



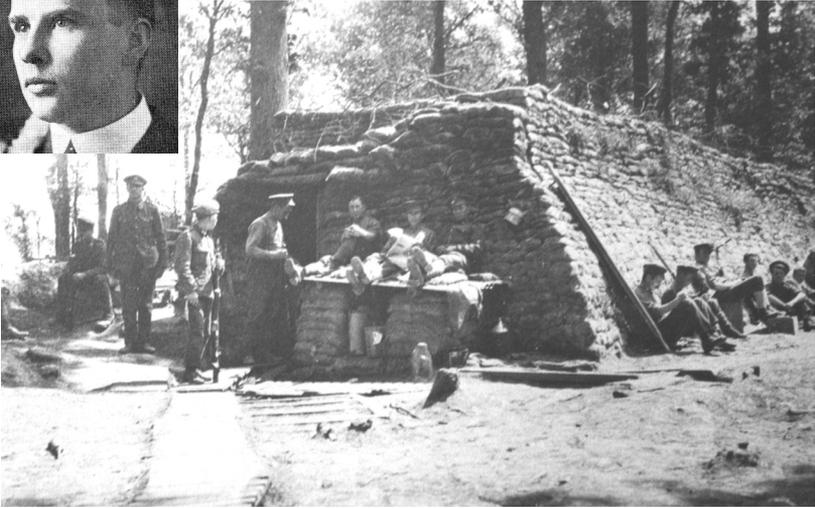
5th CMR Officers

# A Hundred Years Ago, The Great War Began

Par Jocelyn Vachon

It was only called World War I later, after there was a WWII. At the time, though, there had never been a war like it, so destructive and so world-changing. It occurred in far away Europe, among other places, but it's impact reached everywhere, including Sutton.

**W**e all pass by the Memorial Plaque of Sutton's Town Hall but we rarely pay attention. Have you ever wondered about these men who once walked these very streets? Contrary to popular belief, Canadian soldiers who fought in World War I, from 1914 to 1918, weren't all farmers and lumberjacks. More than 80% were urban citizens, often recent British immigrants. For a farming community like Sutton to have its sons and young husbands abandon family and farm to fight for "King & Country" was a troubling choice.



Courtesy of Brome County Historical Society

Maple Copse near Mont Sorrel, Belgium: a sinister place for young Lieutenant Norman M. MacDonald.

## The First Volunteers

Days after the war declaration between Britain and Germany in early August 1914, the first volunteers from Sutton signed up, the initial expeditionary battalions being raised from urban militia units. The 13th Battalion – *Royal Highland Regiment of Canada (Montreal's Black Watch)* welcomed Arthur Gordon Cook, a 34 year old electrician and militia member, married with one young child, and Joseph Hall, a 38 year old Irish immigrant working for Canadian Pacific Railway and an ex-President of our local IOOF Chapter (*International Order of Odd Fellows*). Twenty-year-old Valentine Patman, another Irish immigrant, who worked at the CIBC in Sutton and was a member of the Victoria Rifles militia, joined the 14th Battalion – the *Royal Montreal Regiment*. Thirty-nine-year-old Arthur G. Brown, who had served 12 years with the famous “Glosters” (*Gloucester Regiment*) in England, joined the 2nd Service Corps. And finally, Royce Coleman Dyer, 22 years old, who was living in Winnipeg at

the time, and was the son of Sutton Mayor Leon Dyer<sup>1</sup>, joined the 8th Battalion – the *Black Devils*, in Winnipeg. Ironically, Dyer who was among the first to volunteer (August 12, 1914), was the last to die; he died of pneumonia on December 30, 1918, while commanding the famous *Dyer's Battalion* of the Special Expeditionary Force fighting the Red Army in Siberia<sup>2</sup>. Also dying in Siberia was David Fraser, a Scottish immigrant working in Sutton Junction, who had enlisted in September of 1914; he was killed in action November 13, 1918, while refusing to abandon a wounded comrade into the hands of attacking Bolsheviks.

### **First Combats for Suttonites**

It was April 22, 1915, and after a few weeks on the point of the infamous Ypres salient in Belgium, our local men found themselves engulfed in the mist of the first major attack of chlorine gas. The Germans released 170 tons of chlorine gas toward the French Army, which was positioned to the left of the Canadians. A desperate flanking defence by our men prevented the Germans from rolling up the front; our Suttonites were positioned in the front of the line, right in the action. On the 24th, the gas attack was renewed, this time directly on the Canadian line. For two more days, they fought relentlessly. Patman got shrapnel through the left thigh. He survived to spend the rest of the war as a Shooting Instructor in England<sup>3</sup>. Cook and Hall were part of a heroic rear-guard action at St-Julien; their bodies were never recovered. As for Dyer, during the fight, he was tasked with delivering a message to Battalion Headquarters.

