

4-26-2012

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### Recommended Citation

(2007) "Story of the 22nd Battalion, September 15th, 1916: The Capture of Courcelette," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 16: Iss. 2, Article 5.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol16/iss2/5>

# Story of the 22nd Battalion

## September 15th, 1916

### The Capture of Courcelette

*Editor's note: The George Metcalf Archival Collection at the Canadian War Museum has a thick file of original materials related to the 22nd Battalion's role in the battle of Courcelette including messages written by its commander, Lieutenant-Colonel T.L. Tremblay, and after action reports, many hand-written, by future Dominion Archivist Lieutenant-Colonel Gustav Lanctot. Nothing is known about the provenance of this file. It was in storage at the museum when, in 1971, serious efforts began to assemble disparate documentary materials into a proper archives collection. The file presents a splendid opportunity for someone to complete an in-depth account of the 22nd's role in the battle.*

*The following narrative is included in the file. Neither its author nor the date that it was written is known. It is presented here to provide a taste of what is in the file and an idea of the ferocity of the fighting that the 22nd experienced at Courcelette.*

When the first great attack of September 15th was launched at 6.20 a.m., the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade was in Divisional Reserve. The 22nd Battalion was located in trenches lying approximately between La Boisselle and Contalmaison. There, for the greater part of the day, they were only interested spectators. Over their heads the shells from the heavy batteries hurtled screaming through the air. All about them rows and rows of field guns and light howitzers were firing furiously, with a deafening, brazen crash of sound.

As the morning passed, reports and rumours came to them of the successful assaults by the 4th and 6th Brigades, but they had little expectation of being themselves called upon to take an immediate part in the battle. Suddenly, at 3.30 in the afternoon, Lieut-Colonel Tremblay received his marching orders. His battalion, in conjunction with the 25th Battalion on his left, was, at six o'clock that same evening, to advance to the assault and capture of the fortified village of Courcelette.

Here indeed was a military problem and a task to test the most highly trained and disciplined troops. In the short space of two hours and a

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half battalion orders had to be issued and explained to all the Officers and NCOs who would participate. Careful preparations had to be made and the battalion would have to reach the point of departure for the assault over very rough ground, more than two miles away.

Yet this was done. All went like clockwork. The training of months and months, the detailed and patient labour of anticipation had prepared for this very contingency.

The battalion finally set in motion, and, moving against time, began its march forward up the valley south of Pozières. Two companies in single file abreast, about 350 yards apart, led the way. 150 yards behind them came another company also in single file, and at a similar distance the fourth and last company in the same formation.

In this manner they mounted the ridge which conceals Martinpuich from view. From the trenches on this ridge the morning attack had been launched. Here they entered the zone of heavy hostile artillery fire. The ground, although dry, was a perfect confusion of shell holes, and



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Lieutenant-Colonel T.L. Tremblay was the commanding officer of the 22nd Battalion during the battle for Courcelette. Leading from the front, he survived a number of close calls and survived the battle, unlike many of his junior officers.

was a continuous and deafening explosion of High Explosive Shells and shrapnel, and even here men fell killed or wounded. The other companies as they, in turn, reached the crest of the ridge, followed suit and extended into open order, the battalion thus moving forward in three successive waves.

Lieut-Col. Tremblay went forward with the first wave and remarking on a tendency to move too much to the right in the direction of Martinpuich, himself ran along the whole line, redirecting the advance. For over a mile the battalion continued in this fashion, under a heavy and continuous shell fire. Men were struck down and killed or blown up and buried. Three times Col. Tremblay himself was partly buried by the earth from shells exploding near him. Major Gringras twice narrowly escaped death, being knocked down, bruised and shocked by near-by explosions.

None the less the line moved steadily forward. At times they doubled through the artillery barrage. Thus they passed over the ground so gallantly won that very morning. Scattered here and there were bodies of men of the 20th and 21st Battalions and bodies of their German foes. At last the "Candy Trench" was reached, manned by men of the 4th Brigade, and the Sugar Factory was passed on the left. There the right of the line was thrown forward until it rested on the Gun Pit Road and the direction altered to a left incline, thus advancing directly from the south against the southern edge of Courcelette.

Stage by stage, in front of the infantry, our artillery barrage was laid down with remarkable precision. But the 22nd no longer studied the time. They swept ahead without a pause, practically within their own shell fire.

