



PROJECT MUSE®

The Politics of Surrender: Canadian Soldiers and the Killing of Prisoners in the Great War

Tim Cook

The Journal of Military History, Volume 70, Number 3, July 2006, pp. 637-665 (Article)

Published by Society for Military History
DOI: 10.1353/jmh.2006.0158



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jmh/summary/v070/70.3cook.html>

The Politics of Surrender: Canadian Soldiers and the Killing of Prisoners in the Great War



Tim Cook¹

Abstract

This article explores the act of surrender on the Western Front during the Great War, focusing on the behavior of Canadian soldiers toward surrendering Germans. Informal rules and symbolic gestures governed actions on the battlefield, and those who successfully negotiated the politics of surrender often survived the murderous first contact between attacking forces. But during the grey area between combat and capitulation, prisoners were frequently executed. The article also examines the politics of memory surrounding the killing of prisoners and, using the soldiers' discourse, analyzes why soldiers freely admitted and accepted these acts on the battlefield.

A German had come out of his trench to meet him with the bayonet; [but] had chickened out and tried to surrender. Our boy would have none of it. He lunged at the German again and again, who each time lowered his arms and stopped the point of the bayonet

1. The author would like to thank Cameron Pulsifer, D. Peter MacLeod, Martin Auger, Ian Steele, and Jonathan Vance for their careful reading and commentary on earlier versions of this article.

Tim Cook is a historian at the Canadian War Museum, where he curated the South African and First World War permanent gallery for the new museum that opened in May 2005. His first book, *No Place To Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), won the C. P. Stacey award. His second book, *Clio's Warriors: Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars*, was published by UBC Press in May 2006.

with his bare hands. The German was screaming for mercy. Oh God, it was brutal!

Private James Owen, 15th Canadian Infantry Battalion²

We were held up by machine-gun fire from a ridge. . . . I don't know how I escaped because I was lying right out in the front. After losing half of my company there, we rushed them and they had the nerve to throw up their hands and cry, "Kamerad." All the "Kamerad" they got was a foot of cold steel thro them from my remaining men while I blew their brains out with my revolver without any hesitation. You may think this rather rough but if you had seen my boys go down you would have done the same and my only regret is that too many prisoners are taken.

Lieutenant R. C. Germain, 20th Canadian Infantry Battalion³

BECOMING a prisoner was one of the most dangerous acts on the battlefield of the Great War (1914–18). The pleading of mercy and the downing of weapons did not always stop the bloodshed. The moment of capitulation for a potential prisoner was of crucial importance: would the surrender be accepted or would it result in a bayonet thrust? This act of capitulation, what this article refers to as the politics of surrender, was infused with unwritten rules based on accepted practice and symbolic gestures. And while there was no equality of power, much of the dialogue revolved around both the surrender and the captor. There were a number of factors, too, that affected whether that dialogue was successful, or whether a soldier became one more statistic to the war's butcher bill.

The execution of prisoners involved, for the most part, infantry killing infantry in the wasteland of the trenches. The brunt of the fighting fell to them and, in the words of one, we "got all the dirt and did most of the dying."⁴ The casualty statistics for the Canadians bear that out, with the infantry suffering the vast majority of all casualties during the war.⁵ Theirs was a war of nearly unparalleled brutality. Although this article focuses on the Canadian infantryman, there is ample evidence to suggest that other Dominion troops, especially Australians, as well as British, Germans, and likely all soldiers, regularly executed prisoners on the battlefield.

2. Owen Brothers papers, AQN 20030308, Canadian War Museum (CWM), Ottawa, Canada.

3. Buster to mother and father, 29 August 1918, 58A 1 67.6, CWM.

4. John Harold Becker, *Silhouettes of the Great War* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 2001), 137.

5. G. W. L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914–1919: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War* (Ottawa: Duhamel, 1962), 548.

There has been no lack of historians studying the nature of combat, from tactics and doctrine to the “face of battle,” and there have been a number of works devoted to the experience of prisoners once they made it to the rear.⁶ But where the two meet, that nexus between war-fighting and becoming a prisoner, requires greater analysis.⁷ And it is here where the politics of surrender were played out on the battlefield, providing insight into the razor’s edge between life and death.

Within the Canadian soldiers’ letters and diaries, as well as postwar memoirs and interviews, where one would expect few revelations after the passion of battle receded into memory, there is ample evidence of the killing of prisoners. Cutting across almost all units in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) and reported from the lowest private to the highest-ranking officers, there is no doubt that prisoners of war were killed on the Western Front after surrender. More important, though, is to understand the context surrounding this act. What does it explain about the nature of combat? When was an enemy soldier considered a prisoner? When was mercy granted? Nothing is as cut and dried as the evidence suggests: the chaos of battle is distilled into a letter or a diary entry, and then distilled again by the historian. But all of these experiences go back to the harsh world of mad, scrambling battles, swirling confusion, with the overpowering smell of freshly spilt blood, soldiers

6. For international studies of soldiers and combat, see Paddy Griffiths, *Battle Tactics on the Western Front: The British Army’s Art of Attack, 1916–1918* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994); Denis Winter, *Death’s Men: Soldiers of the Great War* (London: Penguin Books, 1979); Richard Holmes, *Firing Line* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985); John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (1976; reprint, London: Pimlico, 1991); John Ellis, *Eye-Deep in Hell* (London: Croom Helm, 1976). For Canadian studies, see Desmond Morton, *When Your Number’s Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1993); Bill Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Tim Cook, *No Place To Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999). For Canadian prisoners of war, see Jonathan Vance, *Objects of Concern: Canadian Prisoners of War through the Twentieth Century* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1994); and Desmond Morton, *Silent Battle: Canadian Prisoners of War In Germany, 1914–1919* (Toronto: Lester Publishing Limited, 1992). A surprising number of Canadian prisoners published their memoirs; see the Vance book for a complete list.

7. For killing of prisoners in battle, see Roger Noble, “Raising the White Flag: The Surrender of Australian Soldiers on the Western Front,” *Revue Internationale d’Histoire Militaire* 72 (1990): 48–79; Niall Ferguson, “Prisoner Taking and Prisoner Killing in the Age of Total War: Towards a Political Economy of Military Defeat,” *War in History* 2004 11(2): 148–92; Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (London: Granta, 1999); Dave Grossman, *On Killing* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996); John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

deafened from explosions, hearts pounding with adrenaline and fear. This is to say, then, that the Great War Canadian infantrymen are not condemned for their actions almost a century later by an historian comfortably employing hindsight and gathered material from the safety of an archives. But it is necessary to explore and analyse these unlawful actions. During the Great War, it was kill or be killed in battle, and all soldiers recognised that fact. It is time for military historians do the same.



The Allied strategy of attrition, so maligned over the last century, was not only to kill the enemy, but also to break his will. With enormous armies backed by the full resources of the nation, there would never be the opportunity to destroy the enemy in a decisive Cannae-like battle of annihilation. Even in the bloodiest engagements in human history, rarely have casualty rates exceeded 50 percent. Battles are won by breaking the enemy's morale, by forcing him to retreat, mutiny, or surrender. The German armies in November 1918, for instance, were still more than a million-men strong when they surrendered; the Russian and French armies of 1917 were equally powerful, but succumbed to revolution and mutiny. The latter survived, while the former did not. Neither, however, was an effective fighting force during those difficult times. Breaking an army's will to fight, which usually resulted in mass surrender, was the key to victory in the Great War, as it has been in all conflicts.⁸

While prisoners of early warfare often faced a cruel and limited prospect of slavery or imprisonment under harsh conditions, save for those who could buy their freedom, the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 had established basic rights for prisoners. Most of these "laws of war" related to the treatment of prisoners after they were captured: use of prisoners for labour, their internment, conditions for parole, and a number of other issues to ease their incarceration. It was stipulated, however, that the killing of prisoners was illegal, and that prisoners must be "treated humanely."⁹ Nonetheless, there was a grey area for soldiers attempting to negotiate these rules. Was a soldier automatically a prisoner when he put up his arms, or did he have to first be accepted as a prisoner to receive the protection afforded by international law? The former is how the Conventions are usually interpreted, but on the Great War battlefield, the latter was the usual practice.

8. Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 367.

9. Alon Rachamimov, *POWs and the Great War: Captivity on the Eastern Front* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 70–73; and Jonathan Vance, ed., *Encyclopedia of Prisoners of War and Internment* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2000), 362–64.

