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“UNE PERMISSION!...C’EST BON POUR UNE RECRUE.”

DISCIPLINE AND ILLEGAL ABSENCES IN THE
22ND (FRENCH-CANADIAN) BATTALION, 1915-1919

by

Maxime Dagenais

Thesis submitted to
the School of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
M.A. degree in History.

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ABSTRACT

“UNE PERMISSION!...C’EST BON POUR UNE RECRUE.”

DISCIPLINE AND ILLEGAL ABSENCES
IN THE 22ND (FRENCH-CANADIAN) BATTALION, 1915-1919

Maxime Dagenais
University of Ottawa, 2006

Supervisor:
Professor Serge Durlinger

This thesis explores three issues relating to the Canadian experience during the First World War, but more specifically, to that of the 22nd (French-Canadian) Battalion (commonly referred to as the ‘Van Doos’). It first considers the assumption that the 22nd Battalion suffered from a disciplinary problem, and determines whether this was the case in a meaningful comparative context. Several Canadian historians have examined the unit’s discipline. While some have argued that its thousands of infractions and five executions demonstrate that it suffered from a disciplinary problem, others believe that without proper comparison with other units of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), these figures are meaningless. By examining the disciplinary records of the other three battalions of the 5th Brigade (the brigade of which the ‘Van Doos’ were a part) and comparing them to that of the 22nd Battalion, this thesis conclusively demonstrates that the unit did suffer from a disciplinary problem, and confirms the assumptions of several historians. This thesis also examines in detail the unit’s disciplinary problems, and attempts to explain why it suffered from such aberrant behaviour. Evidence suggests that poor morale was the likely cause. One of the most important elements in combat, morale can spell the difference between a disciplined and a disobedient unit. This thesis demonstrates that

the arrival of hundreds of untried reinforcements after the Somme offensives of 1916, and the loss of the unit's commanding officer (Lieut.-Col. Thomas Tremblay) had a significant impact on the spirits of the men, which subsequently led to poor discipline. Finally, this thesis considers the issue of illegal absences. Not only were illegal absences the most common infractions in the 'Van Doos', they were also for the entire 5th Brigade. For so considerable a problem amongst the soldiers of the CEF, the subject surprisingly has yet to receive the full attention of Canadian historians. This thesis thus attempts to find factors that could explain why soldiers would risk courts-martial, and perhaps their lives, by leaving their units without permission. Several factors were discovered such as battle exhaustion, poor conduct, and neuropsychological issues.

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INTRODUCTION

When Great Britain declared war on Germany on August 4, 1914, Canada, a British colony, automatically entered an armed conflict of a magnitude the world had never before seen. Although there were some voices of concern, many Canadians and Europeans celebrated this momentous event. In August 1914, German historian Friedrich Meinecke noted that this was “one of the great moments of my life which suddenly filled my soul with ... the profoundest joy.”¹ Such enthusiasm was shared by the British population. Philosopher Bertrand Russell noted his “amazement that average men and women were delighted at the prospect of war...The anticipation of carnage was delightful” to the majority of the population.² The majority of Canadians also seemed united in their desire to assist Britain rid the world of Prussian militarism. The Montreal-based newspaper, *La Patrie*, noted “there are no longer French Canadians and English Canadians...Only one race now exists, united...in a common cause.”³ At the Associated Canadian Club, Talbot Papineau, descendant of the *Patriote* leader, Louis-Joseph Papineau, declared to a cheering crowd “that there would be as many French Canadians as English Canadians to take up arms in the defence of the Empire in this crisis.”⁴ In the midst of this passion and fervour, the Canadian government authorized the recruitment of 25,000 volunteers for the first contingent of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) that would serve in Europe.

¹ Cited in H. W. Koch, *The Origins of the First World War: Great Power Rivalry and German War Aims* (New York, Taplinger, 1972), p. 318.

² Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1914-44*. (Boston: Little Brown, 1956), pp. 2 & 4-6.

³ Cited in Serge Durflinger, “Les Pirs Canayens’ French Canada and Recruitment during the First World War,” *Dispatches* (Canadian War Museum, Ottawa), no. 1 (November 1998): 1.

⁴ Cited in Desmond Morton and J.L. Granatstein, *Marching to Armageddon: Canadians and the Great War 1914-1919* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys Limited, 1989), p. 6.

Once in Europe, the units of the CEF served under the command of the British Army, which meant that they had to conform to the strict rules and regulations of the British War Office. Although some soldiers adapted well to British military discipline, others did not, and were constantly fined, punished, and brought before courts-martial.

This thesis will consider three issues relating to the Canadian experience at the front, but more specifically, to that of the 22nd (French-Canadian) Battalion (commonly referred to as the 'Van Doos'). In the first place, it will examine the overall behaviour of the soldiers of the CEF with the purpose of providing a better understanding of the disciplinary record of the French-Canadian battalion. Discipline can be defined as the obedience of a soldier before the rules and regulations imposed by the military. When soldiers contravene regulations more frequently, it signals the indiscipline of a unit. Several Canadian historians have commented on and examined the discipline of the 22nd Battalion. As will be shown below, while some have argued that the unit's thousands of infractions and five executions illustrate that it suffered from a disciplinary problem, others have expressed that a lack of comparison with other units of the CEF render these figures, and this assumption, unfounded. The first part of this thesis will therefore examine the discipline of the 22nd Battalion in a meaningful comparative context. Through a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the discipline of the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade (22nd, 24th, 25th, and 26th Battalions), it will demonstrate that the 22nd Battalion did suffer from a disciplinary problem throughout the First World War.

The second part of this thesis will consider the 22nd Battalion's disciplinary record and propose that poor morale led to its breakdown. Military morale is always a very difficult topic to explain as it has been subjected to various interpretations. It will be defined, however, as the willingness to fight and the general character and cheerfulness of a military unit. Several historians and specialists have further argued that there is a link between poor morale and poor discipline, and, as will be demonstrated, one of the most significant consequences of poor morale is the aberrant behaviour of soldiers. Evidence suggests that from October 1916 to the summer of 1917, the unit suffered from poor morale. This was one of the most intense combat periods in the battalion's history and its roster went through several major upheavals and changes. This thesis will thus determine which events had a damaging impact on the men's spirits and subsequently led to the unit's disciplinary problem.

Finally, the issue of illegal absences (defined as absence without leave and desertion) will be considered. Illegal absences were simply two of the many infractions punished by the British War Office during the First World War. Although both involve the act of leaving one's unit without authorization, to be punished for the more serious crime of desertion, *intent* of never returning to his unit had to be proven at the offender's court-martial. Throughout the war, the most common infractions in the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade were illegal absences, which accounted for more than half of the brigade's infractions. Yet, despite this constituting a considerable infraction amongst the soldiers of the CEF, no Canadian historian has attempted to explain its cause. This thesis will consider the issue and offer explanations as to why soldiers would risk punishments, courts-martial, perhaps

their lives, to leave their units. Such an examination will thus demonstrate that illegal absences were sometimes more complex than the simple acts of disobedient soldiers.

This examination will cover the period from September 15, 1915 to April 1919. The former date is when the battalions of the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade first arrived in France. Despite the fact that the war ended on November 11, 1918, repatriation took several months. While these men waited to be sent home, their conduct was still regulated by British military law and individuals could still be sent before a court-martial. These post-war courts-martial will also be considered.

The topic of Canadian military discipline and illegal absences during the First World War has received very little attention from Canadian historians. In fact, studies on both subjects are almost exclusively limited to the efforts of the following historians: Desmond Morton, Jean-Pierre Gagnon, Andrew Godefroy, Chris Madsen, and more recently Patrick Bouvier, Teresa Iacobelli, and David Campbell.

In a 1972 article entitled “The Supreme Penalty”, Desmond Morton was the first historian to examine the case of the 25 Canadian soldiers who were executed during the First World War. He was also the first to suggest the especially poor discipline of the ‘Van Doos’ as he argued that the men of the battalion were “conspicuously over-represented” amongst the executed. He noted that of the 25 executions, five were from the 22nd Battalion, which was a greater number than from any other unit.⁵ Morton refrained from delving deeper into the issue to explain this imbalance.

⁵ Desmond Morton, “The Supreme Penalty: Canadian Deaths by Firing Squads in the First World War,” *Queen's Quarterly*, no. 79:3 (1972): 347.

In 1986, Jean-Pierre Gagnon offered the most detailed, and only, analysis of the discipline of a Canadian military unit. In *Le 22e bataillon (canadien-français), 1914-1919*, Gagnon presented a socio-military history of the unit and added to the issue of the battalion's discipline that Morton initially considered. Gagnon agrees that the 'Van Doos' suffered from a disciplinary problem during the First World War. He noted that "l'hypothèse relative aux problèmes disciplinaires (du 22ieme) est facile à vérifier."⁶ He argued that the written evidence provided by the commander of the battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Tremblay) confirms his claims. Tremblay constantly complained about the unit's aberrant behaviour. Gagnon also examined all of the unit's minor and court-martial infractions between October 1915 and November 1918. His statistics seemed to support Tremblay's impressions of the battalion and led him to conclude that the men of the unit were disobedient.⁷ Gagnon attributes the 22nd Battalion's poor discipline to the heavy casualties it suffered at the Somme offensives of September 1916, and the subsequent arrival of unknown reinforcements that altered the dynamic of the unit. Gagnon also considered the impact of the exceptional leadership of Lieut.-Col. Thomas Tremblay. However, he limits himself to an examination of the imprint he left on the battalion's history rather than demonstrating how his leadership influenced the behaviour of his men. Although Gagnon is convinced that the unit did suffer from a disciplinary problem, he nonetheless felt that much more research needed to be done:

Pour l'évaluer à sa juste valeur...il faudrait aussi disposer de moyens de comparaison. Or, il n'existe, comme on le sait, aucune statistique, ni étude de

⁶ Jean-Pierre Gagnon, *Le 22e bataillon (canadien-français), 1914-1919: étude socio-militaire*. (Ottawa: Les Presses de l'Université Laval et le Ministère de la Défense nationale, 1986), p. 280.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 291. Gagnon's statistics will be discussed in the second chapter.

cette nature relatives à une autre unité de CEC ou même, à notre connaissance, d'une autre force armée qui a combattu durant la Première Guerre mondiale.⁸

More than a quarter of a century after Morton's article, the case of the 25 executed soldiers received greater attention from two historians: Andrew B. Godefroy and Teresa Iacobelli. In *For Freedom and Honour?*, Godefroy provided a case-by-case examination of the executed soldiers themselves and attempted to explain why each was put to death. Godefroy also considered the discipline of the 22nd Battalion. However, unlike Morton and Gagnon, Godefroy questioned the hypothesis that the unit suffered from a behavioural problem and concluded that "due to a lack of any detailed research on the issue, one cannot properly argue as to whether the number of disciplinary infractions in the 22nd Battalion was high or low when compared to other units in the CEF."⁹ Godefroy did not provide this comparison. In 2004, Teresa Iacobelli's M.A. thesis, "Arbitrary Justice?", added to Godefroy's work, and sought to find factors that could explain why some death sentences were carried out while 222 others were commuted. Unlike Godefroy, however, Iacobelli believes that the 'Van Doos' suffered from disciplinary problems as she argued that the battalion's overall poor behaviour was an important factor in its numerous executions.¹⁰ She also referred to the unit as the "infamously poorly disciplined 22nd Battalion."¹¹

In 1999, Chris Madsen's *Another Kind of Justice* examined over a hundred years of military law in the Canadian forces. On the topic of the First World War, Madsen

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

⁹ Andrew B. Godefroy, *For Freedom and Honour?: The Story of the 25 Canadian Volunteers Executed in the First World War* (Nepean, On: CEF Books, 1998), p. 44.

¹⁰ Teresa Iacobelli, "Arbitrary Justice?: A Comparative Analysis of Canadian Death Sentences Passed and Death Sentences Commuted during the First World War." M.A. Thesis. Wilfrid Laurier University, 2004, p. 58.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

noted that Canada preferred to adhere to the strict rules and regulations of British military law, as opposed to Australia, which opted to maintain control over its own disciplinary system.¹² His study briefly considered several issues such as court-martial procedures, the execution of the 25 Canadians, and shell shock. He noted, for instance, that although some historians have suggested that executed soldiers were simply “bad apples,” most were the victims of the stress of combat.¹³ He also noted how authorities poorly understood “shell shock” as it was treated as a disciplinary problem rather than a medical one.¹⁴ Unfortunately, Madsen refrained from exploring how the soldiers of the CEF fared before the strict regulations of British military law, which could have proven extremely useful in understanding the discipline of the ‘Van Doos’.

Patrick Bouvier’s study entitled *Déserteurs et insoumis. Les Canadiens français et la justice militaire* considered both the issues of the discipline of the 22nd Battalion and the problem of illegal absences during the First World War. His analysis does not limit itself to an examination of the ‘Van Doos’, but to all French-Canadian soldiers of the CEF. “[P]ar une étude quantitative,” the goal of his study was to “dresser le portrait social du déserteur canadien-français, afin de comprendre qui était cet homme qui décidait de désertier.”¹⁵ Although his study was the first to address desertion, it gathered statistics solely on the deserters themselves and did not offer any analysis on the possible causes of their actions. For example, by referring to court-martial

¹² Chris Madsen, *Another Kind of Justice : Canadian Military Law from Confederation to Somalia* (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 1999), p. 47.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Patrick Bouvier, *Déserteurs et insoumis. Les Canadiens français et la justice militaire* (Outremont, Qc: Athéna Editions, 2003), p. 12.

proceedings and military personnel files, he noted that 40% of French-Canadian deserters came from the city of Montreal, 75% were not married, and 68% were between the ages of 18 and 23.¹⁶ Bouvier also considered the behaviour of French-Canadian soldiers and, like Godefroy, he questioned the validity of the battalion's infamous reputation. He argued that without a comparative base, it was impossible to conclude that the number of infractions committed by French-Canadians was truly representative of their discipline. Bouvier did not provide this comparative material.

Finally, in "The Divisional Experience in the C.E.F.," a 2004 doctoral dissertation, David Campbell produced a detailed operational and social history of the 2nd Canadian Division. More importantly, his dissertation finally provided the first comparison between the discipline of the 'Van Doos' and that of other units of the CEF. By comparing the minor and courts-martial infractions of the battalions of the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade (27th, 28th, 29th, and 31st Battalions) and the 19th Battalion with that of the 'Van Doos', he concluded that the French-Canadian battalion was ill-disciplined.¹⁷ However, Campbell did not consider the discipline of the battalions that shared the most similar experience with the 'Van Doos': those of the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade. Not doing so could have led to a biased comparison. Battalions that did not participate in the same operations, which consequently might have resulted in fewer or greater total casualties and reinforcements, would not provide a just comparison as discipline could have been less or more of a problem, assuming the link between losses, morale, and discipline. In fact, Campbell's figures are, in several

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 90-1.

¹⁷ David Charles Gregory Campbell, "The Division Experience in the C.E.F.: A Social and Operational History of the 2nd Canadian Division, 1915-1918." PhD Dissertation. University of Calgary, 2004, p. 471.

instances, significantly higher in one battalion than another. He explained that this was due to the fact that “some battalions were more heavily engaged in certain operations than other battalions...”¹⁸ Unfortunately, explaining why the ‘Van Doos’ suffered from disciplinary problems has received little attention as Campbell maintained Gagnon’s theories.

Although the overall aim of this thesis is to provide a better understanding of the behaviour of the ‘Van Doos’, it will reassess two assumptions concerning the unit. First, it will consider the battalion’s discipline and reinforce the assumption that it suffered from a disciplinary problem through a comparison of the three units that shared the most similar wartime experience as the ‘Van Doos’. This thesis will also offer a different perspective to the disciplinary problems of the unit. Although Jean-Pierre Gagnon has already argued that heavy casualties at the Somme in September 1916, and the arrival of reinforcements afterwards, led to a disciplinary breakdown, this thesis will demonstrate that poor morale was perhaps a more likely cause. This will enhance understanding of the complexities of troop morale and help explain the 22nd Battalion’s behaviour, discipline, and ultimately, its combat record.

The main obstacle encountered when working on this thesis was the lack of available resources. In fact, these were limited, for the most part, to court-martial proceedings, personnel files, a few personal accounts, and Part II daily orders. Nonetheless, these proved an essential source of information. The Part II daily orders offer much information on the daily adjustments that were made to the roster of each battalion. These provide information on the casualties suffered, the various

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

decorations and promotions awarded, and the punishments inflicted on soldiers who contravened regulations. They provide statistics on the number of minor infractions that were punished by each unit throughout the war. Although commanding officers could bring their men before courts-martial, not all were willing to broadcast the internal problems of their units. Many preferred a more private forum and punished their men themselves. These disciplinary measures were noted in the daily orders and provide a good illustration of the overall behaviour of each unit.

Court-martial proceedings contain an array of valuable information such as the infraction and sentence of the accused, his defence, eye-witness accounts, letters from commanding officers, and in some cases, the defendant's disciplinary history from the moment of his arrival overseas. Such material provided the opportunity to gather statistics on the variety and frequency of infractions that were brought before courts-martial between September 15, 1915 and April 1919. These proceedings include the extremely valuable testimonies of commanding officers. Each time a soldier was given a death sentence, his superior officers sent a barrage of letters to either condemn or applaud the decision. These provide insight into the overall disciplinary state of each battalion. Finally, court-martial proceedings will also be extremely useful in examining the cause of illegal absences. In cases where there was a "not guilty" plea, the court-martial jury was presented with the absentee's defence and various witness testimonies, which proved enlightening. For example, soldiers often broke down during their trials complaining that they could no longer handle the realities of war and were too afraid to go back into the trenches. In many cases, soldiers also confided similar feelings to their superior officers who, subsequently,

presented this information to the court-martial jury. Both statements are essential as they present valuable insight about the absentee's character and state of mind, and may provide hints as to why he left his unit.

Military personnel files are another significant source of information. Each file contains material such as medical and disciplinary records that are essential in examining illegal absences. By examining the conduct and health of the absentee, along with the timing of the infraction, such information will help determine what might have led him to be away without leave. But, such sources have their limits. Military personnel files and court-martial proceedings cannot fully prove that battle exhaustion or fear, for example, were the actual reasons a soldier left his unit; only a firsthand account from an honest soldier himself can do so. However, logical inference and the best available evidence have generally proven sufficient to support the views which follow. Furthermore, such sources cannot explain the actions of every soldier who deserted as many might have acted on impulse without any obvious reasons to leave. This thesis will nevertheless illustrate the most common factors explaining this infraction.

Finally, this thesis will consider several personal accounts and studies on military psychology. In order to fully understand and grasp the consequences of war on the morale and psyches of soldiers, several studies on military psychology, which were conducted by psychologists and medical officers, were considered.¹⁹ This thesis also

¹⁹ These studies are: John Baynes, *Morale: A Study of Men and Courage. The Second Scottish Rifles at the Battle of Neuve Chapelle* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967); Peter G. Bourne, *The Psychology and Physiology of Stress: With Reference to Special Studies of the Viet Nam War* (London and New York: Academic Press, 1969); Tim Brown, "Shell Shock in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918: Canadian Psychiatry in the Great War," in *Health, Disease and Medicine: Essays in Canadian History*, ed. Charles G. Roland (McMaster University: Conference on the History of Medicine, June 3-5, 1982); Terry Copp and Bill McAndrew, *Battle Exhaustion: Soldiers and*

considers the available accounts of veterans of the 22nd Battalion; these include diaries, correspondence, and interviews.²⁰ These provide valuable insight into the behaviour and the morale of the unit. These personal accounts do, however, have their shortcomings. Most only rarely discuss the negative aspects of the unit's history. For example, Joseph Chaballe's *Histoire du 22ième Bataillon canadien-français* simply provides a day-to-day account of the unit's military prowess and failed to consider, for example, the unit's countless infractions and several executions. While it might be argued that these accounts represent the opinions of those writing them, many of the opinions expressed support one another. It must also be emphasized that these were not the opinions of disobedient soldiers who sought to find any excuse to justify their own shortcomings. These were the opinions of extraordinary soldiers and officers. For example, Arthur Lapointe was nominated for the Distinguished Conduct Medal and was promoted to the rank of lieutenant in 1918. Although Claudius Corneloup was brought before a court-martial for questionable comments he made in a letter, he was promoted to the rank of sergeant-major and became the recipient of various honours and decorations. Finally, Thomas-Louis Tremblay was the commanding officer of the unit, the recipient of numerous awards, and as will be

Psychiatrists in the Canadian Army, 1939-1945 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990); Lt. Col. Roy R. Grinker, M.C. and Major John P. Speigel, M.C., *Men Under Stress* (Philadelphia: Blakiston, 1945); John G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-18* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); P. Juliet and P. Moutin, *Psychiatrie militaire* (Paris: Masson & Cie., Éd., 1969); Lord Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage* (London: N.A., 1945); and Ben Shalit, *The Psychology of Conflict and Combat* (New York and London: Praeger, 1988).

²⁰ Claudius Corneloup, *La Coccinelle du 22e* (Montreal : Éditions Beauchemin, 1934); Claudius Corneloup, *L'épopée du vingt-deuxième Canadien-français* (Montreal: La Presse, 1919); Col. Joseph Chaballe, *Histoire du 22^e bataillon canadien-français, 1914-1919* (Montreal : Les Éditions Chanteclerc Ltée., 1952); Arthur Lapointe, *Souvenirs et impressions de ma vie de soldat, 1916-1919* (St-Ulric, Qc: Le Devoir, 1919); Archives of the Royal 22^e Régiment Museum, Personal Diary of Lieut.-Col. Thomas Tremblay; and Georges P. Vanier, *Soldier: The Wartime Letters and Diaries, 1915-1919*, ed. Deborah Cowley (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2000).

further demonstrated, was admired and respected by his men and superior officers alike. Furthermore, his opinions must be considered extremely significant as he paid close attention to his men and kept informed of their various concerns at the front.

This thesis will be divided into four chapters. The first chapter will discuss the experiences of the soldiers of the 5th Brigade throughout the war, especially those of the 'Van Doos'. This will not only provide background information, but it will also illustrate why the battalions of the 5th Brigade were chosen for the comparison. The second chapter will briefly consider British military law, and examine how the 5th Brigade fared before its strict rules and regulations. This chapter will also tackle the 22nd Battalion's infamous reputation, and demonstrate that the unit did, in fact, suffer from a disciplinary problem. The third chapter will consider the 22nd Battalion's poor reputation and explain it through an examination of its morale and the factors that could have led to its deterioration. Finally, the fourth chapter will explore the issue of illegal absences, the brigade's most common breach of conduct, and explain why its soldiers risked courts-martial, imprisonments, and even executions, to leave their units.

