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Great War Legacy

A Drum from the 207th Battalion

Eric Fernberg

New Acquisitions, Canadian War Museum (CWM) The Winter 2006 issue of Canadian Military History contained a discussion by James Whitham, manager of the CWM's collection of Transport and Artillery, of a fabric iron cross cut from a German Gotha bomber shot down by the First World War Canadian airman Captain William Wendell Rogers. The occasion of the article was the recent acquisition of this item by the museum. Following this example, the CWM's section of Canadian Military History will henceforth, whenever appropriate, present discussions of recently acquired artifacts. These will highlight for readers interesting and significant items of the Canadian military heritage that are being collected and preserved by the country's leading military museum. The following by Eric Fernberg, manager of the museum's Dress and Insignia Collection, is the second installment in this series. (Cameron Pulsifer, ed. CWM section)

During the First World War the Canadian Expeditionary Force recruited a total of 260 battalions for overseas service. Yet the four Divisions of the Canadian Corps maintained only 48 battalions at the front. The vast majority of the battalions sent to England were either broken up to supply reinforcements for units already at the front or reconstituted for duties such as forestry or pioneer work. But all these battalions went through the process of recruiting, training, and working up in Canada before going overseas, thereby developing their own unit personality, traditions, and *esprit de corps*. These were all lost when the unit was broken up. The drum, of course, had been a long standing part of the military retinue, used for beating time on the march and the drum corps formed an important part of a unit's musical ensemble. The drums bore the unit's crest and, stacked on top of one another, occupied a prominent place on such special unit occasions as church parade and the presentation of the colours. Thus, the drums were an important component of a unit's symbolism and sense of tradition. Any that survive from the disbanded battalions would constitute a tactile reminder of fervently developed, but ultimately



lost, traditions and *esprit de corps*. In June the CWM took possession of a drum from one of these lost units, the 207th Battalion, which is interesting not only for what it represents in itself, but for the poignant story associated with the drummer who originally played it - Walter Garvin.

Walter Alexander Garvin enlisted in the 207th Infantry Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force, on 24 April 1916. Born on 19 May 1895, he was 21 years old.¹ He had been raised in Hull, Quebec, and according to his family, was a talented musician, who in addition to percussion, also played other instruments, such as the trumpet. He listed his vocation at the time of enlistment as a student, and because of his musical abilities he quickly became a member of the battalion's bugle band, under the leadership of bandmaster Lieutenant J.M. Brown.

The 207th Battalion was raised on 1 February 1916 in the Ottawa-Carleton area and was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Wesley MacLean, a veteran officer who had already served in France. The battalion gained the nickname of "MacLean's Athletes" due to the

large numbers of officers and men who had been engaged in sports.² The 207th trained at Rockcliffe Camp in the Ottawa area and on 18 November 1916 received its colours on Parliament Hill from the outgoing Minister of Militia and Defence, Lieutenant-General Sir Sam Hughes. This was Hughes' last military public duty as he had been forced to resign by Prime Minister Robert Borden on 11 November; a successor, A.E. Kemp, was not named for almost two weeks.³

The colours had been funded by the American Bank Note Company. During the ceremony the drums of the regiment were arrayed to form an altar and Private Garvin's drum may well have been present. In early 1917, the 207th left Ottawa to undergo further training in Amherst, Nova Scotia, and then sailed for England. Upon arrival on 9 June 1917 the unit was disbanded and its officers and men posted to a special holding unit, the 7th Reserve Battalion.⁴



Above: Private Garvin posing with Ross Rifle, Mk III. **Right:** Garvin with drum and accessories, c.1916.



Photos courtesy of Mr. Gordon A.R. Fowler.

Private Garvin was transferred from the 7th Reserve Battalion to the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry with effect from 13 December.⁵ During his service with the PPCLI, Private Garvin was wounded with a gunshot to the face at Amiens on 8 August 1918, probably at Domart bridgehead at the start of the action.⁶ Garvin was admitted to the No.2 Convalescent Hospital, Rouen, France, on 10 August 1918, and never returned to action. Struck off the regimental strength on 20 March 1919, he eventually obtained a civilian position with the Directorate of Records, Defence Headquarters in Ottawa.⁷ By the start of the Second World War

Below left: Bugle band of the 207th Battalion. Garvin is third from the left in the back row, indicated by the arrow; **Right:** Walter Garvin's 207th Battalion Drum.



Photo courtesy of Mr. Gordon A.R. Fowler.



Photo by E. Fernberg

Photo courtesy of Mr. Gordon A.R. Fowler.



Walter Garvin, c.1940.

in 1939, he was an auditor with the Stores Audit Branch at National Defence Headquarters.

Although Walter Garvin had survived the trenches of the First World War, he was not to be so fortunate during the Second. He left Halifax, Nova Scotia, aboard the SS *Nerissa* on 21 April 1941 to carry out audit work with the overseas forces. *Nerissa* was a combined freighter and passenger ship that had been outfitted in 1939 as a troop transport. On her previous voyage to Halifax she had been engaged by a German U-boat, but managed to escape by using her superior speed.⁸

During the return to England, *Nerissa*, running unescorted, was hit by three torpedoes from *U-552* approximately 120 miles off the UK coast. A total of 122 persons were lost, including 83 Canadian servicemen, and three civilian auditors, among them Walter Garvin, then aged 45.⁹

The family cannot recall how the drum remained in Garvin's possession, but it did pass to Walter's wife, Lillian, after his death in 1941. The drum was eventually passed on to his daughter, who is now deceased. Her husband, Gordon A. R. Fowler, ensured that it came to the Canadian War Museum, in memory both of Walter Garvin and the long disbanded 207th Battalion.

Notes

1. Attestation Paper, 246162, Private Walter Alexander Garvin, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3433-35.
2. Charles E. Compton, *Brief Review of the 207th Ottawa-Carleton Battalion in Photographic Record of the 207th Ottawa-Carleton Battalion, C.E.F.* (Ottawa, 1916). p.2
3. *Ibid.*, p.4.
4. John F. Meek, *Over the Top! The Canadian Infantry in the First World War* (Orangeville, Ontario, 1971), p.129.
5. Ralph Hodder-Williams, *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry 1914-1919, Volume II, The Roll of Honour and Appendices* (London & Toronto, 1923), p.182
6. *Ibid.*, p.41.
7. Personal Records, Walter Alexander Garvin (LAC), provided to author by family.
8. *Hamilton Spectator*, 8 May 1941.
9. *Globe and Mail*, 7 May 1941.

Eric Fernberg is the manager of the Dress and Insignia Collection at the Canadian War Museum.