Prisoners were valuable during the Great War. Not only was the granting of mercy a sign of civilized warfare, but prisoners provided much-needed intelligence, were a source of labour behind the lines, and were tangible proof of battlefield success. Much like captured guns, prisoners were evidence that the unit in question had been in hard fighting, and had prevailed. The exaggeration of enemy body counts did not start with the Vietnam War, and in the desperate battles of the Western Front, the number of dead could easily be exaggerated. Officers up the chain of command were not anxious to underestimate enemy casualty figures, and certainly there was often no proof—and none was expected—of the damage wrought on the enemy. But prisoners were confirmation of success and victory in a war desperately short of either.

Canadian prisoners were always reported on and tabulated in intelligence reports. And while there were 3,847 Canadian prisoners of war—and most of these came from three defensive battles in 1915 and 1916—by war's end, the Canadian Corps¹⁰ had captured at least 42,000 German prisoners.¹¹ Quite clearly, an enormous number of Germans who surrendered to the Canadians survived to spend the war in prisoner of war camps.

It did not make sense to murder prisoners. To kill prisoners lessened one's reputation (by having fewer prisoners to tabulate) and, ultimately, lengthened the war. As long as soldiers thought they might face summary execution after surrender, they would fight to the bitter end. Second World War combat offers grim examples of this in the brutal Pacific and Eastern Front campaigns, where it was understood that surrendering troops often faced a quick execution or, for all prisoners in Russia and Allied soldiers interned by the Japanese, a slow starvation. And so soldiers were more inclined to fight to the bitter end, to the last bullet and the last man. Killing prisoners did not help to win wars. So how and why did it happen?

10. By the end of 1916, the Canadian Corps consisted of four divisions, roughly 100,000-men strong. It fought together for most of the war and was the largest army formation fielded by the Canadians during the war.

11. On Canadian prisoners, see Vance, *Objects of Concern*, 254. The Canadian figures denoting captured German prisoners are far harder to determine, and there appears to be no master list or figure. A page-by-page examination of the Canadian official history, Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914–1919*, revealed at least 42,000 prisoners, but it is likely higher by several thousand since a number of German prisoners, especially those for the Somme battles, are not accounted for in the text.



While there were comparatively few large-scale battles during the fifty-two months of the Great War, the loss of soldiers to artillery fire, snipers, poison gas, and other death-dealing weapons steadily wasted the ranks. Locked in the cycle of moving from frontline trenches to rear, and then to reserve and back again in a two- or three-week rotation, the Canadian divisions lost thousands of men as they held their portion of the Western Front. Some within the infantry believed that they had much in common with their informal partners in suffering, the *frontsoldaten* across the blasted expanse of No Man's Land in the opposite trenches.

"I honestly believe the average Canadian soldier's feeling—when considering the enemy—to be almost identical with the mixture of vexation and grudging admiration he feels towards a football team which has knocked him and his club hollow," remarked Thomas Dinesen, VC, a Danish soldier in the CEF who fought with the 42d Battalion. "We feel no animosity other than the natural feeling against the man who is going to answer your shot."¹² While Dinesen did his share of killing in the war, mutual respect or sympathy for the enemy was not uncommon. Tony Ashworth has documented the system of truces that developed in the trenches between the two opposing infantry sides.¹³ Labelled "live-and-let-live," informal rules and signals helped to ensure that periodic violence did not degenerate into unfettered slaughter. Soldiers tried to control their fate by arranging to fire over the heads of the enemy or other nonlethal acts. But these truces could be and were often broken, and then the killing would resume. There was a bond with the enemy as a fellow sufferer, but so, too, was there a desire for self-preservation and, ultimately, a return home some day. The two were not mutually exclusive. Soldiers had to kill to end the war, or at least kill enough of the enemy so that he realized the hopeless situation and surrendered.

A bloody crash of trench-raiding grenades and stabbing knives was the most common method of breaking the live-and-let-live system. The Canadians did not pioneer these raids, but they refined the deadly art, quickly earning a reputation as being among the finest and fiercest in the British Expeditionary Force (BEF).¹⁴ The raids were generally carried out at night, and anywhere between a handful of men to several compa-

12. Thomas Dinesen, VC, *Merry Hell! A Dane with the Canadians* (London: Jarrolds Publishers, 1929), 172–73.

13. Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare, 1914–1918: The Live and Let Live System* (London: Macmillan, 1980).

14. For Canadian raiding, see Tim Cook, "'A Proper Slaughter': The March 1917 Gas Raid," *Canadian Military History* 8 (Spring 1999): 7–25; and Andrew Godefroy, "A Lesson in Success: The Calonne Trench Raid, 17 January 1917," *Canadian Military History* 8 (Spring 1999): 25–35.

nies would organize plans to crawl out of their trenches, cut through the barbed wire, and raid the enemy's front, killing, destroying, and gathering intelligence. Later in the war, raids went in under complex artillery barrages and support fire from down the line to distract the enemy. The most talented and aggressive men volunteered or were selected for these operations, and few officers censured their raiders for forceful behaviour. Rarely was mercy shown, and only if a prisoner was needed. These operations blurred the lines between battle and killing, for their whole goal was to shock the enemy.

The Canadians had honed their raiding skills for over a year in a series of minor operations before the Battle of Vimy Ridge in April 1917. They took pride in ensuring that they controlled No Man's Land. One raid on 12–13 February 1917 involved more than 900 men from the 10th Brigade. Once in the enemy trench, the fighting was murderous and hand-to-hand as soldiers shot, stabbed, and bombed the enemy to death. One after-battle report noted that phosphorous grenades were used to burn the Germans out of a number of dugouts. As the surviving occupants stumbled out, blinded by the phosphorous fumes, "owing to the very high parapet of trench and difficulty of leading these men as prisoners, it was found necessary to kill them."¹⁵ For an official report, the words were shocking, but not surprising. Raids were deadly affairs based on calculated hit-and-run tactics. To wait too long in an enemy trench would result in falling victim to a German counterattack, and suffering the same fate. The Hague Conventions were shunted aside in the grim reality of trench raiding.

While trench raids were aggressive affairs, the "big pushes" at places like Ypres, the Somme, and Vimy were far more involved and costly. Major operations resulted in the capture of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of prisoners, and it was here where the politics of surrender were recognized and played out. Raids were murderous stealth attacks where Germans were snatched or dispatched with a swiftness born of desperation, but in battle a soldier encountered Germans and was forced to negotiate the surrender process.

To go "over the top" and into No Man's Land was both terrifying and bewildering. There was no protective parapet or trench wall: here, it was flesh against metal, a time of utter chaos and confusion. The enemy was ahead, friends behind—at least for those in the first wave. In fact, attacking freed the soldier from the agonizing waiting and worrying; discipline took over, soldiers advanced, fought and died, but few seem to have felt the anxiety and terror that clung to them before a battle. To see the enemy meant to shoot the enemy, as even a second of hesitation could

15. Stephen Harris and Brereton Greenhous, *Canada and the Battle of Vimy Ridge, 9–12 April 1917* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 1992), 76.

mean death. Sergeant J. E. Laplante of the 21st Battalion described the fierce fighting at Hill 70 in August 1917: "We advanced towards each other . . . Fierce hand to hand fighting occurred, no quarter was asked, none was given."¹⁶ At its most basic level, war-fighting was straightforward: kill and avoid being killed. However, combat became more complicated when soldiers wished to surrender.

It was not easy to give quarter in the heat of battle. Although prisoners were wanted, and a welcomed indicator that not every foot of the Western Front would be fought over in fanatical death struggles, it was difficult for soldiers to alternate between the frenzy of killing and the offering of mercy. At Ypres in April 1915, Sergeant J. C. Matheson of the 10th Battalion recounted in a letter home about a charge at Kitcheners Wood, where the Germans caught two Canadian battalions halfway to their objective, and in the open. It was a terrible slaughter. Their lines wavered, but then the Canadians charged with bayonets at the ready. They crashed through the German position, where "a few 'Huns' were taken prisoners, but damned few. We had enough to do to take care of ourselves and our own wounded to bother about prisoners."¹⁷ Of the 1,500 Canadians who attacked, more than two-thirds were cut down during the battle. The survivors were not inclined to accept the surrender of men who had, only minutes before, been attempting to massacre them and their companions.

