

# Collections of Interest

"In Flanders Fields": radio series and oral history

On November 11th, 1964 CBC Radio broadcast the first in a series of seventeen one-hour programs entitled "Flanders Fields" which documented Canadian participation in the First World War. Described as "one of the largest tape recordings ever undertaken by the CBC"; the series was over two years in preparation during which over 600 hours of interviews were recorded with veterans of "the war to end all wars". These interviews, after being used as source material for the programs, were then sent to the CBC archives for storage.

In 1980, in recognition of its historical value, this huge collection was transferred to the Public Archives of Canada. For although the programs were an outstanding success from the perspective of radio broadcasting; the 600 hours of unedited interviews were - from the perspective of archives - of a far more significant value. But perhaps historical value can be best judged by an extract from an interview in the collection itself.

The interview transcribed below is particularly noteworthy on several levels. First, it demonstrates that important contributions to the historical record can be made through oral history interviews generated for reasons other than archival. At present, this collection represents the largest single oral history project in Canada even though it was undertaken by the CBC for broadcast purposes in 1964, long before "oral history" became a recognized team and collecting oral history recordings a recognized archival activity. Second, the interview reveals the power of the oral history technique when it concentrates in the areas where it is strongest: descriptions of human reactions to social conditions. In this particular recollection the interviewee does not focus on controversial battles or personalities but rather the description of life in the trenches and the actions of fellow soldiers. Oral history is thus employed to recount a history of the war from the vantage point of the infantryman where attitudes and emotions count more than statistics and are necessary to explain the statistics. In this sense this oral history interview is noteworthy from a third and perhaps most important level in that it offers another interpretation of the war based on social history rather than the more conventional strategic and diplomatic interpretations.

Oral history interview of Greg Clark, journalist,<sup>1</sup> for broadcast on CBC radio series "In Flanders Fields" November 1964 to March 1965.

<sup>2</sup>"My attitude on war history. I sent two or three copies of Nicholson's book<sup>2</sup> to some of my old troops when it came out and one of them wrote a very interesting letter back. He said that he enjoyed it. The maps, he thought, were so interesting. He hadn't seen any maps for a long time that were as

intimate as these in the relation to him. But, he says 'Mr. Clark, this wasn't the war. This fella talks only about battles and operations'. Now that to me, was a very interesting thing. This wasn't the war he remembered. Battles, yes, they are decisive incidents in war. But the longer the history lives, the more and more history withers into the decisive incidents of battles what we forget is the experience of those half million Canadians.....The picture of the war is wrong in the eyes of historians. Even if they were there, even if they participated, they have forgotten to remind us of one thing, that from the sea up near Ostende,<sup>3</sup> some hundreds of miles waving and weaving across Belgium and down through France over hill and valley and plain and river, down across and back up into the mountains, three hundred and some miles I think it was, was this ribbon of stealth. Some places it would be only a mile wide, other places - because of the flat terrain - it was wider. This ribbon or belt of absolute stealth, day and night, week after month after year, for four years - never changing; this ban of deathly stealth in which no man moved or spoke loudly. When you entered it from behind whatever hills or other cover enabled you to be yourself (chatting and marching and slouching along with your unit); suddenly you entered this strange, mysterious unearthly land of stealth. And in that stealth, millions of men - British, French, Germans, Americans, every nationality lived years of their lives. Now, it never relaxed. There were shots, there were sounds. There was the distant sound of the gun firing. There was the weird, unearthly howling of shells. There would be the crack and explosion of shells. There would be strange, meaningless rifle shots; little random un-associated rattles of half-dozen bursts of machine guns-in the night and even in broad day. These sounds in this stealth only accentuated it and gave it a more unearthly and slightly lunatic sense. You were living in this strange, weird and wonderful thing not for a little while; battles came and broke it and smashed it into a thousand million pieces, but then the battles subsided and the stealth returned.

Now they speak of trenches in this strange ribbon of deadly stealth across Europe. Trenches is too romantic a name. I mean, it visualizes for you something that wasn't true. These were ditches - common, ordinary ditches. From six to ten or twelve feet deep, averaging eight feet deep when new, but lived in week after month after year they took on the character just of ditches. As time went by-we had no garbage disposal, no sewage disposal; - they became filthy. You threw everything you didn't want out over the parapet or the parapole. And if you stood ever at a place where, with powerful binoculars, you could look at the trenches; you saw this sort of strange line of garbage heap wondering up hill and down dale as far as the eye could see. And that in that setting men lived - month, year after year...

Now, I don't know if I am successfully conveying this sense of dirt and unpleasantness. In addition to the fact that it was a sort of a garbage dump ditch miles and miles long as the home of men, the latrines were little trenches off the main trench. These, when they became too offensive were filled in and a new one dug. But these main trenches were held some times months on end. They became very sour. The smell, as I think most soldiers will recall it, in those dugouts was a sour strange odour overlaid in winter by the smell of coke gas.

I think now, having sort of described this strange and eerie world in which they lived and which was the war to them, battles, perhaps, were even welcome as a little excitement...

.... To me, looking back on it, at the time what struck me, of course, as a naturalist at heart; there were no birds in that land of stealth. No birds sang, no birds came. There was just these lunatic and irresponsible - sort of modern symphony sounds, meaningless bangs and crashes like modern music. All it did was elaborate, extend, and accent the strange lunatic silence of this thing and the birds wouldn't come in. Now and again a hare or a rabbit, which was characteristic of Europe, would lop through; but even it knew that something dreadful was wrong.