CHAPTER 1

THROUGH THE EYES OF THE SOLDIERS

The selection of the battalions that will provide the comparative basis of this thesis was done with great consideration. For results to be as fair and accurate as possible, the units must share a similar operational history to that of the 'Van Doos'. Therefore, of the hundreds of units that fashioned the CEF, only the battalions of the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade (of which the 'Van Doos' were a part) can provide such a comparison. In fact, they not only took part in the same minor and major operations, but they spent the entirety of their war alongside the 22nd Battalion. The following chapter will therefore demonstrate why the battalions of the 5th Brigade provide the only true comparative basis for a study of the discipline of the 'Van Doos'. However, rather than offering a detailed description of the brigade's operational history or the strategic importance of the attacks in which it took part, this thesis will examine the war through the eyes of the soldiers themselves, especially the 'Van Doos.' It will therefore examine their grievances and sufferings while serving at the front, and the pride they felt as they represented their unit, country, and "race" on the battlefields of Europe. As will be further demonstrated in this thesis, several of the following events had significant consequences on the morale and discipline of the 22nd Battalion.

1.1 The Road to the Somme, August 1914-August 1916

When the European powers went to war in August 1914, no one imagined the deadly stalemate that would ensue. The war was expected to be over by Christmas. German generals, for example, believed that France and Russia would be defeated in a matter of months. Based on the plan devised years earlier by General Alfred von Schlieffen, German forces would advance through Belgium and outflank French defences. After a quick victory, German troops would then be rushed to the eastern front where they would defeat Russian forces. The war was brought to a stalemate, however, and on the western front, a line of trenches that extended from the English Channel to the Swiss frontier was the result. The war was also costly in manpower as operations resulted in horrific losses. The Canadians suffered heavily as well. For example, in the Second Battle of Ypres in April 1915, the 1st Canadian Division suffered 6,036 casualties.¹ As a result of such considerable casualties, the CEF was in need of more soldiers. Across the country, men answered the calls of the Canadian government and many battalions were created.

Amongst the new units that were created across Canada was the 22nd (French-Canadian) Battalion. Until its creation in October 1914, the CEF did not include a significant French-Canadian representation. In the first contingent, which sailed before the 'Van Doos' were formed, French-speaking volunteers were inserted into English-speaking units such as the 14th and 12th Battalions.² In September 1914, the first steps to remedy the situation were taken. On the 22nd, a delegation of prominent

¹ Col. G.W.L. Nicholson, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War: Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-19* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer and Controller of Stationary, 1962), p. 92.

² Gagnon, *Le 22e Bataillon*, p. 28.

French-Canadian citizens left for Ottawa and demanded from the government “l’autorisation de lever un contingent canadien, composé de Canadiens-Français, qui s’enrôleront pour le service active de la Grande Bretagne.”³ On October 15, 1914, the government officially approved the creation of such a unit, and the 22nd Battalion was born. The battalion’s first commanding officer was also selected. Colonel Frédéric-Mondelet Gaudet remained at the head of the unit until late January 1916. The unit was one of a kind in the CEF as it was the only combatant unit whose official language was French. The majority of its soldiers were French-speaking and officers gave their orders and instructions in French.

The recruiting process was very slow. Promoters initially hoped that the unit’s ranks (a battalion totalled roughly one thousand soldiers) would be filled in a matter of weeks. However, by October 29, after two weeks of recruiting, the unit only numbered 29 officers and 656 other ranks.⁴ Recruiting in Quebec was a significant problem during the First World War. To many French-Canadians, the real enemy was not in Europe, but at home. Journalist Henri Bourassa argued that “the enemies of the French, of French civilization in Canada, are not the Boches...but the English anglicizers, the Orange intriguers, or Irish priests.”⁵ Bourassa was referring to Regulation 17, which limited the use of French in Ontario schools. Many French-Canadians were also reluctant to risk their lives for the British Empire and its ally, France. Although they sympathised with the French population, they felt at odds with

³ Cited in *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁵ Cited in Morton and Granatstein, *Marching to Armageddon*, p. 28. For a fuller appraisal of French-Canadian mood, refer to Elizabeth Armstrong, *The Crisis of Quebec, 1914-1918* (New York: AMS Press, 1967), and J.L. Granatstein and J.M. Hitsman, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford Press, 1977).

modern, secular France.⁶ Moreover, the majority of Canadians of military age, French and English-speaking, who were either married or tied to the land, volunteered the least. Such characteristics applied mostly to French-Canadians.⁷ In June 1917, Militia Department statistics demonstrated that of the 14,100 French-speaking volunteers in the CEF, less than half hailed from the province of Quebec. In fact, the majority of the province's volunteers were English-speaking.⁸ The 22nd Battalion waited until late December 1914 to fill its ranks.

After months of training in Saint-Jean, Quebec and Amherst, Nova Scotia, the battalion sailed to Europe aboard the HMT *Saxonia* on May 20, 1915. This was a momentous event. The men of the unit understood the importance of their task and sought to represent French-Canada with pride and honour. Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Louis Tremblay, future commanding officer of the unit, noted, "...[nous] sommes plus décidés que jamais à prouver que le sang canadien-français coule dans nos veines aussi limpide et chaudement que celui que possédaient nos aïeux."⁹ The unit arrived in England on May 29, 1915, and began training at East Sandling camp. Several soldiers were discouraged by the poor living conditions that they encountered in England. For example, even a year later in 1916, Arthur Lapointe noted upon his arrival that "au lieu de trouver un peu de confort, nous n'avons que le plancher nu comme litière, et le sac pour nous servir d'oreiller. Je sens mon enthousiasme gravement atteint."¹⁰

⁶ Gerard Filteau, *Le Québec, le Canada, et la guerre 1914-1918* (Montreal : L'Aurore, 1977), pp. 19-20.

⁷ Durflinger, "Les Purs Canayens," pp. 1-2.

⁸ Cited in Morton and Granatstein, *Marching to Armageddon*, p. 33.

⁹ Archives of the Royal 22nd Regiment Museum, Personal Diary of Lieut.-Col Thomas Tremblay, May 21, 1915. There is no box or file number for the diary. Transcripts are available electronically.

¹⁰ Lapointe, *Souvenirs et impressions de ma vie de soldat*, p. 11.

On September 15, 1915, these inexperienced soldiers were finally put to the test as they left their training fields and headed to France. Throughout the entirety of the war, the 22nd Battalion served alongside the 24th Battalion (Victoria Rifles of Canada), the 25th (Nova Scotia) Battalion, and the 26th (New Brunswick) Battalion. Together, they fashioned the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade, which was itself part of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division. The brigade's first trench tour was in the Mount Kemmel sector near the town of Ypres. Compared to later tours, the Kemmel front proved to be relatively peaceful at the time as there were no serious enemy or Allied advances. The brigade played a secondary role on the Western Front but these first few months at the front nevertheless proved educational, and the men of the brigade learned to defend themselves against enemy shelling, snipers, and the occasional raid. They also made the acquaintance of several troublesome features that often made life unbearable in the frontlines. Along with frequent food and water shortages, and poor living conditions, all soldiers at the front had to suffer through lice infestations and being out-of-doors during the winter months of north-western Europe. To Claudius Corneloup, soldier of the 22nd Battalion, lice were the greatest problem.

Les poux? C'était le grand fléau, le pire des tourments, le supplice. On voyait des pauvres diables en casser le tuyau de leur pipe avec leurs dents, tellement la douleur était forte. Aussitôt que le jour pointait, sous les averses infinissables, les soldats se mettaient le torse à nu, écrassaient cette vermine immonde qui renaissait sans cesse. Leur corps labouré par les coups d'ongles offrait de craintes et pénibles cicatrices bleuâtres.¹¹

Winters in north-eastern Europe were not like Canadian winters; not only were they cold, but they were wet and humid. Trenches would fill up with mud and water, often reaching a soldier's hip:

¹¹ Claudius Corneloup, *L'épopée du vingt-deuxième*, p. 30.

There was no escape from it. The trenches, which were nothing more than sandbagged breastworks, simply dissolved. The earth within the sandbags liquefied and oozed out. Everything collapsed. Every indentation of the ground filled with water, and, to make things worse, the enemy, being on higher ground, delighted in draining his trenches across No Man's Land into those occupied by the Canadians.¹²

Winters thus had considerable physical and psychological consequences. Soldiers suffered from various medical problems during this season. Col. G.W.L. Nicholson's official study of the CEF noted that in November 1915 more than 1,198 soldiers reported sick among all Canadian soldiers at the front.¹³ Trench foot was especially a major concern as soldiers' feet would swell up and become infected if not kept properly dry. Men were told to wear rubber boots and rub their feet with whale oil to prevent infections. The constant rain also had profound consequences on the spirits and the morale of the men. For example, in December 1915, Major Georges-Phillias Vanier, officer of the 'Van Doos', noted that "Le temps rend triste—l'aire est lourde."¹⁴ Arthur Lapointe similarly noted during his first winter at the front:

La vue du camp offre un aspect des plus monotones. Toutes les allées qui conduisent aux rangées de petites huttes sont inondées par une boue épaisse dans laquelle se perdent nos brodequins... Ça et là, quelques fermes isolées apparaissent à travers le brouillard. J'ai l'impression que la vie doit être infiniment triste ici. Heureusement que je n'y séjournerai pas longtemps.¹⁵

At least the winter months, from an operational point of view, were quiet. Soldiers had to contend with occasional shelling, sniper activity, and some raids, but no major operations. The arrival of spring, however, put an end to this inactivity as German

¹² Cited in Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-19*, p. 125.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 125-6

¹⁴ LAC, MG 32 A2 Vol. 93—Personal Diaries of Georges P. Vanier, Dec. 6, 1915.

¹⁵ Arthur J. Lapointe, *Souvenir et impressions de ma vie de soldat*, p. 67.

and Allied forces alike prepared for major offensives. In the spring of 1916, the brigade took part in operations that proved to be the costliest to date: the battle of the St-Éloi craters. In fact, according to the soldiers of the 'Van Doos', it was also one of most dangerous assignments they drew throughout the war. Joseph Henri Chaballe, of the 'Van Doos', noted that "bien des soldats d'expérience considère la "bataille des craters" comme l'épreuve la plus terrible à laquelle les Canadiens eurent à faire face durant la guerre, sauf peut-être à Passchendaele."¹⁶ In his study of the 24th Battalion, R.C. Fetherstonhaugh explained that St-Éloi was so dangerous because it "was fought on a front of not more than one thousand yards, on ground blasted beyond recognition by high explosive shells, churned by constant rain..."¹⁷ The front was subjected to constant enemy shelling and counterattacks. As will be demonstrated, this first operation, and several that followed, had a damaging effect on the spirits and discipline of the still-inexperienced brigade, and especially on the 22nd Battalion.

1.2 The Somme Offensives, September-October 1916

From July to September 1916, the soldiers of the 5th Brigade prepared for their first major attack: the village of Courcelette in the Somme sector. The operation was especially important to the men of the 22nd Battalion. There was more than victory on the line; the honour of French-Canada was also at stake. Tremblay noted on September 15:

¹⁶ Chaballe, *Histoire du 22ième bataillon canadien-français*, p. 98.

¹⁷ Robert Collier Fetherstonhaugh, *The 24th Battalion, C.E.F., Victoria Rifles of Canada, 1914-18* (Montreal: Gazette Printing Co., 1930), p. 43.

...nous sommes déterminés de prouver que les “Canayens” ne sont pas des “slackers”...Ce village nous allons le prendre, et quand nous l’aurons pris, nous allons le garder jusqu’au dernier homme. C’est notre première grande attaque, il faut qu’elle soit un succès pour l’honneur de tous les Canadiens-Français que nous représentons en France. Je peux facilement voir sur la figure de mes hommes ce qu’ils ne peuvent dire: leur enthousiasme, leur détermination.¹⁸

The 22nd Battalion did not disappoint. On the evening of September 15, 1915, the soldiers of the ‘Van Doos’ leapt from their trenches and, along with the 25th Battalion, led the attack. According to Corneloup, they were outstanding. “Le 22ième...lutta un contre douze. Les combats corps à corps, à la baïonnette, au poignard, à coup de rotin, s’amplifièrent. Le sang coulait dans les rues. Nos soldats s’interpellaient en français, se battaient à la française, c’est à dire d’un mordant irrésistible.”¹⁹ The brigade captured the village that very night and, for two more days, held it before the enemy’s relentless counterattacks.

The conduct and courage of the 22nd Battalion during its first offensive was remarkable and its officers had difficulty containing their pride. Back in London, Georges Vanier noted in his diary, “I read with tears in my eyes, the communiqué...regarding the exploits of the 22nd at Courcelette. It is clear that the French-Canadians were superb in terms of daring and initiative. I am proud of the old battalion.”²⁰ Thomas Tremblay was equally proud. “L’attaque a été faite dans les conditions les moins favorables. Si elle a été un succès, c’est entièrement dû à l’ardeur, la persévérance, la ténacité de mes hommes. Rien ne pouvait les arrêter, ils ont été sublimes.”²¹ However, this victory came at a tremendous cost as the brigade

¹⁸ Personal Diary of Thomas Louis Tremblay, September 15, 1915.

¹⁹ Corneloup, *L’épopée du vingt-deuxième*, p. 55.

²⁰ Vanier, *Soldier: The Wartime Letters and Diaries*, p. 164.

²¹ Personal Diary of Thomas Tremblay, September, 18, 1916.

suffered thousands of casualties. The greatest loss was that of the commanding officer of the 22nd Battalion. Although Tremblay was buried by shell explosions three times during the attack, he was not injured. He fell victim to a pre-war medical problem and was forced to return to England. His second-in-command, Major Arthur-Édouard Dubuc took over the unit. As will be demonstrated, the loss of Tremblay had significant consequences on the morale and discipline of the battalion. Although Courcelette would go down in the history of the unit, and the Canadian Corps, as a great victory, the extreme violence witnessed during this first attack left a lasting impression on several soldiers. Corneloup noted, “jamais il n’y eut tant de cris, tant de blessés, tant de blasphèmes, tant de morts! Les blessés, retournant en arrière, formaient une procession.”²² Thomas Tremblay also famously noted, “Si l’enfer est aussi abominable que ce que j’ai vu là; je ne souhaiterais pas à mon pire ennemi d’y aller.”²³

The men of the 5th Brigade were not given much time to recuperate and were called back into action less than two weeks later. On October 1, the brigade was given the task of capturing Kenora and Regina Trenches. However, this attack did not gain the approval of all who led it. The losses suffered at Courcelette had left the brigade disorganised and exhausted, and the commanding officers of the battalions of the 5th Brigade opposed the attack. In his history of the 22nd Battalion, Chaballe provides excerpts of the letters that were sent by the commanding officers. For example, Lieut.-Col. Edward Hilliam, of the 25th Battalion, argued that “les hommes à ma disposition sont loin d’être assez nombreux pour une opération de ce genre...ils sont

²² Corneloup, *L'épopée du vingt-deuxième*, p. 52.

²³ Personal Diary of Lieut.-Col. Thomas-Louis Tremblay, Sept. 18, 1916.

tous rendus à bout et je ne les considère pas en état d'être lancés dans une attaque aussi dure."²⁴ The newly appointed commanding officer of the 'Van Doos' similarly added, "Je suis d'opinion que... dans le présent état moral et physique des hommes du bataillon, le succès des opérations proposées est des plus problématiques."²⁵ Dubuc argued that the attack on Courcelette and the losses the unit suffered in the process had left the unit exhausted and disorganised. An advance under such conditions could prove difficult.

The attack nevertheless went on as planned and Dubuc's fears were borne out by events. The brigade was unable to gain either of its objectives and each battalion suffered tremendously in the process. The 'Van Doos' especially suffered. The unit had lost so many men that the brigade commander noted that "the battalion from after moving off to the attack onwards ceased to exist as a unit..."²⁶ For the second time in a matter of weeks, the men of the brigade witnessed the death of many of their friends. The following roll call that was taken after the failed attack dramatically demonstrates the price the battalion paid. Chaballe did not reveal the names of the dead.

- « Dur... » ...Un silence plus long...Rien... « Personne n'a vu Dur...?» Pas de réponse! « Inscrivez-le 'manquant'. »
- « Latr... » ...Deux voix à la fois annoncent qu'il a été mis en pièces par une grenade en se battant dans le village.
- « Crem... » ... « Nous l'avons enterré dans la carrière... »
- « Perr... »... « Ah! oui, 'Ti-Jos'; on était ensemble, monsieur, près du petit chemin, quand il est arrivé un gros obus qui a fait explosion drette sur nous. J'ai été renversé. Quand je me suis relevé, 'Ti-Jos' n'y était plus. »²⁷

²⁴ Chaballe, *Histoire du 22ième bataillon canadien-français*, p. 209.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 209-210.

²⁶ LAC, RG 9, Series III-D-3. Online War Diaries of the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade for the Month of September 1916, Appendix 5, p. 5.

²⁷ Chaballe, *Histoire du 22e bataillon canadien-français*, p. 216.

According to Chaballe, "... l'appel continue, avec, de temps en temps, mais rarement, un présent..."²⁸ Fortunately, Kenora and Regina trenches proved to be the brigade's final operation in 1916. Over the next several months, the composition of each battalion significantly altered as new faces joined the ranks. By the end of December, each battalion had received more than 500 reinforcements amounting to half of the membership of a battalion.

1.3 The 1917 Offensives, January 1917-December 1917

The third year of the war proved to be the brigade's busiest at the front as its battalions played a central role in three of the CEF's major campaigns. The first two, Vimy Ridge (April 9) and Hill 70 (August 15), both near the city of Lens, were resounding successes. The brigade secured all of its objectives and suffered significantly fewer casualties than at the Somme. The advance on Hill 70 proved especially traumatic, however, for Arthur Lapointe. It was his first significant operation. His testimony is extremely useful as it demonstrates just how terrifying a major advance was on a man inexperienced at the art of war. Perhaps its most terrifying aspect was the uncertainty about one's own survival. As will be further demonstrated, such fear had significant consequences on the discipline of soldiers. As zero hour approached, Lapointe suddenly began to understand the seriousness of the coming hour. "...[J]e sens en moi un brûlant désir de vivre. Je voudrais tout au moins avoir la certitude que j'ai encore deux jours devant moi...j'avais cru

²⁸ *Ibid.*

sincèrement m'être préparé de mon mieux, et voilà que je ne me sens pas tout à fait prêt...²⁹ Although Lapointe survived the advance, the pain and agony of one of his friends was a frightening and traumatic sight:

Un peu plus loin, un des nôtres, un jeune soldat de notre ancien 189^{ème}..., gît au fond de la tranchée, horriblement mutilé...il prie tout haut. De temps à autre, il pousse un cri "Maman, Maman", puis quand les souffrances sont trop fortes, il appelle la mort...Le coeur me chavire devant un tel spectacle, je ne puis supporter plus longtemps la vue de tant de maux. Je m'éloigne avec des sanglots plein la gorge...³⁰

In November 1917, the brigade returned to the Ypres sector. The objective was Passchendaele Ridge. Despite the brigade's capture of the ridge, the men of the 22nd Battalion do not remember the operation as a great victory, but as one of the most terrifying ordeal they encountered during the war. Even seasoned veterans were deeply affected by the horrors of Passchendaele. Thomas Tremblay noted:

Passchendaele restera pour les Canadiens un mauvais cauchemar, nous en garderons toujours un mauvais souvenir...Parmi les horreurs vues à Passchendaele, j'ai surtout gardé un mauvais souvenir du spectacle de ces nombreux morts enfoncés à moitié dans la boue qui nous regarde à travers leurs yeux vitrés.³¹

The image of dead bodies rotting in the mud is the most common description of Passchendaele. Arthur Lapointe remembers the disgust he felt when he came face to face with "des cadavres d'Allemands, le ventre démesurément gonflé, flottent dans une eau bourbeuse. Ça et là, des morts ensevelis dans la boue laissent émerger un bras ou une jambe. Des figures macabres apparaissent, noircies par un long séjour sur le

²⁹ Lapointe, *Souvenirs et impressions de ma vie de soldat*, p. 128.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

³¹ Personal Diary of Thomas Tremblay, November 11, 1918.

sol.”³² Corneloup similarly expressed, “...nous sentions une muette terreur nous envahir...Des cadavres flottent dans l’immergent de l’océan d’épouvante. Sont-ils Anglais, Australiens, Canadiens, Allemands? On ne saura jamais...Ils sont morts...pauvres chairs piétinées, décomposées, livides plus encore qu’horribles.”³³

The physical hardships encountered at Passchendale were also significant. On February 5, 1920, Captain Henri Chassé, officer of the 22nd Battalion, gave a speech to the Académie Commerciale in Montreal describing the unit’s march towards the battlefield itself:

That march was the most painful of all our adventures. To begin with we had to follow a little pavement of trenches, three feet wide, for more than six miles...This pavement was a landmark for German batteries. We were forced to follow it as best we could, although in certain places it was partially demolished, so you risked death by submersion in the mud if you put your foot to one side. Unfortunately a number of our comrades met their end in this dreadful way. The officers, who led the march, had never known such difficulties.³⁴

1.4 The Final Push to Armistice, January 1918-April 1919

The winter of 1917-18 brought some bad news to the soldiers at the front. Bolshevik revolutionaries had taken control of Russia and soon began to discuss a separate peace treaty with Germany. On March 3, 1918, the treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed and the Russians were out of the war. German troops in the east thus reinforced those on the western front. Allied forces could therefore expect a considerable German advance in the spring of 1918. On March 21, the Germans

³² Lapointe, *Souvenirs et impressions de ma vie de soldat*, p. 166.

³³ Corneloup, *L’épopée du vingt-deuxième*, pp. 88-89.

³⁴ Cited in Vanier, *Soldier*, p. 204.

launched the great operation that they hoped would bring them victory on the Western Front. Within two weeks, the Germans had pushed some 60 kilometres into Allied territory and threatened to split British and French forces. They even regained positions that had been lost to the Allies in 1916 and 1917 such as Passchendaele, Mount-Kemmel, St-Éloi and Courcelette. The Canadian Corps, including the 5th Brigade, had escaped the devastation of the German offensives. The corps was located in the Lens-Vimy sector. Such reverses had a negative impact on the soldiers at the front. Arthur Lapointe expressed his anxiousness about this significant turn of events:

L'ennemi a réussi à percer le front anglais, et maintenant, c'est l'avalanche qui s'engouffre par la trouée et menace de couper l'armée anglaise de l'armée française, en s'emparant d'Amiens. Un énorme matériel de guerre et une quantité considérable de prisonniers sont tombés aux mains des Allemands...Je me sens pris d'un découragement total.³⁵

But by May, the Germans called off their advance as a result of British resistance, a shortage of supplies, and severe losses.

On July 28, the brigade prepared for another assault as General Foch, who now controlled all Allied forces, opted to advance on the Amiens front and gave General Currie and the Canadian Corps a central role in the operation. The goal of the operation was to capture enemy positions at the eastern part of the city of Amiens. The attack, which covered eight kilometres of depth, stunned the soldiers of the 22nd Battalion. Corneloup noted the battalion's response to such an objective. One soldier laughingly said, "Huit kilomètres!...Mais il est fou, le bonhomme!..." Another soldier

³⁵ Lapointe, *Souvenirs et impressions de ma vie de soldat*, p. 191.

added, “Huit kilomètres!...ils nous prennent pour des autos...”³⁶ But, the 22nd

Battalion did not take part in the initial attack as it was placed in reserve. Thomas

Tremblay was unhappy with this secondary role, and noted in his journal.