The Somme in 1916 was equally unforgiving. After nearly two years of grinding, trench warfare, the Canadians were finally on the offensive. They had some old scores to settle, and there were more than a few cases of officers informing their men that they did not want prisoners. Sixteen-year-old Private James Owen of the 15th Battalion recounted in his memoirs that the night before a 26 September 1916 assault, his commanding officer finished his briefing to the company by saying "I don't want any prisoners."¹⁸ Although these tough words could be, and sometimes were, interpreted as signs of bravado to prepare men for the operation, Owen personally witnessed the execution of several Germans in battle and afterwards. Frank Maheux of the 21st Battalion, a former lumberjack from Maniwaki, Quebec, was also engaged in the fierce Somme fighting. Maheux recounted in run-on sentences and broken English:

it is worse than hell the ground is covered for miles with dead
corpses all over and your Frank past all true without a scratch pray

16. Laplante to Duguid, 4 June 1939, v. 1501, HQ 683-1-28, Records of the Department of National Defence, Record Group (RG) 24, National Archives of Canada (NA), Ottawa, Canada.

17. Charles Lyon Foster, ed., *Letters From the Front: Being a Record of the Part Played by Officers of the Bank in the Great War, 1914-1919*, vol. 1 (Toronto: Canadian Bank of Commerce, 1920), 10.

18. Owen Brothers Papers, AQN 20030308, CWM.

for me dear wife I need it very bad. I went true all the fights the same as if I was making logs I baynetted some killed others. I was caught in one place with a chum of mine he was killed beside me when I saw he was killed I saw red we were the same like in a butchery, the Germans when they saw they were beaten they put up their hands up but dear wife it was too late.¹⁹

This unyielding combat was no surprise to senior officers, and Major-General Richard Turner, VC, commander of the 2nd Division, noted in his diary that his soldiers were out for revenge: “the men were not looking for prisoners, and considered a dead German was the best.” Despite these attitudes, the 2nd Division captured over 1,000 prisoners; it is, of course, unknown how many more did not survive the surrendering process.²⁰

† † † † †

When was the right time to surrender? For soldiers caught in the crash of first contact with the enemy, there was not much hope in giving up until the tide turned decisively in the battle. For attacking troops, terror, adrenaline, rage, and revenge were all factors that inhibited the acceptance of surrender. Most soldiers did not fight to the bitter end, but to surrender too soon meant throwing down one’s arms in the middle of fierce combat and gambling with one’s life; to wait too long, however, as was the case with machine-gunners who offered essential fire support for retreating troops, often resulted in execution by avenging soldiers. Defenders could not expect mercy after firing all of their ammunition and then throwing up their hands only seconds before the Canadians overran their positions.

In most cases, the battle continued until one side was beaten and lost the will to fight, even if in just a secluded section of the front trench. The strange battlefield of trench fighting, where soldiers could not see what was around the corner, their vision obscured by high trench walls, left these major operations involving divisions and corps reduced to individual men fighting for their lives. Without any understanding of the battle around them, which could be faring far better or worse than in this particular sector, the infantry were not inclined to take prisoners until they knew for certain that they had achieved victory.

It was equally problematic to recognise the intent of the enemy. Was he surrendering or was it a ruse? In the heat of battle, a mistake left no second chances. With the memory of false surrenders during the South

19. Desmond Morton, “A Canadian Soldier in the Great War: The Experiences of Frank Maheux,” *Canadian Military History* 1, nos. 1–2 (Autumn 1992): 79–89.

20. Diary of Sir Richard Turner, 18 September 1916, 58 A1 9.1, 19710147-001, CWM.

African War (1899–1902) still lingering in the minds of British officers, soldiers were warned against this type of treachery. There were few who would not come down on the side of caution. German soldiers must have recognised this, too, and many of them, when seeing their positions overrun, went to ground in their deep dugouts. While they were effectively sealing themselves into a deep hole with no exit, this was an act of protection during the heat of battle. Surrendering in ones and twos to enraged Canadians did not offer much chance for survival, but finding protection in numbers and distancing themselves from combat resulted in a better chance of being made a prisoner. That action would certainly account for the many Canadian descriptions of streams of prisoners emerging from dugouts after successful battles. For the moment, then, it is safe to assume that if a prisoner survived first contact with the enemy, there was a process of negotiating the politics of surrender.

There was a universal code among soldiers seeking to surrender: weapons were downed, hands raised. Prisoners needed to show their intent clearly, and white flags were occasionally waved, but most *frontsoldaten* did not have access to this material in the midst of battle. The difference between life and death was fragile at best, and additional patterns of behaviour were also followed. Prisoners called out for mercy with “Kamerad, Kamerad” cadences that were common with almost all surrenders. Most prisoners handed over their personal belongings—watches, helmets, revolvers, and anything else of value—to curry favour, since they realized that they would likely be robbed blind at some point on their journey to the rear.²¹ The pitiful waving of photographs of children or wives by prisoners reminded their captors that they, too, were human. Subservience and humility were displayed to the captors who, quite literally, held the prisoners’ lives in their hands. A number of Canadians testified that seeing the ragged and terrified prisoners softened their anger and hatred of German soldiers, which had been heightened in the terror and confusion of battle. Tens of thousands of captured prisoners proved that many enemy soldiers indeed survived the surrender process.

Prisoners also survived first contact because it was not easy to kill a man in cold blood, no matter the circumstances. At Amiens in August 1918, William Breckenridge was part of a follow-on wave of soldiers that came across a group of prisoners on their knees, begging “Merci Kamerad, Merci Kamerad.” Breckenridge grimly remarked: “Merci Kamerad nothing. You tried hard to get us and now we’re going to get you.” He had no intention of killing the prisoners despite his harsh words, as he was sharing a grim joke with his fellow Canadian infantrymen, but then his commanding officer came on the scene. The officer coldly appraised the

21. H. M. Urquhart, *The History of the 16th Battalion (The Canadian Scottish)* (Toronto: Macmillan Co. of Canada, 1932), 294.

situation and suggested that all the prisoners be killed, since there were too many discarded rifles lying on the battlefield to be safe. Breckenridge was forced to defend the prisoners, believing that to “kill them in cold blood” would “pay them back at their own game,” but also admitting that it was “beyond me to do that.”²² He suggested that they be used as stretcher-bearers. The officer was convinced. That was the difference between life and death for these Germans. The incident also revealed that while the sentiment was there to kill, it was not always easy to pull the trigger or thrust seventeen inches of cold steel through a man’s stomach. Another Canadian, J. J. McLeod, testified that his hatred of the enemy drove him to kill on the Somme during battle, but that he did not “have the heart to bayonet” any “defenceless” Germans as they struggled forth from their dugouts. As he noted, though, “all the boys don’t feel that way and I’m glad they don’t.”²³ German prisoners had every right to be terrified when they met their captors, and the commanding officer of the 16th Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel J. E. Leckie, remembered that an “officer wept when he found he was not to be shot.”²⁴ Despite this helplessness, most prisoners survived first contact by following the norms of surrender.

Not to follow the norms of surrender was a far more dangerous gamble. In the heat of battle, perhaps wounded and no doubt concussed by the pounding of high explosive shells, a soldier might be half-stunned or simply out of his head, refusing or unable to follow directions. Failure to negotiate the politics of surrender often meant execution on the battlefield. Infantryman Allen Hart of the 44th Battalion, in the desperate fighting at Hill 70 in August 1917, recounted that his section had been badly cut up trying to capture an enemy trench. A German soldier appeared to be surrendering to his now-ragged section but, perhaps deranged from the artillery bombardment, he still had his rifle in his hand. As Hart noted, “we didn’t know quite what to make of it all—we didn’t know whether he was scared or whether he was going to go after us, but we decided that something should be done and quickly. So someone shot him, and he fell at our feet, and laid there and moaned.” Unable to carry him out of the trenches, the Canadians “put him out of his misery,” and “shot him again.”²⁵ Lieutenant-Colonel Agar Adamson of Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry informed his wife of the

22. William Breckenridge, *From Vimy to Mons* (self-published, 1919), 168.

23. J. Clinton Morrison, Jr., *Hell Upon Earth: A Personal Account of Prince Edward Island Soldiers in the Great War, 1914–1918* (Summerside, P.E.I.: J. Clinton Morrison, Jr., 1995), 237.