This land of stealth went through towns, villages; but mostly through farm fields - abandoned and of course running wild with turnips and some other farm crops. A weird tangle, you think it would be alive with game, but no. There was nothing in it except rats - by the countless millions. I don't think that it was possible to exaggerate the number of rats that stealthily land and added that last mad feature. Wherever you went, in the daylight and at night, the whole place squeaking and squealing with these huge monstrous rats living on this garbage of our trenches and living on what had been buried there by the french before us and so on...

The tension never for one moment relaxed. The stealth that I speak of never relaxed - day or night; winter, spring, summer, autumn. The stealth and therefore, the tension never ended. You never knew at what moment one of those perfectly meaningless sounds of explosion - whether of a rifle or a machine gun or a shell or a trench mortar - would get you. The casualties: I would be interested to know the ratio of casualties, between battle casualties - casualties in a set battle and the casualties day in day out in that war of attrition. The war of the little raids, the war of trying to improve the trench position. There were raids - I think often that they called for raids to keep up the interest of the troops, to give them a sense of participating in something. Because, mark you, it wouldn't have taken a great deal in this dreadful pre-historic man circumstances for men to have lost heart and they never did. We had a thing called shell shock in our war and in the second war it was called battle fatigue. I remember that a great many of us were very hostile to this phrase 'shell shock' which the military authorities used. It wasn't anything of the kind. It was just fatigue - not so much in battle as in these long intervals of living under these conditions....

Why we liked Currie<sup>4</sup> was, not only that he was the first Canadian to command the corps, but he had a wonderful reputation with his own men and his own division. But the grand important thing was that he gave us maps down to lance-corporals.<sup>5</sup> Prior to that, only officers and gentlemen were allowed to have maps in their possession. Currie said 'maps down to section leaders' because he knew who fights the battles. It's the sections.

... Historians go on about and give you the grand plan, the grand strategy and then they come down to the lesser strategies and it's all great formations and groups. And they go in for initials and all kinds of fancy things and confuse you beyond belief. Do you know that it isn't even battalions that engage in battle. A battalion goes in and the sections of six or five men with a lance-corporal leading them. A little band of brothers. A little group who have lived together. They have come and gone, some have been killed or wounded and new ones come in. They have been traded within the company where the sergeant of the platoon seeing some little uneasiness and stress in one section

arranges to trade men from one section to another. And all of this time through this long drawn out intervals of war is this endless shifting and adjusting and changing and reorganizing of the sections until you've got a battalion that consists of so many sections, not so many companies or so many platoons. The minute the battle begins - at zero hour - it is out of the hands of the generals; it is out of the hands even of the battalion commanders who sit back in their dugout with their telephones, listening desperately with this catch-as-catch-can signalling and message system. We had no radio. You did or did not get information as to how the battle goes except wild guesses from what you could see from the top of the dugout. But who is doing the fighting? The platoon commander might at the actual moment of when the barrage falls and you are to go, might leap up and wave his walking stick and say 'come on, men' and many of us have done that. But before we get to our objective, the lieutenant has fallen back to the position from which he can watch is five sections. It is the sections that are doing the thinking and the planning. They've trained and we've told them all that we know and they've done everything. Where there's difficulty your lieutenant might run forward to the assistance of number four section who suddenly lost its corporal. One of the sergeants might come and join a section that had been mangled. But it was sections that actually fought the war. And when it was all reached and all over and done with, the lieutenant would consult his sergeants and section leaders and report to his company commander. The company commander would report to the battalion commander. The battalion commander would report to the brigadier and so the message would get back - 'the battle is won!' But it was won by lance-jacks and their five or six boys. Blood brothers, friends who knew each other as more than brothers and who hardly knew anybody else in the whole bloody British army. They didn't know anybody. Well, the officers got to know each other because they were being called together every once in a while by the colonel. The sergeants got to know one another because they were frequently called together by the RSM (Regimental Sergeant-Major). But there were men in 'A' company who only knew four or five guys out of the two hundred in 'B' company. We lived separately. We held different parts of the line. We worked separately year in and year out (telephone rings)....

....The fact remains that there was a tremendous isolation with those millions of men living cheek by jowl in such surroundings. There was still a strange overall sense of isolation that was a very important factor... You lived by companies, the four or five officers of a company and the two hundred men - they were considered a unit for social purposes. They lived apart, by themselves. On leave when you went back to a busted village, to your horse-lines; there would be old houses, barns, mission huts and old sour huts built by the french in the earlier years of the war. And 'A' company was away down at the far end of the village and 'A' company's officers had a little farmhouse and the men were in the barns. In 'A' company you put number one platoon in one barn, you put two platoon in another barn and so on; so that even the platoons were apart. On parade they saw the whole two hundred. On parade the two hundred saw the eight hundred - all lined up, but the vast majority of them were strangers. They didn't know one another's names in a battalion. This sense of comradeship that is thought of in this war should be in our memories restricted to sections, above all... To my recollection, the men who lived and died together in battle and in that long war, which is more important than the battles; were the sections".

FOOTNOTES

1. It is interesting to note that the ability of an individual to articulate past experiences may be related to his or her working career. In this interview Greg Clark displays the skills of a trained observer which were undoubtedly aided by his many years as a professional journalist.
2. The official history of the Canadian military involvement in the First World War was written by Colonel C.W.L. Nicholson of the Department of National Defence under the title Canadian Expeditionary Force.
3. Ostende is a seaport on the Belgium coast.
4. Sir Arthur Currie was commander of the Canadian Corps.
5. Lance-corporal is the rank between private and full corporal. He is responsible for a group of five or six privates and reports to the full corporal.