

Pictou Casualties: The Second Battle of Ypres

For Canadians, the Second Battle of Ypres was the first major test of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. The 1st Division saw battle at Neuve-Chapelle, with 100 casualties, and other battalions supported British combat, but Ypres was to provide a horrifying introduction to trench warfare on the Western Front.

The Second Battle of Ypres (the first fought in October, November 1914) consisted of several engagements beginning on April 22nd and lasting for several months, although the bulk of the fighting was in April and May. French, Algerian, Moroccan, Belgian, British, Indian, South African, New Zealand, Newfoundland, and Canadian troops faced an attack, supported with chlorine gas, by German forces around the Belgian town of Ypres. The German forces aimed to push back allied troops from the salient, or bulge, into their lines, thereby gaining the high ground. It was also a battle fought by the Germans to take attention from its main campaign on the Eastern Front. Ypres was the first successful large scale use of gas in the war, specifically chlorine, which caused blindness and damage to the lungs; leading to asphyxia or suffocation. By the end of the battle well over 100,000 men of all nations were dead or wounded and gas was to become a weapon used by both sides during the war.

The 1st Canadian Division was engaged in the battle until relieved by British troops. Individual Canadian battalions continued to be engaged supporting British troops in the Ypres sector. Due to the surprise use of gas on the opening day of April 22nd the allied front along a 6 kilometre area collapsed. The Canadians were ordered to fill the gap and defend the allied flank. At Kitchener Wood the Germans were halted and repulsed by the Canadian Forces with heavy losses on both sides. The Germans attacked again on April 24th near St. Julien north of Ypres, using chlorine gas directly against the Canadians. The Canadians kept order despite the use of gas and bitter fighting took place with many casualties. In the end little territory was gained by the Germans but for the Canadians it proved to be an education in modern industrialized warfare, paid at a high price of 6035 casualties, including over 2000 dead. With the Second Battle of Ypres the Canadians developed a reputation as tough opponents and it began a transformation in how the commanders and soldiers saw themselves as a unified fighting force.

As reports came back to Pictou County through personal letters and newspaper reports, the realization that a major battle occurred took hold. As in all wars, confusion came first with rumours and reports of soldiers dead, wounded, and missing. As facts reached relatives back home the devastation was clear. Those who left New Glasgow as part of the 78th Pictou Highlander contingent, hoping to become part of a Nova Scotia Battalion, were instead sent to reinforce other battalions. Many joined the 13th and 15th Battalions who were in the thick of the fighting during Ypres. Four of those who left with the 78th were killed in action. Many other Pictonians were either injured or captured during the Second Battle of Ypres. It was a hard and savage introduction to the realities of a new method of warfare fought with tactics of a century before.

Norman Rogers writes of the Terrible Canadian Engage- ment.

Antigonish, May 6th.
James A. Fraser, Esq.

Dear Mr. Fraser;—I have just received a letter from my son, Norman, which may be of interest to his companions. It runs as follows.

France, May 7th, 1915

Dear Father;—I suppose by this time you have read what the Canadians have been doing, and that we have upheld our good name. I am certainly more proud to be a Canadian to day than ever before. I went through a charge with fixed bayonets, and never in my life will I forget the moment when the Germans opened fire on us. It was awful—bullets hitting human flesh all around me with a sickening smack, and about every second man going down; but we kept right on with a cheer for old Canada, and drove them back. Afterwards we had time to realize how awful it had been. I tied up wounds for a while and some of them were very large for a bullet. I could put my thumb into them. We lost most of our officers. They proved themselves to be men both in the charge and afterwards—cool and courageous. After we got settled they started to shell us, and the next three days, with little food and water, were a real “—on earth.” Men blown up, and others stepping right in. Through it all I didn't get a scratch, but had my great coat riddled with bullets and shrapnel. The noise was terrific, and soon began to tell on our nerves. We were relieved the following morning about seven o'clock, and we were shelled very heavily coming out. My glengarry was blown off my head and split, and my hair was parted in the middle. The shock almost knocked me down, but never a scratch. I got into a reserve trench for twenty-four hours with two batteries of 4.7 behind us, and they kept at it all day. My nerves were always touchy. Well, I've none left now.