24. Leckie to Duguid, n.d. (ca. August 1929), file DHS 3-17 (v. 4), v. 1739, RG 24, NA.

25. Allen Hart, 1/9, 44th Battalion, Interview transcripts for the 1964 radio program, *Flanders’ Fields*, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, RG 41, NA.

victory at Vimy in April 1917 and the 222 men of his battalion who were wounded or killed. Although his infantrymen captured dozens and dozens of prisoners, “a German major refused to be sent with prisoners to the rear, except in the charge of a major.” Adamson alluded to his fate: “He will trouble us no more.”²⁶ The major had stepped beyond the boundaries, and Adamson agreed tacitly with the actions of his men. Hart, on the other hand, regretted his whole life that act of killing the shell-shocked German soldier. But there was a ritual to be followed by surrendering soldiers, and in the heat of battle, one’s life depended on it.



Assuming the Germans negotiated first contact, they still had to survive a journey to the rear that was fraught with danger. Depending on the unit and the nature of the battle, prisoners could be sent back alone or escorted. The latter was the preferred method, but that meant one or more fewer attackers for the already depleted frontline forces, who would have been digging furiously to strengthen their newly won trench to throw back expected counterattacks. And that lone soldier escorting five, ten, or more prisoners to the rear must have been more than a little wary at being outnumbered and, although his prisoners were unarmed, would have been aware that an enormous number of rifles and grenades could be picked up on the battlefield. A lot could happen during that lonely march back to the rear areas. As one 15th Battalion officer clinically noted in his after-battle report for a 1 March 1917 raid: “six prisoners were taken [,] one of whom had to be killed in No Man’s Land because he became unruly.”²⁷ One can only wonder at what constituted an “unruly” act, but it is clear that the lives of prisoners always hung in the balance until they were escorted before intelligence officers for interrogation. Moving to the rear also meant that prisoners had to evade both small arms and artillery fire. At Passchendaele, 6th Brigade officers reported that fifteen German officers and 230 other ranks had been captured in battle, but that “many were killed on their way out,” and forty-two bodies were “counted along one track alone leading to rear.”²⁸ They were the victims of artillery fire, either Canadian or German.

The prisoners worming their way to the rear cages, scrambling from shell hole to shell hole, also had to deal with the follow-on waves of Cana-

26. N. M. Christie, ed., *Letters of Agar Adamson, 1914 to 1919* (Nepean, Ont.: CEF Books, 1997), 274.

27. General Notes on Operations, Morning 2 March 1917, 58A 1.59.1, Sir Arthur Currie Papers, CWM.

28. Narrative of operations for capture of Passchendaele, 6th Brigade, 20 November 1917, 58A 1.59.7, Currie papers, CWM.

dians. By the summer of 1916, tactics stipulated that the first waves of attackers would flow over the enemy lines and push as deeply as possible into the opposite trenches. They would be supported by follow-on waves, and also “mopping-up” units, which would destroy the remaining pockets of German resistance.²⁹ This usually meant enticing Germans out of dugouts or, failing that, dropping down grenades or entombing them alive. With these follow-up troops looking to destroy any Germans caught behind the first wave of Canadian attackers, one can imagine the difficult position of prisoners making their way to the rear. Captain Claude Vivian, in leading his machine-gun section forward at Vimy, noted in a letter home that as his unit passed by the dead and dying that littered the battlefield, “Fritzes would jump out [of shell holes] by the dozens running like hares to our rear, every time they passed us throwing up their hands calling out ‘kamaradi’ but never slackening their pace—they were absolutely frightened out of their wits.”³⁰

Prisoners had a better chance of surviving the trip to rear cages if they made themselves useful or were accompanied by Canadians. Extreme cases, as that recounted by Sergeant Alexander McClintock of the 87th Battalion, revolved around capturing a German trench and killing most of the inhabitants. A single German private was left alive. With no other option he became McClintock’s prisoner, following him down trenches, running behind him with his arms in the air and “repeating ‘Merci, Kamerad’” as the bloodied Canadian shot, stabbed, and bombed his way through the enemy lines. The prisoner apparently survived his harrowing journey.³¹ A more common battlefield event, however, was the observation by Private T. G. Caunt that prisoners scrambled to assist any wounded Canadian to “ensure their safety.”³² Sandy Bain, a signaller with the 21st Battalion, remembered seeing prisoners shouting “mercy” at the top of their lungs and “willing to do anything,” acting as “if they were ‘long lost brothers,’ instead of our enemies.”³³ The prisoners’ lives often depended on it. Lieutenant W. R. Lindsay of the 22nd Battalion, who was shot and paralysed, recounted that his unit was not always inclined to take prisoners, but those Germans who assisted the wounded “had a chance to get out in safety.”³⁴ The many photographic images of German soldiers carrying out Canadians were a keen testimony to the utilitarian principle at work: either by

29. For Canadian tactics, see Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare*.

30. Audrey and Paul Grescoe, ed., *The Book of War Letters* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2003), 142–44.

31. Alexander McClintock, *Best O’ Luck* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 2000), 63.

32. Private T. G. Caunt, 1/7, 8th Battalion, v. 8, RG 41, NA.

33. J. Alexander (Sandy) Bain, *A War Diary: A Canadian Signaller, My Experiences in the Great War, 1914–1918* (Moncton, N.B.: self-published, 1986), 58–59.

34. W. R. Lindsay, 1/4, 22nd Battalion, v. 11, RG 41, NA.

acting as a crutch or as part of a four-man crew, the Germans were negotiating the politics of surrender.

Historian Richard Holmes has written that with the behaviour of follow-on attacking troops, artillery barrages, and enemy counter-barrages, the chance of a prisoner of war surviving first contact and making it to the rear was no more than 50 percent.³⁵ There is, of course, no way to quantify those figures, as prisoners killed after surrender were simply lumped in with the dead. But those stark numbers give some indication of the severity of this process, and the grave difficulties in negotiating the politics of surrender, and then post-surrender survival. The Hague Convention is interpreted as meaning that as soon as a soldier capitulated, he should be made a prisoner. But that was clearly not the case with prisoners falling within a grey area between combat and captivity during battle, and even immediately afterwards. How they negotiated the politics of surrender influenced their chance of survival. However, once prisoners made it to the Canadian or British rear to be questioned or herded into prison camps, this ordeal was over, to be replaced by the trials of captivity, with its boredom and “barbed-wire disease.” There is no indication that prisoners were harmed once they survived their journey to the rear. But what about those cases where prisoners and captors were unable to negotiate the politics of surrender?



The desire for revenge was the most common reason why a prisoner might be executed. Canadians seeking to avenge the death of a companion, the execution of other Canadian troops, or the mistreatment of civilians might disregard the Hague Conventions in the wreckage of an enemy trench.

It was not uncommon for soldiers to go on a killing rampage to avenge the death of a lost friend. Often these rages were satiated quickly, but not until men died. Sometimes this occurred in the heat of battle or during a trench raid, but sometimes that rage was taken out on German prisoners. Richard Rogerson, whose friend Hector had been killed in battle near him, recounted the fury that resulted in his taking no prisoners at Vimy: “I have got my share of Germans. I got fourteen to my credit in about two hours some I shot with my rifle more I drove the bayonit [*sic*] into and two I killed with a milles [*sic*] bomb. . . . Once I killed my first German with my bayonit my blood was riled every german I could not reach with my bayonit I shot. I think no more of murdering them than I usted [*sic*] to think of shooting rabbits.”³⁶ Canadian infantryman Bill

35. Holmes, *Firing Line*, 382.

36. Morrison, *Hell Upon Earth*, 120.

Boyd recounted that while there was no constant sense of anger towards the enemy, “sometimes you did hate, when you see your chums and your friends get shot.”³⁷ As one Canadian remembered years after the war, there was a soldier in his battalion whose brother had just been killed: “He was asked to take a dozen German prisoners back, and he started off with them, but he never got to where he was supposed to get. What happened to the German prisoners nobody ever knew.”³⁸ While only the infantry could escort troops to the rear, soldiers who had killed and witnessed friends cut down in battle were not safe custodians.

A counter-reprisal for real and perceived executions by the Germans was a more common trigger in pushing the infantry to kill enemy prisoners. Canadians were often treated poorly by their German captors because of their fierce reputation. “The Germans call us the white Ghurkha,” boasted Clifford Rogers, later a recipient of the Military Medal. “Our boys show no mercy.”³⁹ The Germans also did not understand the intimate relationship of Canada and Great Britain, or why Canadians were fighting in the war, considering them as *geldsoldaten*, or mercenaries. At the Canal du Nord during the Hundred Days campaign that went from August to November 1918, Fred Hamilton was captured; as he made his way back through the enemy lines, he was beaten by a German colonel and threatened with death. “I don’t care for the English, Scotch, French, Australians or Belgians,” shouted the colonel, “but damn you Canadians you take no prisoners and you kill our wounded.”⁴⁰ Hamilton survived, but many other Canadians did not. When serving opposite the Canadians, the Germans were cautious and wary of these elite troops, but the capture of Canadian prisoners sometimes led to assaults or executions. And these acts, in turn, drove the Canadians to meet this prosecution with equally harsh justice.