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1. Leon Dyer went on to be Sutton's Mayor for five terms.

2. See *Héritage Sutton*, no. 5, for a more complete story of Captain Royce Coleman Dyer.

3. Patman had the metal pieces removed in November 1915. He was not exactly an irreproachable soldier, his military file being his witness. But he returned to work for CIBC on June 9, 1919, where he stayed until July 1920, when he emigrated to South America. Why his name appears on the Memorial Plaque of Sutton's Town Hall is a mystery.

Incapacitated by poisonous gas, he lost consciousness and was found in a ditch two days later; he spent the next month in hospital. For the 1st Canadian Division, the price of bravery was close to 2,000 dead and 4,000 wounded, all in less than a week. To those at home, the grim realities of war wore a familiar Sutton face.

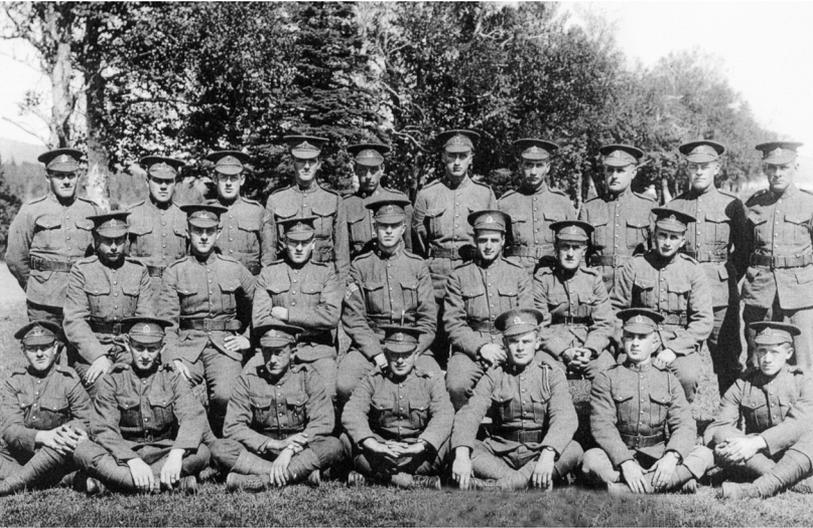
### **Why did they join?**

Unlike in large cities, where recent British immigrants joined the war effort *en masse*, Sutton residents volunteered for a variety of reasons. Was it the élan of being part of the *13th Scottish Light Dragoons of Canada*? Was it the call of adventure, especially for the young? Perhaps it was public pressure, as in the song “*Why aren't you dressed in khaki?*”. or when women handed out white feathers to non-military men implying cowardice. Or maybe it was merely a strong affinity to the British Empire. Surely, the well-organized propaganda left an impression of romantic and holy war<sup>4</sup> to be won against an enemy described as barbarian. Further, systematic censorship made sure neither media nor personal letters exposed civilian populations to “inappropriate descriptions” of reality on the Western Front. So, while each enlisted for his own reason, none was expecting this war, this first industrial war, this war of unimaginable magnitude and ferocity.

Since fighting on the Western Front mostly took place on battlefields, with belligerents deeply entrenched on both sides, most Sutton soldiers joined infantry units, though a small number served with the artillery or other services. Local doctor R.T. MacDonald was given the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel in the Medical Corps, and was asked to recruit other potential locals. His three sons volunteered, sustaining the dark twists of war. Between May and December of 1915, two units were raised in the Eastern Townships:

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4. The book *A Death so Noble* by General Jonathan Vance explains this phenomenon.



Victor Prémont while training with comrades of the 148th Battalion C.E.F.

the *5th Canadian Mounted Rifles*<sup>5</sup> and the *117th Battalion*, the latter being almost unique in being a mixed Francophone/Anglophone unit. Other units with whom Suttonites predominantly served were the *148th Battalion* (which was broken down in England to provide reinforcements for other units), the *Royal Highland Regiment of Canada (13th, 42nd Battalions Black Watch)*, the *Victoria Rifles of Canada (24th Battalion)*, and the *Canadian Grenadiers Guards (87th Battalion)*. Interestingly, French-speaking Suttonites were sent to English-speaking units, instead of being mustered with the *22nd Battalion (French-Canadian)*; the *Van-Doos* was the only French-speaking unit within the British Army at the Front. Many were able to join a unit with other Sutton boys, but once in France attrition quickly ended these friendly field trips. One exception was three older soldiers with the *2nd Service Corps (Transport)*: Warrant

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5. The *5th CMR* is the only Townships Battalion that actually fought as a unit on the Western Front. It was commanded for a good part of the war by Dennis C. Draper of Sutton Junction.

