: 16,000 killed or wounded.

"Of all the battlefields in which Canadians fought during this war, Passchendaele was by far the worst," writes John Martenson in his illustrated history of the Canadian Army, *We Stand on Guard*.

Canadian men and women served in many different capacities during the First World War. Members of the Canadian Forestry Corps cut timber; Canadian railway troops operated light railway networks immediately behind the lines; medical units and Canadian Nursing Sisters served on the Western Front.

Canadian airmen – like Theodore Glasgow – distinguished themselves serving in British air forces, as fighter and reconnaissance pilots, aerial observers, mechanics and flight instructors.

By the end of the war, some 619,000 Canadians had enlisted in the

Canadian Expeditionary Force for service overseas. This was an enormous contribution from a country of just under 8 million in 1914. Approximately 7% of the total population of Canada was in uniform at some point during the conflict, and hundreds of thousands of additional Canadians worked on the home front in support of the war effort.

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While initially consisting mostly of white British-born Canadians, the Canadian Expeditionary Force also included other cultural groups: aboriginals of the First Nations, black Canadians and Americans, and even West Indians from the island of Bermuda.

Canadians were in the forefront of the Allied advance that finally defeated Germany. By the end of the war, Canadian soldiers had come to be regarded as exceptional fighters. Both Allied and German military commanders considered the Canadian Corps as one of the most effective Allied military formations on the West-

ern front.

But the final casualty figures make stark reading. Out of over 600,000 who enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, more than 60,000 were killed and 172,000 wounded.

On the occasion of the commemoration of the centennial anniversary of the Battles of Mount Sorrel and Hill 62 (2-13 June 1916), the

of Ypres, but also cigarette packs with trading cards that would have been swapped during card games in the trenches.

There are Brodie helmets with holes drilled in them to carry cap badges, and gas masks that make you wonder whether or not they were put on in time. You can also find fascinating aerial photos, monochrome snaps of desolation and despair, as well as hastily drawn sketches and painstakingly composed poems.

Canada in Flanders wouldn't be complete without a profile of the war's most famous Canadian – John McCrae, writer of the well-known poem "In Flanders Fields", which led to the adoption of the poppy as a symbol of Remembrance Day.

But McCrae does not outshine other Canadian writers who served in and wrote about the war in Flanders and who remained undeservedly in his shadow: Robert Service, Frank Prewett, Harry Amoss, Frank S Brown and Robert Stanley Weir. And if you look carefully, you might find a poem written not by a soldier, but by a soldier's mother: "At Mendinghem near Provan, NW of Ypres".

It's attributed to Louise C Glasgow, mother of young Theodore.

Until 3 July

In Flanders Fields Museum
Grote Markt 34, Ypres