



Benefits of Military  
Hospital Ships

Insights from a Soldier  
Turned Advocate

Fort Garry Horse  
at Cambrai, 1917

# espritdecorps

## CANADIAN MILITARY

VOLUME 23 ISSUE 4  
\$3.95

### ▶ CANSEC '16: FOCUS ON THE ARMY

PREVIEWING THE  
TECHNOLOGY ON  
OFFER TO THE ARMY

### ▶ INTERVIEW WITH ARMY COMMANDER LGEN HAINSE

May 2016 Issue / Display until 6 June 2016  
\$3.95 Cdn / \$4.50 US



04  
Publications Mail # 40069149  
Return undeliverable Canadian  
addresses to Circulation Dept.  
204-1066 Somerset St. W.  
Ottawa ON K1Y 4T3



**THE FULL SEND:  
A NEW FEATURE**



**A VIEW FROM THE FRONT:  
OPERATION ATHENA 2009**

[espritdecorps.ca](http://espritdecorps.ca)



# WORLD WAR I

## ► FORT GARRY HORSE: Bettering the Charge of the Light Brigade in 1917

by Daniel J. Demers

### THE FORT GARRY HORSE'S

1917 charge against German forces was touted by the *New York Evening World* as equaling “anything in cavalry exploits in the history of the British Empire.” Another era newspaper article was headlined “Canadian Cavalry Betters the Charge of the Light Brigade.” According to Roland Hill, the official war correspondent of the Canadian government at the time, the mid-November 1917 charge “is regarded as the most famous cavalry action of the war.”

By the time the First World War started, most of the world's armies still maintained limited horse cavalry regiments but had stopped using them in massive cavalry wave charges. The realities of trench warfare, poison gas, machine guns, tanks, and airplanes pretty much relegated cavalries to training, scouting and pursuit. The days of the horse-mounted cavalry were numbered. The military glory of the inseparable bond between warrior and his trusted steed would soon be extinct.

When Canadian cavalry forces first arrived in Europe they often found themselves dismounted and “[leaving their] horse behind [they] joined the infantry in the trenches,” according to an article in the *New York Sun*. In June of 1915, the commanding general of the First Canadian Division apologetically addressed the First Canadian Cavalry Brigade: “I had to put you in the trenches the other night to help us when we ... were short of men.”

The much heralded Fort Garry's Horse (a.k.a. “Hell-for-Leather”) charge started on November 20, 1917 as part of the Battle of Cambrai, the British forces' attempt to break Germany's infamous Hindenburg Line. The goal was to capture Cambrai, a key German supply depot. The plan anticipated breaching the line with tanks behind which “cavalry formations could be unleashed,”



Members of the Fort Garry Horse bridge a trench in June 1916. Their legendary cavalry charge in Cambrai would forever draw comparisons to that of the British light cavalry's infamous October 25, 1854 Charge of the Light Brigade during the Crimean War's Battle of Balaclava.

(LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA)

according to Major M.R. McNorgan in his 1992 article “The Canadian Cavalry Brigade, Part 2 of 4, Cambrai” published in Canada's *Armoured Bulletin*. All five divisions of the British Army's Cavalry Corps were committed under the battle plan. The Fort Garry Horse regiment was under command of LCol Robert Walter Paterson.

The Hindenburg Line was a defensive bulwark which had been constructed by the Germans along the Western Front in September of 1916. It was virtually impenetrable, despite being repeatedly attacked by French and British forces. On this particular day, according to Roland Hill, the Fort Garry Horse would be “responsible for the capture of several [French]

villages [from the Germans] ... one battery of German guns and scores of prisoners — among them a complete engineers' staff, with valuable plans of the [military] district.” As conceived, the cavalry charge was led by a contingent of 350 armoured tanks followed by infantry along a six-mile front. The tanks flattened “tons of [barbed] wire and [caved] in the wide trenches, so that the mounted [soldiers] could easily” traverse the battlefield. An unnamed major who led one of the squadrons was quoted as saying, “it was a joy ride all the way to [the French village of] Masnières.” Getting to Masnières required negotiating two bodies of water: *l'Escaut* (the Scheldt River) and the Canal de Saint-Quentin. The river was easily fordable but the canal was deep. Bridges over the river and canal were damaged by both offensive British and retreating German forces, thus posing traversing difficulties to the advancing British forces. By the end of the first day of battle, British forces had experienced 4,000 casualties. They had taken 4,000 German prisoners and captured or destroyed 100 German guns.



# S WOOD YPRES FLANDERS FIELDS GENERAL CURRIE OW TANKS STRATEGIC BOMBING TRENCH WARFARE IOBE BEAUMONT-HAMEL CAVALRY CONSCRIPTION

*"The two men had their mounts shot out from under them,  
forcing them to complete the trek on foot."*

According to McNorgan, B Squadron was "tasked with capturing the German 13<sup>th</sup> Corps Headquarters and returning with the Corps Commander as a prisoner." The squadron was commanded by Captain Duncan Campbell who would be killed during the attack and be replaced by Lt Marcus C. Strachan. It would be B Squadron's assault that the press likened to Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade*:

*When can their glory fade?  
O the wild charge they made!  
All the world wondered.*

*Honour the charge they made*

B Squadron's course took them slightly to the east of Masnières. The cavalry forded the river and then crossed over a temporary bridge built over the double lock of the Canal de Saint-Quentin. During the crossover B Squadron lost several men and horses to German fire.

*Boldly they rode and well / Storm'd at with shot and shell*

As nighttime was approaching, headquarters opted to halt the attack and recalled B Squadron. Unfortunately the message to return never reached the squadron.

