

**HALIFAX MILITARY HERITAGE
PRESERVATION SOCIETY**

Historical Paper No. 2: Philip Bent – Halifax's VC

October 19, 2016

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There are ninety-eight Victoria Cross (VC) recipients considered to be Canadians. Of this number, five were from Nova Scotia, but only one was from Halifax. Philip Eric Bent served in the British Army during the First World War, rising from second lieutenant to command of his unit, the 9th Battalion of the Leicestershire Regiment. For his actions at Polygon Wood, Belgium, on October 1, 1917, Bent was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross.

The undersigned would be pleased to receive any comments or questions regarding this paper at contactus@hmhps.ca.

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Introduction

One of the greatest of several British soldier-poets of the First World War, Siegfried Sassoon, brilliantly summed up one of the most horrific battles of the war in a few words in his poem "Memorial Tablet (GREAT WAR)":

*. . . I died in hell—
(They called it Passchendaele). My wound was slight,
And I was hobbling back; and then a shell
Burst slick upon the duck-boards: so I fell
Into the bottomless mud, and lost the light.*

Similarly, a British general's reaction to the muddy quagmire is a telling comment on the battle and illustrates the isolation of some senior commanders and staff from the conditions their soldiers experienced on a daily basis. A month after the battle, Commander-in-Chief Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig's chief of staff, Lieutenant-General Sir Launcelot Kiggell, paid a rare senior staff officer's visit to the Ypres Front, his first to that combat zone. As he proceeded in his staff car from the town of Ypres through the former battlefield, he surveyed the devastation around him and became more and more agitated. Finally, he burst out crying, "Good God, did we really send men to fight in that?" The officer who was escorting him, a veteran of the battle, replied quietly, "It's worse farther up."

Third Battle of Ypres

At 3:50 a.m. on July 31, 1917, Haig mounted an offensive in Flanders intended to dislodge the Germans from the high ground east of Ypres. Known to the British as the Third Battle of Ypres, the Canadians, echoing Sassoon's words, had another name for it—they too called it Passchendaele. Haig had a number of reasons for launching an offensive in Flanders. In the first place, he had always wanted to fight the Germans here, closest to the British supply ports of Le Havre and Calais. Secondly, he wanted to capture the German submarine bases on the Belgian coast as the Admiralty believed U-boats were about to sever Britain's Atlantic lifeline. Finally, the operation had another purpose, which the British Commander-in-Chief did not even communicate to his own government. Mutiny, mass desertions and refusals to obey orders had broken out in as many as sixty French divisions, and the French Army was incapable of withstanding a major attack upon it, or launching a major offensive, for some time. In the meantime, the British would have to keep the Germans occupied until the French Army was once again in a fit state to fight.

Initially the British attacks met with little resistance and achieved some degree of success. In the northern half of the salient, the advancing British quickly captured the villages of Pilkem, Langemarck and St-Julien, the latter the scene of the courageous stand by 1st Canadian Division during the Battle of Second Ypres in 1915, when chlorine gas was first used. In the southern portion, the British experienced similar early successes, capturing the village of Hooze and Belleward Ridge. When the Germans did react, they managed to stop the British advance, and even pushed them back in the north.

Then, another key adversary entered the picture—the weather. Three days of torrential downpour followed the initial attacks, turning the low-lying Flanders Plain surrounding Ypres into a sea of mud. Previous artillery barrages had already destroyed the region's normal drainage system, and the water had no place to go. Mingling with soil and clay, it created a gooey, clinging, waist-deep mass that slowed down all movement and dragged hundreds of heavily laden or wounded soldiers to their deaths as they struggled across the stinking ooze. Unusually high levels of rain and the results of millions of exploding shells ensured the mud remained.

Polygon Wood

Throughout August, the British attacks continued, retaking the ruined villages of Langemarck and St-Julien in mid-month, and advancing slowly against determined German opposition. But by the end of the month the expected breakthrough had still not occurred and the British suffered 70,800 casualties in the process. It was time to regroup and refit before going on the offensive again, which happened on September 20. British and Australian troops attacked in an easterly direction towards the village of Zonnebeke, driving in the Germans over the next few days. On September 26, they captured Polygon Wood, a key position south of Zonnebeke, and the remains of Zonnebeke itself, but at great cost. Then, on the night of September 30, the 110th Brigade, made up of four Leicestershire units, joined the battle. They marched up to Polygon Wood along wooden duckboards, the only safe means of traversing the battlefield.

