



Life in the trenches was hard; rain, mud and cold were every day companions.

By Ève Denis and Georges Létourneau

Héritage Sutton delves into its scrapbooks of the Great War, 1914–1918, and brings to us the voices of Sutton boys from the Front. This valued correspondence, from which we present extracts, takes us back 100 years into the turmoil through which the soldiers and their families lived.

At the beginning of the last century—before radio, television and the internet—people had only newspapers to get local and world news. This made “the paper” very important, particularly in time of war. People from Sutton mostly read *The Sherbrooke Record* and *The Richford Journal*.

Scrapbooks were also very popular at the time. They allowed people to conserve bits of history: people, events and celebrities, as well

as particular themes. In them, you also find obituary notices, poems and caricatures. Newspaper clippings might be assembled in booklets, specially made for that purpose, or pasted on the pages of an old catalogue. These articles were often from large Canadian or American newspapers, having been republished in local papers.

Héritage Sutton owns fifteen such scrapbooks. Two of them cover the The Great War, one of them kept by F.N. Curley. They contain letters between soldiers and their families—some relating heroic acts—and notifications of deaths, wounds, promotions and homecomings. There are also various texts on the war itself.

The “Sutton Boys” became local heroes, models of courage. The wounded were proud; those who died were said to have made the “ultimate sacrifice” for their country.

News from Home

Some families had 2, 3, even 4 sons in the forces. At times, a father and his son were both enlisted. The mail allowed correspondence between them, and even the delivery of parcels. Telegrams were usually the carrier of bad news—news all feared to receive—like the death of a soldier or his admission into hospital.

In war time, welfare groups like the Red Cross, “manned” mainly by women, prepared parcels for soldiers. Most of the time these parcels contained socks, cigarettes, maple products, hand-knitted items, fountain pens, and local newspapers. Parcels were very much appreciated by the soldiers. Besides being useful, they delivered comfort from home, as well as the assurance they had not been forgotten.

December 1917

... I just received a lovely Christmas box from Sutton Red Cross and also received the parcel you sent me. Thanks many times. Well



Canadian Red Cross volunteers in action.

father, how I wish I could be at home to spend Xmas. [I'll] be in the dugout, but you must not worry about me for I take good care of No. 1. It is now eighteen months for me in France without a scratch and have been buried up five times in the trenches so you can see I have a lucky star. Well father you must not mourn me not being with you on Xmas for us boys will have a good time in our dugout and I will think of you all. If I cannot be with you in person I will be with you in mind and heart.

Corporal Robert B. McClarty to his parents Mr. and Mrs. Jas. McClarty.

Dear Mrs. Mudgett,¹

I am indeed very pleased to inform you that I have received with much pleasure your box of very nice eatables and useful things it contained. ... If you could only see the happy smile that comes over our boys' faces when they see the Canadian mail. ... You cannot imagine how letters and parcels from loved ones around home seems (sic) to cheer them up. And I am sure it gives us all fresh courage. Of course

1. Mrs. Charles Mudgett was secretary of *The Golden Rule Rebekah Lodge*.

we have not very much to look forward here, only the end of the war, and I think it will take some hard hammering and strenuous work before that is accomplished.

I really believe there is a whole lot out here who will appreciate their homes and friends a great deal more than they ever have done before, when they do get back to dear old Canada again. ...

It isn't the foe that we fear;
It isn't the bullets that whine;
It isn't the business career
Of a shell, or the bust of a mine;
It isn't the snipers who seek
To nip our young hopes in the bud;
No, it isn't the guns,
And it isn't the Huns ...

It's the MUD,
MUD,
MUD.

It isn't the melee we mind,
That often is rather good fun,
It isn't the shrapnel we find
Obtrusive when rained by the tons;
It isn't the bounce of the bombs
That gives us positive pain;
It's the strafing we get
When the weather is wet —

It's the RAIN,
RAIN.
RAIN.

It isn't because we lack grit
We shrink from the horrors of war.
We don't mind the battle a bit;
In fact that is what we are for;
It isn't the rum-jars and things
Make us wish we were back in the fold;
It's the fingers that freeze
In the boreal breeze —

It's the COLD,
COLD,
COLD.

Oh, the rain, the mud and the cold,
The cold, the mud and the rain;
With weather at zero it's hard for a hero
From language that's rude to refrain,
With porridge muck to the knees,
With sky that's a-pouring a flood,
Sure the worst of our foes
Are the pains and the woes

Of the RAIN,
the COLD
and the MUD.

Again thanking one and all, and wishing you the best of luck and prosperity, I remain respectfully,

Driver G.H. Walsh

Hard Life in the Trenches

The letters from the Front do not reveal much of what the conditions really were; censorship prevented that. The soldiers were ordered to tell their relatives as little detail as possible, never to mention any precise location, and to speak of events only after a certain time had elapsed. But nobody doubts that the fighting was fierce, or that life in the trenches was extremely hard. Much is said about rain, mud and cold.