We were shifted again, and saw the Germans open out on the British with their awful gas. The British retired, let the gas blow over their trenches, and charged through the gas back to their old trenches before the Germans got there. It was a wonderful feat, and required brains and courage to carry it out. I'm keeping a few notes. I've got a piece of a sixty pounder that hit me on the chest, but my great coat stopped it. I had a note from Dr. Neley this morning.

Your loving son
Norman

Eastern Chronicle, May 28, 1915.

Private Angus Gray, son of Captain John Gray of Granton/Abercrombie, was born in Edinburgh, Scotland. At 34 years he was of medium height with light brown hair and blue eyes with a position as a chauffeur for James C. McGregor of New Glasgow before joining up. His brother Gunner George E. Gray joined shortly after and just arrived in France with the 23rd Battery, 3rd Brigade, Second Contingent. Angus was part of the 13th Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada) attempting to hold the line before St. Julian when he was killed on April 24th. His body was not found and he is remembered on the Ypres Memorial – Menin Gate.

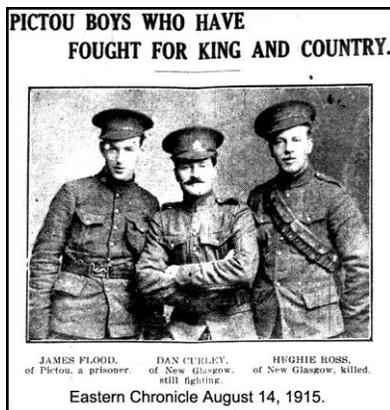
Private Adam James Mackenzie, son of Donald R. and Catherine MacKenzie from Barney's River, was killed April 23rd as the 13th Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada) struggled to hold the left flank against gas, shells, and a concentrated German attack. It appears his body was not recovered until the 28th as many of the records list this as his date of death. He was identified by his army issued disc and had no effects to return. James, aged 39 and a clerk in civilian life, was described as 5 feet 9 ¾ inches with blue eyes and light brown hair. He declared himself a Roman Catholic upon enlistment. He is buried in Poelcapelle British Cemetery in Belgium.

THANKS.

Mr. and Mrs. D. R. McKenzie, of Kenzieville, desire to thank most sincerely all the kind friends and neighbors, the congregation of Barney's River, and the members of Norton Lodge, I.O.O.F., New Glasgow, for the great kindness and sympathy shown them on the occasion of the death at the front of their beloved son, Jas. McKenzie. They likewise desire to assure all, that the sympathy and kindness received will never be forgotten.

Eastern Chronicle June 25, 1915.

Private Cecil Richards was originally from Pugwash in Cumberland County, listing James Richards of the same town as next of kin. At the outbreak of war he was a 19 year old crane driver living in Stellarton. He was 5 feet 6 inches in height, of dark complexion with brown eyes, black hair, and a scar on his left calf. He declared himself a Baptist. As with Private Angus Gray he was with the 13th Battalion when he was killed on April 24th. Like many in the First World War Cecil's body was never found as the size and number of artillery shells used obliterated the battlefield. He is remembered on the Ypres Memorial – Menin Gate.



Private Hugh (or Hughie) Ross was 20 when he was killed on April 24th. His father was William Ross a well-known furniture dealer in New Glasgow. He was posted with the 15th Battalion (48th Highlanders of Canada) but assigned to the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade Signal Section for his final two months. In a letter to Hughie's sister, Anna Ross, a fellow signaller and chum, Harry Adams from Saint John, New Brunswick described his death and how much he meant to the unit. He and Harry were loading and moving sandbags at the Brigade Headquarters in St. Julien when he was shot in the head, dying instantly. Harry had retrieved the envelope from Hughie's pocket, which provided him an address to send his letter. Within two days the HQ was forced to retreat under intense German

shelling. Hughie Ross' body was never found and he is remembered on the Ypres Memorial – Menin Gate.

It was following the Second Battle of Ypres that Canadian physician Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae wrote the famous war poem "In Flanders Field". The poem holds some of the early romanticism of the War, which as the conflict dragged on and casualties mounted, turned to disillusionment for many. But even John McCrae has a Pictonian connection. He was close friends with Margaret MacDonald Matron-in-Chief of the Canadian Nursing Service from Bailey's Brook, having served in the Boer War together.

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