Officer Albert G. Brown, Sergeant Charles Landrey, and Sergeant Tom Turtle. While they never fought the enemy directly, they were within easy gun range. In a letter to his wife in mid-October 1917, just before the Canadian attack on Passchendaele Ridge, A.G. Brown wrote to his wife and entitled it "From Somewhere in Mudland": *"I have just returned from [the] last battle and [am] thankful to come through. We were rushing up wood to make temporary roads to get our big guns forward, and old Fritz —[the Germans]—[was] blazing at us... Tell the ones that think I am not in danger [,] that I have been in charge of convoys right up to our front line and only 250 yards from the Germans' front line... the day is ours and we all know it..."* Watch the papers for reports of the Canadians. I am with them,..."

The Canadians took Passchendaele, but at a cost of 4,000 dead and nearly 12,000 wounded, all in barely three weeks.<sup>6</sup>

## **Major Actions of the War**

One hundred-twenty thousand strong, the Canadian Corps gained a stern reputation; the Germans nicknamed them *Stormtroopers*. Our local citizens took part in all the major battles of the war: the gas attack at Ypres (April 1915); the battle of Mont-Sorrel, Mont-St-Éloi and the Somme (1916); Vimy Ridge, Hill 70 and Passchendaele (1917); and Amiens, the Drocourt-Quéant Switch, the Hindenburg line, Cambrai and the Pursuit to Mons (1918). Not surprisingly, these famous large-scale battles also reflect the time and places of Suttonite casualties, with Vimy Ridge being the bloodiest for our locals.

## **War Stories**

During the war, people at home reported to their local papers any news they'd received from loved ones at the Front. The stories varied from

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6. [http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/history/first-world-war/fact\\_sheets/passchendaele](http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/history/first-world-war/fact_sheets/passchendaele).

amusing anecdotes and down-to-earth descriptions, to thanks-for-the-wool-socks-you-sent-me and exaggerated accounts of heroism. Some tales actually turned out to be true! After the war, however, it was typical for veterans to be reticent, reluctant to speak of their experiences in The Great War because many were horrendous and beyond description.



Courtesy of Brome County Historical Society

Future Brigadier-General Dennis C. Draper while training in Sherbrooke, 1915

Life expectancy at the Front knew no social class, nor could it be related to time spent there. Sheer luck—good or bad—played its role. Young Lieutenant Norman MacDonald, an electrical engineer and son of Sutton’s local doctor, had been at the Belgium Front for only a few weeks when, exiting his shelter he’d named *Maple Copse*, he and a comrade were killed instantly; he never heard the incoming shell. A few seconds could make all the difference between a premature death and a scary story to tell in a letter.

Sergeant Sydney Vokes was an English immigrant in his early forties. Vokes was solidly built, had a fine personality, and he'd worked for Mr. Hextall in Abercorn. He joined the Heavy Artillery in late 1915, having served in India and England in his youth. In late March 1917, just days before the attack on Vimy Ridge, he had saved a burning ammunition depot by removing over 100 cases of bombs. For this, on June 1st—while 8 km behind the lines—he was awarded the Military Medal for his act of bravery. Minutes later, however, a blindly-fired German shell struck and killed Sergeant Vokes.

Some, like George Cumine, were just plain lucky. On June 2, 1916, German sappers blew up mines under the Canadian lines at Mont-Sorrel, killing hundreds instantly. Cumine, who had grown up in British Columbia before moving to Sutton, was one of the few spared, both from the exploding mines and the subsequent charge of the German troops. Sent rearward as a prisoner, Cumine heard a German soldier shout, *“Get down you damn fool; you’re going to get your head blown-off.”* Surprised to be addressed in his native English, Cumine engaged the soldier, only to learn that the two had grown up but a few miles apart in Westholme, B.C.!

## **Bravery under Fire**

Courage wears no medal, yet many of the stories that made their way to us, a hundred years later, are those officially recorded by the military. Lieutenant Harold Eastman received the Military Cross for discovering a new type of machine gun during a raid.

