

Dan E. MacQuarrie Middle River

In

Cape Breton's Magazine

*(When did you first go to the military?)* 1907, I suppose. The militia. *(Why?)* Well, crazy to go to camp. Aldershot. Used to go up to Nova Scotia—Kentville, you know—camp out for two weeks—it was great. There was a company from Middle River—well, the companies were small, probably fifty men and officers. There was another company in Big Baddeck, Baddeck, Margaree, Inverness, and Iona. *(All separate companies in the militia?)* Yes. And they'd have the camp every year, around September. People would be through with their hay then. I went about six or seven years to that camp.

We'd drill at camp. Rifles. Uniforms. We had the red coats, same as the Mounties. We had tents. Go from here on the boat, the *Blue Hill*—and we'd get the train in Iona. Then we'd go to Truro and they'd shift up through the Valley. It was quite a trip for us young fellows. And everybody was crazy to go. They didn't have to coax them. Stay for two weeks. Drilling. Learn how to shoot. They had the old Ross rifles then. And when the war came, we took those Ross rifles overseas with us.

*(Was it more patriotic or fun?)* It was just fun. It got me in trouble, though. Well, I was called in in 1914. I was working in the lumber woods. And I got this letter, to report next day in Baddeck. And we didn't know where we were going or anything else. We knew the war was coming. And I did report—1914, August. And they sent us down to Marconi Towers—the wireless there—in Glace Bay. We were guards.

They had about fifty masts there then, and they had—oh, it was foolish, when you come to think of it—had men hoisted up in them, up in the tower in a kind of a basket, watching, see if the enemy'd be coming. They kept men there all through the war. Then there was a cable in Sydney Mines—had some men there. Had a cable in North Sydney. There was a cable up in Canso—had a company there. Those cables were going overseas. Vital to the country, you know, when the war was on. Whether they would be destroyed or not, I don't know.

We'd drill. And then we were on guard duty at night, so many, *(What did they tell you you were watching for?)* Oh well, there were a lot of Germans and Austrians working in the mines here. They might come up there and blow it up. But there was no sabotage in Cape Breton in the First War.

I was away five years. Went a few months to the Marconi Towers there. Then I enlisted. We drilled a little while in Sydney, at Victoria Park. And then we went to Halifax and we were there for the winter—winter of '15. And the summer of '16 they sent us to Kentville. Then we went overseas from Halifax on the old *Olympic*. She was a big one—there were seven decks on her. Went from Halifax to Liverpool. We were on the ocean about five days, made it in five days. They had them stacked, boy, and it was wonderful the way they had it arranged. Every seventh man was appointed to feed, to draw the grub for six other men. There was no confusion. There were so many appointed every day. And we slept in hammocks. On deck. There were 7,000 numbered, 7,000 men on that ship.

*(What did you think you were going to?)* We were going to our deaths, that's where we were going. Sixty thousand Canadians stayed over there, in the First War.

A bloody slaughter, that's what it was. And a lot of it was—they never should have sent them in to Passchendaele, because it wasn't fit for human beings. Just a mudhole. There were places there you could fall off the track and be up to there. I saw fellows in to their hips, and it'd take three or four men to haul them out of it. It's hard to believe that, but it's true.

You saw death, mostly. Barbed wire. And mud. And probably fellows lying there, dead. I saw them when we'd be coming out, when we were in Passchendaele—and you'd see the stretcher-bearers coming out with the wounded fellows—and the wounded fellows were dead and the stretcher-bearers were dead, lying in the mud. We

couldn't touch them. Somebody else would go in and do it. Well, I can tell you right now, it was just the same as if it was a pure hell, that's what it was. I don't know how anybody ever came out of there alive. We had over 700 casualties there, in seven days. There were only about, probably a hundred, could answer roll call when we came out—killed, wounded, and missing. Of course, a lot of them were taken off to the hospital and we never saw them any more.

Oh my, we lost near all our officers there. I think there were only four officers left in the battalion. They weren't all killed, but wounded, and a lot of them were killed. Our colonel was killed there. Our second in command was killed there. And I don't know how many lieutenants—I just forget now. (*And common soldiers?*) Yes, lord. I'll tell you how bad it was—they pulled us out, about probably twenty miles from Ypres. And we had to stay there for a whole month till we got reinforcements. There was nothing left. When I came out of there, the blood was running out of my feet. Blood, you know, and you couldn't have time to change your socks. She was rough.

(*What would they do with someone who died there?*) I'll tell you what they did with them—they were rolled up in a blanket and buried, with their shoes on. Be all they got. (*Cemetery?*) Oh yes, they had nice cemeteries—still there, and still looked after. Just two men that I saw put in a box. Two officers—the boys thought so much of them that they went to an old house and ripped the ceiling out and made a rough casket for them. No, no Canadians came home. The Americans sent their dead home.

