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Kamerad, tritt ein!: German Trench Culture—An Aspect of the Human Side of the First World War

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German Trench Culture: An aspect of the Human side of the First World War

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Editor's Note: As noted in an article on the history of the Canadian War Museum in the Spring 2007 issue of Canadian Military History, *one of the foundations of the Canadian War Museum's original collection was a large number of so-called "war trophies," stemming from the First World War, many of which remain in the collection today.[1] These consisted (and consist) mostly of pieces of German weaponry that Canadian soldiers captured on the battlefields of the First World War, which were shipped to Canada in large numbers immediately following the Armistice. Historian Jonathan Vance has commented on the meaning and significance of these trophies to the post-war Canadian population, and has described how a special Committee, under Dominion Archivist Arthur Doughty, distributed many of them amongst communities and institutions across Canada. These, for the most part, wanted them as memorials and symbols of Canadian losses and successes on the Western Front. "A heavy howitzer in a Manitoba park or a trench mortar in front of New Brunswick town hall," writes Vance, "demonstrated that Canada, a peace-loving nation of citizen-soldiers, had triumphed over the militarized and Junker-ridden Germany."[2]*

The most sought-after items were large artillery pieces, thousands of which arrived in Canada from Europe. These, together with at least an equally large a number of captured enemy machine guns, exemplify the depersonalized, industrial nature of warfare on the Western Front, where the individual soldier counted for little in the face of such distant death-dispensing technology. However, Vance argues that Canadians did not view them as symbolizing such a bleak view of modern war, but rather as emblems of the accomplishments of the individual Canadian soldier in triumphing over such impersonal engines of war.[3]

Whatever the case, items that represented the humanity of the enemy soldier were not heavily represented amongst the war trophies. Recently, however, a war trophy that has remained in the museum's collection since its arrival in Canada from the front does offer some insight into the everyday life of the German soldier on the other side of the lines.

This is a sign, identified in the original War Trophies Stock Ledger completed by the War Trophies Review Board in the 1930s, as simply a German "Canteen Notice."[4] This seemingly mundane artifact hung in a German military canteen that Canadian soldiers must have overrun at some point in one of their numerous advances on the Western Front. Unfortunately, there is no indication as to who captured it, or when, or where. Recently one of the museum's volunteers, Mr. Bruno Friesen, who is fluent in German, became interested in this artifact. Bruno also served in German Army in the Second World War, which provides him with a special insight into the psychology of the German Frontsoldaten and a sensitivity to the meaning of such expressions of their culture as this sign. (Bruno's service in the German Army

is a very interesting story in itself, which cannot be told here. His memoirs, however, are with a publisher.)

Although the sign has been translated before, Bruno thought this to be inadequate and proceeded to undertake his own. He also has provided a brief commentary upon it, drawing upon his own experience of German military culture. These are reproduced below, as they help to illuminate the meaning of an interesting artifact which, perhaps overshadowed by some of the grander implements of war, has been somewhat overlooked since it became a part of the museum's collection. Bruno's translation helps to convey a sense of the humanity of the German soldier and his life at the front that the majority of the war trophies brought back to Canada do not. His comments serve to enhance and humanize the artifact in a manner that has not been done since Canadian troops removed it from the wall on which it originally hung.

- Cameron Pulsifer, Canadian War Museum

Notes

1. Cameron Pulsifer, "Colonel Wily's Brainchild: the Origins of the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa's Cartier Square Drill Hall, 1880-1896," Canadian Military History, 2007 (16) pp.59-68.
2. Jonathan Vance, "Tangible Demonstrations of a Great Victory: War Trophies in Canada," *Material History Review* 1995 (42) p.52.
3. *Ibid*. pp.52-53
4. The artifact in question is AN 19390001-821. For the work of the War Trophies Review Board, see Pulsifer, "Colonel Wily's Brainchild," p.67.