The soldiers wrote to their relatives about their health, their mood, and their will to hold on.

When wounded, they sought to reassure them. They hoped that the hostilities would soon cease, and that they would make it back home. Many said that they missed home and would prefer the fire of the fireplace to the enemy fire, and that they wished they could be with the family for Christmas or some anniversary. They gave their impressions about the “old countries” they’d visited while training or on leave. Most had visited England or France for the first time, and had discovered different cultures. In many letters there were photos, a decoration received, or sometimes a souvenir taken from the uniform of a dead German soldier.

They asked for news from home, and about the people they knew. The letters speak, too, of other soldiers from Sutton and environs, confirming the normal arrangement at the time: units were grouped geographically, so that Sutton enrolees served along side others from the Eastern Townships.

Spring 1915

I am at present feeling stiff and sore and for a number of days have had neither clothes nor shoes off. We have been driving our way in cold, rainy, miserable weather with mud up to our knees in places. At times we stopped and rested in German dug-outs, and you may be sure we are [at] present covered with Hun vermin, and are sadly in need of both a change and bath, but can never tell now when we will be able to get one. ...

The boys of Canada have done, and are doing[,] great work, and will continue to do so as long as Canada can send men fast enough to fill the big gap in the battalions. I hope the boys at home will keep coming forward so that we can keep up the great fight. ...

We are winning, we see it, victory is near, but many of my friends who only ten days ago were anxious to get at the Huns, have now paid

the price; others have been wounded and gone back, some to stay in France, some in England, and other to dear old Canada, disabled for life; we who still live must keep on with the help of new men. ...

On the first morning after this battle I shall never forget looking across the shell-torn fields where the wounded were being cared for, the dead lying here and there, and our boys picking up souvenirs to send back to their friends. ... Our boys stand in wonderfully well. Each and every one ready to start again. ...

Private Royce Coleman Dyer to Mrs F.A. Cutter².

***From somewhere in France,
September 14, 1917***

Dear Father,

... We came down from the trenches Tuesday, were there six days. Expect to go up again in a few days. ... Old Fritz is trying very hard to gas the lot of us. He catches a few once in a while, but believe me, Fritz is getting the worst of it. Our artillery is simply wonderful and we have plenty of it. We pulled off quite a show on the 15th of August. When we took "Hill 70," I suppose you have read about it before now, Fritz had [a] great observation [point] at this place, and tried very hard to win it back. He counter attacked seventeen times in forty-eight hours but every attempt failed. His losses must have been terrible.

Yes, they say we will be home for Xmas but – I don't believe everything I hear although I hope so. ... My opinion is [that] the war will stop as quick at it started, but how far that time is away nobody knows. ... This is all for this time, hope to find you all well and enjoying life the best possible. As ever,

Your son, Gordon Crowell.

2. Royce Coleman Dyer was the son of Leon Dyer and Mae Cutter, so he was acquainted with Dr. Frederick A. Cutter's family.

On October 1, 1918, a few weeks before the war end, Gordon Crowell was killed in action in Cambrai.

June 7, 1918

Dear Dad and Mother,

Just a few lines this morning to let you know I am still on earth and well. How are you? ... We are kept pretty busy here. The Hun has found out that the U.S. boys are different than they thought at first. I bet [they are] beginning to get worried. The weather here still continues to be as beautiful as ever. The fields and trees are so green and fresh. The birds all seem to be as happy as if there wasn't any war at all. The boys in our company are fine. I am on detached service at present and am away from the company so [I] don't see them every day.

How is your back getting on Dad? I hope it is better by now. I wish you would go a little easy on some of that work[,] you will do just as well if you do that. I don't want you to kill yourself so I won't have a Dad when I get home. ... Well dear ones will call this enough for this time. Will close with love and kisses from your boy[,] Reg.

Sent by Reginald Brown to his parents about three weeks before he was killed.

Our two wartime scrapbooks speak also of the mourning of families who received official notices that a son or a husband had been killed in combat. The details of a sad incident, however, were more often reported by soldiers who were present, or the man's officer. Dead soldiers were buried in near-by cemeteries in Europe; families were sorry they could not grieve or pray over their graves. In Sutton, the media reported large attendance at the Memorial Service for the local fallen, noting that the event was very emotional for all.

Sent to Reginald Brown's father, November 27, 1918

Dear Mr. Brown,

*Received your letter inquiring details as to the death of your son Pvt. Reginald L. Brown of this Company. I will give you as full details as I possibly can. It was the third day of the second battle of the Marne, near Trugny, on the left of the French city of Chateau Thierry, that your son, while engaged in delivering an important message, was struck by a piece of shrapnel from a German shell which wounded him very severely. He was struck in several places, but chiefly on his leg close to the knee, almost amputating it. Your son was a battalion runner and was always engaged in carrying messages. This position takes a good deal of nerve and grit to hold down and your son certainly had it. He was a good soldier and was always faithful and honest. Hoping this information will be satisfactory to you. I remain. Truly yours,
B. Carroll Reece, 1st Lieut. 102nd U.S. Infantry.*

—It will be remembered that Pvt. Reginald L. Brown, after getting stricken as above stated, managed to drag himself back[. A] while after bandaging his badly shattered leg, he succeeded in reaching the lines of the American Army, where he delivered his message, was picked up and died two or three days later in Mobile Hospital No. 1, near the front lines, breathing his last of the morning of July 25th, 1918.