During the early defensive battles of the war, especially at Second Ypres in April 1915 and at Mount Sorrel in June 1916, a number of Canadians testified to the execution of their fellow countrymen by advancing German troops. At Ypres, Frederick Fraser of the 8th Battalion recounted how, while he was lying wounded in a makeshift hospital, the position was overrun, the enemy bayoneting all Canadians who could not walk to the rear.⁴¹ Another Canadian, Harry Watson, his ankle shattered by a bullet, limped into captivity at Ypres, and “repeatedly saw the

37. Daphne Read, ed., *The Great War and Canadian Society* (Toronto: Hogtown Press, 1978), 134.

38. *Ibid.*, 195.

39. Morrison, *Hell Upon Earth*, 67.

40. Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 209.

41. Morrison, *Hell Upon Earth*, 209.

Germans fire on our wounded men.”⁴² There was little mercy in the Ypres salient. Engaged in a fighting retreat, many Canadians felt guilty for leaving behind the wounded, and more than a few believed that they had abandoned men to execution.⁴³ With 1,410 Canadians captured at Ypres, however, it is likely that most of the men were in fact not killed. But perception was stronger than reality.

The most influential account of a German atrocity story was the supposed crucifixion of a Canadian soldier in the Ypres salient. It became a powerful myth, and while many Canadians claimed to have seen the crucified Canadian, all had different versions. Canadian Corps Commander Sir Arthur Currie even investigated the issue later in the war, concluding that it was untrue.⁴⁴ The image of an executed Canadian was strong, however. It was widely believed in the CEF and employed as a justification to show no mercy to the Hun. The enemy was capable of all manner of barbarity, with this crucifixion preceded by the pillage of Belgian towns and murder of civilians, and followed by the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915 and the execution of British nurse Edith Cavell in October of that same year. In retaliation for perceived German atrocities, William Gosford of the 5th Battalion had been told by his officers that the next time his unit was in the line, they were to take no prisoners: “shoot the bastards or bayonet them.”⁴⁵ Barlow Whiteside, a graduate of McGill University and then working in a field hospital, was also enraged by the supposed crucifixion in “cold blood, a form of death to which the most debauched murderer would think too hideous.” In the end, it did not matter whether the incident ever occurred, and there is no evidence to suggest that it did: the belief of the Canadians that it had happened was enough to make many think twice about offering mercy to the Germans. The only solution in the war, opined Whiteside to his sister, was to “exterminate the enemy.”⁴⁶

Revenge-killings were considered a suitable punishment on the Western Front. Lieutenant Coningsby Dawson, an Oxford-educated Canadian, testified to his anger and that of his men when they encountered a British tank officer, stripped naked, and bombed to death with grenades: “When I tell you that no prisoners were taken for the next twenty-four hours, I think you’ll applaud and wonder why the twenty-

42. *Alberta in the 20th Century: The Great War and Its Consequences*, vol. 4 (Edmonton, Alta.: United Western Communications, 1994), 45.

43. Canadian Field Comforts Commission, *With the First Canadian Contingent* (Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), 88.

44. Currie to Reid, 20 April 1925, file 7, v. 27, MG 30, E100, Sir Arthur Currie Papers, NA.

45. Morton, *Silent Battle*, 2.

46. Grescoe, *The Book of War Letters*, 112–13.

four hours wasn't extended. The men said they got sick of the killing."⁴⁷ In a counterattack at Mount Sorrel in June 1916, the 58th Battalion overran a casualty clearing station where they found dead Canadians displaying fresh bayonet wounds. It appeared to be, and likely was, a case of the enemy killing the wounded. Later in the day, when a number of Germans attempted to surrender to the unit, a machine-gun lieutenant turned his gun on them, justifying the action as a fair reprisal. Few argued with him.⁴⁸ These particular Germans, almost certainly not responsible for the first atrocity, suffered a harsh fate deserved by others. The same occurred to a group of Germans during the Battle of Fresnoy in May 1917. The 25th Battalion had captured a position and was then pushed out by an enemy counterattack. When the same unit later recaptured the trench, the infantry of the 25th Battalion found many of their wounded companions, whom they had been forced to leave behind, executed, bound, and shot in the head. The defenders then holding the line blamed it on the Prussian Guards, who had a reputation for fierceness, much like the Canadians. The 25th were not assuaged. When an officer tried to stop a series of counter-executions, an enraged sergeant told him to "mind your damn business. We're doing this, [after] what they did to our fellows."⁴⁹

While it is understandable that the Canadians meted out revenge killings in the vicious cycle of executions on the Western Front, the infantry also justified their actions by avenging the death or mistreatment of civilians. This is a less-common view of the Canadian soldier. Upon hearing of the sinking of the *Lusitania* by a German U-boat in May 1915, Sergeant George Ormsby of the 15th Battalion informed his wife that "our chaps and in fact the whole army is furious. I am afraid there will be very few prisoners taken by our boys."⁵⁰ In addition to the perceived uncivilized nature of unrestricted submarine warfare, the Canadians developed a strong sympathy for French civilians, although far less so for their Belgian counterparts. In the last Hundred Days, the Allies were bitterly pushing the Germans back along the front. The Canadian Corps fought and defeated the enemy during the Hundred Days battles at places like Amiens, the Drocourt-Quéant Line, and the Canal du Nord, but only after suffering nearly 45,000 casualties. Despite the terrible cost of victory, the Canadians took some solace as the liberators of dozens and dozens of towns and villages. At the final Canadian set-piece battle

47. Coningsby Dawson, *Living Bayonets: A Record of the Last Push* (New York: John Lane Company, 1919), 204.

48. Kevin R. Shackleton, *Second to None: the Fighting 58th Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force* (Toronto: Dundurn Group, 2002), 62.

49. L.C. Seymour, 2/2, v. 15, RG 41, NA.

50. George to Maggie, 10 May 1915, George Ormsby Papers, 58A 1 153.1, CWM.

of the war at Valenciennes on 1–2 November 1918, Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie noted that with the overwhelming artillery barrage, the two attacking Canadian brigades lost only eighty killed and 300 wounded, at the expense of at least ten times that many Germans. But some of those dead may have occurred after the battle, as he recounted in his diary, and later to a senior Canadian politician: due to the poor treatment of French civilians, “I know it was not the intention of our fellows to take many German prisoners.”⁵¹ One 50th Battalion officer even apologetically reported, “it was impossible to avoid taking so many as they surrendered in batches of from 20 to 50.”⁵²

While revenge was the driving factor in a number of cases involving the execution of prisoners, at times it was simply bloodthirstiness. Combat was a grim and brutal experience. “When we reach the firing line, ask no quarter and give none,” wrote Canadian infantryman L. E. McKay. “Fight to the last gasp,” and “expect no mercy from the Germans.”⁵³ For McKay, war-fighting was kill or be killed, and while many soldiers did not, or could not, accept that there was “no mercy” to be had or given, some soldiers took that sentiment to heart. Victor Wheeler recounted an inexcusable act of cruelty by a Canadian who had accumulated a number of German prisoners. In marching them back to the rear lines, he casually dropped a Mills No. 5 grenade into the greatcoat pocket of one of the prisoners, which dismembered him seconds later. Wheeler shrugged it off by noting that there was “some ‘god’ and some ‘devil’ in all of us!”, which perhaps offers evidence that these acts were not as uncommon as they appear. Nonetheless, soldiers were far less comfortable in describing these evil deeds. Captain George McKean, VC, recounted in his memoirs, however, that at the desperate battle of the Drocourt-Quéant Line in early September 1918, he and a few men, after a bloody bayonet charge that wiped out a resolute machine-gunner, worked their way into a fortified German-held village. The enemy, demoralized from the fighting and aware that they were being overrun, wanted to surrender. When McKean called down to a dugout of defenders, he was met with a chorus of “Kamerads.” In a few seconds the lead German appeared, scrambling up the dugout steps, trying his best to get a footing on the broken woodwork and at the same time to keep his hands above his head in the approved style of the “Kamerading German.” Just then, another Canadian arrived on the scene and shot the

51. Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 178; Currie to Kemp, 1 November 1918, file 2, v. 1, Currie Papers, NA; A. M. J. Hyatt, *General Sir Arthur Currie: A Military Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press and Canadian War Museum, 1987), 122.