The first thing the Germans knew, the front line all blew up. And they were coming out with their hands up, hundreds of them. They knew the jig was up. Just tell them, "Here, there's the road, and you follow it down there." There might be one or two fellows following them with rifles. No trouble at all with them. I suppose a lot of them were glad to get out, and get something to eat.

When the war ended we were in a place called Bethune. A little town. There's where we were when we got the word that she was gone, ended. (*Were you fighting the day before?*) Yeah, and there were eleven of our boys killed that day. And that was the sad part of it. One day, and they'd be safe.

(*How were you told?*) The officers got the message. They signed in an old railway car. You might have heard that. It came over the wire; they had telephones, you know. Told us the war was over. And of course, the Germans were pulling out, for home. We started following them. Followed them right into Germany, across the Rhine Bridge. Oh Jesus, their horses were dying everywhere.

When we were on the way to Germany, they were trying to pull some of their guns back, and you could see where the horses would give up, dead alongside the road. The guns were still there. And I saw a couple times there was a big piece cut out of the rump of the horse—they must have been getting hungry. I guess we took about two weeks following them. Till we got to Germany. And they didn't keep us there, though. None of us were allowed into Berlin. It was out of bounds.

(*What did you do to celebrate?*) Came back, and this is where we found the wine cellar—in a castle in Belgium. And we stayed there over six months. (*Drinking?*) Yes, there was quite a bit of drinking. I know, myself and another fellow from Glace Bay, we were pals. He died last fall. And I went to bed—you just think of the luxury of getting into clean sheets, a good mattress, after sleeping on the ground. We were put there, you see, there was room for so many men there; I forget how many. It was a big castle. But every man had a bed.

My friend came up and he shook me by the shoulder. He said, "Get up!" He was drunk, you know. "What the hell is going on?" I said. He said, "We found a wine cellar."

Well of course, I got up too, and went down; and we started helping ourselves to the wine. It was in shelves there, in the basement. It was fellows from Glace Bay found it, too. Started exploring, you know, and they saw this door, and wondered what was behind the door. Well, the door didn't last long with those fellows, it was broken in. Here was this big wine cellar, and quite a bit of brandy there, too. They called it cognac over there. Well, we started lugging it out—we got feed bags—and hiding it—we were putting it into the hedges. And the room I was in, there was

a flue going through it. There was no fire in it, of course. We started shoving it up the flue as far as we could reach. We had it there for months. They never bothered us.

Oh, they found out, all right; a lot of them were drunk the next day. The colonel raised hell, said, "You fellows will have to pay for that" And they boarded the door up. They put a guard on the door. Had a guard on it day and night. And this fellow was on, I guess, in the evening. A person waited for him to leave for a little while, the devils, and they broke in again. And I guess they practically cleaned her the second time.

Well, anyway, Col. Ralston said, "We'll have to pay for it." But he went to see the fellow that owned it, or got into communication with him, and he said, "No. Give it to the boys. Only for them, I wouldn't have a castle left." He was a rich Belgian. I don't know what business he was in, but he must have been damn rich, because it was beautiful. There were glass doors and everything in that place.

*(When did you come back to Canada then?)* We landed back, I think, the 13th of June, 1919. We landed in Quebec, the bunch I came with. We came up on the *Empress of Berlin* to Quebec, and we came down to Halifax by special train. We got our discharges there. We were only in Quebec one day. We had a parade through the town—you know the hilly city it is, cliffs up and the houses on top. And of course, we paraded to the train. And a special train came down to Halifax.

*(How were you greeted in Halifax?)* Well, I'd say it was rotten. We couldn't get a drink there—Prohibition was on, you see. The only way you could get a drink there was to go to the vendor. Had all the saloons closed down. Some of the fellows said, "To hell with it—let's go back to Britain!" Well, I went to a house, a fellow I knew, he was a MacDonald. And we used to visit him—he was a Cape Bretoner—and I told him my story, that I couldn't get a bottle of beer. He said, "I'll get you a beer. I'll get you a whiskey, too," he said.

*(Didn't Halifax get out and greet you?)* Oh yes, they did, they met us at the boat, a lot of them, and a pipe band marched us up. *(How'd you get home to Middle River?)* Came down by train. And when I got into Baddeck, do you know how many cars were in Baddeck? Landed at Iona and got over on the boat. The *Blue Hill* was running then, twice a day; it met every train. And there were just two cars in Baddeck, and I came home in one of them. And I went to work in a few days, haymaking.