Je vais à la Brigade cet après-midi rencontrer le Général afin de protester énergiquement sur le rôle qu’il nous fait jouer dans la prochaine attaque...Je fais remarquer au Général que mon bataillon a été choisi pour attaquer seulement dans les conditions les plus difficiles alors que les chances de réussir étaient petites mais quand il s’agit d’une attaque bien organisée où le succès est assuré que nous sommes en réserve. Alors si nous sommes appelés à attaquer nous le ferons dans des conditions très désavantageuses, puisque l’attaque se fera à quelques minutes d’avis, sans les préparatifs nécessaires, avec des petites chances de succès et avec grandes pertes.³⁷

Despite these protests, the attack went on as planned on the morning of August 8, and the eight kilometres that were thought unfeasible were captured by the men of the brigade. The following day, the 2nd Canadian Division sent instructions to the 5th Brigade ordering another advance on the Germans’ positions at Amiens. It was hoped that the previous day’s gains had broken the morale of the German soldiers thus making it easier to seize more territory. The ‘Van Doos’ and the 25th Battalion successfully pushed several more kilometres into the German line. This had a positive impact on the men’s morale and spirits. To the soldiers of the ‘Van Doos’, there was little doubt that the end of the war was approaching. Vanier expressed such feelings in a CBC broadcast on January 14, 1965:

The effect on the troops of that successful breakthrough was extraordinary. It was the first time that we were attacking and advancing in terms of miles instead of yards. We felt somehow that the Germans

³⁶ Corneloup, *L’épopée du vingt-deuxième*, p. 126.

³⁷ Personal Diary of Lieut.-Col. Thomas-Louis Tremblay, August 5, 1918.

were beaten and after years of crawling, of dugouts and shell holes and mud, hope stirred in our hearts.³⁸

There was indeed much hope and optimism in the hearts of Allied soldiers as trench warfare had given way to a war of movement, and for the next three months, the brigade, along with the Canadian Corps, headed the advance towards Germany. Along the way, the brigade pushed into German lines at Arras and Cambrai, and liberated several French towns in the process. Arras proved especially costly. From August 26 to 29, the 22nd Battalion lost several hundred officers and other ranks. Col. Chaballe noted that every officer that participated in the operation returned either injured or dead.³⁹ The unit's most significant losses were to Lieut.-Col. Dubuc, who had recently been appointed commanding-officer of the battalion, and Major Georges P. Vanier.⁴⁰ Their advance nevertheless had a tremendous impact on upcoming operations. Vanier noted in an interview with the CBC,

[General Burstall] assured me that the High Command had been much impressed by the terrible losses of the 22nd Battalion but that these were not in vain. On the contrary, they had facilitated the advance of the troops who came after them and thus they had contributed to victory.⁴¹

With the signing of the armistice on November 11, the war was over for the men of the 5th Brigade and the Canadian Corps. After a few months in Germany and England, the Canadians were ready to return home. On May 10, aboard the troop transport *Olympic*, they bid farewell to England and were on their way back to Canada.

³⁸ Cited in Vanier, *Soldier*, p. 243.

³⁹ Chaballe, *Histoire du 22e bataillon canadien-français*, p. 362.

⁴⁰ Gagnon, *Le 22e Bataillon*, p. 126.

⁴¹ Cited in Vanier, *Soldier*, p. 253.

CHAPTER 2
MILITARY LAW AND DISCIPLINE
IN THE 5TH CANADIAN INFANTRY BRIGADE

During the First World War, the conduct of Canadian soldiers overseas was dictated by British military law. Through documents like the *Manual of Military Law* and *The King's Regulations and Orders for the Army*, Canadian officers maintained the discipline of their units. Throughout the war, unit commanding officers could dictate, at their own discretion, the manner in which a soldier ought to be punished when he contravened army regulations. If the infraction was a minor breach of conduct, the commanding officer would punish the soldier himself. In such cases, he could either impose fines, detentions, or field punishments.¹ However, in cases where the infraction was considered serious, or the soldier himself was a repeat offender, the commanding officer could resort to a court-martial. It must be added that courts-martial were usually a last resort. Cathryn Corns and John Hughes-Wilson have noted that commanding officers were initially “extremely reluctant to wash regimental dirty linen in public.”² Many commanding officers would rather deal with troublesome soldiers in a more private forum.

Throughout the First World War, troublesome soldiers that were sent before courts-martial were predominantly tried by a Field General Court-Martial (FGCM).³

¹ There are two types of Field Punishments (FP): No. 1 and No. 2. FP No. 2 included food deprivations, extra drills and marches, hard labour, fines, no mail, etc. FP No. 1 involved the securing of the prisoner to a post with handcuffs for no more than 2 hours a day, and three days out of four. Such a punishment could last from a couple of days to a couple of months. The practice of FP No. 1 was eventually stopped as it was considered inhumane. Lieut.-Colonel S.T. Banning, *Military Law Made Easy* (London: Gale Polden Ltd., 1915), p. 16 & Godefroy, *For Freedom and Honour*, p. 12.

² Cathryn Corn and John Hughes-Wilson, *Blindfold and Alone: British Military Executions in the First World War* (London: Cassell, 2001), p. 89.

³ Madsen, *Another Kind of Justice*, p. 45.

In cases where a civil offence (rape, murder, assault) was committed, the offender would be sent before a civil court. FGCMs were assembled in the field, and according to Chris Madsen were employed as a “speedy means to punish a variety of offences.”⁴ A FGCM usually comprised three officers and a “court-martial officer.” The role of the latter was to assure that the proper proceedings were being followed, and that the rights of the accused were respected.⁵ Once assembled, the accused was brought before the officers of the court and the evidence was paraded. The accused was allowed to have a junior officer, known as the *Prisoner’s Friend*, to act as a defence council.⁶ Unfortunately, these often lacked legal experience. Once the evidence was presented, the officers of the court examined the facts and reached a decision. Courts-martial juries were quite ruthless; conviction rates in the British army were 87% for other-ranks and 76% for officers.⁷

In the eyes of civilians, military law, which includes courts-martial and punishments, may seem rather harsh and unjust, although it remains an important facet of military life. According to British Lieut.-Col. S.T. Banning, writing in 1915:

the object of military law is to maintain discipline among the troops and those who accompany an army on active service. With this object, offences which in civil life would be punished by a small fine, e.g., assault, or would be merely breaches of contract, e.g., desertion or neglecting to obey orders, are in the army dealt with as crimes and render an offender liable to heavy punishment.⁸

The main objective of military law is therefore not necessarily to do “absolute justice to the individual”, but to maintain discipline within the ranks and dissuade any others

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Godefroy, *For Freedom and Honour?*, p. 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁸ Banning, *Military Law Made Easy*, p. 1.

from acting in a disorderly fashion.⁹ As will be demonstrated, there is no doubt that the needs of the unit were much more important than the behaviour of the individual. Although the focus of this thesis is not the practice and fairness of military law itself, it will nevertheless maintain that in the case of the 5th Brigade at least, military law, courts-martial, and severe punishments, were principally employed to maintain or restore discipline, and in other words, *pour encourager les autres*. As will also be noted, in the case of the ‘Van Doos’, this system proved beneficial.

Throughout the war, the most serious infractions, for both other ranks and officers, were punishable by death by firing squad. When a death sentence was given to the offender at a court-martial, it often resulted in a barrage of letters sent by the commanding officers of the battalion, brigade, and division; these would offer reasons to commute or pass the death sentence. In cases where the offender was given the death penalty, he was shot at dawn by a firing squad on a later date. However, in most cases, the sentence was commuted. In such cases, the offender was condemned to penal servitude or imprisonment, with or without labour, of several months or years. Less serious infractions, such as drunkenness, negligence with firearms, and insubordination were usually dealt with by a field punishment, a detention, a fine, or in the case of an officer, a reduction in rank.¹⁰

On paper, many infractions were punishable by death. Included amongst these were treason, murder, mutiny, cowardice, the shameful abandoning of a post, and desertion. However, throughout the First World War, one infraction was considered the most serious and dealt with more ruthlessly than any other: *desertion*. Between

⁹ Morton, “The Supreme Penalty,” p. 346.

¹⁰ Banning, *Military Law Made Easy*, p. 16.

1914 and 1919, British military authorities executed 348 soldiers; these included 25 Canadians. Of these, 22 were executed for desertion; that is 88 per cent of them were executed for deserting His Majesty's forces without intention of returning.¹¹ The British Army (non-colonial) boasted a similar ratio. Of 312 officers and other ranks who were shot at dawn, 268, or 86 per cent, were executed for the crime of desertion.¹² In fact, desertions were the cause of the majority of executions in both Allied and enemy forces. For example, of the 48 executions in the German army, 28 (58.3%) were for desertion.¹³

According to the *Manual of Military Law*, desertion “implies an intention on the part of the offender either not to return to His Majesty's service at all, or to escape some particular important service...”¹⁴ In order to be punished for desertion, *intent* must be proven at the offender's court-martial. Intent may be proven in a variety of ways. For example, whether or not an offender was forcibly apprehended or came back of his own will, or whether he was in civilian clothing or still in uniform could influence the final verdict. If intent is not proven, then a soldier is guilty of *absence without leave* (AWOL). Although this was not as severely punished (none resulted in a death sentence), the penalty could be as high as a two-year imprisonment. Consequently, during many courts-martial, soldiers charged with desertion did not attempt to prove their innocence, but simply opted to prove that they always intended

¹¹ For more information and a case-by-case look at the soldiers who were executed, see Godefroy, *For Freedom and Honour?*.

¹² These statistics were taken from Bouvier, *Déserteurs et insoumis*, p. 118; and Godefroy, *For Freedom and Honour?*, p. 3.

¹³ Bouvier, *Déserteurs et insoumis*, p. 118.

¹⁴ War Office, *Manual of Military Law* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1914), p. 18.

to return to their unit and that they ought to be punished for an absence without leave instead.

2.1 The Ill-disciplined 'Van Doos'

The question of the 22nd Battalion's discipline has been subjected to various interpretations since Desmond Morton first commented on the issue. It is hoped that by examining the discipline of the other battalions of the 5th Brigade and comparing it to that of the 'Van Doos', this chapter will determine whether the 22nd Battalion's infamous reputation is justified or not. Was the unit an anomaly or was it simply following the tendencies of the CEF? In order to do so, it will consider the number of minor infractions, courts-martial appearances, and executions in each battalion. When available, the opinions of commanding officers concerning the discipline of each unit will also be considered.

The most convincing evidence that justifies the 22nd Battalion's reputation are the various accounts and comments of officers and soldiers throughout and after the war. During the war, the commanding officers of the battalion often complained about the disciplinary problems of the unit. These complaints also illustrate that the unit's problems began after the Somme operations of 1916 and lasted well into the summer of 1917. Afterwards, commanding officers were content with the discipline of the unit as infractions were less frequent, especially concerning illegal absences.

The commanding officers of the battalion, Lieut.-Col. Thomas Tremblay and Major Arthur Dubuc first noted the disruptive behaviour within their unit in

November 1916. Tremblay was still in hospital when Dubuc paid him a visit in London. Tremblay noted their conversation in his diary: “Le nouveau bataillon a dans ces cadres un trop grand nombre d’hommes plutôt dégénérés...Enfin, Dubuc m’assure que la situation s’améliore, que graduellement le bataillon reviendra ce qu’il était.”¹⁵ Unfortunately, the situation did not improve and the battalion’s behavioural problems deteriorated to the point where the commanding officer of the 5th Brigade himself got involved. In January 1917, Tremblay noted in his diary, “Il y a beaucoup d’absence sans permission au 22e et le Général Turner est anxieux que je retourne en France au plus vite.”¹⁶ For the next eight months, the battalion seemed to be in crisis as Tremblay, Dubuc, and other commanders frequently complained about the unit’s aberrant behaviour, especially illegal absences. As a result, Tremblay had to use drastic measures to repair the discipline of his unit. During a meeting with the unit’s officers, on March 3, 1917, he reminded them that it was their duty to “raidir la discipline” if there was any chance of fixing “l’état pitoyable du bataillon.”¹⁷ Tremblay thus tightened discipline and used harsh penalties, such as several courts-martial and executions, to restore the character that the unit had prior to Courcelette. Tremblay’s measures were successful. By the summer of 1917, the situation in the ‘Van Doos’ stabilized and discipline became less of an issue. On July 3, 1917, Tremblay noted in his diary that the state of his battalion had improved and that his men were “de la plus belle humeur.”¹⁸ This improvement, especially with respect to

¹⁵ Personal Diary of Thomas Tremblay, November 14, 1916.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, January 1 to 23rd. The lack of a precise date was Tremblay’s own doing. Quite often, he summarizes days and weeks in short paragraphs. In this instance, he summarized his activities between January 1 and 23 in a few sentences.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, March 3, 1917.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, July 3, 1917.

illegal absences, was also noted by Major Dubuc. At Pte. Alexandre Dumesnil's court-martial in September 1917, he noted, "The character of Private Dumesnil from a fighting point of view and from the point of view of behaviour is bad. *The state of discipline of the Battalion is at present very good. Absences without leave are very rare* [author's italics]."¹⁹

After the war, various veterans, who served with and alongside the 'Van Doos' also commented on the discipline of the battalion. In fact, many attempted to justify or even apologize for it. In 1934, Claudius Corneloup, of the 22nd Battalion, published a novel entitled *La Coccinelle du 22e*, which was loosely based on the front-line experiences of the 'Van Doos'. Within its pages, he reproduced a conversation between a veteran and a young recruit. The exchange illustrates the unit's indifference towards the rules and regulations of the British military. When the recruit expressed concern about being arrested by the military police for an illegal absence, the veteran responded: "C'est parce que c'est ta première escapade mon garçon!...Quand tu y seras habitué, tu diras comme l'ami Germinal: 'Je m'en fiche!'"²⁰ Another soldier also cried out: "Une permission!...c'est bon pour une recrue."²¹

Furthermore, in 1962-63, the CBC conducted a series of interviews with First World War veterans. Amongst these veterans were soldiers of the 5th Brigade. They talked about the motivations for their enlistments, the campaigns in which they took part, their lives after the war, and the memories and friendships they created at the

¹⁹ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reel T-8655. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Alexandre Dumesnil.

²⁰ Corneloup, *La Coccinelle du 22e*, p. 49.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

front. However, when interviewing soldiers of the 'Van Doos', or simply when referring to the unit itself, the interviewers kept asking about its rowdiness and indiscipline at the front. Many soldiers thus had to explain the unit's behaviour. For example, Staff Sergeant Leo Lasnier rationalized: "You see, when you're behind the line, you have to look at it this way: behind the line I'm going to enjoy myself. Maybe I'm behind the lines for two weeks. In two weeks I'll be up. Maybe it's my turn to get it. You're going to take a chance on anything and enjoy it."²² Even the soldiers of other battalions were asked about the disorderliness of the battalion. Major Mitchell, of the 24th Battalion, noted that the Van Doos "weren't as susceptible to discipline as we [the 24th Battalion] were."²³ He even recalled a humorous anecdote about their indiscipline: "They [the Van Doos] scared the pants off the quartermaster in this Sandling Camp, I remember they chased him. There was some trouble over food. We went out there and here was the quartermaster running away and the whole gang after him."²⁴ His fellow officer F. Portwine nevertheless added, "No, but they were good fighters, give them credit."²⁵ A veteran of the 25th Battalion similarly added, "but these Frenchmen are damn good fighters *when* the 22nd was a good unit."²⁶

The statistics that were gathered from the Part II daily orders and court-martial proceedings suggests that the complaints and comments of officers and soldiers alike were well founded. The Part II daily orders offer a great deal of information on the

²² LAC, RG 41, Vol. 11. CBC Interviews. Interview conducted with Staff Sgt. Leo Lasnier, p. 6.

²³ LAC, RG 41, Vol. 11. CBC Interviews. Interview conducted with Major Mitchell and Frederick Portwine, p. 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁶ LAC, RG 41, Vol. 11. CBC Interviews. Interview conducted with Crooks and McCorry (the first names and ranks of the two are not given.), p. 9.

daily adjustments that were made to the roster of each battalion, but more importantly, provide a general overview of the discipline of the unit as they include every minor infraction that was punished by the unit. Unfortunately, Library and Archives Canada is missing the first two years of the orders. For this section, the following comparison will therefore refer to the statistics gathered by Jean-Pierre Gagnon as he examined the complete version at the Archives of the Royal 22nd Regiment in Quebec City. His methodology was also employed when examining the minor infractions of the other units. Gagnon added up all of the infractions that were punished from October 1915 to October 1918. He excluded the months of September 1915 and November 1918 because he wanted to create a monthly average of the infractions that were committed at the front; these two months were not fully spent at the front in combat and would therefore falsify his results. Gagnon counted a total of 2,475 minor infractions. See Table 1 for their breakdown.

Table 1: Minor infractions of the 22nd Battalion²⁷

Year	Absences	Drunkenness	Other Infrac.	Total
Oct. 1915- Sept. 1916	731	104	202	1,037
Oct. 1916- Sept. 1917	468	87	196	751
Oct. 1917- Nov. 1918.	461	71	155	687
Total	1,660	262	553	2,475

The most noticeable statistic is how frequent illegal absences were in comparison to all other infractions. In fact, of the 2,475 infractions, 1,660 were for the crime of illegal absence, 67% of the total. Along with this table, Gagnon also provided an

²⁷ The following statistics were found in Gagnon, *Le 22e Bataillon*, pp. 287 & 404.

appendix, which displayed the number of infractions that were punished per month (Appendix 1). He noted that during its first year at the front, the unit was punished for an average of 86.4 infractions per month, 62.6 infractions during its second year, and 52.9 during its final year. The unit's average throughout the war remained at 66.9 infractions per month.²⁸ As will be further explained, the unit's improved behaviour was the result of the strict discipline practiced by Tremblay upon his return in February 1917. Gagnon also noted that October 1915 was the unit's most troublesome month as it was punished for a total of 151 minor infractions. It seems that the transition from life in England to life at the front was quite difficult. These disciplinary problems continued over the next few months as the men of the unit were punished for 122 and 117 minor infractions in November 1915 and December 1915.²⁹ By January and February 1916, the behaviour of the unit began to improve; the number of minor infractions dropped to 86 and 35, respectively. Gagnon noted that this change coincided with the arrival of Tremblay at the head of the unit. In fact, during Tremblay's first command, the unit only went through one difficult period in March and April 1916 when it was punished 95 and 124 times, respectively. Gagnon noted that this was the result of the battalion's first taste of serious trench warfare at the St-Éloi Craters. Apart from these two months, the unit was punished for only 35 infractions in February 1916, 74 in May, 49 in June, 45 in July, and 36 in August.³⁰ In September 1916, the battalion once again went through a difficult period as it was punished 103 times. Gagnon concluded that this was likely due to the fact that the unit was about to take part in its first major campaign (the Battle of the Somme).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 283-285.

News of the heavy casualties that had recently plagued the area must have worried the men of the unit and led to a reaction that was similar to that witnessed at St-Éloi. However, unlike St-Éloi, Tremblay was not there to restore discipline, and infractions did not diminish after the battle. For the following eight months, infractions remained quite high reaching a peak of 103 in January 1917.³¹

Gagnon's study also examined the number of infractions that were punished by courts-martial. He noted that between October 1915 and November 11, 1918, the 22nd Battalion had a total of 185 of such infractions. These included 54 for absence without leave, and 40 for the crime of desertion; therefore 50.8% of courts-martial infractions were for illegal absences.³² He also noted that the majority of these infractions were committed between the battle of Courcellette and the summer 1917. In fact, 52.9% of all infractions punished by courts-martial were during these 10 months or so; this is especially true with regards to illegal absences (67%).

Although these statistics resulted from thorough research, they will not provide the material for the following comparison as Gagnon's methodology is simply not clear enough. Throughout the war, soldiers were not always with their respective units; many injured soldiers were attached to reserve units in England while others were briefly attached to other units at the front. Gagnon does not explain whether he included them in his statistics or not. Moreover, soldiers that were brought before courts-martial were often charged with and guilty of more than one infraction. However, Gagnon did not explain whether he included all of these infractions or simply the most serious ones in his statistics. In order to treat each battalion as

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 285-286.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 292.

equally as possible, this thesis will follow a different methodology. The following statistics will therefore include all of the infractions that were committed by the men of the 5th Brigade, even while attached to other units. Moreover, the following statistics will include all of the offences that were found guilty by courts-martial. Thus, if a soldier was guilty of two counts of illegal absences and three counts of insubordination, five infractions were added to the battalion's total.

The following statistics will also be divided differently. They will be divided into 11 categories: desertion, absence without leave (AWOL), illegal absence-related infractions, drunkenness, negligence with firearms, insubordination, theft and fraud, striking an officer or other rank, disobeying, and other. 'Illegal absence-related infractions' includes every infraction a soldier committed during his absence. These include loss of equipment, escaping, impersonation, etc. The 'other' category includes all of the infractions that were uncommonly punished by courts-martial. These include threatening an inhabitant of the country he is serving, resisting arrest, acting in a disorderly manner, self-inflicted wound, etc. Finally, they will also be divided into different time periods. These divisions will provide a better look at the behaviour of the unit during the leadership of each commanding officer during its most difficult period. Thus, September 1915 to February 1916 represents that of Frédéric-Mondelet Gaudet; March 1916 to September 1916 represents the first leadership of Thomas Tremblay; October 1916 to February 1917 represents that of Dubuc; and March 1917 to December 1917 represents the second command of Tremblay. The final two time periods are not as significant for the purpose of this thesis as the following examination of the unit's discipline will focus on the period from September 1916 to

December 1917. Nonetheless, Tremblay was the unit's commanding officer for most of its final year at the front.

Although the following statistics differ from Gagnon's, the conclusions and insight they provide are similar. These statistics, along with those of the other battalions of the 5th Brigade, will thus provide the evidentiary basis to suggest the poor discipline of the unit, and confirm what Gagnon suspected. See Table 2.

Table 2: Court-martial convictions of the 22nd Battalion³³

Infraction	09/1915 to 02/1916	03/1916 to 09/1916	10/1916 to 02/1917	03/1917 to 12/1917	01/1918 to 11/11/1918	Post- War	TOTAL:
Desertion	0	2	7	23	10	0	42
AWOL	1	5	15	25	21	9	76
Illegal absence-related infractions	0	0	5	1	7	1	14
Drunkenness	5	1	2	3	5	1	17
Insubordination	0	0	0	0	2	0	2
Theft/Fraud	0	3	2	4	6	7	22
Striking officer or other rank	0	0	1	0	2	0	3
Disobeying	0	1	2	1	0	0	4
Negligence with firearms	0	2	8	6	9	0	25
Other	0	2	3	7	7	9	28
TOTAL:	6	16	45	70	69	27	233

Similar to the evidence provided by the Part II daily orders, illegal absences (desertion and absence without leave) were also the most frequent infractions that were punished. The 'Van Doos' were charged with 118 counts of illegal absences; that is 50.6% of all their infractions. Moreover, of the 76 cases of AWOL, 36 were initially cases of desertion, but due to a lack of evidence, they were only guilty of

³³ The following statistics were gathered from the court-martial proceedings of the 22nd Battalion. LAC, RG 150), Series 8, Files 649-A-3297 to 649-Z-75, Reels T-8651 to 8690.