52. 50th Battalion Report of Operations, 7 October to 17 November, cited in Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914–1919*, 475.

53. Morrison, *Hell Upon Earth*, 236.

German in cold blood, sending him tumbling back down the stairs and forcing out a “chorus of shouts, shrieks and moans.” Dressing down the soldier who carried a “broad, expansive smile on his face,” McKean yelled, “now you’ve done it, we’ll never get those Huns out of that dug-out in a blue moon now.”⁵⁴ McKean’s angry reaction stemmed from his belief that the action would prolong the battle, rather than distaste at the unnecessary execution of a German soldier.

In addition to recorded isolated cases of soldiers killing in cold blood, there is ample evidence to suggest that certain officers also urged their men to take no prisoners. At Vimy, for instance, Archie McWade of the 13th Battalion testified that his platoon officer informed the men: “Remember, no prisoners. They will just eat your rations.” McWade did not reveal whether his unit followed through with the order, but he rightly noted that in every battle it was the infantry who had the “dirtiest jobs on the face of the earth: you live like pigs, and you kill like pigs.”⁵⁵ One must also account for the possibility of miscommunication from officers. Corporal Deward Barnes of the 19th Battalion, upon hearing a speech from Currie, the corps commander, before the Battle of Amiens, misinterpreted what he was saying, believing that the General Staff “did not want any prisoners, which meant kill them all.”⁵⁶ This was not Currie’s message, but it would appear that speeches like these, usually delivered to thousands of men without the aid of megaphones or a sound system, could be misinterpreted. Although most of the orders to take no prisoners came from junior officers, some historians have suggested that before the 1916 Battle of the Somme, Sir Douglas Haig’s chief of staff, Lieutenant-General Sir Launcelot Kiggell, issued orders that no prisoners should be taken. Historian John Hussey has analyzed the orders, which clearly were not stipulations to kill wantonly, but warnings to be cautious of false surrenders and other acts of treachery.⁵⁷ Quite simply, it was up to the prisoner to show that he was no longer a threat, and that, of course, meant that many would die before quarter was given.

A handful of anecdotes implying that officers sanctioned the killing of prisoners does not constitute a general policy. There were equal cases of officers—and men—intervening to save their captives, often for blurred reasons of morality or intelligence necessities, or simply because

54. G. B. McKean, VC, *Scouting Thrills: The Memoir of a Scout Officer in The Great War* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 2003), 117–18.

55. Interview transcript with Archie McWade, n.d. (ca. early 1960s), file 958.009 (D40), v. 20,409, RG 24, NA.

56. Bruce Cane, ed., *It Made You Think of Home: The Haunting Journal of Deward Barnes, Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1916–1919* (Toronto: Dundurn Group, 2004), 215–16.

57. John Hussey, “Kiggell and the Prisoners: Was He Guilty of a War Crime?” *British Army Review* 105 (December 1993): 45–50.

soldiers who killed and butchered uncontrollably were a danger to themselves and others. But officers could not be everywhere on the battlefield, and from 1916 onward, the Canadian and British forces developed an attack doctrine that embraced a greater decentralization of command. If officers were more inclined to follow the Hague Conventions, and there is no indication in the records that was the case, then what happened when noncommissioned officers or even privates led charges, or were the only survivors after particularly bloody advances? The lack of control by officers on the battlefield may be a reason for some of the killings, but there appear to be no cases of soldiers being sanctioned or court-martialed for excessive cruelty.

As opposed to these seemingly uncommon orders by officers to take no prisoners, it was more common for the attacking soldiers to dispense their own form of rough justice. Specialty units like sniper teams were particularly despised. These were trained killers who stalked men. They were frequently executed when captured. The same often occurred to soldiers who were found with unique weapons, like saw-toothed bayonets that were viewed as causing unnecessary suffering. The same fate, it can be assumed, befell flame-thrower operators, although these men, carrying liquid fuel on their backs, almost always became targets and rarely survived battles anyway. With certain groups of soldiers in high-risk categories, so were various actions on the battlefield.

There was no more dangerous gamble on the Western Front than the fake surrender: if the “surrendering” group in question succeeded, they likely killed their “captors”; if they failed, they could expect no mercy, and all would be executed. Moreover, either conclusion muddied the waters for succeeding prisoners. How did the potential captors, who were warned of such treachery, or heard of such deeds through trench rumours, know if future surrenders would be a ruse? At Amiens, the Canadians and Australians spearheaded the major Allied counterattack against the Germans on 8 August 1918. Surprise and a concentration of artillery, infantry, and tanks broke through the German lines. Thousands of Germans were captured. While the advance was easy for some Canadian units, others were fighting to the death against stubborn outposts of enemy troops who refused to surrender. Brigadier-General G. S. Tuxford of the 3rd Brigade noted that in one trench his soldiers encountered Germans who waved white flags to surrender: “Upon our men advancing they were met with heavy fire again, and the fight recommenced. Two white flags were soon displayed by the HUN, but this time our men took no notice and practically exterminated the garrison.”⁵⁸

58. J. L. Granatstein, *Hell's Corner: An Illustrated History of Canada's Great War, 1914–1918* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2004), 161.

The Canadians continued their desperate last Hundred Days fighting at the Drocourt-Quéant Line, where the Canadian Corps was bashing its way through a defensive trench system several kilometres deep and protected by machine-gun nests, artillery positions, and shock troops available for rapid counterattack. At Cagnicourt, a fortified town that operated as a hinge for one of the German defensive lines, the 14th Battalion infiltrated the position on 2 September after fierce fighting. Lieutenant A. L. McLean, a decorated and respected officer, led a small group into the town to take out a machine-gun nest that was wreaking havoc on the advancing battalion. After a deadly skirmish, the last two surviving Germans surrendered. McLean went over to accept the surrender, but was shot dead at point-blank range by the enemy. His avenging men stormed the position bayoneting the machine-gunners. But they did not stop there. Another group of capitulating Germans, who had no relation to the treacherous machine-gunners, offered their surrender, and they, too, were slaughtered. Such was the nature of death on the battlefield.⁵⁹ Had the machine-gunners not broken the rules of surrender, subsequent groups would likely have survived.

The Canadians were also aware of other acts of treachery. After accepting the surrender of prisoners, they sent the Germans to the rear, sometimes with a guard, if one could be spared, sometimes on their own. Private T. G. Caunt recounted how, on the Somme, many of the unescorted soldiers were sent back through the Canadian lines, but instead picked up discarded weapons on the battlefield and “turned the guns on our backs and on the front of the 2nd wave.” After that, Caunt remembered, his colonel ordered “no more prisoners. And there weren’t any more prisoners taken because we lost a lot of men through this action.”⁶⁰ The German prisoners may in fact have taken up arms again, or other German troops who had taken cover could have surfaced to harass reinforcing Canadians, as was the German infantry tactic at the time. Either way, the relationship between prisoners and soldiers was increasingly muddled, and prisoners died as a result.

The killing of prisoners was also sometimes directly linked to issues of safety. With the advancing soldiers trapped in a ferocious cycle of attack and counterattack, of men moving forward, being pushed back, and all the while leaving the wounded or prisoners like flotsam on some bloody beach, there were cases like that involving the 72nd Battalion during the disastrous 1 March 1917 gas raid at Vimy Ridge. With the Canadian raid relying on gas to stun the enemy, and then failing to do that when the wind direction changed and blew the chemical clouds

59. Daniel Dancocks, *Spearhead to Victory: Canada and the Great War* (Edmonton, Alta.: Hurtig, 1987), 113.

60. Private T. G. Caunt, 1/7, 8th Battalion, v. 8, RG 41, NA.

back on the attacking troops, the operation was a terrible failure that resulted in 687 casualties—a 43 percent casualty rate among the troops that went into battle.⁶¹ As one of the four attacking battalions, the 72nd Battalion had entered the German trenches and captured some fifty or sixty prisoners.⁶² But cut off from their lines by German fire and steadily losing men, the Canadian captors were overpowered by their prisoners. Should the Canadians have killed their prisoners in order to save themselves? A month later at Vimy, a similar event occurred, and Victor Wheeler noted that while his 50th Battalion overran German positions, prisoners began to emerge from their honeycombed underground dugouts, “unarmed and nervously trudging toward our advancing line, hoping to be taken alive. Many of them were not. The number of men required to herd them back to the P.O.W. [prisoner of war] cages could not be spared. Our men were still falling at twice the rate of the enemy’s casualties, and the job of highest priority, capturing The Pimple, was becoming the task of fewer and fewer of us.”⁶³

