

# Remembering the Canadians in Folkstone during the Great War

As winter approaches preparations will be taking place across the British Isles, and around the world, for the national act of Remembrance, marking the anniversary of the Armistice in 1918. Although the ceremonies on the 11<sup>th</sup> November are the most widely observed, other acts of remembrance take place throughout the year. Some are simple family affairs to remember the loss of a loved one on a particular day, with others marking significant events, such as the Battle of the Somme. This article will describe a unique event which takes place every year in Folkestone, Kent. On Canada Day, 1<sup>st</sup> July, children from primary schools across the district attend Shorncliffe Military Cemetery to pay their respects to the 305 Canadian Great War soldiers buried there. First, and to appreciate the origins of this event, it will be helpful to understand the impact that the Canadian troops had on Folkestone which, it was said, became a suburb of Toronto.

Within days of the outbreak of war in August 1914, Canada offered to send troops to support the Mother Country and, that offer being readily accepted, the First Contingent arrived for training on Salisbury Plain in October 1914. In the spring of 1915 the Second Contingent arrived in the UK and they were sent to Shorncliffe Camp, and the several other camps just outside Folkestone, for their training. With the sea air and opportunity for a swim, this was a great improvement over the mud of Salisbury Plain. Tens of thousands of Canadians passed through Folkestone and they became popular with the townsfolk. They had more money in their pockets than British soldiers and the band concerts, boxing matches and choral events they put on were a source of welcome entertainment. Especially popular were the military spectacles held at Radnor Park during the summer months. As well as the massed bands, with the pipes and drums, the Canadians demonstrated their horsemanship with roping displays and tent pegging. The



Poster advertising a military spectacular at Folkestone's Radnor Park

locals were also introduced to the game of baseball. Perhaps the most memorable, and controversial, game took place between Canadian and American troops in nearby Hythe one Sunday in the summer of 1918. After strong protests from local Sunday observance supporters, who condemned the game as 'Sunday desecration', the game went ahead in front of 2000 spectators. The Canadians won by 8 runs to 5. On the other hand, the sight of exposed legs and flesh in the Beauty Show held on the Victoria Pier did not attract any moral condemnation. It did attract whistles and catcalls from the mixed audience, the reason being that all competitors were Canadian soldiers. Drum Major Morley carried off the £2 first prize.

Recreation for the soldiers was varied. The YMCA huts were furnished with board games, skittles and a gramophone, with writing paper and envelopes supplied for letters home. Being keen sportsmen, the Canadians enjoyed their football, which was also encouraged for its morale building benefits. In 1918 the men from the 11<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion at Shorncliffe reached the finals of the Canadian Military Forces (British Isles) Championships. The match was played at Seaford where the Bramshott team took a three goal lead in the first half from which, despite a second half fight back, the Shorncliffe men were unable to recover. Off camp, sea bathing was popular and also free. Concerts at the Leas were free for men in uniform and there was roller skating at the rink near Folkestone Harbour. However, concern grew at the number of soldiers who seemed to roam the town aimlessly, especially in the evenings. The pubs were subject to restricted opening hours and, in any case, the men were not allowed to buy alcohol. The concerts and plays in the town's theatres were perhaps of limited interest to many. To solve this problem the local churches set up Soldiers' Clubs. The troops could expect a warm welcome, with snacks and non-alcoholic drinks, postcards and cigarettes at competitive prices. Although religious support and services were offered, there were also secular activities such as billiards and ping-pong. The club at the Radnor Park Congregational Church was especially popular; the religious menu was very informal and there was a good helping of popular and military music.



Canadian troops on a route march at Sandling Camp, Folkestone, in 1915



The Canadians were popular with the locals!



Despite the efforts to provide the soldiers with wholesome distractions, one issue persisted – women. In an age when Victorian prurience still held sway, the combined forces of military, civic and religious leaders were concerned about the soldiers falling prey to temptation. It is true that there was a problem with professional ladies and what were called their 'Abodes of Love', with Mrs Grundy's Social Purity League being called in to patrol the beaches and other likely trouble spots, such as Lovers Walk and Madeira Walk. However, it is also true that many Canadians formed genuine attachments to local girls, with some 1100 of them marrying and taking their brides back to Canada. In retrospect, perhaps we can appreciate that for men whose lives might be measured in days rather than years, the prospect of a smile, a kiss, maybe more, from a Folkestone lass did as much for morale as a rousing speech from any number of generals. Private Jack Branch of the 28<sup>th</sup> (North West) Battalion sums it up. Injured whilst part of a wiring party in No Man's Land and, realizing he had caught a 'Blighty', he called out to his pals as he was stretchered away from the front line 'I'll give your love to all the girls at Shorncliffe.'