Just at the edge of the village they were held up for a few moments until the barrage lifted. Then, with shouts and wild cries they poured into Courcelette in an irresistible flood. On the right, heavy hostile machine gun fire met them and about 50 men fell before the guns could be silenced. Here and there hand to hand struggles took place, snipers had to be dislodged, and deep dugouts full of cowering Germans were bombed. The greater part of the 2,000 Germans who formed the garrison of Courcelette had, however, little stomach for the fight. The men of the 22nd

shattered trenches. At this point, Major Bauset and Captain Chaballe who were in command of the two leading companies respectively, swung their men up on the right in extended order, one man to every three yards. In this way they covered a line of about 900 yards, the right flank guided by the light tramway running into the south-western corner of Martinpuich, and their left directed towards the ruins of the Sugar Factory, which presently came into view. This manoeuvre could not have been more perfectly executed on the peaceful plains of Salisbury or the sandy fields of Valcartier. And yet, all about them there

This air photo of Courcellette was taken in July 1916 after the commencement of the Battle of the Somme, but before the Canadian assault on the village on 15 September 1916. There is a significant amount of artillery damage apparent in this photo, but it is nothing compared to the damage that would be wrought on the village by the subsequent fighting. In particular, the church, visible near the centre of the photo, is virtually undamaged.



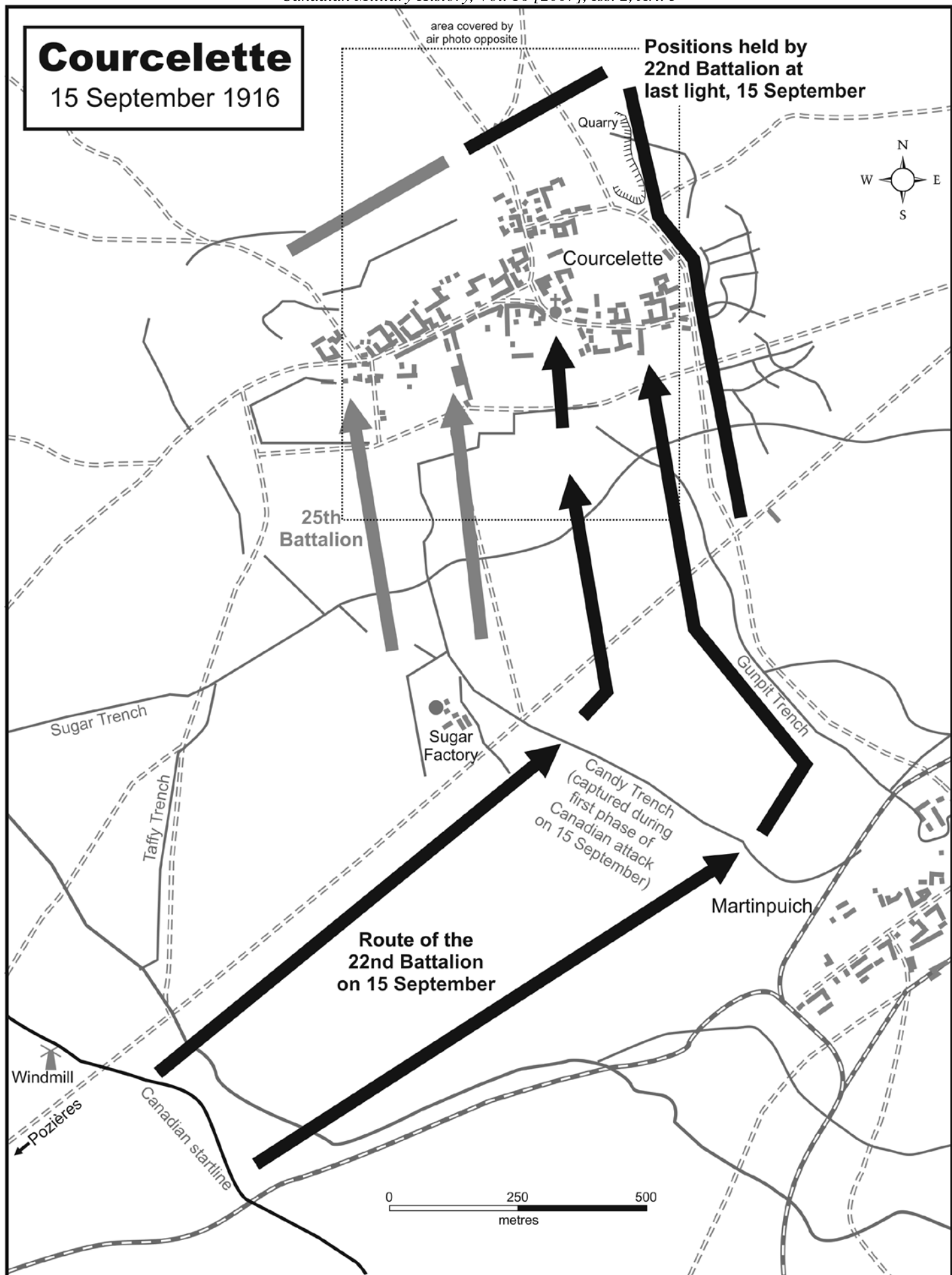
speaking of them with disgust as "les vaches" ["cows"]. In the streets they knelt down imploring mercy with their hands raised. They crept out of dugouts and sought eagerly to surrender. As the 22nd pressed northward through the village with their left flank guided by the main street and their right along the eastern edge of Courcellette they could see the enemy in numbers running away over the crest beyond and throwing off their rifles and equipment as they fled.