At Passchendaele, Private W. A. Dunlop of the 116th Battalion described a gut-wrenching dilemma that faced his section. The 116th had suffered heavy casualties from enemy artillery fire and poison gas as it moved to consolidate frontline positions. With communication cut and isolated in their water-filled shell craters that passed as forward trenches, they were increasingly anxious that they would be overrun. Two German prisoners were captured as they stumbled around lost in the wasteland, and one of them, an imposing giant at six foot three, scared the muddy, exhausted Canadians. Dunlop noted that they “couldn’t afford to send them back alone” with all the weapons available for the picking up on the battlefield, nor could they spare any men. So his section drew straws to see who would execute the Germans: “It was either their lives or ours.” Before the Germans were shot, though, a battalion runner dragged himself into their trenches and told them to prepare for a relief by another unit. Not wanting the responsibility or the weight on their consciences of these executions, they left the Germans there, retreating back to their assigned forming-up point. Of all the slaughter and mud of Passchendaele, Dunlop recounted years later that the possible execution of those two Germans was his “most vivid recollection of Passchendaele.”⁶⁴ Canadians did not take the murder of prisoners lightly, but if it was seen at the time as a question of life and death, battle-hardened soldiers knew on which side of caution to err.

61. Cook, “A Proper Slaughter,” 18.

62. M. Young, 1/5-7, 72nd Battalion, v. 16, RG 41, NA.

63. Victor Wheeler, *The 50th Battalion in No Man’s Land* (Nepean, Ont.: CEF Books), 100–101.

64. W. A. Dunlop, 1/6, 116th Battalion, v. 17, RG 41, NA.

With all of these factors resulting in the execution of prisoners, one would suspect that the Canadians took no German prisoners on the battlefield. That, of course, is inaccurate. Canadians captured at least 42,000 prisoners during the war, more than ten times the number of men they lost to captivity. Yet it is also true that in the harsh world of the Western Front, the Hague Conventions were sometimes viewed as just an agreement between nations, and that the mitigating factors of battle were what guided the *frontsoldaten* of all armies.

† † † † †

Private Dunlop's grim account at Passchendaele is a useful pivot on which to move from the politics of surrender to the politics of memory. Dunlop recounted almost fifty years later that the grim decision to execute those German prisoners was his strongest memory of the battle. The turmoil of Dunlop and his exhausted companions must have been palpable, and none wanted the dirty job that would forever weigh on their consciences. They were able to avoid the dilemma. However, the most interesting aspect of this battlefield narrative is that the execution of prisoners was not a secret. Dunlop's recollections were part of an extended Canadian Broadcasting Corporation radio series, *Flanders' Fields*, in the early 1960s, for which over 600 veterans were interviewed. Dozens of Canadians testified to the execution of German prisoners, which was simply another part of the brutal fighting on the Western Front. And while none of these grim accounts found their way into the final seventeen-hour script, they speak to the power and, perhaps, the conventionality of battlefield executions. The execution of prisoners was not a secret during or after the Great War. These stories were shared with family members in letters, they were recorded in diaries, they were incorporated into the trench culture, and they were revealed in memoirs.

While studying the soldiers' discourse, one expects stories of loss and misery, of heroics and brutality, but one does not expect the soldiers to cast themselves as executioners. Yet they often did. One Canadian infantryman wrote to his sister, "We are not anxious to add to the extra burden to the country of keeping prisoners." Another, Lieutenant C. V. Williams, informed his clergyman-father, "You will very seldom now hear of the Canadians taking prisoners, they take them to some quiet spot and then it is a case of the dead may march."⁶⁵ The execution of prisoners was a part of soldiers' discourse, in a way that, say, masturbation or consorting with prostitutes was not. Those latter subjects remained taboo, and thus there are few accounts of these sexual experiences by

65. Morton, *Silent Battle*, 175.

soldiers. There was much that was kept from those on the home front, but not the killing of prisoners. Like depictions on modern American television, sexual urges would appear to be far more contentious than murderous ones.

In attempting to capture the unique perspective of soldiers, and as part of his desire to promote the Canadian wartime contribution, Sir Max Aitken (Lord Beaverbrook) aimed to produce a collection of soldiers' writing in 1916. Aitken had General Headquarters issue an order to all commanding officers to encourage their men to contribute front-line accounts of battle for a commemorative "war book for the masses." However, Aitken chose only those works that conformed to his own image of the Canadian soldier.⁶⁶ Accounts that acknowledged fear and bitterness were excluded in favour of stories emphasizing an ability to endure or display coolness under fire. One submission read:

A C.O. [commanding officer] detailed two Highlanders to escort four German prisoners back to the prisoners' pen, about one and half miles in the rear. In less than ten minutes they returned, and being questioned by the C.O., about the four German prisoners, replied; - "They all dropped dead Sir, and we didna want to miss this fight, so we returned."⁶⁷

With the title of "Fact," the passage was a mixture of trench humour and the grim nature of fighting on the Western Front. However, the execution of German prisoners did not fit Aitken's vision of a book that would glorify Canadian deeds and soldiers. "Fact" was never published; instead, readers were treated to a different collection of anecdotes.

Another execution story surfaced in *The Staffer*, a trench newspaper published by the 66th Battery. Unlike Aitken's book, this was a soldiers' newspaper where they chose the content (after receiving the support of the commanding officer). This "joke" was published:

Hun: "Kamerad! Me wife, three children."

Tommy: "'And me the blinkin' pin, we'll soon 'ave a widow and three orphans."⁶⁸

Drawing from common battlefield events, in this case the proclivity of German prisoners to surrender and thrust photographs of wives and children before them, these experiences were harnessed as part of the soldiers' narrative in explaining their war.

66. See Tim Cook, "Documenting War & Forging Reputations: Sir Max Aitken and the Canadian War Records Office in the First World War," *War In History* 10, no. 3 (2003): 265–95.

67. "Fact," 140/10, v. 4733, RG 9, NA. The Canadian Corps had a number of Highland battalions in which the infantry wore kilts.

68. *The Staffer*, no. 4 (Christmas 1918), 58A 1 13.7, CWM.

“An amusing story is told in connection with a lone prisoner brought back,” wrote Major George McFarland of the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles in his unpublished memoirs. “One of our sergeants was detailed to escort two prisoners back from the Hun Lines to our own. When he arrived at our Front Line he had only one prisoner, and when asked by an officer what had become of the other, his reply was, ‘The blighter spoke out of his turn, Sir, and I shot him.’”⁶⁹ Whether amusing or not, McFarland was comfortable enough to inscribe the execution in his memoirs. A similar event occurred at Passchendaele where a padre at a dressing station remembered seeing a wounded Canadian stumbling back over the cratered battlefield. Rushing to his aid, the padre asked why one of the hundreds of German prisoners streaming in had not helped him to the rear, to which the soldier replied, using an adjective, remarked the padre, that

I think was the most incongruous I have ever heard in my life. He said in his broad way, “well sir, I hadn’t gotten but one prisoner and when I wasn’t looking, some mischievous little bugger poked him off with his bayonet.” Well, mischievous was a description which seemed to be a little out of place.⁷⁰

It is not a word usually associated with the execution of another soldier, but during and immediately following the Great War, stories about these executions were sometimes used to express the dark irony of the war, and such humour could be both understood and acknowledged by trench soldiers. Perhaps the millions and millions of dead had inured all sense of loss, or perhaps it was just a common, ruthless reality of the battlefield, as it has been throughout human history. Whatever the case, these executions were not secrets to be buried in shallow graves with the executed prisoners.