While the 8th Battalion took over left hand side of the brigade frontage inside the wood, now almost completely denuded of trees, the 9th Battalion under Lieutenant-Colonel Philip Bent occupied the right, with both units facing roughly southeast. One of the soldiers in Bent's battalion headquarters, DA Bacon, recalled that night:

Though we had fully prepared for a rough night, the first hours passed quietly enough and we began to hope that after all, the Ypres bark might be worse than its bite. The ordinary precautions of a battle front were observed; patrols were pushed out to reconnoiter the ground and to give alarm in case of sudden attack. At headquarters, as soon as the relief was reported complete and the Australians had cleared, and orders as to dispositions and instructions in case of alarm had been given, it was decided to try to obtain a night's rest. I use the word 'try' because we were mud-wallowing in the open air, it was bitterly cold and no blankets could have been brought, and we were on the edge of a volcano that might and as a matter of fact did, belch forth at any moment. Firstly, we dug ourselves in as well as possible, in front of the headquarter Mebus [an abandoned German pillbox], and with the aid of some old wood planks lying about, contrived to make a little shelter and firing position. At midnight, we lay down in the mud with the idea of sleeping, each taking one turn at sentry.

In these miserable surroundings and depressing circumstances, Bent spent his last night on earth. Shortly after the relief of the Australians was complete on the early morning of October 1, the Germans launched a strong counter-attack from the southeast against the 8th and 9th Battalions in an attempt to retake Polygon Wood. It

began about 4:40 a.m. with a terrific artillery barrage that included smoke to cover the movement of the German troops as they formed up for the attack. In Bacon's words:

At 5:30 a.m., the enemy launched a determined infantry assault against our positions, through the smoke screen. The first wave of attackers was beaten off by 'A' Company using Lewis gun and rifle fire. The second wave was also successfully driven off on the [battalion's] Front, but penetrated somewhat into the lines of the battalion on our left flank. By this time the SOS was being sent up all along the Front—several were discharged at Head Qrs, both night and daylight rockets—and the situation looked threatening; Brigade Headquarters was called upon for immediate help. Under the determined pressure of the enemy 'A' Company commenced and continued to fall back. Lieut Col PE Bent DSO commanding the 9th Leicesters, decided to make a counter-attack, with such forces as were available, as no help could be expected from the troops in support for some hours, owing to the conditions of approach and the heavy and deep enemy barrage.

Bent's Heroism

With the situation so critical and confused, Bent took charge and formed a small force from his headquarters personnel, the reserve company and elsewhere. In a letter to Bent's mother, Sophy, one of his officers explained what happened next:

The Colonel immediately led a counter-attack...Utterly regardless of his own safety he went ahead of the men, waving his revolver and shouting 'Forward the Tigers!' The attack was a brilliant success and the enemy definitively driven back, but at the moment of victory the Colonel was struck by a bullet and killed instantly.

It was the finest act possible, and undoubtedly saved the day...We feel the loss of our Colonel more than words can say, for he was beloved by all ranks. I am very proud to have had the privilege of knowing such a fine Christian gentleman, whose memory will live forever in the history of the Regiment.

Bent's body was never found, being lost to the Ypres mud forever. He was one of twenty-six officers and 491 other ranks from his unit killed in the war. His name is inscribed on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing eight kilometers north of Ypres, along with 34,888 others killed in the Ypres Salient who have no known grave, three others of them VC recipients. His mother received her son's VC and the DSO he had won earlier from the King at Buckingham Palace. His sword hangs in the Cathedral Church of All Saints in Halifax, while his VC is on display in the Royal Leicestershire Regimental Museum in England. His name is on the War Memorial outside St Alban's Church, Hindhead, Surrey, and on a memorial at Ashby-de-la-Zouch Grammar School.

The citation for Bent's VC was published in the *London Gazette* on January 11, 1918 and reads:

For most conspicuous bravery, when during a heavy hostile attack, the right of his command and the battalion on his right were forced back. The situation was critical owing to the confusion caused by the attack and the intense artillery fire.

Lieut.-Col Bent personally collected a platoon that was in reserve and, together with men from other Companies and various regimental details, he organized and led them forward to the counter-attack after issuing orders to other officers as to the further defence of the line. The counter-attack was successful and the enemy was checked. The coolness and magnificent example shown to all ranks by Lieut.-Col Bent resulted in the securing of a portion of the line, which was of essential importance for subsequent operations. This very gallant officer was killed whilst leading a charge which he inspired with the call of 'Come on the Tigers!'