AWOL. This means that 66 per cent of soldiers who illegally absented themselves were initially charged with the more serious crime of desertion. As with Gagnon, these statistics have also demonstrated that the most troublesome period for the 'Van Doos' were the months after Courcelette to the end of 1917; close to half (49.4%) of all infractions were committed during these months. What is even more significant is that almost 60 per cent (59.3%) of all illegal absences that were brought before courts-martial occurred during that time. These statistics thus confirm Dubuc's and Tremblay's various complaints that the unit suffered from aberrant behaviour, and, as courts-martial significantly increased after March 1917, they further show that they sought to repair the problem through the use of legal procedures.

When studying the 'Van Doos', the question of the five executed soldiers must also be dealt with. Throughout the First World War, the battalion bore the brunt of more executions than any other battalion in the CEF. In fact, a total of eighteen soldiers were initially given the death sentence, but only five of them were executed. Former Canadian Corps commander General Sir Arthur Currie was well aware that such a high representation was destined to spark questions of ethnic prejudice and injustice. In a letter to Major General J.H. McBrien, he noted, "Apparently the aim will be to prove that French Canadians were treated unfairly, whereas we both know they got a little more consideration than anybody else."³⁴

Several Canadian historians have considered the issue of ethnic prejudice and each has concluded that there was no injustice on the part of British authorities. For example, Gagnon refused to consider that the unit was the victim of cultural and

³⁴ Cited in Morton, "The Supreme Penalty," p. 349.

linguistic discrimination which resulted in various courts-martial appearances and five executions. He concluded that, “[r]ien dans nos recherches ne permet donc de conclure, ni même d’affirmer, que des soldats francophones ont été exécutés à cause de leur langue ou de leur nationalité.”³⁵ Gagnon based his conclusions on the fact that no execution was carried out without the consent of the commander of the battalion. In fact, British military authorities often had mercy on soldiers that Tremblay wanted executed. Andrew B. Godefroy also pondered the issue of language and culture and, like Gagnon, he refused to believe that the unit was the victim of discrimination. However, he supports his claim with a mere summary of Gagnon’s arguments. He noted, “Gagnon makes several excellent references to primary source documentation that clearly illustrates [Tremblay’s] desire to use executions to crack down on the high rates of desertion and AWOL in his battalion. In light of these facts, it is difficult to continue the argument that injustice towards French-Canadians soldiers was masterminded by the higher chains of (Anglophone) command.”³⁶ Teresa Iacobelli also rejects the view that cultural and linguistic differences played a role in the unit’s five executions. Her conclusions were similar to Gagnon’s as she argued that Tremblay’s strict discipline and the unit’s poor disciplinary record led to such harsh punishments.³⁷ Although David Campbell similarly argued that the unit was not the victim of linguistic and cultural prejudice, he nonetheless believes that it was the victim of prejudice “based mainly on its poor disciplinary record.”³⁸ Campbell noted that Pte. Delisle’s execution in May 1918, for example, occurred when the battalion’s

³⁵ Gagnon, *Le 22^e Bataillon.*, p. 308.

³⁶ Godefroy, *For Freedom and Honour*, p. 46.

³⁷ Iacobelli, *Arbitrary Justice*, p. 58.

³⁸ Campbell, “The Divisional Experience in the C.E.F.,” p. 456.

discipline was actually satisfactory. Unfortunately, the battalion's past disciplinary difficulties came into consideration when Major Arthur Dubuc, acting-commanding officer, demanded that Delisle be executed. According to David Campbell, this "amounted to preemptive exemplary punishment."³⁹

Literature on the issue has therefore noted two factors that explain the 22nd Battalion's several executions: the poor discipline of the unit, and Thomas Tremblay's personality. Available evidence confirms such conclusions. It was *Tremblay* who first proposed the use of the death penalty to resolve the *disciplinary problems* of the battalion. When he returned to his battalion in mid-February 1917, he noticed that the sentences that were previously awarded by courts-martial did not stop men from deserting.

There seems to be an impression amongst the men of my Battalion, that by committing the offense of desertion, they will be awarded a term of imprisonment, which will prevent them from serving in the trenches, and that the Canadian Authorities will arrange for sentences to be remitted after the war. I am of the opinion that in previous cases in which my men have been tried by F.G.C.M. [Field General Court-Martial] and sentenced to a term of imprisonment, it has not had a beneficial effect on my battalion.⁴⁰

Tremblay therefore urged the execution of a deserter to show his men that illegal absences would be punished to the fullest extent of military law. In another letter, Tremblay was pleased to report that executions had the desired effect. He noted in July 1917 that "The crime of absence without leave *was very prevalent in my Battalion until (two) men were shot a short time ago.* [author's italics] The prevalence of this crime was due principally to the extraordinary leniency of the previous courts-

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 458.

⁴⁰ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reel T-8680. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Arthur Lemay.

martial...”⁴¹ In fact, Tremblay’s requests for the death penalty were not always granted by the courts-martial judges and British military authorities. Take for example the case of Pte. Oswald Castonguay. Prior to his court-martial for desertion, Castonguay illegally absented himself twice, on November 12, 1915 and January 8, 1916. He was brought before a court-martial when he absented himself from trench duty between March 18 and May 5, 1917. Castonguay was initially sentenced to death, a decision later commuted to fifteen years’ penal servitude. This went against Tremblay’s request, who, while noting that Castonguay had been good in the trenches, still recommended that “in order to stop altogether absence without leave in my Battalion, that the extreme penalty be carried out and that the execution be public.”⁴²

Available evidence therefore makes it improbable that the battalion suffered from ethnic prejudice and a gross injustice. Tremblay himself, a French-speaking Canadian, sought these death sentences. This therefore begs the question, why was Tremblay so strict with his men? Tremblay took his position as commander of the 22nd Battalion very seriously. He believed that the battalion was not only a battalion of the CEF, but it was the representative of an entire “race”. He noted the unit’s importance when he took command on February 26, 1916:

Je suis nommé aujourd’hui officiellement au commandement du 22e avec le grade de Lieut. Colonel. Je comprends pleinement toute la responsabilité que comporte cette nomination... Mon bataillon représente toute une race, la tâche est lourde. Cependant j’ai confiance en moi-même et je me sens estimé par mes hommes. Mes actes seront guidés par notre belle devise “Je me souviens”.⁴³

⁴¹ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reel T-8586. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Oswald Castonguay.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Personal Diary of Lieut. Tremblay, February 26, 1916.

When Tremblay returned to the unit in February 1917, he found a battalion that was different than the one he had left, a battalion that did not live up to the standards it had established at Courcellette. These disciplinary problems left a dark spot on the reputation of the battalion and Tremblay and several other officers agreed that it suffered from aberrant behaviour. For example, at Pte. Théodore Lachapelle's court-martial in April 1917, Tremblay complained that "The men of my Battalion will not consider absence without leave as a serious crime until someone is shot. Already, sentences of death awarded in this Battalion have been commuted and my men are under the impression that the extreme penalty will never be carried out."⁴⁴ This complaint was all too common at the unit's many courts-martial. For example, Brigadier A.H. MacDonnell of the 5th Brigade mentioned, in February 1917, at Napoléon Bienvenu's court-martial, "...in view of this man's character, and the prevalence of absence without leave in this Battalion, I recommend the sentence be carried out."⁴⁵ Even the commander of the 6th Brigade, Brigadier H.D.B. Ketchen, got involved in the case of another soldier, "The crime of desertion from the trenches is very prevalent in this Battalion, and it is considered that unless examples are immediately made in such cases, that this crime will continue."⁴⁶ With the importance and the responsibility he placed on himself and the battalion, it is therefore not a surprise that Tremblay tried to restore the discipline of the battalion.

It must also be added that Thomas Tremblay's reaction to his unit's disciplinary problems was considered common and customary in the British army. In his

⁴⁴ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reel T-8674. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Théodore Lachapelle.

⁴⁵ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reel T-8654. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Napoléon Bienvenu.

⁴⁶ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reel T-8667. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Alexandre Gaudy.

examination of executions during the First World War, Gerald Oram noted that “executions [were] widely held as the *only* [Oram’s italics] way to restore discipline where it was thought suspect.”⁴⁷ Oram noted several cases in which commanding officers maintained that their unit’s discipline was only restored as a result of an execution. As a result, he concluded that there was an “over-reliance on the death penalty as a means to maintain discipline” in the British army.⁴⁸ Thus, when Tremblay returned, he first attempted to clean up the battalion with numerous courts-martial, and when this failed and the unit remained ill-disciplined, he simply did what many officers of the British army did, and used the threat, and practice of executions to restore his unit.

2.2 The 24th Battalion (Victoria Rifles of Canada)

An examination of the other units of the 5th Brigade is unfortunately much more complicated than that for the ‘Van Doos’. Although quantitative sources are available, qualitative ones are much more difficult to locate. The 22nd Battalion has been commented on and studied by various historians and veterans alike. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about the other units of the 5th Brigade. None has received the same treatment as Gagnon provided for the ‘Van Doos’ and it does not appear that any soldier has published his own wartime experiences with these units. Although the letters found in the courts-martial proceedings do provide some written statements on the overall discipline of the units, such letters were not always

⁴⁷ Gerald Oram, *Military Executions during World War I* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), p. 114.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 114-15.

available. This analysis will therefore focus on the statistics that were gathered from the Part II daily orders and court-martial proceedings.

A study of the minor infractions reveals two contrasting stories. See Table 3. Whereas the ‘Van Doos’ were punished 2,475 times, the Victoria Rifles were punished only 911 times.

Table 3: Minor infractions of the 24th Battalion⁴⁹

Year	Absences	Drunkenness	Other Infrac.	Total
Oct. 1915- Sept. 1916	128	60	108	296
Oct. 1916- Sept. 1917	104	51	149	304
Oct. 1917- Nov. 1918.	121	59	131	311
Total	353	170	388	911

These statistics seem to indicate that the 24th Battalion was much more disciplined than the ‘Van Doos’. The battalion’s monthly average of infractions was much lower with 24.6 from October 1915 to September 1916, 25.3 the following year, and 23.9 during their final year at the front. The unit’s average throughout the war was 24.6 infractions per month. (Appendix 2) However, similar to the ‘Van Doos’, the Victoria Rifles also had problems with illegal absences. Throughout the war, a total of 353 punishments were given out for illegal absences. They accounted for 38.7% of all infractions, compared to drunkenness (18.7%), which was the second most frequent infraction. These statistics also demonstrate that the unit’s most difficult periods were in September 1916 and November 1917, when it was punished 50 and 47 times, respectively, for minor infractions. These troublesome periods seem to have an

⁴⁹ The following statistics were gathered from LAC, RG 150, Series 1, Vol. 73 and 74. Part II orders of the 24th Battalion.

explanation. September 1916 was when the unit took part in the Somme offensives while November 1917 was the battle of Passchendaele. Compared to the ‘Van Doos’, it seems that the transition from life in England to life on the front was much smoother. Between October 1915 and December 1915, the men of the unit were punished a total of 35 times; a monthly average of only 11.6 infractions.

The statistics that were gathered from court-martial proceedings also indicate a similar situation. Compared to the ‘Van Doos’, only 119 infractions were convicted by courts-martial throughout the war. See Table 4.

Table 4: Court-martial convictions of the 24th Battalion⁵⁰

Infraction	09/1915 to 02/1916	03/1916 to 09/1916	10/1916 to 02/1917	03/1917 to 12/1917	01/1918 to 11/11/1918	Post- War	TOTAL:
Desertion	0	2	1	2	0	0	5
AWOL	1	2	4	8	7	8	30
Illegal absence related infractions	0	0	0	2	0	3	5
Drunkenness	2	1	5	1	1	0	10
Insubordination	0	0	0	4	2	2	8
Theft/Fraud	0	0	2	0	2	3	7
Striking officer or other rank	1	0	0	0	1	1	3
Disobeying	1	0	0	2	0	18	21
Negligence with firearms	2	0	4	4	7	1	18
Other	0	1	0	4	3	4	12
TOTAL:	7	6	16	27	23	40	119

These statistics also seem to indicate that the 24th Battalion was much more disciplined than the ‘Van Doos’. This is especially true with illegal absences; men of the Victoria Rifles were convicted by courts-martial only 35 times for such an

⁵⁰ The following statistics were gathered from LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Files 649-A-3297 to 649-Z-75, Reels T-8651 to 8690, Courts-Martial Proceedings of the First World War.

infraction compared to 118 for the 22nd Battalion. Not unlike the Van Doos, however, illegal absences were the most common infractions. Thirty-five of the 119 infractions (29.4%) were for AWOL and desertion. Moreover, 14 of the 30 men who were eventually charged with AWOL were initially charged with the more serious crime of desertion. This means that of 35 illegal absences, 19 (54.2%) were initially brought before courts-martial for desertion. Although the problem of illegal absences was not as obvious as that of the Van Doos (29.4% compared to 50.6%), they were nonetheless the unit's most common court-martial infraction. Illegal absences were followed by disobedience (17.6%) and negligence with firearms (15.1%).

No member of the Victoria Rifles was executed during the First World War. Only three death sentences were initially bestowed upon the 24th Battalion, but all were commuted. With every death sentence passed came several letters and appeals from the commanding officers of the 24th Battalion, 5th Brigade, and 2nd Division. The first man to be given the death penalty was Pte. Ralph Adrien Ingersoll. On July 30, 1917, he was sentenced to death when he absented himself from trench duty on July 17, until he was apprehended and taken into custody on July 27, 1917. Two officers sent letters opposing the sentence. Major-General Sir. H.E. Burstall, commander, 2nd Canadian Division argued that "owing to the high standard of discipline which has been maintained in [the] 24th Battalion, I recommend the extreme penalty be not carried out in this case."⁵¹ Lieut. Anderson, commander, 5th Canadian Trench Mortar Battery, added "As this is the first case of desertion which has occurred in this unit

⁵¹ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reel T-8670. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Ralph Adrian Ingersoll.

[...] I beg to recommend that the extreme penalty be not inflicted in this case.”⁵² The sentence was thus commuted to a ten-year penal servitude. A few weeks later, Pte. Robert L. Cheeney was charged with desertion and sentenced to death when on May 16, 1917, he absented himself until apprehended on June 20, 1917.⁵³ This time, it was Lieut.-Colonel Ritchie, commanding officer of the 24th Battalion, which sent in an appeal. He argued that “The state of discipline in this battalion at the present is excellent [...] I consider that the discipline of the battalion does not warrant the extreme penalty being inflicted in this case.”⁵⁴ Lieut.-Colonel Ritchie’s appeals were met and Pte. Cheeney was sentenced to a 15 year penal servitude.

The fact that Ritchie’s opinions of his battalion’s discipline were shared by several officers and outsiders render his comments much more reliable. Evidence therefore does not suggest that the 24th Battalion, or any of the brigade’s battalions, attempted to hide cases of indiscipline on a regular basis. In fact, such a practice would not have benefited a commanding-officer, and might have led to significant disciplinary problems. His men undoubtedly would have taken advantage of such a situation as they would have been aware that their actions would not result in an appearance before courts-martial, and that they would not receive the ensuing punishments. Thus, as was the case with the ‘Van Doos’, an undisciplined 24th Battalion, or any other, would likely have attracted the attention of brigade and division commanders as well as that of other units.

Finally, Sergeant F. Jennings was the last Victoria Rifle to be sentenced to death. He absented himself on January 21, 1916 and remained missing until apprehended on

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ LAC, RG150, Series 8, Reel T-8656. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Robert L. Cheeney.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

January 8, 1917.⁵⁵ This time, appeals came from all levels of the Canadian Corps. Lieut.-Colonel Kennedy, 24th Battalion, was the first to appeal the sentence by arguing that the “state of discipline of the battalion [was] good.”⁵⁶ This was followed by the appeals of Major-General Burstall, 2nd Infantry Division, and Brigadier-General Ross, 5th Infantry Brigade. Burstall argued that the death penalty be commuted “because the discipline in the 24th Canadian Battalion is and has been good.”⁵⁷ Ross likewise added that “in view of the fact that the discipline of the 24th Battalion is good and an example is not required [...] I recommend that the sentence be commuted.”⁵⁸

These letters are very interesting, and illustrate that the discipline of a unit was much more significant than the character of the offender when considering punishments. This confirms Desmond Morton’s statement that the main objective of military law is not necessarily to do “absolute justice to the individual”, but to maintain discipline within the ranks, and dissuade others from acting in such a disorderly fashion.⁵⁹ Iacobelli confirmed such a conclusion, especially with the use of the death sentence. In her examination of the 25 death sentences passed and 25 death sentences commuted, she noted that “behind every decision to execute was the maxim ‘for the sake of the example’ and the question of whether such an example needed to be made.”⁶⁰ She noted that such an application of the death sentence was the standard at all levels of command in the British military. For example, Field-Marshal Sir

⁵⁵ LAC, RG150, Series 8, File 649-J-11198, Reel T-8670. Court-Martial Proceedings of Sgt. F. Jennings.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Morton, “The Supreme Penalty,” p. 346.

⁶⁰ Iacobelli, “*Arbitrary Justice*,” p. 55.

Douglas Haig demonstrated his own faith in the death sentence when he argued that the Australian Corps' poor discipline resulted from the fact that "the Australians refuse[d] to allow capital punishment to be awarded to any Australian."⁶¹

2.3 The 25th (Nova Scotia) Battalion

Minor infractions also suggest that, as with the Victoria Rifles, the 25th Battalion was much more disciplined than the 'Van Doos'. See Table 5.

Table 5: Minor infractions of the 25th Battalion⁶²

Year	Absences	Drunkenness	Other Infrac.	Total
Oct. 1915- Sept. 1916	123	60	153	336
Oct. 1916- Sept. 1917	95	44	113	252
Oct. 1917- Oct. 1918	164	34	134	332
Total	382	138	400	920

During the unit's three years at the front, a total of only 920 minor infractions were punished. The battalion's monthly average was therefore much lower with 28 infractions from October 1915 to September 1916, 21 the following year, and 25.5 during their final year at the front. The unit's average throughout the war was 24.8 per month. (Appendix 3) However, as with the 'Van Doos', the majority of the unit's infractions were also illegal absences. Throughout the war, a total of 382 punishments were given out for illegal absences, which accounted for 41.5% of the unit's minor infractions; drunkenness (15%) was the second most frequent. The most difficult

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁶² The following statistics were gathered from LAC, RG 150, Series 1, Vol. 72-73. Part II Orders of the 25th Battalion.

months were during the winter of 1915-16 and August 1916. As with the 'Van Doos' and Victoria Rifles, the unit seemed to have been significantly affected by the battles of the Somme as it was punished for 54 infractions in August 1916. By August 1916, the unit had already begun training for the upcoming battle and was fully aware of the heavy casualties that had already plagued the battlefields at the Somme. Furthermore, it seems that the unit also had a difficult time adapting to life at the front, especially during its very first winter. In December 1915 and January 1916, the unit was punished for 56 and 48 infractions, respectively.

Court-martial proceedings also suggest the good behaviour of the unit. See Table 1916. Throughout the war, a total of 109 infractions were convicted by courts-martial.

Table 6: Court-martial convictions of the 25th Battalion⁶³

Infraction	09/1915 to 02/1916	03/1916 to 09/1916	10/1916 to 02/1917	03/1917 to 12/1917	01/1918 to 11/11/1918	Post- War	TOTAL:
Desertion	0	2	1	0	0	0	3
AWOL	0	4	4	5	7	2	22
Illegal absence related infractions	0	2	1	2	2	1	8
Drunkenness	8	6	4	4	3	0	25
Insubordination	0	0	0	1	5	0	6
Theft/Fraud	1	1	0	1	3	0	6
Striking officer or other rank	0	1	0	0	3	1	5
Disobeying	0	0	0	1	3	0	4
Negligence with firearms	0	0	3	1	3	1	8
Other	0	2	2	6	8	4	22
TOTAL:	9	18	15	21	37	9	109

⁶³ The following statistics were gathered from LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Files 649-A-3297 to 649-Z-75, Reels T-8651 to 8690, Courts-Martial Proceedings of the First World War.

These statistics also indicate that the 25th Battalion was much more disciplined than the 'Van Doos'. This is especially true with illegal absences; the 25th Battalion was only convicted 25 times for such infractions. Although not as obvious as the 'Van Doos', illegal absences were nevertheless the most frequent court-martial infractions. Twenty-five of the 109 infractions (22.9%) that were brought before courts-martial were for AWOL and desertion. Moreover, 11 of the 22 men that were eventually convicted of AWOL had initially been charged with the more serious crime of desertion. Therefore, out of 25 illegal absences, 14 (56%) were initially brought before courts-martial for desertion. Drunkenness (22.9%) was another serious problem in the 25th battalion, especially for its officers. In fact, seventeen of the 25 (68%) cases of drunkenness involved an officer of the battalion. This was such a problem that the commanding officer of the 2nd Division got involved and stated that "Instructions have been issued that immediate steps are to be taken to ensure that the usual customs and regulations appertaining to Officers' Messes are enforced in the 25th Canadian Bn."⁶⁴

Despite the battalion's good discipline, one of its soldiers was executed during the war. On September 16, 1916, after a short stay as an officer's servant, Pte. Elseworth Young was sent back to the front as a result of the heavy casualties the battalion had suffered at Courcellette. However, Young did not report to his company leader and was declared missing. He was arrested a couple of weeks later, on September 29, a

⁶⁴ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reel T-8670. Court-Martial Proceedings of Sgt. William Just.

few miles behind the line. Young was disguised as a corporal of the artillery and gave false details about his identity.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, with the little evidence available, it is possible to argue that the battalion perhaps demanded the commutation of the sentence on the basis that the unit did not suffer from disciplinary issues. In his study of the 25 executions, Godefroy noted that the battalion's commanding officer wrote to the court-martial jury that "the accused had been with the battalion since 1914 and though he had been thoughtless and careless and was undependable nothing had previously been brought against him regarding his conduct in the line."⁶⁶ Godefroy also noted that the commander of the 2nd Division, Major General R.E.W. Turner, had asked for the commutation of the death sentence.⁶⁷ As was demonstrated with the 24th Battalion, the recommendations of the division were generally similar to those of the brigade and the battalion. For example, when the commanding officers of the 24th Battalion sent letters to commute the sentence of Pte. Jennings, those of the 5th Brigade and 2nd Division sent similar letters. Moreover, available evidence concerning the 22nd and 24th Battalions, and Teresa Iacobelli's work have suggested that the overall discipline of the battalion was the *most* important rationale when arguing for or against the death penalty. Whether it was Tremblay, Dubuc, or Ritchie, the state of the battalion repeatedly decided the fate of the accused. Although it cannot be fully proven, circumstantial evidence suggests

⁶⁵ Although Young's execution should include the sentencing recommendations from commanding officers, which would provide us more evidence on the discipline of the unit, these have unfortunately disappeared or were simply destroyed.