Within a decade of the Armistice on 11 November 1918, however, the meaning of the war became increasingly contested. While it remained a conflict conceived and remembered through the prism of a justifiable sacrifice for most soldiers and their families, a growing number of elite writers were questioning the war through poetry and fiction.⁷¹ One of the most famous and erudite was Robert Graves. In his memoir, *Goodbye To All That*, published in 1929, he accused the Canadians of

69. George Franklin McFarland, memoirs, ca. 1919, 21 April 1918, 58A 2 7.7, CWM.

70. Col. Rev. Dr. Kilpatrick, D.S.O., 2/10, 42nd Battalion, v. 13, RG 41, NA.

71. Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997); J. M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory. The First World War: Myth and Realities* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2001).

having “the worst reputation for acts of violence against prisoners.” But he also noted that the

Canadians’ motive was said to be revenge for a Canadian found crucified with bayonets though his hands and feet in a German trench. . . . How far this reputation for atrocities was deserved, and how far it could be ascribed to the overseas habit of bragging and leg-pulling, we could not decide. At all events, most overseas men, and some British troops, made atrocities against prisoners a boast, not a confession.⁷²

If the Canadians were the worst offenders, then the rest of the British troops were close behind, attested Graves. It is unclear how Canadian soldiers reacted to Graves’s accusation about their murdering nature, but their generals were quick to label it a falsity. When questioned by a reporter on his reaction in 1930, Sir Arthur Currie, then the principal of McGill University, denied the veracity of the story, calling it a “yarn.” The “reputation of the Canadian soldier stands too high for me to rush into print to defend them, not from charges, but from certain insinuations made in a novel.”⁷³ Others like Cy Peck, a former battalion commander and Victoria Cross winner, derided *Goodbye To All That* as the “product of an unstable and degenerate mind.”⁷⁴

Graves’s memoir was followed the next year by the publication of *Generals Die in Bed*, written by Charles Yale Harrison, an American who had served in the CEF. It was shocking even for an antiwar novel. Like many of the “disillusionment” generation, Harrison lamented the terrible loss of the war and, specifically, railed against the generals behind the lines, safe from the fighting, who seemed to callously order the soldiers into battle after battle where their numbers withered away under the hurricane of fire. Writing from the limited perspective of the trenches, Harrison depicted the degradation and suffering of the soldiers, the rampaging and looting of a “liberated” town in the last Hundred Days, and even the killing of prisoners: “We are to take no prisoners. We say this on all sides. It has become an unofficial order. It is an understood thing.” Before the Amiens battle, Harrison evoked the 27 June 1918 sinking of the *Llandovery Castle*, an allied hospital ship, and employed that as the reason for why the soldiers avoided granting mercy. Of course, during the Amiens battle, the Canadians took thousands of prisoners, but Harrison offered a different, harsher account: “The figures run with funny jerky steps towards us, holding their hands high above their heads. We open rifle fire as we advance. The silhouettes begin to topple over. It is

72. Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (1929; reprint, London: Penguin Modern Classics, 1960), 154.

73. Currie to W. Edgar, 14 January 1930, file 23 (E), v. 8, Currie Papers, NA.

74. Colonel C. W. Peck, “Modern War Books,” *The Brazier* 18 (December 1930): 7.

just like target practice. . . . They are unarmed. They open their mouths wide as [if] they are shouting something of great importance. . . . Doubtless they are asking for mercy. We do not heed. We are avenging the sinking of the hospital ship. We continue to fire.”⁷⁵

Like Graves’s earlier work, Currie, and several other Canadian generals, found Harrison’s novel—and what it represented—incomprehensible. For them, the Canadians had won their laurels on the battlefield and played a distinguished role in breaking the German armies. Harrison’s account of Canadian troops rampaging drunkenly and executing prisoners was nothing short of blasphemy. “His book is a mass of filth, lies and appeals to everything base and mean and nasty. . . . He talks about nothing but immorality, lice, and other not only disgusting but untrue things,” raged Currie. Of course, the filth and constant “wastage” of men were not the only aspects of the Canadian infantryman’s experience, but they were, for many, the defining characteristics of the war. Currie knew of the trials of the trench soldier, and he even acknowledged the likely murder of German prisoners, but after more than a decade, and having fought a high-profile court battle over his own reputation and that of the Canadian Corps in 1928, he would accept nothing that impinged on the collective reputation of his men.⁷⁶ That was certainly the belief of Currie, and presumably other senior generals. At the same time, the novel’s literary and financial success meant that it struck a chord with survivors. The politics of memory had begun to change, and what was acceptable during and immediately after the war seems, by the late 1920s, to have resulted in a stronger rebuke from Canadian generals, who believed they had to fight vigilantly against those attempting to denigrate the memory of the CEF. And while veterans of the CEF were willing to depict these battlefield executions in their postwar writings, and especially in their recollections during the 1960s, military historians have followed the lead of generals rather than the men who carried out the acts, by burying this harsh reality of Western Front war-fighting.



In popular memory, Great War trench soldiers are still considered little more than victims. The “poor bloody infantry” at the front are sometimes even depicted as some confused band of communal sufferers, men who hated the enemy less than they did their own commanders. In some cases that might have been true, but most men knew their enemy

75. Charles Yale Harrison, *Generals Die in Bed* (New York: Morrow, 1930), 249.

76. For Currie’s reputation, see Tim Cook, “The Madman and the Butcher: Sir Sam Hughes, Sir Arthur Currie and their War of Reputations,” *Canadian Historical Review* 95 (December 2004): 693–719.

was the soldiers opposite shooting at them, not those in the rear. Nonetheless, soldiers found ways to change the terrible nature of trench warfare by establishing unspoken truces, dubbed the live-and-let-live system. Perhaps feeding off this particular aspect of the war, the flow of scholarly and popular books, films, journalistic pieces, and even choir music highlighting the 1914 Christmas Truce continues unabated.⁷⁷ There is something life-affirming about soldiers who decided to forgo killing, embracing their fellow enemy, even if for only a few hours. The humane nature of men caught in the terrible vortex of war where, on the wings of naivety in 1914, they rushed to battle, only to find the terrible irony that awaited them as they were ground away in war's maw, is highlighted instead of the warrior nature of trench soldiers. Yet where in this trope is the savagery of battle as recounted by countless Canadian infantrymen? How does the execution of prisoners fit into this view of innocent victims caught in war's vortex? Surely these cruel accounts are far different from our cigarette-swapping, football-kicking soldiers at Christmas, and to date there are few, if any, books, documentaries, short films, or choir songs devoted to the killing of prisoners.

More than nine million soldiers were killed during the Great War. They were not all victims of artillery, which blasted soldiers from miles away. Deaths also resulted from shooting men through the head as they crouched to defecate, tossing grenades into dugouts full of scared soldiers, mercilessly machine-gunning to death attackers that milled like sheep in uncut barbed wire, and, although far less frequently, running a man through with cold steel. The infantry were there to win control of No Man's Land and, at some point, to break through the enemy trenches to end the stalemate. While some *frontsoldaten* realized the futility of fighting to the last man or the absurdity of waiting to become a statistic in the daily wastage of the trenches, most realized that victory could only be won by killing the enemy.

Were the Canadians more likely to execute soldiers on the battlefield than other soldiers? Robert Graves thought so, but that reputation for fierceness was, as he rightly noted, also part of the Canadian reputation as shock troops. The Germans, too, believed the Canadians were less likely to take prisoners. Therefore, Canadians who fell into German hands often suffered a similar grim fate. That beget a cycle of reprisals

77. Robert Wilde, *The Christmas Truce of 1914* (New York: Free Press, 2001); Malcolm Brown and Shirley Seaton, *Christmas Truce*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Trans-Atlantic Publications, 1999); Michael Jürgs, *Der kleine Frieden im grossen Krieg* [The small peace in the big war] (Munich: Bertelsmann, 2003); Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Remarkable 1914 Christmas Truce* (New York: Free Press, 2002); The Mormon Tabernacle Choir, *Silent Night, Holy Night: The Story of the Christmas Truce*, Book and CD-ROM (Salt Lake City, Utah: Shadow Mountain, 2003).

and counter-reprisals. It might be tempting to ascribe these unlawful actions to undisciplined or inexperienced soldiers, but they appear to have happened throughout the war, in almost every battle from 1915 to 1918, and were recounted in official reports and personal memoirs, carried out by the lowest private to junior subalterns, and sanctioned by senior officers from lieutenant-colonels to the corps commander. Clearly, soldiers killed indiscriminately on the battlefield, and becoming a prisoner was no guarantee of future safety.

Informal rules and norms governed actions on the battlefield, and those who successfully negotiated the politics of surrender often survived the murderous first contact between attacking forces. But the grey area between combat and capitulation was a time of chaos and confusion, of fear and aggression, of danger and desire for revenge. The fragile rules that governed the nature of warfare could not always contain soldiers in the heat of battle, and there were a host of reasons why executions were carried out. It is time for historians to return to the harsh nature of war-fighting during the Great War, and to acknowledge that while soldiers generally felt sympathy for fellow sufferers, the Western Front often left soldiers with two choices: kill or be killed. The Great War soldier was as much an executioner as he was a victim.