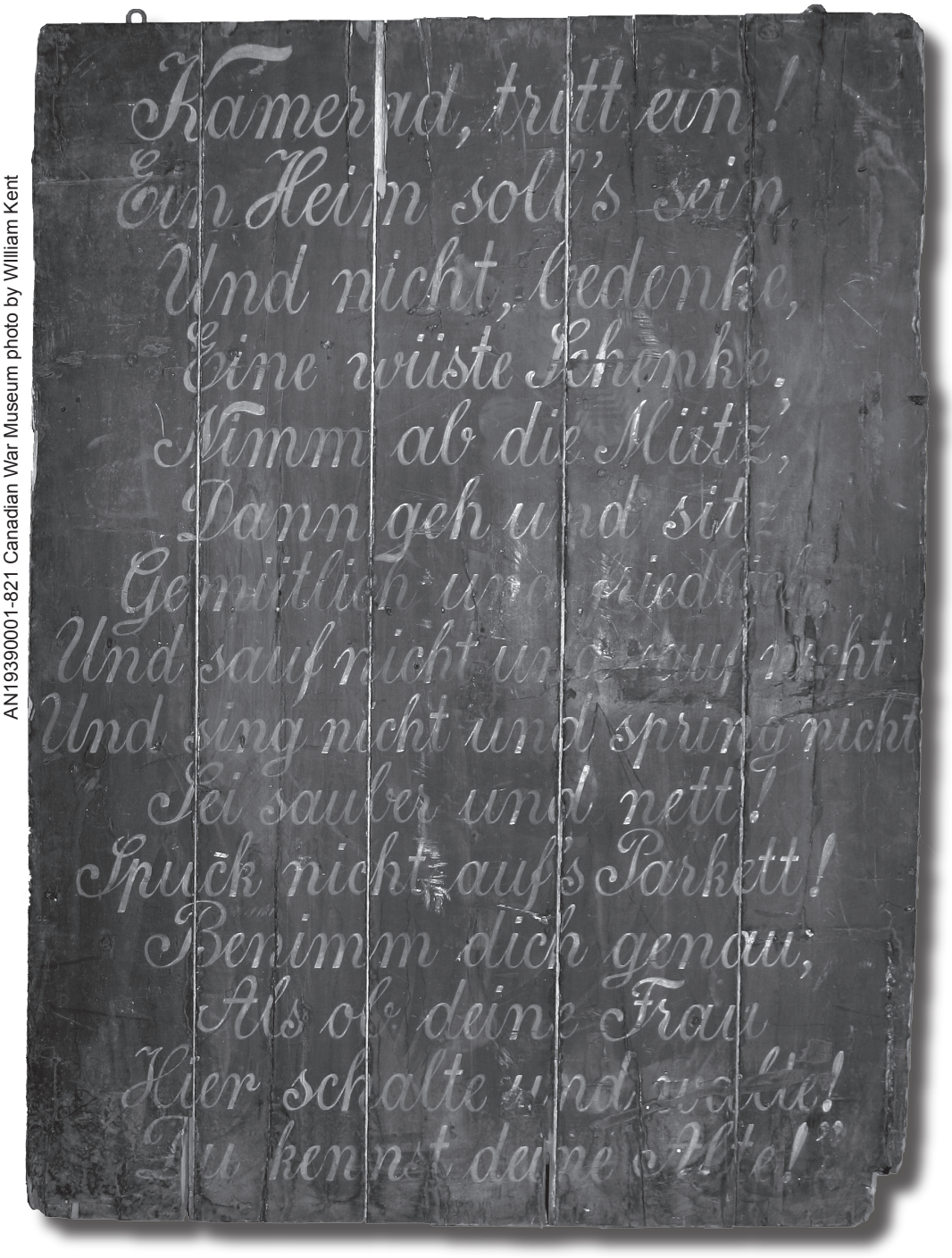
The popular image of the German frontline soldier of the First World War too often remains that of the soulless military automaton. This belies the fact that despite coming from a culture that was definitely more militarized than Canada's, most were still more civilians than they were professional soldiers. This sign came from a German canteen near the front, or perhaps an estaminet farther back. It is not an official sign but an informal one put up by the troops themselves, containing words of greeting and some friendly admonitions about how one was to behave while within its walls. It reveals some of the prevailing cultural norms of contemporary German civilian society, combined, perhaps, with some of the more roughhewn attitudes of the front-line soldier (i.e. the reference to the "Old Lady.")