⁶⁶ Cited in Godefroy, *For Freedom and Honour?*, p. 90. Unfortunately, at the time of writing, Young's court-martial files are in conservation, and cannot be consulted. However, Godefroy has consulted them and provides much information on their content. He found his information in LAC, RG 24, Vol. 2538, HQS 1822 Vol. 2, Death Sentences and Executions in the CEF, 1915-18.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

that the unit sought the commutation of Private Young's sentence based on the good discipline of the unit.

Corps and Army command disagreed and demanded that the death sentence be passed. Private Elsworth Young was shot on the morning of October 29, 1916. Why was he executed then? Teresa Iacobelli considered Young's case and concluded that the timing of his desertion sealed his fate. She concluded that his death was "no doubt due to the fact that Young deserted during the heavy fighting at Courcellette..."⁶⁸ Although this seems a likely conclusion, the maxim "for the sake of the example" could still have played a significant role. British authorities perhaps feared that if they did not punish Pte. Young, it would send the wrong message to Canadian troops, and lead to other desertions in future operations. The Somme operations of 1916 were for many Canadian soldiers their first important operation. Although Young's execution was not aimed at the battalion itself, it might have been meant as a warning to Canadian soldiers that any desertion during major operations would be dealt with ruthlessly. However, more research on the execution itself has to be done to fully demonstrate such a view.

2.4 The 26th (New Brunswick) Battalion

The examination of the 26th (New Brunswick) Battalion was much more problematic than that of the other units of the 5th Brigade as valuable information is missing. The letters sent by the commanding officers are unavailable as the unit was never given a death sentence to commute. This analysis will therefore focus on the

⁶⁸ Iacobelli, *Arbitrary Justice?*, pp. 24-25.

statistics that were gathered from the Part II daily orders and the court-martial proceedings. Moreover, statistics on minor infractions are incomplete; the part II daily orders for the first two years of the war are missing. Nevertheless, the final two years should provide a reasonable illustration of the discipline of the unit. See Table 7.

Table 7: Minor infractions of the 26th Battalion⁶⁹

Year	Absences	Drunkenness	Other Infrac.	Total
Jan. 1917- Dec. 1917	104	26	100	230
Jan. 1918- Oct. 1918.	228	28	129	385
Total	332	54	229	615

Obviously, this analysis cannot compare the 615 minor infractions of the 26th Battalion with those of the 'Van Doos'. Therefore, in order to analyse the discipline of the 26th, a monthly average of each unit's minor infractions during the last two years of the war was created. From January 1917 to December 1917, the 26th Battalion was punished 19.1 times per month, and 38.5 times per month during its final year at the front. The 22nd Battalion, on the other hand, was punished 62.6 and 49.6 times per month during the same time periods. (Appendix 4) However, similar to the 'Van Doos', the unit also had a problem with illegal absences as they accounted for 53.9% of the unit's total infractions. It is unknown whether the unit had difficulties adapting to life at the front, or how it responded to the stress of its first serious campaign at the Somme. However, available evidence has shown that the unit's most troublesome period was in July and August 1917. It was punished for 70

⁶⁹ The following statistics were gathered from LAC, RG 150, Series 1, Vol. 75. Part II Orders of the 26th Battalion.

and 54 infractions, respectively. This was likely the result of the August campaigns at Amiens and Cherisy, as the following months saw a significant drop in the unit's infractions; it was punished for 12 infractions for each of the months of September and October.

Court-martial proceedings also suggest the unit's good behaviour. See Table 8.

Throughout the war, a total of 90 infractions were convicted by courts-martial.

Table 8: Court-martial convictions of the 26th Battalion⁷⁰

Infraction	09/1915 to 02/1916	03/1916 to 09/1916	10/1916 to 02/1917	03/1917 to 12/1917	01/1918 to 11/11/1918	Post- War	TOTAL:
Desertion	0	1	0	0	1	0	2
AWOL	0	2	0	9	10	5	26
Illegal absence related infractions	0	1	0	1	0	0	2
Drunkenness	0	0	2	1	6	2	11
Insubordination	0	0	0	3	2	0	5
Theft/Fraud	0	0	0	1	7	3	11
Striking officer or other rank	0	0	1	0	1	0	2
Disobeying	0	0	0	1	1	0	2
Negligence with firearms	0	0	2	1	7	0	10
Other	1	2	3	6	7	0	19
TOTAL:	1	6	8	23	42	10	90

These statistics also seem to indicate that the 26th Battalion was much more disciplined than the 22nd Battalion. This is especially apparent with regards to illegal absences. The 'Van Doos' were found guilty of 118 counts of desertion and AWOL whereas members of the 26th Battalion were convicted of only 28 counts of illegal absences. Remarkably, only two men were charged with desertion. Nonetheless,

⁷⁰ The following statistics were gathered from LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Files 649-A-3297 to 649-Z-75, Reels T-8651 to 8690, Courts-Martial Proceedings of the First World War.

illegal absences were the most common infractions. Twenty-eight of the 90 infractions (31.1%) were for AWOL and desertion. Moreover, 15 of the 26 men that were eventually charged with AWOL were initially charged with the more serious crime of desertion. This means that of 28 illegal absences, 17 (60.7%) were initially brought before courts-martial for desertion. Although the percentage of illegal absences was not as high as that of the 'Van Doos' (50.6% compared to 33.1%), they were still the most common infractions. Drunkenness and theft/fraud followed with 11 infractions (12.2%) each.

Although the 26th Battalion was never handed a death sentence, it is difficult to comment with certainty about its level of discipline. Taking into account the maxim "for the sake of the example," it would appear that this unit's overall discipline was good. Although it cannot fully be proven whether this was the case, the statistics that were gathered from available evidence offer a very convincing case.

2.5 Were the 'Van Doos' Undisciplined?

As a result of all the available evidence, it is safe to conclude that the 'Van Doos' did suffer from a disciplinary problem. A comparison of their statistics with those of the battalions of the 5th Brigade reveals contrasting experiences. The 'Van Doos' committed significantly more minor infractions and were consequently brought before courts-martial far more often than the other units. Moreover, it seems that the 'Van Doos' was the only battalion of the brigade to be subjected to derogatory remarks concerning its discipline. These comments were considerably different than

for those of the 24th Battalion and possibly of the 25th Battalion. Although such evidence is unavailable concerning the 26th Battalion, the significance of its clean record with regards to death sentences suggests that the unit was quite disciplined. Evidence has also suggested that military law (which includes courts-martial and executions) was specifically employed to maintain and restore the discipline of a unit. If a battalion was undisciplined, a soldier would be condemned and executed. However, if a unit was not suffering from behavioural issues, a death sentence was commuted. In fact, such a rationale was prevalent in the British army. Gerald Oram noted that only a few capital cases were based on the merits of the individual, “disciplinary concerns were a major feature of the decision-making process in most instances and *the* [Oram’s Italics] major factor in many of those cases.”⁷¹ Although one can not argue that such a system proved particularly beneficial in the entire CEF, it *was* beneficial in the case of the 22nd Battalion. Prior to the arrival of Tremblay, the unit was suffering from significant disciplinary difficulties, and was, as a result, the focus of much criticism as was noted. However, by the summer of 1917, following several courts-martial and executions, Tremblay noted, both publicly and privately, that discipline was no longer a problem in the battalion. In fact, criticisms in general had ceased.

Furthermore, the first part of this chapter suggested that although various infractions were punishable by death, illegal absence (especially desertion) was targeted more than any other. As noted, the vast majority of executions (88% of those suffered by the CEF and 86% of those of the British army) were specifically for that infraction. Available evidence has also suggested that desertions and illegal absences

⁷¹ Oram, *Military Executions during World War I*, p. 68.

were, by far, the most common infraction committed by the men of the 'Van Doos'; they accounted for more than 50% of court-martial infractions and more than two thirds of all minor infractions. Even Tremblay and Dubuc noted that illegal absences had become such a problem that they resorted to harsher discipline, which included death sentences, to prevent it. Therefore, the 'Van Doos' might have gained their infamous reputation because they were constantly contravening the most serious of all infractions. This begs the question: if the soldiers of the 22nd Battalion had committed the same amount of infractions, but instead of illegal absences it was drunkenness, would they have suffered from a similar reputation?

Finally, this examination has also noted that the most troublesome period for the 'Van Doos' was between September 1916 and the summer 1917. The comments from the officers of the battalion and the statistics that were gathered reflect this. Although the unit initially had much difficulty adapting to life at the front, the months prior to Courcellette had been generally satisfactory from a disciplinary point of view as minor infractions reached their lowest point to date. What is also significant is that despite the unit's difficult period in March and April 1916, which resulted from combat at the St-Éloi Craters, Tremblay's leadership was able to restore discipline. In September 1916, as a result of the Battle of the Somme, the unit once again went through a similar difficult period and infractions again increased. However, unlike St-Éloi, the unit's discipline did not improve after the battle, but began to degrade until it reached its lowest point in January 1917 when it was punished for 103 infractions. The use of courts-martial thus increased after Courcellette only to significantly increase once again when Tremblay returned to the unit. Many questions thus arise, which will

provide the focus of the following chapter. Why did the unit suffer from such a disciplinary breakdown after Courcelette? Was it the result of the problem of integrating new recruits? Was it the fact that Tremblay was away?

CHAPTER 3

PROBLEMS OF MORALE IN THE 22ND BATTALION

Jean-Pierre Gagnon is the only historian to have attempted to explain the cause of the disciplinary problems of the 'Van Doos'. Unfortunately, he did not offer an in-depth analysis, but simply stated that heavy casualties at the Somme in September 1916, and the arrival of hundreds of reinforcements as a result could have led to the unit's disciplinary problems.¹ Gagnon also discussed the leadership of Thomas Tremblay, but failed to demonstrate how his loss affected the men of the unit. This chapter will revisit some of Gagnon's evidence and conclusions, and suggest that the unit's disciplinary problems might have resulted from poor morale.

The question of troop morale is always a very difficult topic to explain. Although various military historians and psychologists have pondered the issue, morale itself has been subjected to various interpretations, with some sharing common ground. All agree that the morale of a unit is one of the most important elements in combat performance. In his extensive study on morale, John Baynes noted, "the maintenance of morale is recognized in military circles as the most important single factor in war..."² Although there is no absolute definition of morale, it can be defined as the willingness to fight and the overall contentment and pride permeating a unit. Thus, when the morale of a unit suffers, soldiers may not perform their duties with as much enthusiasm and drive, will complain about their officers and living conditions, but more importantly, a unit might start to suffer from disciplinary problems. Such a relationship between poor morale and poor discipline has been noted by several

¹ Gagnon, *Le 22e Bataillon*, p. 285.

² Baynes, *Morale. A Study of Men and Courage*, p. 95.

historians and specialists. For example, Baynes noted that “certainly no unit with good morale has continual cases of bad discipline.”³ In *Troop Morale and Popular Culture*, John G. Fuller also suggested the connection between poor morale and poor discipline, and considered a 1947 study by S.L.A. Marshall entitled *Men Against Fire* to support his point of view. While examining soldiers of the Second World War, Marshall concluded that it is “one of the oldest myths in the military book that morale comes from discipline...the process is precisely the reverse...true discipline is the product of morale.”⁴ Morale may therefore prove the difference between a well-behaved and a deviant unit.

The sheer amount of studies on military morale demonstrates the complexities that are involved in maintaining the high spirits of a unit. In fact, these studies are essential in the following examination as they illustrate the various factors that can influence the morale of a unit. By referring to such valuable information, this chapter will therefore offer an examination of the morale of the 22nd Battalion and explain what could have led to its deterioration. Although this chapter will focus especially on leadership and reinforcements, it must be noted that it nonetheless considered every element that played a role in troop morale such as food, water, rest, leave, rum, entertainment, and sports, to name a few.⁵ All of these elements were taken into consideration, but unfortunately did not always apply to the principal topic of this examination: the 22nd Battalion. Available evidence only allowed an examination of

³ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁴ Cited in Fuller, *Troop Morale*, p. 52.

⁵ For an excellent article on the impact and benefits of rum on the morale of the troops, see Tim Cook, “More as a Medicine than a Beverage”: ‘Demon Rum’ and the Canadian Trench Soldier in the First World War, *Canadian Military History* 9:1 (Winter 2000), pp.7-22.

reinforcements, leadership, and to a lesser extent, the 22nd Battalion's relationship with the British as likely causes of this morale crisis.

3.1 Were the 'Van Doos' Suffering from a Morale Problem?

When dealing with the 22nd Battalion, it is easy to demonstrate that during its most troublesome period the unit did suffer from a problem of morale, especially if discipline is a good measure of a unit's spirits. Throughout the war, in particular after September 1916, the unit contravened regulations much more frequently than any of the other unit in the 5th Brigade.

More importantly, the evidence left by Tremblay and Georges P. Vanier also suggests a breakdown of morale within the ranks of the battalion. In a letter dated October 12, 1916, Vanier commented on the character of the unit: "Le batallion a bien changé [depuis Courcellette]; peu des anciens restent. *La gaieté d'autrefois ne règne plus* [author's italics]: cela n'est pas surprennant quand on considère les amis qui ont fait le suprême sacrifice. Ça rend un peu triste..."⁶ When Tremblay returned to the unit in February 1917, he noticed that the battalion's problems were much more than disciplinary. On March 2, 1917, he complained that "L'esprit de corps si remarquable au 22e avant la Somme n'existe pas, il faut tout de suite la ressusciter."⁷ Tremblay was extremely distressed about the state of his battalion which explains why he resorted to harsh discipline to fix it. His actions proved fruitful. By the summer of 1917, he commented that the morale and the character of the battalion was

⁶ LAC, MG 32 A2 Vol. 3, File 3-3. Correspondence of Georges P. Vanier.

⁷ Diary of Lieut.-Col. Thomas Tremblay, March 2, 1917.

improving. On July 3, 1917, he noted that his men were “de la plus belle humeur.”⁸ Even as the unit was involved in bloody operations at Hill 70 in mid-August 1917, Tremblay again noted that “le moral ne pourrait être meilleur.”⁹

As a result of the relationship between morale and discipline, it is fair to conclude that Tremblay’s disciplinary measures might have played a significant role in this turnaround. In fact, the unit’s disciplinary problem ended roughly at the same time as its morale problem. Dubuc noted in September 1917 that the unit’s discipline significantly improved and believed it was “probably because of the shooting of three men of this unit since the month of April.”¹⁰ By restoring the unit’s discipline, Tremblay might have re-established his men’s commitment to the unit, its reputation, and themselves, which eventually might have improved the spirits and the morale of the troops.

3.2 A Hundred New Faces

Available evidence suggests that the arrival of reinforcements, officers and other ranks, after the Somme operations of 1916 significantly affected the morale of the unit. Reinforcements can have a significant impact on morale as they may alter a unit’s ‘esprit de corps’. ‘Esprit de corps’ is an important factor in the motivation of troops, and can be defined as a feeling of belonging to and identity amongst a group of soldiers. Quite simply, soldiers will fight for each other. The arrival of new recruits can therefore be a detriment to the unit as new soldiers have not shared the same

⁸ *Ibid.*, July 3, 1917.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. August 14, 1917.

¹⁰ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reel T-8655. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Alexandre Dumesnil.

experiences and may not share the same values and the same bond as veterans. Lieut.-Col. Roy R. Grinker and Major John P. Speigel believe that when soldiers do not share this 'esprit de corps', poor morale will ensue.¹¹ Soldiers will perform their duties out of fear of punishment rather than out of a sense of pride, and will occasionally illustrate their resentment by an occasional "breach of discipline or acts of hostility..."¹²

As a result of the casualties suffered in September 1916, the unit received, in the following weeks, more than 600 reinforcements.¹³ In fact, the battalion had lost so many men that Georges Vanier noted that "the battalion has changed to such an extent that one could hardly recognize it."¹⁴ These reinforcements could have had a negative impact on the unit's character. This was noted in Tremblay's journal as early as November 1916. He complained that the battalion's rookies "n'ont pas *l'esprit de corps* que nous avons développé chez nos hommes jusqu'à Courcelette."¹⁵ Arthur Dubuc also noted that

(L)e récent mélange de 50 pour cent de troupes entièrement nouvelles, sans aucune expérience du combat ou des tranchés, et plus spécialement les épreuves terribles, éreintantes des deux derniers jours, ont produit la réaction inévitable d'une lassitude complète, physique et morale.¹⁶

It is apparent that these reinforcements did not share the same commitment as the veterans of the battalion. Between October 1916 and March 1917, soldiers from the

¹¹ Grinker and Speigel, *Men Under Stress*, p. 41.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹³ LAC, RG 9, Series III-D-3. Online War Diaries of the 22nd Battalion from October 1916 to December 1916.

¹⁴ LAC, MG 32 A2 Vol. 3, Letter to his mother dated October 19, 1916.

¹⁵ Diary of Thomas Tremblay, November 14, 1916.

¹⁶ Chaballe, *Histoire du 22e bataillon canadien-français*, p. 209-210.

unit were punished by courts-martial 27 times for illegal absences.¹⁷ Out of these 27 illegal absences, 14 (51.9%) were committed by soldiers who were amongst the soldiers that joined the unit after the Somme operations. Moreover, seven (25.9%) had joined the battalion only a few months before Courcellette. Finally, only six (22%) had been with the unit for more than a year. It must also be noted that two of the six veterans absented themselves while recovering from injuries in England.

In fact, evidence suggests that these reinforcements were simply not up to par with the men that gave their lives at Courcellette; this was especially due to the poor quality of the battalions from which reinforcements originated. In the weeks that followed the Somme offensives, the unit received a total of 600 reinforcements from the 41st (88), 57th (218), and 69th (233) Battalions: this is almost 90% of all reinforcements, and more than 50% of the battalion's entire strength.¹⁸ These battalions were held in Britain and were broken up to feed units at the front.

According to Jean-Pierre Gagnon and Desmond Morton, this threesome suffered from significant leadership and disciplinary problems. For example, Gagnon noted that the soldiers of the 69th Battalion received their training from officers "dont plusieurs étaient carrément incompetents et manquaient de formation, d'experience, de connaissances, ou de leadership..."¹⁹ Gagnon also noted that the men of the 57th Battalion were quite aberrant as their officers did not subject them to vigorous discipline.²⁰

¹⁷ The following statistics were gathered from the examination of the battalion's appearances before courts-martial. LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Files 649-A-3297 to 649-Z-75, Reels T-8651 to 8960. Courts-Martial Proceedings of the Soldiers of the First World War.

¹⁸ Gagnon, *Le 22e Bataillon*, p. 286.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

However, the most well-known case is that described by Desmond Morton in an article on the 41st Battalion. He noted that poor troops and leadership had rendered the battalion ineffective and ill-disciplined. For one, as a result of recruiting issues, the unit depended on other units to fill the gaps in their ranks. Morton noted that “predictably, they handed over their least desirable specimens...”²¹ These same specimens soon joined the ranks of the 22nd Battalion. Morton also noted that the unit’s officers were utterly incompetent, and provided poor training. For example, soldiers who committed serious infractions such as illegal absences were simply scolded by Lieut.-Col. Louis H. Archambeault rather than punished.²² The officers of the unit were not even disciplined themselves, and consequently did not provide the right example to their men. Not only did they suffer from a drinking problem, but according to the Court of Enquiry of the 41st Battalion in March 1916, “the officers did not seem to help and the N.C.O.’s less. They dropped out of the ranks themselves” during marching orders.²³ The battalion’s discipline became such a problem that two of its men, Lieut. Codère and Pte. Sokolovitch, were involved in separate cases of manslaughter.

These, then, were the battalions that provided 90% of the reinforcements to the 22nd Battalion after the Somme offensives. It is therefore no surprise that the *esprit de corps*, character and quality of the battalion suffered as a result. Good soldiers were replaced by poor soldiers, and good officers were replaced by poor officers. The training that these men received from their previous battalions was completely

²¹ Desmond Morton, “The Short, Unhappy Life of the 41st Battalion, C.E.F.,” *Queen’s Quarterly* 81:1 (1974), p. 76.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 75.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

inadequate, and did not prepare them to overcome the challenges that awaited the post-Somme battalion. The results were poor discipline, poor morale, and greater incidences of illegal absences.

3.3 The Loss of Thomas-Louis Tremblay

The majority of studies on military psychology agree that one of the most important factors in maintaining high troop morale is the commanding officer.²⁴ John Baynes noted that “the influence of the Commanding Officer was the greatest overall factor in shaping the battalion’s character...”²⁵ In fact, a military unit is the reflection of the abilities and the character of the officer that leads it. The role of a commanding officer is therefore very complex and an ideal one must embody several of the following qualities: he must be able to show the same passion for his men that he has for the cause; he must know them on a personal basis and act as a father figure; he must do what is best for his men, must be aware of their limits and ensure that they are not sent into a situation that he would avoid.²⁶ Because the leader serves as an example for his men and must lead them into life-threatening situations, he must demonstrate strength of character and have their utmost confidence. He must show great strength and courage, and be willing to put his life on the line along with those

²⁴ See for example Baynes, *Morale*, pp. 98 & 110-113; Grinker and Spiegel, *Men Under Stress*, pp. 46-48; Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage*, p. 180-196; and Gary L. Tischler, “Patterns of Psychiatric Attrition and of Behaviour in a Combat Zone,” *The Psychology and Physiology of Stress: With References to Special Studies of the Viet-Nam War*, ed. Peter G. Bourne (London and New York: Academic Press, 1969), pp. 22-3.

²⁵ Baynes, *Morale*, p. 101.

²⁶ Grinker and Spiegel, *Men Under Stress*, pp. 46-48.

of his men.²⁷ The role of the commanding-officer as a paternal-figure was especially important. In *Leadership in the Trenches*, Gary Sheffield noted that paternalism dominated officer-man relations in the British Army during the First World War. This was based on the belief that “privilege entailed responsibilities.”²⁸ Officers were therefore not only expected to lead their men into battle, but they were also expected to guide and help them. A delicate balance was consequently involved as officers had to ensure that their men were comfortable, but at the same time had to maintain order and discipline those who threatened the unit’s stability.²⁹ Grinker and Spiegel noted the importance of maintaining discipline: “Promptness in punishing any activity inimical to the welfare of the group is ... appreciated by the men, and is important to the maintenance of good morale.”³⁰

Thomas-Louis Tremblay was the definition of an ideal commanding officer and had the complete admiration and confidence of his men. He embodied many of the above-named qualities and it is easy to understand how his leadership could have led to such high spirits and morale amongst the men of his unit. Tremblay had the trust of all who fought alongside him. In a letter dated June 5, 1919, Georges Vanier noted that “... as long as I followed him no harm would come to me.” Even when they were in a difficult situation, he never lost his confidence in his leader and always thought that Tremblay “would bring us through.”³¹

²⁷ Baynes, *Morale*, p. 98; Grinker and Spiegel, *Men Under Stress*, pp. 46-48; Tischler, “Patterns of Psychiatric Attrition and of Behaviour in a Combat Zone,” pp. 22-23

²⁸ Gary Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches: Officer-Man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the British Army in the Era of the First World War* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd., 2000), p. 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5 & 82.