Philip Eric Bent

Philip Eric Bent, although he served in the British Army, is always considered a Canadian. Bent was the only officer from Nova Scotia to earn the Victoria Cross, and was the first Atlantic Canadian to be awarded the VC posthumously. He was born in Halifax on January 3, 1891 and moved with his family to Leicestershire, England, where he attended Ashby Boys Grammar School in Ashby-de-la-Zouch. In 1910 he joined HMS *Conway*, a former RN two-decker moored in the River Mersey near Birkenhead and used as a training ship to turn out officers for Britain's huge merchant fleet. After graduation in 1912, Bent went to sea. When the war broke out he had his second mate's ticket and was a qualified Merchant Navy officer. Bent and a friend joined the Royal Scots on October 2, 1914, believing the war would be over by Christmas and wanting to see some action. If the recruiters had known of his nautical qualifications, he

would never have been allowed to join the army and would have been commissioned into the navy. He may well have survived the war as well, but it is highly unlikely he would have earned the VC.

Leicestershire Regiment

The next month Bent was granted a temporary commission as a 2nd lieutenant in the Leicestershire Regiment, nicknamed "The Tigers." The Leicestershire Regiment had been raised in London as 17th Regiment of Foot in September 1688, during the last years of the reign of James II and at the time of the creation of the first true standing army in Britain. Previously, colonels raised or disbanded regiments as the need arose. Prophetically, one of the unit's earliest campaigns was against France in Flanders, the cockpit of Europe, during the War of the League of Augsburg. The regiment earned its first battle honour—*Namur*—there in 1695, the second oldest of all British battle honours.

The Seven Year's War (1756-1763) saw the beginning of the regiment's connection to Canada when 17th Foot served here as part of General James Wolfe's brigade. It took part in the capture of Fortress Louisbourg on Cape Breton Island in 1758, for which it was awarded its second battle honour—*Louisburg*—but only its grenadier company participated in the Battle of the Plains of Abraham at the fall Quebec. The 17th Foot's links with Leicester followed a few years later, in 1782, when regiments were allocated separate recruiting districts across the country.

The regiment's nickname, "the Tigers," came about in 1825, when George IV recognized the unit's service in India by approving the figure of the "Royal Tiger" on its colours and appointments, with the word "Hindoostan" super scribed "as a lasting testimony to the exemplary conduct of the Corps during its period of service in India from 1804 to 1823." After the Crimean War, a second battalion was formed and during the latter half of the nineteenth century, both battalions served in Canada, at Montreal and Quebec, as well as at Halifax. The 1st Battalion was stationed in Halifax from 1863 to 1865, while 2nd Battalion was posted here from 1891 to 1893, making it one of the last imperial units to be stationed in Canada before the final withdrawal of British troops in 1906. Coincidentally, its service in Halifax overlapped with Bent's first two years of life here.

On the outbreak of the First World War, British Prime Minister Herbert Asquith appointed Field Marshal Lord Kitchener, the nation's greatest living soldier, as Secretary of State for War. Whatever his many failings, Kitchener clearly recognized one fact: the war would not be over by Christmas as almost everyone else believed, but would be a long war of three or more years. Accordingly, he gained cabinet approval to call for hundreds of thousands of volunteers. At the time, the Leicestershire Regiment consisted of two regular battalions, 1st and 2nd; a reserve battalion, 3rd; and two territorial battalions, 4th and 5th. In short order, four more battalions—6th, 7th, 8th and 9th—were raised in August and September 1914 and termed "service" battalions as they were created only for war service. Perhaps uniquely, these latter four battalions were kept together and formed into the 110th Brigade at the end of April 1915, which became known, not surprisingly, as "The Leicestershire Brigade."

France

At Perlam Down on Salisbury Plain, the brigade, and Bent, underwent their final training, with Bent in command of Number 2 Platoon, A Company. Then, Bent was temporarily attached to the Bedfordshire Regiment, where he received his permanent commission in June 1915. Later that month, with Bent still away, King George V inspected the Leicestershire Brigade, a sure sign it would be proceeding overseas shortly—but where? The Middle East or Gallipoli headed the list of possible soldier-specified locations.

In the end, the brigade went to France, landing in the pre-dawn hours of July 30, 1915, and entering the front lines near Berles-au-Bois in northern France in September after a period of instruction from experienced troops. It spent the winter of 1915-16 in the trenches until transferred south in July to replace another brigade decimated in the opening days of Haig's great Somme offensive, where each battalion suffered about three hundred dead or wounded in taking Bazentin Wood. It took a few weeks for the news of the attack to filter through to the home front. When it did, "Across Leicester, in street after street, the blinds were being drawn as they had never been before up to this point in the war." Among the casualty replacements was one 2nd lieutenant who wrote home, "Have just received my orders to go up the line. I go at 7:40 tonight to the 9th Leicesters (some mouldy crowd I s'pose)."

Meanwhile, Bent had been made temporary captain in April 1916 with the Bedfordshires before he was transferred back to the Leicesters to help rebuild its depleted companies.