The wooden sign bears a pithy 15-line poem, written in German. The impressively large sign (1.05 m. wide and 1.43 m. high) consists of five vertical 1.91 cm.-thick softwood boards, all of equal width and fitted together side by side. Two relatively small screw eyes, placed 81.3 cm. apart at the top edge of the sign, suggest that it was meant to hang inside rather than outside.

The purpose of the anonymous untitled poem, which is neatly written in white paint on a slate-grey background, was to caution comrades visiting the canteen or estaminet that they should not misuse the place. Edited for punctuation, the poem reads, in German, as follows:

Kamerad, tritt ein!
Ein Heim soll's sein
Und nicht, bedenke
Eine wüste Schenke.
Nimm ab die Mütz',
Dann geh und sitz
Gemütlich und friedlich,
Und sauf nicht und rauf nicht
Und sing nicht und spring nicht.
Sei sauber und nett!
Spuck nicht auf's Parkett!
Benimm dich genau,
Als ob deine Frau
Hier scahlte und walte!
Du kennst deine Alte!

The following literal translation omits meter, internal rhyme, and end rhyme, yet it preserves the content and pithiness of the original.



AN19390001-821 Canadian War Museum photo by William Kent

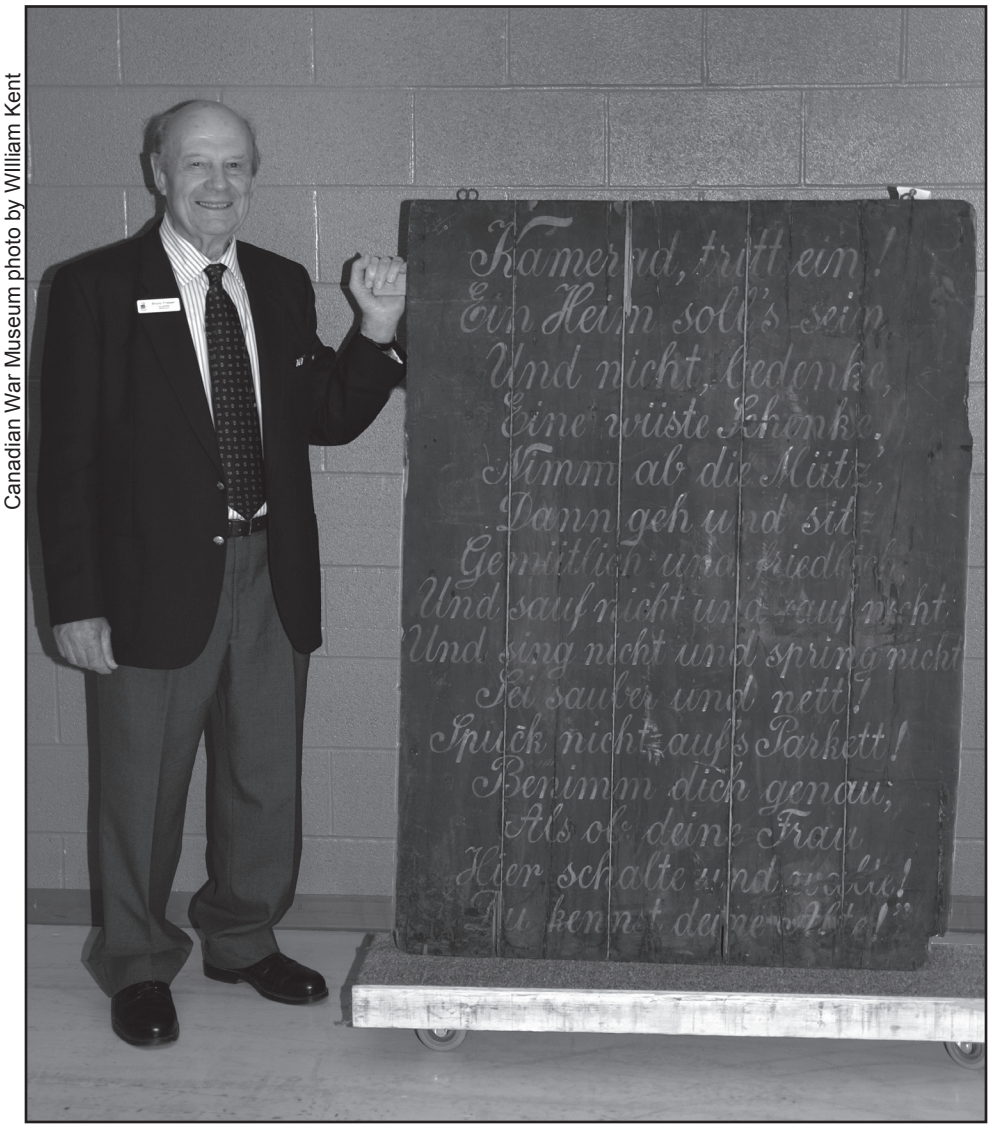
Comrade, come in!
This is meant to be home
And, bear in mind,
Not a vulgar tavern.
Take off your cap,
Then go and sit,
In comfort and in peace,
And do not booze and do not brawl
And do not sing and do not jump.
Be clean and nice!
Do not spit onto the parquet!
Behave exactly
As if your wife
Were here the manager!
You know your Old Lady!