³⁰ Grinker and Spiegel, *Men Under Stress*, p. 48.

³¹ LAC, MG 32 A2 Vol. 4, File 4-2. Wartime Correspondence of Georges P. Vanier.

Tremblay's courage was also the source of admiration; he was an example that all could and would look up to. He, too, was in the front lines at Courcelette and risked his life with his men. After the advance itself, one unknown soldier noted, "Lieut.-Col. Tremblay went forward with the first wave and remarking a tendency to move too much to the right in the direction of Martinpuch, himself ran along the whole line, redirecting the advance... Three times Col. Tremblay himself was buried by the earth from shells exploding near him."³² This same soldier explained that the success of the battle was in large part due to Tremblay's work:

... 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 at the forefront of the battle, constantly exposed to shell fire and the enemy's snipers. He personally placed the forward posts and frequently visited the whole line, encouraging his men and directing defence. He established his headquarters in the very heart of Courcelette itself, and during the three days and two nights when the battalion continued to hold the village, he was timeless [i.e. tireless] in his efforts; never even paused to sleep and was the soul and spirit of the defence.³³

Even after the war, Tremblay's courage was what most remembered of their leader. During a CBC interview in the 1960s, W.R. Lindsay, veteran of the 22nd Battalion, noted that "men are always good if officers are good, it all depends on the leaders..."³⁴ This statement led him to reflect on one of his favourite memories of Thomas Tremblay.

He was a wonderful man. If we had a bombardment, we would see Tremblay in the frontline, every time... He'd be among the boys... Oh yes, Tremblay was a wonderful man. He knew what to say to the boys. He was

³² Canadian War Museum Archives, 58C 1 14.8, Account of the battle of Courcelette by an unknown soldier, September 1916.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ CBC Interviews, RG 41, Vol. 11, W.R. Lindsey interview, p. 9.

cool, he was calm, he was never frightened. He is a guy that never was frightened. He didn't get killed, I don't know why...He never was touched although he was buried a couple of times. He had thirteen batmen killed just beside him. He was not a guy to duck. When we used to call duck, you see, you would hear something and then you would try to get against the trenches to protect yourself. He would stay right there.³⁵

Tremblay was not only an example of courage, but he was also a man that was not easily intimidated. During the advance on Courcelette, the "Van Doos" captured many German prisoners:

Among the prisoners captured there were two colonels, one a regimental commander and 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.³⁶

Tremblay thus calmly sent the baron and the other prisoners away with a few of his men. Shortly after, the German artillery began to shell the area. During the chaos that ensued, the same baron encouraged his men to escape, which consequently brought him back before Tremblay.

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.'" 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.³⁷

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

³⁶ Canadian War Museum Archives, 58C 1 14.8, Account of the battle of Courcelette by an unknown soldier, September 1916.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Along with his tremendous character, courage and passion, Tremblay was a just leader and was concerned about the safety and the fate of his men. In his history of the 22nd Battalion, Chaballe noted:

Avant tout, il était juste, ce qui est chose capitale chez un chef. Connaissant tous ses hommes, il s'intéressait à leurs affaires privées. Dans la tranchée, il s'arrêtait au cours d'une tournée pour s'entretenir avec les soldats, demandant des nouvelles des parents, s'informant si l'on avait écrit, les interrogeant au sujet de la nourriture et des ennuis de la guerre.³⁸

Although he sent several troublesome soldiers before courts-martial and firing squads, he nonetheless wanted his men to get all of the honours and decorations they deserved when they displayed courage on the battlefield. For example, on the night of February 28 to March 1, the 4th Division raided German positions. To surprise the enemy, the Canadian Corps opted to forgo shelling enemy positions. Gas was also used in the attack but unfortunately, it did not have the desired effect. The Germans had recently been issued new gas masks, which protected them from the incoming chlorine and phosgene.³⁹ Moreover, German counter-shelling punctured some gas cylinders and released the toxic cloud on the attacking Canadians.⁴⁰ The results were horrifying. Hundreds of Canadians lay dead and injured in 'No Man's Land'. The situation was so bad that a Bavarian colonel asked his men to cease fire in order to give the Canadians a chance to go into 'No Man's Land' and retrieve their fallen comrades. Tremblay even noted that some Germans helped as they carried fallen soldiers and relayed them to the incoming Canadians. During the massacre, Cpl. Deblois left battalion HQ to see what was going on in the field. When he noticed the

³⁸ Chaballe, *Histoire du 22e bataillon canadien-français*, p. 111.

³⁹ Tim Cook, *No Place to Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), p. 99.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

amount of casualties, he went over, in plain daylight and against the advice of an officer of the 4th, and brought back several dead and injured soldiers. According to Tremblay, Deblois retrieved his thirteenth soldier in the German barbed wire. On his way back, he was shot in the shoulder, but continued to walk back with the injured soldier. Ironically, Tremblay noted, “Deblois mérite une punition pour avoir laissé son poste sans permission, et aussi la Croix Victoria pour cet acte presque sublime. Je vais m’occuper de son cas.”⁴¹ On March 14, 1917, he explained how he dealt with this absentee.

Je refuse aujourd’hui d’accepter le ‘bar’ au D.C.M. (Distinguished Conduct Medal) qu’on offre à Deblois en récompense de sa magnifique action après le fameux ‘raid’ de la 4e Division. Il a pleinement mérité la Croix Victoria, et j’insiste pour que la Croix Victoria lui soit décernée. On prétend que son action est celle d’un brancardier, et comme il n’est pas brancardier, il n’est pas qualifié pour cette haute décoration. Je prétends qu’au contraire, il l’a mérité plus encore qu’un brancardier, puisqu’un brancardier n’aurait fait que son devoir tandis que son acte ne pouvait être plus volontaire qu’il a été.⁴²

Unfortunately, Deblois did not receive the Victoria Cross, but was the recipient of the D.C.M., and was cited in the daily orders of the army.⁴³

There is no doubt that Tremblay was admired by the men who served with him. Throughout the war, Vanier often mentioned the possible creation of a French-Canadian brigade. When it came to a possible commanding officer, there was no doubt in his mind who it should be: “...any other consideration [than Tremblay] would be very distasteful to all French Canadians at the front.”⁴⁴ In a letter dated March 25, 1917, Major Asselin noted, “J’ai rencontré au 22e des âmes

⁴¹ Personal Diary of Thomas Tremblay, February 28, 1917.

⁴² *Ibid.*, March 14, 1917.

⁴³ Gagnon, *Le 22e Bataillon*, pp. 413-414 & 418.

⁴⁴ LAC, MG 32, A2, Vol. 3, File 3-19. Letter from Vanier to his mother, June 1918.

extraordinaires. Le colonel Tremblay en est une. À certains égards, naïf comme un enfant. Et ferme, et bon, et brave.”⁴⁵ Chaballe himself had tremendous respect for Tremblay: “[il était] le meneur d’homme par excellence; il [avait] sur eux une emprise que possèdent bien peu de chefs...il était aimé des officiers et adoré des hommes qui l’auraient suivi n’importe où sans discuter, alors même qu’ils auraient été certains d’y rester...”⁴⁶

It is easy to understand how the qualities of a great leader could have led to such high spirits and morale amongst the men of the battalion. Tremblay was a very special officer and his temporary loss had a significant impact on his men. In a letter to Henri Bourassa, editor of *Le Devoir*, dated 23 January, 1917, Corneloup noted,

Always smiling, often too much exposed,...encouraging, the brave Col... All remember still where, at the head of his battalion, always Tremblay, the fearless Colonel electrified his men and led them to the lasting glory of Courcelette...A soul, there was a soul to lead on the great and wondrous...The men, intoxicated with this rising glory, rushed madly like demons and broke the onrush of a foe who thought himself invincible...*But, when the sublime Tremblay left, these big children looked at one another. Sadness was written on their faces. A fear rose up, and confidence was gone. The second attack [at Regina Trench] was an utter failure...* [author’s italics]⁴⁷

Although the loss of Tremblay played a significant role in the battalion’s difficulties, much of the blame must also fall on the shoulders of Major Arthur Dubuc, who replaced Tremblay after the battle of Courcelette. It is no coincidence that the unit’s problems began when Dubuc took over. He was unable to restore the unit’s morale

⁴⁵ Canadian War Museum Archives, 58C 1 14.8, Extrait d’une lettre du Major Asselin, du 22ieme, à M. Jules Fournier, 25 Mars, 1917.

⁴⁶ Chaballe, *Histoire du 22e bataillon canadien-français*, p. 111.

⁴⁷ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8653. Court-martial of Claudius Corneloup. Corneloup ended up being brought before a court-martial in February 1917 for the comments he made in this letter. The original letter was written in French, but it was typed and translated into English for the court-martial proceedings. Both are available in his file.

after the Somme like Tremblay had done after St-Éloi. Unfortunately, Dubuc still remains an unknown figure in Canadian military history and has been studied very little. Moreover, he has left no material about himself and his impressions of the battalion. However, a comparison of the little evidence which survives of his character and leadership with that of Tremblay demonstrates that he not only did not share the qualities of his predecessor, but was perhaps simply, at that time, a mediocre leader.

As was noted, Desmond Morton's article on the 41st Battalion has demonstrated that poor leadership will have negative consequences on a battalion. While not as extreme, a similar situation seems to have occurred with the 22nd Battalion. Although Dubuc may have been a fine leader in his own right, he was perhaps simply unlucky to have replaced the mythical-figure of Thomas Tremblay. In contrast to Tremblay, Dubuc might have therefore appeared as a weak leader, and consequently, did not gain the respect and hearts of his men. Evidence first suggests that several individuals believed that Dubuc was not capable of leading the unit. As was noted in the previous chapter, General Turner, of the 5th Brigade, expressed his anxiousness about the battalion's discipline during Dubuc's command and wanted Tremblay to return to the front as soon as possible.⁴⁸ Although Claudius Corneloup believes that Dubuc was a fine commanding officer, he nevertheless admitted that he had been a problem to many. He noted, "...il me semble que beaucoup ont été injustes envers lui. Sans avoir la témérité et l'audace du colonel Tremblay, qui était une âme extraordinaire, le major

⁴⁸ Diary of Thomas Tremblay, January 1 to 23, 1917.

Dubuc était loin d'un peureux... On a essayé de jeter du discrédit sur cet officier supérieur... Il n'était pas aimé parce qu'il ne savait pas se faire aimer...⁴⁹

Moreover, it is fair to assume that he did not display the same courage, and fearlessness as Tremblay. On the night following the attack on Courcelette, Pte. Leo Patenaude, later promoted to the rank of colonel, had to make a dangerous run from the new front back to the original line. Despite enemy shelling and machine gun fire, he reached his objective. However, when Dubuc was asked to replace Tremblay at the front and take the same route that he had taken, Patenaude explains:

I don't know if I should say that but the second in command [Dubuc] of the 22nd unit the same night was ordered to report to replace Colonel Tremblay in the church where he was suffering from piles. The second in command went as far as Souvre LaFarnier and the firing was so intense that he came back to the 5th Brigade.⁵⁰

Gary Sheffield noted that in order to become a true leader, a newly appointed commander had to gain the confidence and the hearts of his men.⁵¹ Sheffield thus believed that Bernard Montgomery was right when he noted that "the first thing a young officer must do... is go fight a battle, and that battle is for the hearts of his men. If he wins that battle and subsequent similar ones, his men will follow him anywhere; if he loses it, he will never do any real good."⁵² Although Dubuc might have rightly considered the consequences of losing both the commanding officer and himself (the second in command), and was justified to return, Patenaude might have considered Dubuc's caution as a sign of weakness. The first chance Dubuc had to prove that he was a great leader was perhaps considered a failure. Finally, it also seems that Dubuc

⁴⁹ Corneloup, *L'épopée du vingt-deux*, pp. 134-5.

⁵⁰ CBC Interviews, RG 41, Vol. 11, Col. Leo Patenaude Interview, p. 2.

⁵¹ Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches*, pp. 79-80.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 80.

was perhaps not as stern as Tremblay in dealing with indiscipline. As was noted by Grinker and Speigel, promptly punishing troublesome soldiers was not only the mark of a quality leader, but it was important in maintaining good morale.⁵³ Evidence seems to hint that when Tremblay returned to the unit, he noted that the discipline that was practiced by Dubuc was simply not ruthless enough: “The crime of absences without leave was very prevalent in my battalion until two men were shot a short time ago. The prevalence of this crime was due principally to the extraordinary leniency of the previous courts-martial, *especially at the end of the last year, and the first 2 or 3 months of this year...*”⁵⁴ The period Tremblay was referring to coincides with Dubuc’s command.

3.4 A Tense Relationship

The arrival of reinforcements after the Somme offensives and the loss of Thomas Tremblay had damaging consequences on the morale of the unit. However, evidence could also, in time, demonstrate that the poor relationship between the soldiers of the ‘Van Doos’ and the British army played a similar role.

After the war, Corneloup noted, “le 22ième eut été blâmé, réprimandé, disgracié, parce que sur sept millions de soldats anglais, il était le seul de langue française.”⁵⁵ Available evidence partly agrees with this statement. Although the ‘Van Doos’ were disparaged throughout the war, evidence does not confirm whether this was the result

⁵³ Grinker and Speigel, *Men Under Stress*, p.48.

⁵⁴ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reel T-8656. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Oswald Henri Castonguay.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

of their being French-speaking. Nonetheless, there were intense rivalries, which led to anger and frustration amongst the ‘Van Doos’.

During an interview with the CBC, Col. Leo Patenaude, a veteran officer of the battalion, politely revealed his feelings and that of his fellow soldiers towards British soldiers. Answering a question about a specific altercation, after the British blamed them for a loss at the front in October 1916, he noted,

You go up to the trenches for example. We are being replaced by the English and you take Regina Trench, I think it happened there. ...meeting the English going up, we were coming out, they told some of our men, “we are going back to the frontline to retake the trenches you have lost,” so they started to fight together, [answered Patenaude]

You must have hated them more that you hated the Germans, [asked the interviewer]

At one time, yes.⁵⁶

Throughout the war, French-Canadians were also subjected to various insults and abuse by the British press. Thomas Tremblay blamed Lord Beaverbrook (Max Aitken), a newspaper owner and representative of the Canadian government in London, for these various attacks. Tremblay noted that

...Ses articles sont d’une violence inouïe. Tous les jours il dépeint les Canadiens-Français sous les couleurs les plus sombres. L’acte de Judas est moins traître que celui des Canadiens-Français. Nous sommes plus que des « slackers », [...] La campagne de Beaverbrooke [sic] tend à isoler complètement les Canadiens-Français et à les faire considérer par les peuples alliés dans les même sens que les chrétiens considèrent Judas...⁵⁷

Although these attacks were not aimed at the soldiers of the battalion, but to the people of Quebec who did not support the war, available evidence suggests that the

⁵⁶ CBC Interviews, RG 41, Vol. 11, Col. Leo Patenaude Interview, pp. 11-12.

⁵⁷ Diary of Thomas Tremblay, November 27, 1917.

soldiers were nonetheless disturbed by such articles. In fact, several of them took great risks to express their anger and frustration. For example, Cpl. Constant Victor Doyon sent two letters to his friends and family, which expressed his disgust towards the English. These letters were caught by the censors, however, sent to the appropriate authorities, and Doyon was quickly dealt with, and dismissed to Canada. His most virulent comments were made in a letter dated February 2, 1917. He wrote to his friend Albert Labelle:

The number of enrolled men who are pottering in Toronto, in London, at the base, or skulking behind the lines will not count in the history of the Contingent. Those men can insult the men fighting at the front who have better work to do than to answer those disguised Germans who...do nothing but...show their low, cowardly patriotism [by insulting] the French-Canadian race which has sent the flower of its youth into the battle; which knows how to fight for death or victory. ...the English ...[have never been] more shameless nor [their] cowardice more odious than at the present.⁵⁸

Along with Doyon, Thomas Tremblay was another outspoken adversary of these attacks by the British press. In November 1917, while coming out of a luncheon with Sir George Perley, Tremblay had a brief conversation with Beaverbrook. This exchange is significant as it not only illustrates Tremblay's own anger towards the controversial articles, but it also illustrates his battalion's.

- How are things at the front?, [asked Beaverbrook]
- Sorry but I don't know you, [answered Tremblay]
- How are you treated at the front?
- Sorry you are mistaken I don't know you.
- My name is Lord Beaverbrooke [sic] Max Aitken.
- My name is Lieut. Col Tremblay commanding officer of the 22nd FRENCH CANADIAN Battalion.

⁵⁸ Archives of the Royal 22nd Regiment Museum, Victor Doyon File.

- What do you think of the articles of the British Press on the Province of Quebec?
- I am a soldier and I have nothing to say in the matter.
- Do your men object to them?
- They would have no soul if they did not.
- I will advise my friend who writes those articles to be less violent.
- I would advise him, to keep clean of the 22nd Battalion whose men are fighting side by side with the British Tommies, and dying every day for the cause. The vile campaign that your friend is carrying in the British Press against the French Canadians is very much resented by every one of us. Your friend has no conscience and no idea of British fair play.
- I will tell him to be more easy.
- Tell him to shut up.
- Good day.
- Good day.⁵⁹

Unfortunately, it cannot be concluded whether this tense relationship played a significant role in the unit's poor morale, and subsequent disciplinary struggles. The only evidence that suggests that the men's spirits were affected by their relationship with the English is the following statement by Claudius Corneloup, which he claimed represented the feelings of the unit's soldiers. In December 1916, in a letter addressed to Henri Bourassa entitled "Ce qu'ils disent, Ce qu'ils pensent," he complained about the treatment the unit received from the English.⁶⁰ He explained, "After breaking down our moral and physical powers, after embittering our heart, an attempt is now made to deprive us of our soul's sustenance..."⁶¹ There is much more research to be done on the topic of the 22nd Battalion's relationship with British and English-Canadian troops.

⁵⁹ Diary of Thomas Tremblay, November 27, 1917.

⁶⁰ Although Corneloup was brought before a court-martial for this letter, he was nevertheless a tremendous soldier. Corneloup received the Distinguished Conduct Medal in November 1917 at Passchendaele. MG 32 A2 Vol. 4, File 4-11, Fonds Georges P. Vanier.

⁶¹ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8653. Court-martial Proceedings of Claudius Corneloup.

CHAPTER 4

ONE THE RUN:
AN EXAMINATION OF ILLEGAL ABSENCES

Available evidence has suggested that illegal absences (AWOL and desertion) were the most commonly punished infractions throughout the First World War. They accounted for 65.7% of all minor and court-martial infractions for the 'Van Doos', 37.6% for the Victoria Rifles, 39.6% for the 25th Battalion, and 51.1% for the 26th Battalion. Altogether, they accounted for 2,933 of the 5,472 (53.6%) infractions that were committed in the 5th Brigade.¹ Unfortunately, the topic of illegal absences has not received just attention by Canadian historians as none has actually attempted to explain their causes. This chapter will therefore undertake such an investigation and present factors that could explain why a soldier of the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade would risk his reputation, and perhaps his life, to abandon his unit. The following analysis will moreover demonstrate that illegal absences were sometimes much more complex than the simple actions of an aberrant soldier. The qualitative examples used are for soldiers for whom there is an availability of material. In several cases, valuable evidence is missing, such as the absentee's defence, conduct history, or character witnesses. Soldiers with the most evidence to offer were thus selected. It must finally be added that this chapter has considered a significant amount of both secondary and primary sources such as personal files, courts-martial proceedings, and memoirs. The subjectivity of certain courts-martial files, such as the offender's statement, was considered, and the following factors thus resulted from an analysis of

¹ This does not include the two years that are missing from the 26th Battalion's part II daily orders. These percentages were taken from the statistics that were gathered from the part II orders and the court-martial proceedings.

the accused soldier's defence, his disciplinary history and medical files, eyewitness accounts from his superior officers and fellow ranks, character witnesses and the timing of his infractions.

4.1 Poor Conduct

Perhaps the most common factor that can explain illegal absences is the fact that several soldiers simply conducted themselves poorly in the frontlines. Such soldiers did not suffer from any known psychological or health problems, but were simply repeat offenders whom their superior officers were eager to punish. A good example is Pte. James Willie Fulton of the 26th Battalion.² Pte. Fulton was subjected to disciplinary troubles several times throughout his tenure at the front. After several minor infractions, which included illegal absences, Fulton was brought before a court-martial in May 1917 for theft, fraud, and impersonating a superior officer. He was guilty of all charges and given two years' imprisonment with hard labour (IHL). When Fulton returned to the frontlines, he continued to contravene regulations. He was once again sent before a court-martial for desertion in April 1918. Fulton's medical records do not suggest that he suffered from psychological issues or nervousness. He was simply a repeat offender. Major-General Sir. H.E. Burstall recommended that "this man be committed to prison. Attention is drawn to the evidence of bad character of the accused."³ Another of his superior officers similarly

² The following information was taken from the personal files of the soldier; LAC, RG 150. Accession 1992-93/ 166, Box 3337. And from the court-martial of the soldier; LAC, Series 8, Reel T-8663. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. James Willie Fulton.

³ LAC, Series 8, Reel T-8663.

noted that “this man [had an] extremely bad character” and ought to be punished.⁴

Fulton was found guilty of absence without leave and once again given two years’

IHL.

Another good example is Pte. Arthur Desjardins of the 22nd Battalion.⁵ Pte.

Desjardins’s record suggests his poor conduct. While training in England, from May

to August 1916, he absented himself on five occasions and even refused to work

while in detention. His behaviour did not improve when he joined the ranks of the

‘Van Doos’ after the battle of Courcelette. In January 1917, he was brought before a

court-martial for illegally absenting himself on four different occasions in November

1916. Desjardins’s medical records do not suggest that he suffered from

psychological issues or nervousness. He was simply another repeat offender.

Brigadier-General A. Macdonnell noted “In view of the fact that the commanding

officer of the 22nd Battalion is desirous that the marginally noted man be committed

to prison, and taken into consideration the previous misconduct on his part and the

fact that he has given considerable trouble while under arrest, I recommend that he

undergo the punishment awarded to him.”⁶ Desjardins was guilty of AWOL and

given two years’ IHL.

Finally, there is Pte. Robert Moran of the 25th Battalion.⁷ Prior to joining the

battalion in April 1916, he was punished for seven infractions, which included six

illegal absences. His behaviour did not improve once at the front, and he continued to

⁴ The name of the officer was unreadable. LAC, Series 8, Reel T-8663.