It was not the task of the 22nd to take prisoners – that was for the "mopping up" parties who followed them, to do – nevertheless, by the end of

the attack, when the entire village was in their hands and they had reached beyond and established a line to the north and east of the quarry, over 300 prisoners, not including the large numbers of wounded, were found to have been captured. There was also a German 4.1" gun which they could claim, with 1000 rounds of ammunition, several machine guns, and a large quantity of German hand grenades.

The story of the fighting in Courcellette is one largely of individual courage and initiative. Innumerable tales could be told, for there was not a man who did not have his own adventure. Quickly, ferociously, they spread through every ruined house and cellar and dugout; shooting, bayoneting, returning triumphant with some crestfallen prisoner.

Sergeant Mitchell, known in the regiment as a daredevil fighter, secured a number of German bombs and set off on his own. He bombed two



Canadian War Museum 1994001-420 Courcelette, September 15th, 1916.



This air photograph of Courcelette was taken by a reconnaissance aircraft of the Royal Flying Corps on 15 September 1916 and clearly shows the condition of the village during the attack by the 22nd Battalion.

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dugouts crowded with the enemy, but as he was attacking a third, he was himself shot and killed.

One devout soldier brought in a prisoner and said :- "J'aurais pu bien le tuer mais ce n'était pas nécessaire. Le bon curé M'a [sic] dit de ne pas en tuer si ce n'était pas nécessaire." ["I could well have killed him but it was not necessary. The good priest told me not to kill someone if it were not necessary."]

Lieutenant Greffard, who had at one time been the regimental sergeant major, was stunned by a shell near the Sugar Factory as the battalion was advancing to the attack. He lay unconscious for about two hours. When he regained consciousness, he refused to remain at the Dressing Station, but followed the battalion into Courcelette and reported to Colonel Tremblay. Colonel Tremblay put him in charge of a party with which he planned an attack upon a battery position some distance beyond the village.