The Canadians became part of the community, but they were here neither to enjoy themselves, nor to entertain the townsfolk. They were here to train for the Western Front. A key part of the training was the art of trench warfare. Practice trenches were dug in fields and on the



*One of the 8 stained glass windows presented by the Canadian army to Folkestone at the end of the war. Originally installed at Shorncliffe Station, they are now at the National Railway Museum in York*

hillsides around Folkestone, where the men learned about bomb throwing and 'going over the top'. It is doubtful whether the best simulations can have prepared the men for the true horrors they were to face in France and Flanders. Opinions were divided about how effective the training was. Infantryman, Private Donald Fraser, recorded in his diary at Digby Camp that he thought the training was 'decidedly amateurish', whilst Captain J W Margeson of the 25<sup>th</sup> (Nova Scotia) Infantry Battalion believed that, after their training in trench warfare at Sandling Camp, the men were 'prepared to fight, prepared to die if necessary...'. As each battalion was deemed ready for war, kit was issued and they were marched to Folkestone Harbour to board the troop ships. The short crossing to Boulogne took place under the protective screen of warships from the Dover Patrol.

As the people of Folkestone developed affection for the Canadians, it is clear from letters and diaries that the feeling was reciprocated. When they finally left the town, the Canadian Army presented a set of eight stained glass windows to the people. These were installed in Shorncliffe Station (now Folkestone West) but later removed and now kept at the National Railway Museum in York. Even Private Fraser, a stern critic if ever there was, recorded having 'an enjoyable time' here. Private Charles Davies of 12 Canadian Field Ambulance reflected the feelings of many of his comrades in a poem:



*Canada Day at Shorncliffe in 2003*



**SHORNCLIFFE CAMP**

Folkestone, thou Queen of the Southern Coast,  
I'm loath to leave your grassy warren;  
Those steep white cliffs that beacon like a genial host  
Receding from my eyes nigh dim with tears.

What soothing hours and happy days so dear does memory recall;  
The walk along the Leas, the leafy undercliff, and Oh, that changing sea,  
When the rich red sunset sparkles on thy face,  
Such are my thoughts of thee picture of grace.

Garden of England! Brave Men of Kent!  
Think of your heritage: the flowers sweet scent,  
That wooded glade at Seabrook, primrose clad;  
The glimpse of moving picture shore to make you glad.

Those verdant meads of Shorncliffe Plain,  
Bright green as emeralds after rain.  
Deep down in mist of blue lies sleeping Sandgate town,  
Whose twinkling lights shine like some fairy's crown.

St. Martin's spire, 'neath which brave Plimsol sleeps,  
Whose noble work the British sailor reaps;  
The bugle blasts and all war's grim array,  
Much as it did in Moore's far distant day.

Not even the mists of Passchendaele and its blood strewn duckboard track  
Can blot from out my memory the charm of Radnor Park.  
Who would not fight for thee, dear land,  
For every flower and Kentish maid's fair hand.

Who cares for the muddy trenches and the shrapnel's piercing scream,  
The waves of poison and all the ghastly scene?  
There are those away in the Golden West  
Dearer than Nelson's name-  
Mothers and wives and sisters; it's for them we play the game.

With so many Canadians in the area, it is not surprising that there were deaths. Illness and accidents accounted for many, whilst others died from wounds sustained at the Front. Shorncliffe Military Cemetery had been created in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when the nearby camp was commanded by Sir John Moore at the height of the Napoleonic Wars. The graves in the old cemetery are a record of every conflict and almost every British regiment during Queen Victoria's reign. There are three Victoria Cross winners buried there.