Royce C. Dyer risked his life to save a pilot who had crashed into No Man's Land, though the officer died later behind Canadian lines. For other bravery, Dyer twice received the Military Medal for courage under fire: once during the gas attack at Ypres in 1915, the other during the battle of the Somme, in 1916, for delivering messages under a storm of shellfire. In October 1918, he received the Distinguished Conduct Medal,

as well as the Order of St. George, 4th Class from the White Russians, for his terrific handling of a Lewis machine gun, and for coolness under fire during the taking and clearing of the town of Onega in Siberia.

Dennis C. Draper,<sup>7</sup> a farmer from Sutton Junction, who had studied law and had been a highly regarded marksman before the war, was commended for his leadership as a Second-in-Command during the battle of Mont-Sorrel (June 1916), and as a Commanding Officer at Passchendaele (October 1917). He received the Distinguished Service Order on both occasions, as well as the French Croix de guerre when the 5th CMR was the first unit to enter Cambrai. Draper was a “man's man”, one never afraid to face the enemy. He was also *mention in dispatch*<sup>8</sup> no less than eight times, including *a mention* by British Field-Marshal



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Lapugnoy Cemetery near Vimy, France where William Stanistreet was laid to rest. He was born in Liverpool.

7. See *Heritage Sutton Sketchbooks* no. 10 and no. 11 for a more complete story on Brigadier-General Draper.
8. *A mention in dispatch*—in French, *Citation à l'ordre du jour*—gives recognition from a senior commander for acts of bravery or meritorious service, normally in the field.

Sir Douglas Haig. Draper commanded a brigade of 5,000 men for the last six months of the war, and commanded the 3rd Division (22,000 men) in post-war Germany. He was made Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George (CMG) for his relentless efforts. Draper eventually became Chief of Police of Toronto.

## Some Statistics

The population of Canada in 1911 was 7.2 million, while Sutton and its township numbered 3,906. Of the 620,000 Canadian soldiers who participated in WWI, 64,976 were killed or died of wounds,<sup>9</sup> about 0.9% of the total population. I was able to trace about 160 Suttonites who had served under the Flags in the Great War, though this number is probably incomplete. Twenty-five of those died in combat. While many were Canadian-born, a fair number were British orphans who had originally come to Brome County in their youth through a charitable organization called *The Knowlton Home*.

Marc-Aurèle Pratte worked for CIBC in Sutton prior to volunteering with 199th Battalion (Irish-Canadian Rangers) serving overseas with the RMR.



Courtesy of CIBC, from the book "Letters from Home"

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✦PRATTE, MARC AURÈLE—Private. Born 25th March, 1898. Father, deceased. Entered the service of the Bank, 8th November, 1915. Enlisted, September, 1916, from Sutton branch, in 199th Canadian Battalion, with the rank of Private. Transferred to 14th Canadian Battalion.

Killed in Action, 9th August, 1918.

9. Commonwealth War Graves Commission Report 2009-10.

## War's End

By Armistice Day, November 11th, 1918, Suttonites with the Canadian Army Corps had advanced the furthest of all Allied troops, entering the city of Mons, Belgium. Ironically, this is where combat had first commenced for the British Army, way back in August 1914. Names of those who never came back to Sutton are inscribed on remembrance plaques in their respective churches, with the exception of St-André Catholic Church. Other memorials can be found at the Fairmount Cemetery. The fallen soldiers themselves are buried in Europe, in Commonwealth cemeteries located near the battlefields where they fought. Soldiers not identified, and those known but unrecovered, *are* remembered on the Vimy Memorial in France, alongside the names of 11,000 other Canadians. In Belgium, the Menin Gate at Ypres serves the same purpose. In May 2003, I took it upon myself to visit each Sutton soldier's grave or cenotaph. Most had come from modest families who could not have afforded a visit of their own. Sadly, today their names have long been forgotten by our younger generations; chances are that no one has ever visited their memorials before, a sad tribute for the brave men who gave their lives. It should be noted, too, that several names are missing from our own Memorial Plaque near the Town Hall entrance.

According to newspaper clippings, Sutton citizens made sure that those soldiers who *did* return were honoured as they deserved. They had a welcome-home dinner hosted in their names, and each was awarded a gold watch. Yet, for Leon Dyer, our five-term mayor, and for Dr. R.T. MacDonald, our local recruiting officer, there had been nothing glorious about the war. Each had been left with two empty seats at his family table. ●

*Je me souviens.*

*Special thanks to Ms. Gill Sowerby as well as the Sutton Legion #158 for their help.*