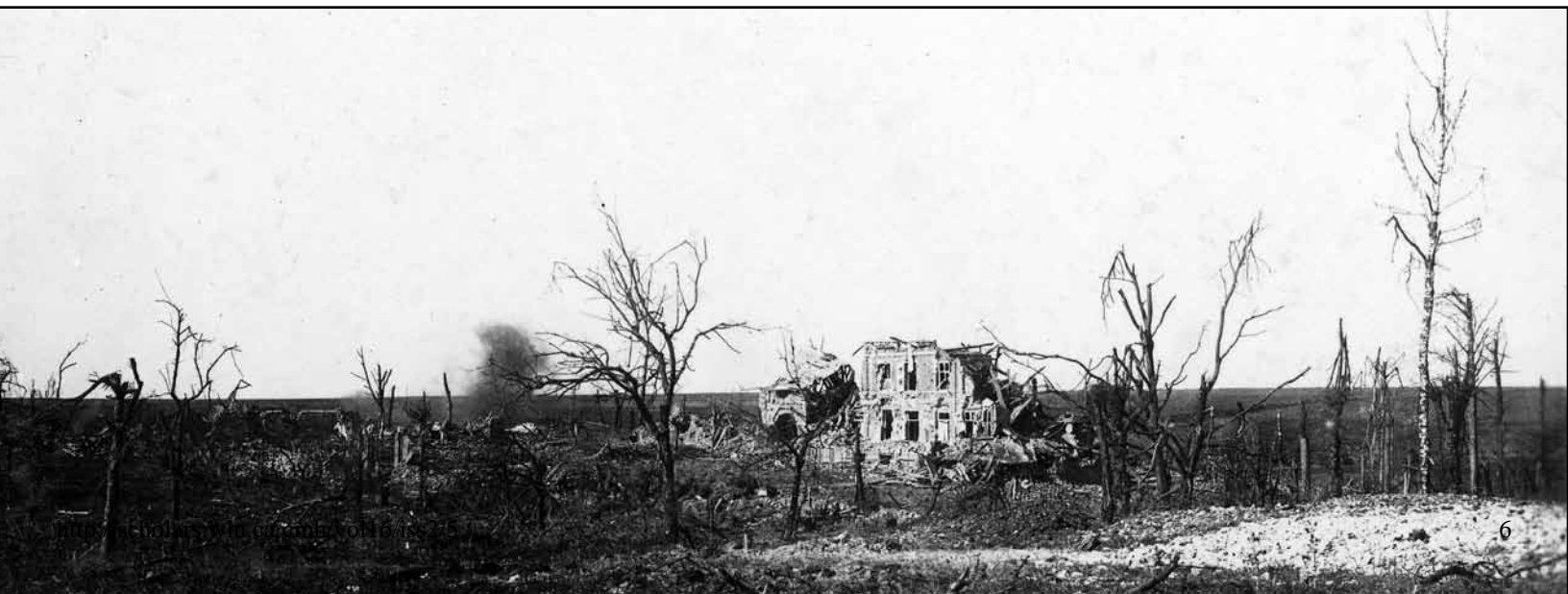
While in the forward trench Lieutenant Greffard was shot through the shoulder. His wound was dressed by the battalion doctor and he then returned to his command. Here he was once more wounded and obliged very reluctantly to leave the fight.

Lieutenant R. Lefèbvre was shot through the chest during the attack. As he lay on the ground, he raised himself up and waved his men forward although the blood was flowing from his mouth. He had behaved with great gallantry and was actually recommended for the DSO, by the Colonel, who had not heard that he had died from his wound.

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Two views of the "Red Chateau," one of the last buildings standing in Courcelette, October 1916.

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Two views of the ruins in Courcelette following the capture of the village. The top photo shows what is left of the Church.

Major M. Bauset [Beauset] had gone forward with his men and established a line along the eastern edge of the village. There for several hours he was tireless in his duties, encouraging his men, assuring them a supply of bombs, ammunition and drinking water and personally active in repelling repeated bombing attacks. Unfortunately in one of the numerous determined counterattacks which the enemy afterwards made, he was shot in the breast and instantly killed.

Major A.E. Dubuc and Lieut. Belzile had not taken part in the attack. They were among those officers who had been ordered to remain behind. During the night, Major Dubuc was sent forward by the Brigade to examine the situation and, if necessary relieve Colonel Tremblay, who, it was reported – erroneously as it afterwards proved – had been wounded. Lieut. Belzile volunteered to accompany him. Together they passed through a furious barrage which the Germans had then placed about Courcelette, and eventually reached





Canadian War Museum EO-0736

Wounded Canadian soldiers are patched up in a trench near Courcelette before being sent back behind the lines for further treatment, 15 September 1916.

the village. All communications with Major Bauset [Beauset] on the right had broken down. Major Dubuc sent six men to try and reach him. Of these, two were killed, three wounded and the other returned to report. Another four men were then sent, all of whom were killed or wounded. Eventually two men succeeded in reaching him. They returned to say that he was holding on with great difficulty and seriously in need of reinforcements. A small party was collected by Major Dubuc and placed under command of Lieut. Belzile, who succeeded in reaching the front line. After Major Bauset [Beauset] was killed, Lieut. Belzile took command and held on grimly until he himself was severely wounded, his leg being shattered and afterwards amputated. One of the men pressed on beyond the others and entered a German trench to the east of Courcelette. There he discovered a machine gun which he shouldered and brought back to his own trench. Not satisfied with this he called out:-

“Y a-t-il quelqu'un avec le 'pluck' de venir avec moi? Il y a une autre bien plus beau par là.” [“Is

there somebody with the 'pluck' to come with me? There is another more beautiful gun there.”] and, without waiting for a reply, back he went to fetch the other, but this time he was shot and killed.