Just before the Great War, with uncanny foresight, the Board of Ordnance had purchased several additional acres of land for the cemetery, and it is here that the majority of the Canadian soldiers were buried. Each of the 305 men buried has his own story, but there are two series of graves, where several men died on the same date, which are of wider interest. Firstly, there are graves for 12 men all killed on 13 October 1915. On that evening England had been attacked by German Zeppelins, with London being the primary target. One of the attackers, L14, headed towards the Kent coast and unloaded four bombs over Otterpool Camp at 9.15pm. The camp was home to the Canadian Field Artillery and 13 men were killed instantly with 23 injured, two of whom later succumbed to their wounds. Seven horses were also killed. Next, we find a row of headstones all with the date 25 May 1917. This was a Friday, the Whitsun bank holiday weekend. The evening was fine and the Canadian troops were resting outside their tents and huts at Shorncliffe Camp. In Folkestone, housewives were queuing in Tontine Street to buy provisions

for the holiday, with their children playing happily in the street. With no warning a score of German Gotha bombers appeared from the west, disgorging their bombs as they flew over the town. 17 Canadian soldiers were killed at the camp, and there was a terrible loss of life amongst the mothers and children as one bomb exploded in Tontine Street.

It was ironic that the proposal to hold the very first Canadian Flower Day had been published in the local paper only days before what became known as The Great Air Raid. The month of June 1917 was one of grieving as memorial services were held for the civilian casualties of the raid and, on 13 June, around 1300 children from local schools attended Shorncliffe Cemetery to lay flowers on the graves of Canadian soldiers. With the exception of the years 1939-1945, the ceremony has been held every year since 1917. Many of the children who attend the Canada Day ceremony today have parents and grandparents who did so when they were children.

I have been privileged to visit many of the local schools which take part on Canada



Canada Day at Shorncliffe in 2010



The Cross of Sacrifice at Shorncliffe after the Canada Day ceremony on 1st July 2010



One of the early Canadian Flower Days at Shorncliffe Military Cemetery, circa 1920



Day and talk to the children about the Great War and the Canadians. The children were invited to think about why so many men volunteered for service, when they would face such danger. I then asked for a volunteer from amongst the children and several hands shot up. I told them that they would be asked to do something dirty and dangerous, to go away from home and that their mothers would be angry and upset if they did so. Some hands went down at this point, but many more were raised! The chosen volunteer came forward and was put in uniform, a real leather Sam Browne belt and holster from the Great War.

The girls were then asked to imagine that the boys were their husbands or boyfriends and how they would feel if they went away to war. The boys were asked if they would still volunteer if the girls did not want them to do so. This was a revealing exercise! I asked them what sort of things they might give to each other as mementoes when they parted, and showed the children real keepsakes, a silk handkerchief with 'Canada' embroidered on it, and a sweetheart brooch in the shape of a maple leaf. They were then shown a film

about a lad who lied about his age to join the army and was killed in action, aged just 16. Finally, each child was then given a sprig of Rosemary, and told of the plans to replant the shrub down the Road of Remembrance. The Step Short Project is an ambitious plan to mark the centenary of the Great War in Folkestone. The Road of Remembrance, down which so many men marched to the harbour and, for many, oblivion on the Western Front, is central to the project.

Particularly poignant in talking to the school children was the fact that many classes included children of Gurkha soldiers. Shorncliffe is now the home of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, the Brigade of Gurkhas. I met many of the children again at the cemetery on Canada Day as they each sat quietly in front of the headstone engraved with the name of 'their' soldier. Many of them wanted to know details about the soldier, where he was from, was he married and how did he die. They seemed to think that, because I had told them about one or two of the Canadians when I had visited their school, I knew the stories of every single soldier!

I suggested at the beginning of this article

that the Canada Day ceremony in Folkestone is unique. I said this because it actually began in 1917. All other remembrance ceremonies began after the Armistice in November 1918. Shorncliffe Military Cemetery itself is perhaps not unique, but it is certainly unusual. As well as its old part, maintained by the Army, there is the large Commonwealth War Graves section, including the Canadian graves, and it also continues to be the final resting place of today's soldiers. Rifleman Peter Aldridge was buried there in February 2010, having been the 250<sup>th</sup> British casualty in Afghanistan. The essence of the cemetery is its peace and, with the sweeping views across the sea to the Romney Marshes in the west, its beauty. It is a fitting place for heroes to rest and be remembered.

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#### About the author

Michael George is a member of the WFA. He is the author of two books, *Coast of Conflict* (2004) SB Publications, and *Dover and Folkestone during the Great War* (2008) Pen & Sword. He gives talks and walks about the military history of the coast of south Kent.



Canada Day at Shorncliffe in 2010