*Someone had blundered / Theirs not to make Reply  
Theirs not to reason why / Theirs but to do and die*

On they rode towards the Village of Rumilly-en-Cambrésis.

*Boldly they rode and well*

*Into the jaws of Death / Into the mouth of Hell*

As they approached the village they "caught sight of a battery of German field guns that had hastily been unlimbered and were firing at sight range on three or four [British] tanks."

*Cannon in front of them / Volley'd and thunder'd  
Storm'd at with shot and shell*



*Lt Marcus Strachan leads his squadron through a village on the Cambrai front in December 1917. In May 1917 Strachan was awarded the Military Cross after a raid near Saint-Quentin. Six months later, he earned the Victoria Cross in Masnières for his gallantry in the November 20, 1917 action. Strachan would take command after the squadron leader, approaching the enemy front line at a gallop, was killed. (LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA)*

*Boldly they rode and well*

According to one newspaper account, in four-formation the Canadians launched a surprise attack with "drawn sabers." Two rows swerving to the right and two to the left — "surrounding and killing every man and horse."

*Flash'd all their sabers bare  
Flash'd as they turn'd in air  
Sabring the gunners there*

Two Canadian cavalrymen, Troopers William Albert Morrall and Jean Edouard Clement van Wilderode, both slightly wounded in the attack, were sent back to regimental headquarters as messengers. The two men had their mounts shot out from under them, forcing them to complete the trek on foot.

"The next adventure of the raiders was [along] a sunken road," reported

the *Bisbee Daily Review*. The cavalry encountered a large body of German troops marching down the road to reinforce their comrades in the village of Rumilly-en-Cambrésis. The Canadian contingent decided to charge and rode at breakneck speed towards the Germans.

*Forward, the Light Brigade! / Charge for the guns!*

At the crest of a hill they came upon a German machine gun emplacement. The *Bisbee* article went on to relate: "It was a massacre. More than 50 Germans were killed ... the rest [of the Germans] got to Rumilly and gave the alarm." Nearly 100 Germans surrendered, but thinking British forces were behind them, B Squadron left them as they continued their assault. It was a mistake according to McNorgan: "Once the enemy soldiers had been bypassed ... they took up arms again ... inflicting more

**FORT GARRY HORSE ... CONT'D ON PAGE 67**



casualties [from behind] on the squadron.” German machine guns opened up on the cavalry troop that was holding out along the sunken road. Four officers and 129 men with 140 horses (some were pack animals) had started the assault. By this time only three officers, 43 men and 46 horse remained standing. Several of the men were wounded as well as all the horses. With dusk coming they decided to fight their way back on foot and join whatever friendly forces they could find.

Era newspapermen touted the squadron’s ruse of stampeding their remaining horses in the opposite direction in an effort to make the Germans believe they had galloped off in that direction. But in reality, according to Major McNorgan, “The horses were so tired they just wandered off into the darkness and were quickly shot down.”

*Storm’d at with shot and shell  
While horse and hero fell.*

During their escape the squadron inadvertently became split in two. One contingent led by Lt William Joseph Cowen, who spoke fluent German, and the other by Lt Strachan. The men were told to use their sabers in preference to their rifles as they were “less alarming” than gunfire.

*Reel’d from the sabre stroke  
Shatter’d and sunder’d*

Under guise of darkness the two groups encountered several German infantry details and took fire — another five Canadians were killed or wounded. In an effort to further confound the enemy, the squadron cut all telephone wires and power lines in the area. Yet another cavalryman was electrocuted cutting wires. As they proceeded they took additional prisoners while fighting as they fought through German details and outposts. At one point the horseless troopers came upon a German engineering contingent (an officer and nine men). The German-speaking Canadian major [probably Lt Cowen (later a major) who by now had been shot in the neck] joked with a German officer. The German “hesitated a second” and the Canadians were able to surround the Germans who then surrendered. The Canadians made the Germans guide them back to Masnières and regimental



*Fort Garry horses, June 1916. Only one third of B Squadron’s men and none of its horses would return after their charge on Cambrai in November 1917. (LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA)*

headquarters without any further fighting. Reported Hill, “It was one of the most stirring cavalry adventures of the war.” Only 37 men of Squadron B survived the attack. All their horses were killed.

*They that had fought so well  
Came thro’ the jaws of Death  
Back from the mouth of Hell  
All that was left of them*

According to McNorgan, B Squadron “had destroyed an enemy battery, inflicted well over a hundred casualties, tangled enemy communications ... and captured or caused the surrender of numbers of enemy soldiers far exceeding their strength.” Arthur Conan Doyle praised the effort in one of his newspaper dispatches: “one small mounted body of Canadian Cavalry, the Fort Garry Horse from Winnipeg, particularly distinguished itself, getting over every obstacle, taking a German battery, dispersing a considerable body of infantry, and returning after a day of desperate adventures without their horses ...”

*Honor the charge they made*

The British Empire forces were able to hold onto Masnières a brief 12 days before being forced to withdraw when the Germans were able to successively counterattack and close the gap in the Hindenburg Line. While casualty reports are sketchy — roughly 41,000 British forces were counted as casualties while the Germans experienced 53,300 — the Hindenburg Line would not fall until October of 1918 when an overpowering battle mounted by British, Canadian, American and French forces pushed the Germans back. Five weeks later the war ended. 🍁

**INVESTIGATIVE NEWS  
INDEPENDENT VIEWS  
INFORMATIVE HISTORY  
EVERY MONTH**



**espritdecorps**  
CANADIAN MILITARY MAGAZINE



**Follow us on Twitter  
@EDC\_Mag**



*The one that's **read!***

**Subscribe today**

**Toll Free**

**1-800-361-2791**

**Digital copies now  
available for  
download on  
espritdecorps.ca**