Death so Close

Sutton boys often looked death in the eyes. Langdon (Laddie) Norris told his sister how he'd been injured, and how he dreaded returning to the Front. In a letter to his brother, E. Warden told how, before being rescued, he saw his sergeant blown to pieces beside him. But in spite of the hard life and constant danger of the trenches—or perhaps because of it—some volunteered for special missions, as did Royce Coleman Dyer who sent the following letters to Mrs F.A. Cutter:

HAD NARROW ESCAPE WHEN SHELL BURST.

North Sutton, July 12—(Special)—The following letter has been received by Mrs. Tom Smith from her brother, Pte. L. Norris, who was in the big battle :

June 10, 1916.

Dear Sister :

Just a line to let you know I am O.K. I am at our base now but expect to be back with the battalion in a couple of weeks. I was hit in the head and eye, but am getting along fine. I was disappointed that I did not make England. I think I would have had I been sent to a Canadian Hospital, but I was not lucky enough to get sent there. I had a very narrow escape. The shell landed almost at my feet and threw me some distance. I was bruised up a bit as I landed on the cobble road on my head, I simply dread going back up the line again.

Have not heard from you lately as my mail has not been sent from the battalion yet, expect to get it in a few days. Will write more next time and don't worry about me. Love to all, LADDIE.

BURIED BY SHELL WHICH KILLED HIS SERGEANT

Sutton, Jan. 9—(Special)—The following are extracts from a letter, sent by E. Warden, to his brother, Frank :

Dear Brother, Sister and all : Was pleased to hear from home. I had a letter from John on the 3rd of September, same day the Canadians made the drive, and believe me it was interesting to see the boys go ahead. I was buried up and dug out and sent to the hospital then to the base depot. It is pretty hard for me to get around. My sergeant was blown to pieces by the same shell. I think I came out lucky. Well Frank, it is one year tomorrow, since I landed in England. I have seen the Sutton boys, Eber Eastman, John Boright. I also saw some more from Cowansville, Knowlton and Brome. I saw Freddie McCrum, Raymond Ball and Stone from Knowlton. I have not very much to write and must write mother.

From E. WARDEN.

June 3, 1918.

A few lines to say [that] I am leaving for an unknown country. ... Our work will be very dangerous, as much, [or] even more so, than in France. I felt I must still fight for my flag and you at home. I could not stay on in England. I and eleven other sergeants volunteered for this dangerous mission. I am still brave though still war worn after my four years in service but never shall I give up. The photos I send you were taken on top of the Tower of London. We have lived here for eighteen days; [we] had a very good time. ...

July 6, 1918.

At last we can write and say a few things. I am on the Kola

Peninsula.³ My next place to march to will be Petrograd. When we landed here I was taken ill with fever. My! but I was very sick; never before was I like it. However, it only lasted five days. Now I am back in best of health again. ... Next month winter starts. Christmas time we get only two hours of daylight. ... I hope this will find you as I am, in the very best of health. Love to all. ...

Royce

Royce Coleman Dyer did not come back; he died on December 30 1918, in Russia.

Those who actually survived this horrible war received triumphal receptions upon their return, from their relatives, from municipal authorities, and from the whole Sutton population. Ceremonies were also an opportunity to award other tokens of honour, such as gold watches.

In our two scrapbooks, we hear from more than 25 combatants, either Sutton natives or those having family and friends in the Sutton area. Among them are: Albert Brown, Reginald Brown, Charles W. Cowell, Gordon Crowell, T. Cutter, Dennis C. Draper, Ernest Draper, William Dow, Royce C. Dyer, H. Eber Eastman, Richard Clair Eastman, Earl Ingalls, Douglas Macdonald, Ed MacFarlane, Robert B. McClarty, Langdon Norris, Ulric Norris, Claude Rockwell, Irwin Scott, Malcolm Scott, Homer C. Stowell, Kyle Sweet, Sydney Taylor, G.H. Walsh, E. Warden, Channing George Westover, Norris Young. Contact *Heritage Sutton* to read their testimonies.

To learn more about Suttonites to both World Wars, see these *History Sketchbooks*: no. 5 (Royce Coleman Dyer), no. 9 and 10 (Dennis Colburn Draper), no. 17 (Gaétan Mireault), and no. 20 (The First World War). To access our archives databas and our special file *Stories of the Wars*, see <http://heritagesutton.ca> ●

3. Arctic Russia, east of northern Finland