⁵ The following information was taken from the personal files of the soldier; LAC, RG 150. Accession 1992-93/ 166, Box 2466. And from the court-martial of the soldier; LAC, Series 8, Reel T-8657. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Arthur Desjardins.

⁶ LAC, Series 8, Reel T-8657.

⁷ The following information was taken from the personal files of the soldier; LAC, RG 150. Accession 1992-93/ 166, Box 6348. And from the court-martial of the soldier; LAC, Series 8, Reel T-8679. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Robert Moran.

contravene regulations. He was first brought before a court-martial in December 1916 and was given two years' IHL for an illegal absence. He was released in January 1918, but was again brought before a court-martial six months later for yet another illegal absence. The recommendations of his superior officers were unanimous: "it is recommended that this man be committed to prison as this [is] the only way to prevent him from going absent."⁸ Brigade authorities agreed that his behaviour warranted a significant imprisonment.⁹ Moran was given two years' IHL.

4.2 Battle Exhaustion

The physical and mental consequences of war have been widely discussed by historians and medical specialists alike; many witnessed these consequences while alongside soldiers in combat. One of the accepted characteristics of warfare is that soldiers have their limits and *will* break down. This was noted by Lord Moran during the First World War. As a medical officer, he witnessed just how costly war was on the courage and character of a soldier and concluded that every soldier had his limits. He argued that "...in the trenches, a man's will power was his capital and he was always spending... When [his] capital was done, [he] was finished."¹⁰ It is therefore no longer a question of *if* a soldier will break down, but a question of *when*. This belief was also noted by of two military psychologists in 1945 after they examined American soldiers during the Second World War. In their study entitled *Men Under Stress*, Lt. Col. Roy R. Grinker and Major John P. Spiegel argued that "everyone has

⁸ LAC, Series 8, Reel T-8679.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage*, pp. 68-9.

a limit to the amount of stress which he can withstand.”¹¹ They noted that in many cases, the stress of war crippled soldiers; they call this “operational fatigue.”¹² In cases of “operational fatigue,” a soldier would lose control of his nerves, anxieties, and eventually himself. This could lead to obvious disciplinary problems.

From a Canadian perspective, Terry Copp and Bill McAndrew produced the most extensive study on the subject, entitled *Battle Exhaustion*. In their examination of Second World War soldiers, they argued that “one of the paradoxes of military affairs is that a unit needs battle experience to complete its training, but the inherent strain of operations begins a wearing-down process...”¹³ Battle exhaustion has devastating effects on the behaviour and discipline of soldiers as was demonstrated with the Canadians in Italy. After vicious fighting at Ortona, the Canadian soldiers were exhausted and needed to rest. Unfortunately, this was not on the agenda. The primary focus of the Italian campaign had turned to Cassino, where Allied soldiers were having great difficulties against German forces. In order to prevent the Germans on the Canadians’ front from reinforcing those at Cassino, the Canadian forces had to keep them in the area through continuous engagement. However, this lack of rest had devastating consequences as many began to suffer from battle exhaustion, which resulted in disciplinary problems; soldiers were ready to do anything to get their rest, including desertion. When the 1st Canadian Infantry Division opened a field punishment camp in February 1944, within a few weeks it already held 200 prisoners.¹⁴ Copp and McAndrew also noted that a total of 2,088 courts-martial had

¹¹ Grinker and Speigel, *Men Under Stress*, p. 82.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹³ Copp & McAndrew, *Battle Exhaustion*, p. 62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

been called in 1944. An 8th Army report even noted that "... the most serious of the problems in Italy was the number of good soldiers with good records who eventually broke down under the strain of prolonged action."¹⁵

Available evidence suggests that soldiers of the First World War also succumbed to battle exhaustion and illegally absented themselves as a result. Soldiers who suffered from battle exhaustion are easy to recognize. They were good, disciplined soldiers prior to their absence; they committed very few infractions while on active service and were highly esteemed by their superior officers. What made this war so unique compared to all that preceded it was that soldiers never had the peace of mind to fully rest and rebuild their physical and psychological reserves. In his study entitled *When your Number's Up*, Desmond Morton explained that when soldiers left the line, they were not expected to rest and lounge around until the next trench tour, but plenty of hard work waited.¹⁶ Soldiers not only had to clean their rifles and clothes, shine their boots, and polish their buttons, they were also expected to dig new trenches, build dugouts, repair roads, etc.¹⁷ Lord Moran, moreover, noted that even behind the line "there was no such thing as one moment's complete security."¹⁸ He argued that prior to the First World War, when combat was either hand-to-hand or close ranged, armies would retreat from the battlefield, and soldiers could rest peacefully in a worry-free environment. However, with the advent of long-range weaponry, there

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 105-106.

¹⁶ Desmond Morton, *When your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House of Canada Ltd., 1993), p. 145.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 144-45.

¹⁸ Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage*, p. 69.

was no real place to retreat as soldiers were frequently within range of enemy shells. Even away from the frontlines, death was a grim possibility.

A good example of battle exhaustion is the case of Pte. Auguste Duchesne of the 22nd Battalion.¹⁹ Duchesne arrived in France in June 1916 and prior to his desertion in April 1917, had been an exemplary soldier. Major G.E. Dupuis noted that:

he had known the accused for about two years, he is a good soldier. At the attack at Courcelette, he was under my command. He was then a machine gunner. He was on duty with his gun crew for two days [and] two nights in several exposed [and] dangerous positions [and] never left his post. He did very good work.²⁰

Lieut. G. Bourgeault similarly noted, "I have known the accused for nearly twelve months. I was his platoon sergeant in July 1916. I found him a first class soldier [and] very good on posts. He is keen on his work [and] always eager to do his tour of duty."²¹ Bourgeault also noted that Duchesne was a brave soldier. For example, at Courcelette, he had been left in a very dangerous post and remained on duty all night. The very next morning, only he and another man were left in the post. At Vimy Ridge, Bourgeault also noted that "A Lewis Gun post of three men was wiped out [and] I asked for 6 volunteers to carry these men behind the line [and the] accused was one of these volunteers."²² Despite his good conduct and character, he deserted shortly after the battle of Vimy Ridge. On April 16, his platoon leader warned him that the unit had been placed on standby, and could be sent to the trenches within the

¹⁹ The following information was taken from the personal files of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 2462. And from the courts-martial of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8660. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Auguste Duchesne.

²⁰ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8660.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

hour. The last time he was seen by his unit was on April 18. He was arrested a month later at La Havre. His court-martial showed a man that had reached his limits. He admitted that one of the reasons he absented himself was because his request for leave was rejected. He never intended to desert, but every time he had asked for leave, it was denied. Major Georges Vanier confirmed Duchesne's claims and noted that the soldier had been with the battalion for a year and had not been given any leave. Duchesne is a perfect example of battle exhaustion. He had been a good soldier who had acted courageously in two of the most costly battles of the CEF and, yet, deserted. How can one doubt the fact that after the physically and psychologically draining events at the Somme and Vimy, he simply needed to rest? Unfortunately, his previous good record was not taken into consideration as he was given 10 years' penal servitude; it was eventually commuted to 2 years' IHL.

Another good example is the case of Pte. Eugene Perry of the 22nd Battalion, one of the five executed soldiers for that unit. Eugene Perry sailed for England in October 1915 and soon joined the battalion. He was present at the Somme offensives where the battalion suffered significant casualties. His disciplinary record demonstrates that he was an ideal soldier and had only one offence until April 1917. However, after being warned for duty at Vimy, he disappeared on April 2 at 3pm and was apprehended that very day at 9:45pm.²³ His trial shows the portrait of a man who was at the end of his resources. Andrew B. Godefroy, who also examined Perry's court-martial, explains that prior to his absence he had told a sergeant that he could no longer return to the trenches. Perry furthermore added during his trial that he was

²³ This information was taken from LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 7747, and Godefroy, *For Freedom and Honour?*, p. 42.

simply too nervous to continue. Godefroy concluded that “it is clear that Perry could no longer fight.”²⁴ Nevertheless, Perry was found guilty and executed on April 11, 1917. Godefroy noted that Perry was used as an example to end the unit’s disciplinary problem. Thomas Tremblay had insisted that Perry be shot as a warning to others.²⁵

4.3 Inability to Cope with the Realities of War

When a soldier enlists for war, it is impossible to predict the manner in which he will react to his new surroundings and living conditions. For some soldiers, the stress, horrors and discomforts of war were too much to handle, and illegal absences were its consequence. This was the case with Pte. Alonzo Smith of the 26th Battalion.²⁶ Smith was one of the original members of the unit that arrived in France on September 15, 1915. As soon as he arrived at the front, it was obvious that war was simply not for him as he was in a constant state of nervousness. Many who served with him noticed his inability to cope with life on the frontline. For example, Cpl. A. McPhearson noted that Smith “is always nervous in the trenches.”²⁷ Sgt. H.D. Scribner similarly argued at the absentee’s court-martial, “the accused is satisfactory except under fire when he is extremely nervous.”²⁸ Pte. W.E. Reid even noted that “on one occasion...while [our position] was being shelled, he covered himself up with

²⁴ Godefroy, *For Freedom and Honour?*, p. 42.

²⁵ *Ibid.* Perry’s file is also in conservation. However, Godefroy provides much information concerning the court-martial proceeding.

²⁶ The following information was taken from the personal files of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 9008. And from the courts-martial of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8682. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Alonzo Smith.

²⁷ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8682.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

sandbags and lay shivering during the shelling.”²⁹ Finally, Cpl. R.A. Ralston similarly noted that Smith “has always been frightened and nervous under fire...On one occasion, he cried and begged to be allowed to stay out.”³⁰ On the night of his absence, Cpl. Ralston had even warned Smith that “if we go into the trenches tonight, you will have to go with us. There is no getting away from it this time.”³¹

Unfortunately, the stress of war finally got to him, and Smith absented himself on April 27, 1916. At 6pm, he was told by his superior officers that the unit would be going to the trenches that very night. When the unit went on parade an hour later, Smith was nowhere to be found. He was eventually arrested on May 7th, brought before a court-martial and found guilty of desertion. He was given three years’ penal servitude.

4.4 “Shell Shock” and Other Psychological Issues

Throughout the First World War, psychological problems resulting from active service were widely misunderstood by the British and Canadian military as they were not considered the cause of disciplinary infractions. In fact, Sir Andrew MacPhail, author of *The Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War, 1914-1919: The Medical Services*, commented that psychological issues were simply “manifestations of femininity” and weakness.³² However, available evidence suggests that active service did have serious consequences on the psyche of individuals. It

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Sir Andrew MacPhail, *The Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War, 1914-1919: The Medical Service* (Ottawa, 1925), pp. 276-78.

could lead to the development of psychological problems or enhance minor issues that were present in a soldier prior to the war. Throughout the First World War, medical professionals (including psychologists) often examined soldiers when they were brought before courts-martial. These specialists often concluded that some did suffer from neuropsychological issues and could not be held responsible for their actions. Moreover, how can anyone doubt the effects of stress and the horrors of war on the mental capacities of soldiers? As Chris Madsen noted, most soldiers were “simply ordinary men placed in extraordinary situations.”³³

Several psychologists agree with these conclusions. The First World War was an important event in the history of psychiatry as the discipline took a “great leap forward” in Canada and Europe.³⁴ In fact, the “shell shock” debate pushed psychiatry to the forefront of the medical profession, and the advice of psychiatrists was sought by politicians, educational leaders, and prison officials alike. Although “shell shock” was initially believed to be a physical problem with the brain, it was soon also recognized as a psychological problem. Dr. Colin Russel, head of the Canadian Special Hospital for Nervous Diseases at Ramsgate, noted that “shell shock” also resulted from the “expectancy of being exposed to grave danger, danger clothed in such terrifying forms as human nature has seldom been called upon to face previously.”³⁵ The terrifying nature of war was perfectly captured by Dr. C.B. Farrar, Medical Director of the Canadian National Committee for Mental Hygiene and Psychiatrists to the Department of Soldiers’ Civil Re-Establishment in 1919, when he

³³ Chris Madsen, *Another Kind of Justice: Canadian Military Law from Confederation to Somalia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), p. 46.

³⁴ Brown, “Shell Shock in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918,” p. 324.

³⁵ Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 314.

noted, “the terrors of the trenches...were omnipresent and uninterrupted...they threatened by night and day...and they strike not alone the surface of the earth but from the skies above and from subterranean depths.”³⁶

The psychological effects of war gained more attention during and after the Second World War and psychologists began to fully understand the effects of war on the character and conduct of soldiers. For example, soldiers who suffered from neuropsychological issues were more likely to get into disciplinary troubles than those who did not. In their study entitled *Psychiatrie Militaire*, psychiatrists P. Julliet and P. Moutin agreed with this statement, and listed several studies that confirmed such an assumption. For example, in a 1947 study entitled, *Évaluation psychiatrique du délinquant dans la marine*, L.D. Boshes examined 2,046 U.S. marines that suffered from disciplinary problems during the war. He noted that 1,585 (77.4%) suffered from psychological issues which included hysteria, immaturity, schizophrenia, and intense nervousness.³⁷ In 1946, J.C. Penton examined 2,000 deserters and noted that only 43% could be considered normal. The remaining 57%, he concluded, suffered from “disharmonious personalities.”³⁸ Finally, in a 1966 study entitled *Psychiatrie dans le système pénitentiaire de l’armée*, I.C. Berlien presented his result for his examination of 23,143 military delinquents that were detained in 1945. He noted that only 40.5% of them had no *major* anomalies, while 59.5% suffered from major psychological problems.³⁹ These studies have noted that symptoms often took much time to reveal themselves. A soldier who thus deserted or refused to fight

³⁶ Cited in *Ibid.*

³⁷ Julliet & Moutin, *Psychiatrie Militaire*, p. 336.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

for no apparent reason would therefore get into disciplinary troubles.⁴⁰ War also had a tremendous effect on soldiers who suffered from the slightest pre-war psychological flaws. A study by N.Q Brill and B.W. Beebe, *A Follow-up Study of War Neuroses*, noted that soldiers with pre-existing neuropsychological defects had seven to eight times more chances of suffering from serious psychological issues while in service.⁴¹

Soldiers of the First World War also suffered from such psychological problems. As will be shown below, medical officers who examined these soldiers have even concluded that several of them were not responsible for their actions and in some cases, had their cases dismissed.

Several soldiers succumbed to the stress of active service and developed neuropsychological problems. A good example is the case of Pte. Henry Rastel who joined the 22nd Battalion in June 1918.⁴² It did not take long for Rastel to fall prey to the stress of war. In July 1918, he was brought before a court-martial for absenting himself from his post. At his defence, he claimed that since he joined the army, God had been punishing him. His medical records show that in August 1918, he suffered a nervous breakdown and was diagnosed with delusional insanity, which was, according to his medical records, the result of combat stress. His records also noted that the soldier had “no history [of psychological issues] prior to enlistment. [He] became delusional in France [and]... also hallucinated.”⁴³ He was sent to England in late August 1918 to be examined by a medical board. They noted that he was “very

⁴⁰ Grinker and Speigel, *Men Under Stress*, p. 57.

⁴¹ Noted in Bourne, *The Psychology and Physiology of Stress*, p. 21.

⁴² The following information was taken from the personal files of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 8102. And from the courts-martial of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8684. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Henry Rastell.

⁴³ LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 8102.

emotional [and] laughs immediately without apparent reason. No desire to go to work [and] says laughingly that life is of no use to him but denies any suicidal ideas. [He] was visited by [his] wife and child...but would not recognize the visitor was his wife but accepted the child as his...”⁴⁴ The case was eventually dismissed, and Rastel was discharged as medically unfit.

Another good example is the case of Pte. John Lannigan of the 24th Battalion.⁴⁵ In September 1916, John Lannigan was sentenced to 5 years’ penal servitude for deserting His Majesty’s forces. Although one might believe that his desertion resulted from the potential danger of the Somme offensives, his medical records reveal a different story. On November 22, 1916, medical specialists concluded that Lannigan was suffering from dementia. A month later, on December 23, 1916, they added that the problem had originated “4 months ago [in] France.”⁴⁶ This means that he started having neuropsychological problems in August of 1916, a few weeks before he deserted his unit. His medical examiners noted that after he arrived in France he was under a great deal of fire, they also added that he was not wounded. Nevertheless, they concluded that he was suffering from “stress of campaign acting”, in other words, active service, and was not fit for duty.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Pte. Lannigan was “very delusional [,] thinks people are plotting against him, that everyone is talking in reference to his case [...]”⁴⁸ This was very detrimental to his mental health and discipline as he most likely isolated himself from his fellow comrades. This without a

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ The following information was taken from the personal files of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 5735. And from the courts-martial of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8671. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. John Lannigan.

⁴⁶ LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 5735.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

doubt destroyed the solidarity he had with his unit, perhaps a factor persuading him to desert. When he was discharged, his case was reviewed by a medical board that concluded that the "Patient's mental condition has improved sufficiently so that he is able to take good care of himself, but still shows slight retardation..."⁴⁹ Moreover, Pte. John Lannigan was apparently a very good soldier at the front prior to his infraction. According to Sgt. Gardner, "I have always found him a good worker...He is a willing man and has never given any trouble."⁵⁰ Although there is no evidence suggesting whether the medical officers believed that Lannigan was responsible or not for his actions, there is little doubt that his condition could have played a significant role in his absence.

Finally, there is the case of Pte. Richard Aggee of the 22nd Battalion.⁵¹ Throughout his stay at the front, Aggee was brought before courts-martial in June 1917 and June 1918 for desertion. Although one might believe that he was simply a delinquent, his officers did not believe so. During his 1917 court-martial, Sgt. J.A. Gourier noted that Aggee was "so nervous [in the trenches that] I could not leave him alone on a post...Although he was nervous he always...did his work."⁵² During his second court-martial, his nervousness was again considered. This time, however, medical officers concluded that he suffered from more than nervousness issues and sent him to England to be examined. His medical records reveal the portrait of a man that was not in his right mind and not responsible for his actions. First, his medical

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8671.

⁵¹ The following information was taken from the personal files of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 8225. And from the courts-martial of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8684. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Richard Aggee.

⁵² LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8684.

history showed no signs of psychological troubles prior to enlisting. Apparently, the soldier had been under a great deal of fire in October 1916 and was wounded by shrapnel. Soon after, he began to suffer from terrible headaches. The doctors who examined him in England diagnosed him with feeble mindedness and noted that “he has periods of dullness [and] partial amnesia when his head was usually bad.”⁵³ They also tested his memory and intelligence with simple questions. For example, when asked what was the capital of Canada, he answered Montreal. When he was asked who was the king of England, he answered, “don’t know but he was old (and) had a big beard.”⁵⁴ They also concluded that “his...behaviour and general outlook are those of a child of about 12 years...[and] his attention is easily distractible.”⁵⁵ The question of responsibility thus came into consideration. Aggee argued that “he has no recollection of absenting himself on the occasion for which he had been tried.”⁵⁶ The specialist who examined him, W.L. Chambers, agreed:

Undoubtedly this man suffers from such a degree of mental deficiency as to render him incapable of withstanding any degree of stress or strain. Under such conditions he would not [be] responsible for his actions. I do not believe he was responsible at the time of his offence.”⁵⁷

Luckily for Aggee, the death sentence he was given for his second sentence was dismissed as a result of his obvious mental disabilities. He was evacuated to England for further help.

⁵³ LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 8225

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Amongst the many cases of war neuroses, there are also examples of soldiers who suffered from pre-existing psychological issues, which were severely amplified as a result of the war. A good example is the case of Pte. Victor St-Jean of the 22nd Battalion.⁵⁸ St-Jean arrived at the front on September 15, 1915, and in 1916, his disciplinary troubles began as he was brought before courts-martial in March and June 1916 for desertion. During his first court-martial, his nerves and sanity were addressed. St-Jean said in his defence; “when I left the trenches...I was a nervous wreck. I ran around the fields without knowing what I was doing. I had no control over my nerves.”⁵⁹ A fellow soldier, Pte. G. Senecal, also noted

I have known the accused some fourteen months [and] have always found him very nervous [and] peculiar. Since the death of his platoon [sergeant] about four months ago the accused had acted very strangely doing things that no sane man would do. The accused was about ten feet from his platoon sergeant when the latter was killed by a shell...⁶⁰

During his second court-martial, his sanity was again taken into consideration. Sgt-Maj. J. G. Meauld noted that St-Jean did “not appear in his right mind.” The man who arrested St-Jean, Lt. H.J. Woodman, also noted that when he apprehended the accused he did “not appear in his right mind [and had] no idea where he comes from, or where he is going.”⁶¹ These signs of mental disability were confirmed in June 1916 when a medical board diagnosed St-Jean with dementia. Apparently, he was a very nervous individual prior to the war, which was aggravated when he witnessed the death of one of his comrades. One of his superior officers noted that “all went well with him up to

⁵⁸ The following information was taken from the personal files of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 8596. And from the courts-martial of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8653. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Victor St-Jean.

⁵⁹ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8653.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

the end of November 1915 when a sergeant was killed by a shell beside him. This got [to] his nerves and sometime after the holidays...he ran away.”⁶² A medical board noted that he was “weak minded and childish...is emotional...and has little self control.”⁶³ As a result, it was the general consensus that he was not responsible for his absence. Charles Meyer, medical officer for the 2nd Canadian Division, noted that “taking his general physical condition with consideration, I am of the opinion that he is not fully responsible for his actions...”⁶⁴ Capt. J.M.B. Prevost, medical officer of the 22nd Battalion, similarly concluded, “...I have this date and in a previous occasion made a careful examination of Pte. V. St-Jean...also an enquiry as to his past life. From the examination [and] the information gathered I am of the opinion that this man is suffering from shell shock, is mentally depressed and not responsible for his actions.”⁶⁵ The case was dismissed and the soldier was discharged as medically unfit.

4.5 Other Causes of Illegal Absences

Combat-Related Absences

Advancing on enemy lines is a very stressful and confusing moment for a soldier. Under the cover of darkness, in often unfavourable weather conditions, a soldier was expected to find his objective through a maze of trenches, enemy and friendly shelling, and enemy defences and barbed wire. It is therefore not a surprise that some soldiers simply became lost. This was the case with Pte. Lewis Lloyd Forsythe of the

⁶² LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 8596.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8653.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

26th Battalion.⁶⁶ On the morning of August 15, 1917, he went over with his section, and headed for his objective (Hill 70). It was a very dark morning, and as a result of the chaos and excitement of the attack, he got separated from his section and found himself with the 4th Brigade. After the attack, he enquired on the whereabouts of his unit, but was unable to reach it as a result of enemy shelling and snipers. The next morning, while still searching for his unit, he ran into several wounded soldiers of the 26th and they told him where he could find the battalion, which he did. At his court-martial, Forsythe explained that while he was looking for the unit, he assisted injured soldiers get to dressing stations and provided eyewitness testimonies to confirm these claims. It must be added that Forsythe was diagnosed with shell shock after the Somme, and suffered from nervousness. However, this did not seem to affect him as he had a clean conduct record, and never absented himself from the battalion. He was even considered by Lieut. Campbell, “a good soldier and he has never caused any trouble in my company.”⁶⁷ Although one might feel compelled to argue that shell shock may have been the cause of his absence, the jury at his court-martial believed his story and gave him a minor punishment for such a serious infraction. For absenting himself during the advance, an offence which previously had been punished by death despite claims of exhaustion and nervousness, he was sentenced to a three-day field punishment. Sgt. Kaine’s testimony played a significant role in the leniency of the court-martial. Apparently, at the moment of the attack, he noted that it was very dark and there had been a lot of shelling and gas attacks. Sgt. Kaine concluded that it

⁶⁶ The following information was taken from the personal files of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3215. And from the courts-martial of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8663. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Lewis Lloyd Forsythe.