Captain [D]ansereau was badly wounded in the leg but refused to leave his men. He lay in the trench loading spare rifles and passing them on to the men who were firing.

Sergeant Contant, when all the officers in his company had been killed, took command and carried on with great skill and devotion until he himself was killed. There were numerous cases of this kind, NCOs and even men assuming command of detached posts and acting with distinguished courage.

Of the 22 gallant officers who went into the action, 6 were killed and 11 wounded – so that only 5 came through unscathed. Of the wounded, two remained at duty during the three days and nights which followed – days of constant shelling and frequent counter attacks.

Altogether while they held the line, the 22nd repelled 13 determined attacks, each time inflicting heavy losses upon the enemy.

It is impossible to mention the gallantry of all for each man did his duty, but the actions of Captain Chaballe, of Lieutenant B. Languedoc who was wounded, of Major Renaud and Lieut. Lavoie who were killed by the same shell, of Lieuts. Dupuy and Le Compte [Lecompte] and of Lieut. Binet who was also killed and of Captain Fontaine and Lieut. Baillargeé were particularly remarkable.

Reinforcements were received from the 24th and 26th Battalions and Colonel Tremblay has expressed his admiration for the manner in which he was assisted by such men as Captain "Herby" Kingston of the 24th, afterwards wounded for the 2nd time, and Captain Ritchie of the same regiment. Also Major McKenzie and Lieut. Ward of the 26th Battalion.

Lieut. Bagnall, the artillery liaison officer, was magnificent throughout and rendered the most valuable service. Captain Fair of the 5th Brigade Trench Mortar Battery was killed while operating his Stokes Guns. He had assisted very materially in the successful defence of the position.

But there is no one who is more deserving of praise than Lieut-Col. Tremblay himself. His men have unbounded admiration for him and speak of him with an enthusiastic affection. He was in the forefront of the battle, constantly exposed to shell fire and the enemy's snipers. He personally placed forward posts and frequently visited the whole of the line, encouraging his men and directing the defence. He established his headquarters in the very heart of Courcelette itself, and during the three days and two nights when the battalion continued hold the village, he was tireless in his efforts; never even paused to sleep and was the soul and spirit of the defence.

"The Road to Death" – The sunken road beyond Courcelette.



Canadian War Museum EO-0836



Canadian War Museum EO-0815

A Canadian staff officer (centre, with pencil and paper) gathers intelligence from German soldiers captured during the fighting for Courcellette, 15 September 1915.

Among the prisoners captured there were two colonels, one a regimental commander and one a battalion commander. The regimental commander was a German baron – a large man of most dignified and arrogant appearance. He frowned down upon little Colonel Tremblay and, with a fine show of indifference, pulled out a silver cigarette case, and made to smoke a gold tipped cigarette.

“It wouldn’t have been so bad,” said Colonel Tremblay, “if he had offered me one, but he didn’t.”

He was put with about 250 of his men, under a guard of 4 of the sturdy French-Canadians who were to march them back to the Corps Cage. In order to protect them from their own artillery, Colonel Tremblay gave one of their NCOs a Red Cross flag from the German Dressing Station and he told him wave it. This he did with a right good will, running up and down the line waving the flag frantically. However, the German gunners paid no attention to it and began to shell the party very heavily. Several of the prisoners were killed or wounded. In the confusion the big baron thought he saw an opportunity. He called out an order

to the men who then began to scatter, and he himself attempted to escape. This was a glorious opportunity for the little guards. Dropping on one knee, they began shooting. Several of the prisoners were dropped, several others were bayoneted and the remainder came very meekly back into line. As for the baron – Pte. Shagoury, a battalion runner, shot him through the leg and led him limping and groaning back to the Colonel.

Thereupon Colonel Tremblay looked upon him with a stern eye.

“Tell him,” he said to a German interpreter, “that he must be shot, ‘dos au mur.’” [back to the wall.]

Thereupon the proud baron fell to trembling, lost all his fine assurance, protested that he was only attempting to escape the artillery fire, and humbly begged to be spared.

Satisfied with his triumph, Colonel Tremblay gave him a warning and sent him away a very different man in appearance to the proud captive of a few moments before.