

Humbled officers still wanted to serve in First World War

Adriana A. Davies, Edmonton Journal - August, 2014



Upon arrival in England, Canadian regiments were largely used to top up British units. Members of the 5th Battalion Canadian Mounted Rifles are pictured in August, 1916.

Some of Alberta's unwanted officers were determined to be anything but army surplus during the First World War.

Because they had been members of militias or were veterans of the Boer War, they enlisted in Canada as officers. But upon arrival in England, Canadian regiments were largely used to top up British units, and the influx created both a surplus and an uncomfortable situation, as outlined in Major John McKendrick Hughes' book *The Unwanted: Great War Letters from the Field*.

At Shorncliffe Military Camp in Kent, military authorities delivered the bad news.

"Owing to circumstances beyond the control of the Canadian Army in England, a very large surplus of officers has accumulated in England. Much as it is regretted, there is no alternative but to ask you to revert to the rank of lieutenant or return to Canada."

Major William (Billy) Wilkin of Edmonton's 194th Battalion gave the unwanted their rallying cry.

"To hell with going home. I served as a trooper in South Africa and I can serve as a private in France. I go home when the war is over."

Wilkin was born in England in 1875 and came to Edmonton to join an uncle who was a merchant on Whyte Avenue. Wilkin and 25 others from the region enlisted with the Lord Strathcona's Horse to fight in the Boer War. When he enlisted again on June 29, 1916, he was an established property developer and broker.

Hughes, meanwhile, had served with the Alberta Mounted Rifles and 19th Alberta Dragoons and went overseas with the 151st Battalion in October 1916. He had been a farmer in Alberta, and in June 1917 he accepted a demotion to lieutenant and served as an area commandant with the British Second Army in

France. In a letter to his wife in July 1917 he described his surroundings.

“All the land around is highly cultivated and crops are splendid.”

He proposed that crops in battle zones be harvested for military and civilian use, with the help of soldiers not on active service, including those suffering from shell shock. He and others travelled around the countryside, by bike or horseback, visiting farms and harvesting. Eventually, they would also help in planting crops.

On Oct. 19, 1918, he was assigned to the Directorate of Agricultural Production, which was part of the Armistice Commission. The French government made him an Officier l'Ordre du merite agricole, one of only four Canadian officers to receive this award.

Wilkin wound up in charge of provisioning for the British Army in France.

“From Eccke I was posted to Thiembronne Area – in Pas de Calais. This was a Divisional Area 8 x 12 miles of farming country capable of billeting a Division at full strength. I found everything in an awful mess – no organization whatsoever,” he wrote in his memoir.

Wilkin was responsible for ensuring that suitable accommodations were found for the troops. He had 60 “B” men, that is base men unfit for the trenches, working for him. Wilkin brought retail and organizational skill to his job and began by creating a comprehensive map of the area showing roads, houses and barns. He also marked the number of officers, men and horses to be billeted and noted that a large barn could accommodate 60 to 70 men and 20 horses.

“The Army paid — per night — 1 franc for an Officer — 1/2 franc for other ranks and horses. A franc was thus worth 20 cts and billeting returns which I sent at intervals to 2nd Army ran into very big money,” he wrote.

The work was enjoyable, though his zeal got him into trouble.

Several chateaux in the area had been leased by the British crown but he discovered that the owners were receiving billeting monies. He put a stop to it and the mayor of the village came to him to complain.

Later, the Major General in charge came to him shouting: “Why the hell are you antagonizing the French civil people around here?” I told him the story and showed him the leases. He said pay them anyway. I said “I will, Sir, if you give the order to do so – in writing.” He said “You know I can’t do that” and stomped out. Whether (the) Army paid them or not, I couldn’t find out.”