⁶⁷ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8663.

would have been in fact quite easy for a soldier to lose himself. Claudius Corneloup also mentioned in his book, *L'épopée du vingt-deuxième*, that the attack had been confusing.

Les bataillons s'avancèrent derrière le barrage. Presque tous les soldats avaient allumé leur pipe ou une cigarette. Le mélange était unique: 22ième, 24ième, 25ième et 26ième bataillons étaient ensemble, et cependant ils ne devaient pas l'être. L'objectif du 22ième était fixé un peu en avant de la route Lens-La Bassée, celui du 26ième à la fosse 14 de la cité Saint-Auguste; il y avait des 22 rendus à la fosse 14 et des 26 dans nos lignes.⁶⁸

In fact, Forsythe was not the only soldier of the 26th to have become lost during the advance. Two other 'good' soldiers, Ptes. Crawford Fullmore and Fred Plummer Johnston, were initially given two-year prison sentences for their absences on August 15.⁶⁹ Both soldiers had clean records, were highly esteemed by their superior officers, and unlike Forsythe, did not suffer from nervousness issues. As a result of their sentencing, the officers of the unit sent various letters to the jury of the court-martial. They read; "I recommend that the punishment be suspended. The man concerned had up until this time done very good work with the battalion, and he has a clean record I feel that, if given the chance, he will make good."⁷⁰ Their appeals were successful as Johnston's and Fullmore's sentences were dismissed.

Another combat-related absence stems from the fact that in the face of danger and potential death, some soldiers were given no choice but to leave their posts. Pte.

⁶⁸ Claudius Corneloup, *L'épopée du vingt-deuxième Canadiens-français*, p.80.

⁶⁹ The following information was taken from the personal files of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3336 & 4867. And from the courts-martial of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8663 & 8670. Courts-Martial Proceedings of Ptes. Crawford Fullmore and Fred Plummer Johnston.

⁷⁰ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8663 & 8670.

William Davis of the 26th Battalion absented himself for such a reason.⁷¹ On the night of April 28, 1917, Davis was sent to a listening post. During enemy shelling, he left his post without orders to find shelter, which brought him before a court-martial. Davis seemed to have a good reason to leave his post. When he arrived at the post, he noted that it was nothing but a shallow shell-hole, which afforded no cover against shrapnel. When the Germans began to shell the area, he believed he was justified to move to a safer area. Davis was highly esteemed by his superior officers. Lt. Fulton noted that he had a very good character, was well-behaved and quite popular in his unit. He always did his job, remained at his posts, and this was the first instance of such an incident.⁷² Sgt. Graham also noted that he had known the accused for a long time and that he was always willing to do his work; he was a good soldier.⁷³ Although he was initially given a one-year imprisonment, he was eventually declared not guilty and the case was dismissed.

Girls, Girls, Girls...

Thomas Tremblay once noted that French women had a negative effect on the men of his battalion. He complained that “un grand nombre de femmes sont très légères et causent beaucoup d’ennuis en rapport à la discipline du bataillon.”⁷⁴ During his CBC interview, Staff Sgt. Leo Lasnier noted that many men would often absent themselves in the search of such women:

⁷¹ The following information was taken from the personal files of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 2359. And from the courts-martial of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8655. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. William Davis.

⁷² LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8655.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Diary of Lt.-Col. Thomas Tremblay, November 14, 1917.

Sometimes skipping away and walking five or six miles to a village to go in an estaminet and have some red wine. You walk in there and you have a military suit, an English military suit, and the French women used to take you for an English soldier and you'd ask them in French for what you want and you had them on your knee...⁷⁵

Available evidence suggests that several soldiers did absent themselves as a result of a woman. Evidence further suggests that this was especially a problem for the men of the 'Van Doos' as no other soldiers of the 5th Brigade are known to have absented themselves for such reasons. For example, Pte. Edmond David was brought before a court-martial for an illegal absence that lasted from February 18 to March 5, 1918.⁷⁶ His story is an all-too-familiar one with the 'Van Doos.' During his defence, he did not attempt to blame his absence through sickness or "shell shock," but simply admitted that he left to go see some local women. What makes David's defence believable is the fact that he was well-behaved and appreciated by his officers. Lt. P. Bageault noted, "the accused is in my platoon...He always did his duty in the trenches."⁷⁷ According to another officer, "I have known the accused for a year and he has been in my platoon all that time. He [is]...a very good man. He has never had a crime against him while he was in the battalion."⁷⁸ Moreover, several witnesses saw the accused at Herison, on March 5th, prior to his arrest with a woman. Pte. J.A. Morris noted, "I found the accused...sitting in a back room talking to a girl. He was in uniform..."⁷⁹ He was guilty of AWOL and given a 15-year penal servitude. Although the severity of the sentence was not explained at David's court-martial, Pte.

⁷⁵ CBC Interviews, RG 41, Vol. 11. Interview with Staff. Sgt. Leo Lasnier, p. 7.

⁷⁶ The following information was taken from the personal files of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 2312. And from the courts-martial of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8655. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Edmond David.

⁷⁷ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8655.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

Edmond Boyer's trial does offer some valuable insight. Boyer and David were both brought before courts-martial for the same offence; both absented themselves from February 18 to March 5, 1918. Evidence suggests that both were used as examples. In a letter, Tremblay noted that if Boyer was "allowed to remain with the battalion, without apparent punishment, the influence on the other men of this unit will be bad and the seriousness of the crime of desertion will not be brought home to them as it should be."⁸⁰ Similar to David, Boyer was also given 15 years' penal servitude. These are simply a few of the many similar examples that were noted. For several soldiers of the 'Van Doos,' the lure of women was enough to risk courts-martial. This was especially a problem for the men of the 22nd Battalion simply because they spoke French, and could therefore communicate with the local population far easier than an English-speaking soldier; the temptation to leave one's unit could therefore easily be acted upon.

Fear of Consequences

Other soldiers absented themselves as a result of a previous infraction. In other words, they feared the consequences of their actions. A good example is Pte. John A. Nelson of the 22nd Battalion.⁸¹ After being placed in the guard room for a minor infraction, Nelson was taken out in time for the attack on Vimy Ridge so he could redeem himself during the advance. The accused went to the jumping-off trench with his company, but was not seen by his officers during the attack. The actual time and

⁸⁰ The following information was taken from the courts-martial of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8652. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Edmond Boyer.

⁸¹ The following information was taken from the personal files of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 7268. And from the courts-martial of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8673. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. John A. Nelson.

cause of his departure was never figured out; several witnesses claimed they saw him in the Vimy area between April 9th and 13th with German prisoners. The soldier nevertheless went absent and remained so until he was arrested on May 8, 1917. His court-martial proceedings provide contradicting character witnesses. For one, Major-General H. Burstall believed that the soldier's conduct sheet, which counted five minor infractions, demonstrated that he had a bad character. However, Sgt. A. Fraser of the 'Van Doos' noted that "the accused...was always a good man in the trenches."⁸² Although the reason for his departure is debatable, the reason he gave explaining the length of his absence is plausible. At his court-martial, he noted, "I intended everyday to report back to the Battn. but was afraid of the consequences..."⁸³ It is fair to assume that the recent events within the unit might have led to his fear of returning to the unit. As was noted in the second chapter, when Tremblay returned to the unit, he attempted to restore its discipline, which had significantly deteriorated since September 1916, through the threat and use of court-martial and even executions. Upon his return, Nelson would surely have faced a court-martial, and perhaps worse.

Protest Absence

It seems that a few soldiers used illegal absences to display their disapproval and displeasure when they felt they were being cheated by their units. For many, leaving their unit was their only way of obtaining some sort of revenge. A good example is

⁸² LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8673.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

the case of Pte. Joseph Lapointe of the 'Van Doos'.⁸⁴ In August and September 1917, Lapointe absented himself for 10 days. In his defence, he claimed, "I did this because of unfair things which have been done to me."⁸⁵ Apparently, Lapointe had been the chief cook of the battalion for the eight months prior to his absence. However, he was unexpectedly replaced with another man and was retrograded to third cook. He found this very unfair and decided to leave the unit. He had given good service to the unit and found it unjust to be treated in such a way. Sgt. Belanger noted that "the accused when in the trenches was a good soldier. He was in the charge at Lens and did his duty well. I have no complaint to make against him."⁸⁶ Lapointe was extremely well-behaved and reliable, and this proved to be his last infraction. He was given a 42-day field punishment.

Other

Finally, the following factors were quite uncommon and were often limited to one or very few soldiers. Throughout the war, several soldiers claimed that they absented themselves because they were simply too sick to go in the line. However, at their courts-martial, medical officers could not support their claims as several such soldiers never asked for their assistance, which undermined their defences. In some cases, however, such as that of Pte. James Harding Humphrey of the 25th Battalion, it is possible to confirm that his sickness was the cause of his absence.⁸⁷ On January 2,

⁸⁴ The following information was taken from the personal files of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 5396. And from the courts-martial of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8674. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Joseph Lapointe.

⁸⁵ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8674.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ The following information was taken from the personal files of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 4611. And from the courts-martial of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8664. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. James Harding Humphrey.

1917, prior to proceeding to the trenches, the accused failed to appear on parade and was not seen until apprehended by military authorities on January 24, 1917. It must be added that this was not his first infraction; he had committed four illegal absences since he had enlisted. During his court-martial, he claimed that he was feeling so sick that he did not care about the consequences of his absence. He also mentioned that he was in an insane asylum for a year in New Brunswick, but does not remember when. It is not clear whether he was telling the truth or not. A medical officer examined him and concluded that he "is unable to state definitely whether [the accused] is insane or not."⁸⁸ Was he really insane or delusional because of his claimed sickness? His medical records make his claim probable. In November 1916, he complained to the medical officer of the unit of some irritation in his chest. He was later diagnosed with tuberculosis and suffered from violent coughs, haemorrhages, and respiratory problems. He died on February 2, 1917, only one week after he was arrested for desertion.

Another unusual cause of illegal absence, and one that was solely limited to the 'Van Doos', was the simple fact that some soldiers did not understand orders warning them to go to the front because they were given in English. Although this was not a problem for soldiers serving in the 'Van Doos', since the internal language of the battalion was French, it was a problem for the following soldier who was briefly attached to the 5th Brigade Trench Mortars. Pte. Pierre Anger was brought before a

⁸⁸ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8664.

court-martial for desertion when he missed a trench tour on May 24, 1917.⁸⁹ Apparently, the orders to move to the front were only given in English and he did not understand them. The evidence presented during his court-martial confirmed his defence. Cpl. Couturier explained, "I did not myself repeat the orders in French."⁹⁰ However, Sgt. Grenier claims that orders were given in French by Sgt. Descarriaux. Cpl. Couturier refuted Grenier's statement arguing that if the sergeant in question had given the orders in French, he would have heard them, which he did not. Descarriaux also mentioned that it was his duty to repeat orders in French, but for some reason, which he did not explain, he did not on that day. Moreover, this was not a soldier with a disciplinary problem, but one who had a clean record and was appreciated by his superior officers. He had never missed a trench tour, and his court-martial was his first and only infraction during the war. Company Sergeant Major P. Tremblay noted that he had known the soldier since October 1916 and that "he has never refused to obey an order. He was a very good man in my platoon [and] always did the work I gave him to do. To my knowledge, all orders had to [be] translated into French for the accused. He does not speak English."⁹¹ Unfortunately, as a result of the prevalence of illegal absences in the battalion, he was found guilty and given a penal servitude.

Finally, several soldiers while in reserve in England, claimed they absented themselves because they could not adapt to life away from the front, and wanted to return to their units. However, most were arrested in London pubs. This was not the

⁸⁹ The following information was taken from the personal files of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 187. And from the courts-martial of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8651. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Pierre Anger.

⁹⁰ LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8651.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

case for Pte. Charles Berthiaume of the Van Doos.⁹² In February 1918, while in England, he absented himself and was arrested on March 17, 1918. The accused had been in convalescence since he was wounded in April 1917. During his defence, the accused claimed that he had not been to the front since April 1917 and was “anxious to get back to [his] battalion so [he] went out without authority [and] reported.”⁹³ Berthiaume was far from an ideal soldier as he had already been brought before a court-martial in March 1917. However, his claims were confirmed by the following letter from the 22nd Battalion itself, “The marginally noted arrived at this unit, last night, stating that he had come from the 2nd Command Depot, Bramshott, without authority whatever.”⁹⁴

Through an analysis of court-martial proceedings, medical files, and disciplinary histories, this chapter proposed several factors that could explain why a soldier would leave his unit, and risk severe punishments. This analysis has moreover demonstrated that illegal absences are much more complex than the actions of an undisciplined and aberrant soldier. Although some soldiers consciously made the decision to desert, it could be argued that some did not. For a number of soldiers, it demonstrated an inability to cope with trench warfare as seen with Alonzo Smith. Other soldiers appeared to be the unfortunate victims of circumstances as confusion in battle or enemy activities led to their absences. It also seems that other soldiers were not in full control of their actions as the stress and horror of war got the best of their

⁹² The following information was taken from the personal files of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 691. And from the courts-martial of the soldier; LAC, RG 150, Series 8, Reels T-8652. Court-Martial Proceedings of Pte. Charles Berthiaume.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

psychological capabilities. This examination is therefore much more than an attempt to find factors that could explain the behaviour of some soldiers. It also provides a glimpse into the psyches of soldiers of the First World War. In many ways, an illegal absence is a demonstration of a soldier's inability to cope with the reality of war, and an attempt to escape the physical and mental grind of daily life in the front lines.

CONCLUSION

Although the 22nd Battalion displayed extraordinary courage on the battlefields of Europe throughout the First World War, its reputation remains tarnished by the belief that it suffered from a disciplinary problem. By examining the discipline of the other battalions of the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade and comparing it to that of the 22nd Battalion, this thesis attempted to determine whether the unit's infamous reputation is justifiable or not. Such a comparison has added more depth to the claims that the 'Van Doos' suffered from a disciplinary problem and, in the process, has confirmed several historians' assumptions that this was the case. The statistics that were gathered are convincing. The 22nd Battalion contravened regulations significantly more often than the other units it served alongside. Moreover, these figures confirm the complaints of the officers of the battalion, brigade, and division concerning the unit's behaviour. From October 1916 to the summer of 1917, the unit's behaviour had been subjected to much criticism, unique to the 'Van Doos' amongst the battalions of the 5th Brigade. This thesis has also proposed a possible theory that could explain the unit's unfortunate reputation. Throughout the First World War, illegal absences (especially desertion) were considered the gravest breach of conduct by British military authorities. They were the most severely punished infractions, and were the cause of 22 of the 25 executions suffered by the CEF. Evidence has also demonstrated that they accounted for the majority of the 22nd Battalion's disciplinary troubles. The 'Van Doos' therefore might have earned their infamous reputation because they were constantly contravening the most serious infractions. In order to

support such a view, however, an examination of a unit with a similar total of infractions, but significantly fewer illegal absences, must be undertaken.

Although several historians agree that the 22nd Battalion suffered from a disciplinary problem, only Jean-Pierre Gagnon has offered a detailed explanation. Gagnon attributes the unit's poor discipline to the heavy casualties it suffered at the Somme in 1916, and the subsequent arrival of numerous reinforcements. Although Gagnon's assumptions are plausible, this thesis has forwarded the theory that poor morale could have been a more likely cause. An examination of the evidence left by the unit's officers has demonstrated that the 22nd Battalion suffered from a problem of morale from October 1916 to the summer of 1917. Considered one of the most important and complex elements in combat, military morale can be the difference between a disciplined and a disorderly unit. The 22nd Battalion was no exception as its morale and disciplinary problems coincided with one another; both began after the operations at the Somme in September 1916 and ended in the summer of 1917. This thesis thus suggested several factors that could explain the battalion's morale breakdown, which subsequently led to poor discipline. Evidence first suggests that the unit's *esprit de corps* suffered as a result of the arrival of reinforcements, officers and other ranks, after the Somme offensives. It seems that these did not share the same commitment as the veterans, and several of them got into disciplinary troubles. Even the commanding officer of the battalion, Thomas Tremblay, complained that they had a negative effect on the unit's *esprit de corps*, which is itself an important factor in the maintenance of morale. More importantly, the loss of Thomas Tremblay after Courcellette seemed to have had a tremendous impact on the spirits of the unit.

Tremblay was a top-quality commanding officer; he had great courage, was ready to risk his life alongside his men and had the confidence of all who served with him. Such a leader cannot easily be replaced. The fact that the unit's behavioural and morale problems began with the loss of Tremblay is no coincidence.

Finally, evidence has demonstrated that illegal absences were not only the most common infractions in the 'Van Doos', but in the entire 5th Brigade. They accounted for 53.6% of all infractions. Unfortunately, for such a considerable problem in the CEF, the topic of illegal absences has not received the attention of Canadian military historians. This thesis has attempted to determine factors that could explain their cause. Although illegal absences may appear as simple disciplinary infractions and manifestations of aberrant behaviour, which is sometimes the case, they are, in fact, much more complex. For example, while for some soldiers absenting themselves meant replenishing their physical and psychological reserves, to others it was a reaction to an uncontrollable fear and nervousness that the grim realities of war would occasion. In several other cases, illegal absences illustrate the tremendous psychological effects of war as the rational mind of soldiers gave way to irrational behaviour. Despite the fact that this thesis has demonstrated that in some cases soldiers could not be accountable for their actions, it does not desire to validate or justify the actions of these absentees, given that all were aware of the rules and regulations of the British military. It would also be unfair to the many other soldiers who dealt with their fears and nervousness without any disciplinary breaches. By examining the several causes of illegal absences, this thesis hoped to illustrate that illegal absences were sometimes much more than the acts of undisciplined soldiers.

Despite the occasional lack of available material, this thesis has strengthened the understanding of the 22nd Battalion's behaviour, discipline, and ultimately, its combat record. It first reassesses a common assumption about the battalion's disciplinary problems, and reinforces it through a comparison of the three units that shared the most similar wartime experiences with the 'Van Doos'. This thesis has also offered a different perspective to the disciplinary problems of the unit. Explaining why the 'Van Doos' suffered from a crisis of morale is a much more complex question, which needs to be further explored as new evidence becomes available. At the very least, this thesis has provided some plausible explanations and hopefully intriguing leads for future historians.

APPENDIX 1

MONTHLY OVERVIEW OF THE MINOR INFRACTIONS FOR THE 22ND BATTALION

Month	Illegal absences	Total
October 1915	93	151
November 1915	86	122
December 1915	91	117
January 1916	79	86
February 1916	32	35
March 1916	64	95
April 1916	89	124
May 1916	44	74
June 1916	40	49
July 1916	28	45
August 1916	26	36
September 1916	62	103
TOTAL:	731	1,037
October 1916	40	74
November 1916	26	49
December 1916	39	74
January 1917	74	103
February 1917	29	52
March 1917	58	76
April 1917	20	33
May 1917	46	79
June 1917	40	64
July 1917	30	34
August 1917	24	63
September 1917	24	56
TOTAL:	468	751
October 1917	43	68
November 1917	15	36
December 1917	51	87
January 1918	47	63
February 1918	87	96
March 1918	26	41
April 1918	38	66
May 1918	45	73
June 1918	28	36
July 1918	31	49
August 1918	9	17
September 1918	28	35
October 1918	13	20
TOTAL:	461	687
GRAND TOTAL:	1,660	2,475

APPENDIX 2

MONTHLY OVERVIEW OF THE MINOR INFRACTIONS FOR THE 24TH BATTALION

Month	Illegal absences	Total
October 1915	5	14
November 1915	4	15
December 1915	0	6
January 1916	10	45
February 1916	15	28
March 1916	13	23
April 1916	8	17
May 1916	13	18
June 1916	18	35
July 1916	5	12
August 1916	16	33
September 1916	21	50
TOTAL:	128	296
October 1916	11	28
November 1916	4	11
December 1916	7	17
January 1917	8	17
February 1917	7	27
March 1917	9	31
April 1917	9	21
May 1917	3	17
June 1917	13	28
July 1917	8	34
August 1917	13	30
September 1917	12	43
TOTAL:	104	304
October 1917	11	15
November 1917	12	47
December 1917	10	18
January 1918	22	40
February 1918	8	11
March 1918	13	45
April 1918	5	18
May 1918	3	11
June 1918	4	20
July 1918	9	19
August 1918	4	14
September 1918	6	26
October 1918	14	27
TOTAL:	121	311
GRAND TOTAL:	353	911

APPENDIX 3

MONTHLY OVERVIEW OF THE MINOR INFRACTIONS FOR THE 25TH BATTALION

Month	Illegal absences	Total
October 1915	3	8
November 1915	1	6
December 1915	15	56
January 1916	12	48
February 1916	1	16
March 1916	5	17
April 1916	18	39
May 1916	21	34
June 1916	7	20
July 1916	5	17
August 1916	24	54
September 1916	11	21
TOTAL:	123	336
October 1916	5	27
November 1916	2	13
December 1916	6	19
January 1917	13	22
February 1917	9	39
March 1917	13	21
April 1917	4	7
May 1917	9	17
June 1917	3	9
July 1917	3	17
August 1917	11	31
September 1917	17	30
TOTAL:	95	252
October 1917	17	25
November 1917	11	29
December 1917	22	37
January 1918	29	42
February 1918	12	20
March 1918	6	12
April 1918	10	32
May 1918	12	31
June 1918	18	34
July 1918	6	11
August 1918	9	33
September 1918	7	17
October 1918	5	9
TOTAL:	164	332
GRAND TOTAL:	382	920

APPENDIX 4

MONTHLY OVERVIEW OF THE MINOR INFRACTIONS FOR THE 26TH BATTALION

Month	Illegal absences	Total
January 1917	13	24
February 1917	6	19
March 1917	16	33
April 1917	5	8
May 1917	2	6
June 1917	3	13
July 1917	11	29
August 1917	7	27
September 1917	7	9
October 1917	19	28
November 1917	5	12
December 1917	10	22
TOTAL:	104	230
January 1918	29	49
February 1918	8	15
March 1918	18	43
April 1918	27	48
May 1918	43	53
June 1918	20	29
July 1918	45	70
August 1918	29	54
September 1918	6	12
October 1918	3	12
TOTAL:	228	385
GRAND TOTAL:	332	615

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