The poem's varyingly indented lines consist of a pleasant tabulation of do's and don'ts. The three lines that jut out to the left refer to types of objectionable behaviour. Nonetheless, the taboos are softened by the comforting injunction: Nimm ab die Mütz,/ Dann geh un sitz / Gemütlich und

friedlich." (Take off your cap, / Then go and sit / In comfort and in peace.) Also, it is interesting to note the use the cursive derivative of the italic script. This averts the sternness and solemnity of the ubiquitous and more official German gothic script.

Very likely, the lines containing rauf nicht (do not brawl) and spring nicht (do not jump) were directed to the younger guests, whereas the nonstandard expression deine Alte (your Old Lady) was intended for the older ones. Parkett (parquet), the German soldiers' slang for all kinds of flooring, could have referred, ironically, to no floor at all (i.e. one of earth). Or perhaps it refers more properly to parquetry, a floor of inlaid design, as found in a soldatenheim, a home away form home for German soldiers (usually in a requisitioned house far away from the front.)

The Canteen Notice conveys a sense of the humanity and a taste of the social life of the German First World War soldier. It helps to show that these soldiers too responded to cultural norms of social decorum and that on the other side of no-man's land a trench culture flourished that was every bit as human and as much a blend of civilian and military norms as that on the Canadian side. This poignant reminder of the social side of the German soldier's life in the First World War was probably not seized specifically because it brought this across, but rather as a symbol of conquest. It is fitting that, as we approach the 90th anniversary of the end of the First World War, the testimony it provides to the humanity of the "other side" be at last brought to light.



Canadian War Museum photo by William Kent

Bruno Friesen standing beside the canteen sign, at the Canadian War Museum, 5 July 2007

Bruno Friesen holds an M.Phil. in English from the University of Waterloo. He taught English for 20 years at Algonquin College in Ottawa, and has been a volunteer at the Canadian War Museum since 1997. He would like to thank Ms. Et Van Lingen, Registrar at the Canadian War Museum, for making available the existing documentation on the sign, and James Whitham, Manager, Transport and Artillery, at the Canadian War Museum, for bringing this artifact to his attention.