He rejoined the 9th Battalion in time to take part in its next battle on the Somme at Gueudecourt. The 8th and 9th battalions led the brigade, attacking rather unusually in the middle of the day at 12:35 p.m., instead of the early morning, on September 25, followed by 6th and 7th battalions. The Leicesters managed to capture Goat Trench, the first of three German lines in front of the town, but according to 9th Battalion's War Diary, "Advance hung up on account of MG fire and rifle fire. Enemy still occupying Grid Trench" [the second German line].

The 9th Battalion's CO, Lieutenant-Colonel CH Haig, accompanied by his adjutant, advanced behind the leading waves until they too were stopped by machine-gun fire in front of Grid Trench, where they remained overnight with a few soldiers who had made it that far. Sometime during this period, Haig was wounded in the hand and was relieved by Captain Bent the next day, an indication of the effect of German fire on the battalion's officers. With the help of a lone tank, the Leicesters eventually succeeded in capturing Gueudecourt on the morning of September 26, but again with heavy losses. Once more a period of rebuilding was required before the men from Leicestershire would be able to rejoin the fight.

The spring of 1917 found Bent as a 25-year-old temporary lieutenant-colonel in command of the 9th Battalion. From March through to June, the Leicesters were part of the concerted attempt to break through the Hindenburg Line, one of the strongest fortified positions ever constructed by the Germans. Bent's performance as CO during this period was recognized in June when he was awarded the DSO, given only to commissioned officers "for distinguished conduct and devotion to duty," after having been previously honourably mentioned in dispatches "for meritorious or distinguished service in the field, or before the enemy." Due to this requirement, there are frequently no detailed DSO citations available. Often the only indication of the quality of service that the award recognizes is the overall standing of the award itself.

The Supplement to the *London Gazette* dated June 4, 1917, noted that "His Majesty the KING has been graciously pleased to approve of the undermentioned rewards for distinguished service in the field" and under the heading "TO BE COMPANIONS OF THE DISTINGUISHED SERVICE ORDER" lists 2nd Lieutenant (temporary major and acting lieutenant-colonel) Philip Eric Bent.

On June 16, as Bent led his battalion forward in the communication trenches in support of another brigade's attack on the Hindenburg Line, he ran into a heavy German counter bombardment. Bacon, one of the soldiers with Bent in Battalion Headquarters, described what happened:

Almost immediately after our barrage opened, the enemy's counter fire became intense and many casualties were caused among the attacking troops and those in support. For some time the attack appeared to succeed on the right front, but on the left the assault was held up by the very thick enemy wire defences and machine-gun fire. Despite these obstacles and the enemy's stout defence, our men, or at least some of them, eventually got into the hostile works and hung on for several hours; and desperate hand to hand fighting took place, in which the enemy had the numerical advantage.

Flanders

Shortly afterwards, the British attack was called off, but not before suffering several casualties. Then, in July, the Leicestershire Brigade went into divisional reserve until early September, when they entrained for the north and Bent's date with destiny. Later that month, the Leicesters moved to Belgium for the third time since arriving on the continent, occupying an area in the rear of the Ypres Salient. By now, the Third Battle of Ypres had been underway for two months and the whole region resembled a vast waterlogged and cratered lunar landscape. To add to the soldiers' suffering, mustard gas, first used by the Germans that summer, had saturated and dissolved in pools of water. Anyone attempting to use shell-hole water for washing or drinking, even if boiled beforehand, was likely to be poisoned. A 7th Battalion soldier summed it up succinctly: "Foulest place we have yet struck."

By October 3, two days after Bent's act of self-sacrifice at Polygon Wood, the British and Australians suffered another thirty thousand casualties. They renewed their assault on October 4, with New Zealanders capturing Gravenstafel Ridge, an important spur jutting westwards from the much larger Passchendaele Ridge. From this precarious toehold, the British hoped to seize the higher—and drier—ground of Passchendaele Ridge. But the Germans, who had somehow found the means to revitalize their defence, stopped the concerted attacks of the British and Anzacs cold in their tracks. By October 12, they could advance no farther, having run themselves literally into the ground. British formations had been fed continuously into the monumental struggle in

the mud, more grist for the mill. Coupled with a hardening of the German defence, which had earlier seemed on the verge of faltering, Haig persisted in the operation, as he did at the Somme, long after any hope of achieving the original objectives had disappeared. The assaults continued as the weather worsened and the fall rains, coupled with endless artillery barrages, continued to churn the marshy, low-lying ground into a muddy quagmire.

But before he could carry on, Haig had to look elsewhere for fresh troops to renew the attack.

And it was the Canadian Corps that answered his call.