

The Canadian Army at Boschbult (Hart's River) – 31 March 1902

Presentation for the OMRS Virtual Convention 2024

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Outline

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Canadian participation in the war in South Africa

- ◆ When the war in South Africa broke out in October 1899, the Canadian government was not keen to be involved, but public patriotic and imperialist sentiments forced the hand of Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier, and a contingent of infantry was offered and accepted.
- ◆ The 1st Canadian Contingent consisted of the 2nd (Special Service) Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment, which left Canada 30 October 1899, arriving in South Africa 29 November 1899, and returning to Canada 23 December 1900. 4 Canadian nursing sisters, 4 accredited journalists from Canadian newspapers, and a YMCA representative also accompanied this group.
- ◆ The 2nd Canadian Contingent consisted of the 1st Battalion Canadian Mounted Rifles (title changed to Royal Canadian Dragoons (RCD) while in South Africa, to reflect that of its parent unit); the 2nd Battalion Canadian Mounted Rifles (which reverted to the title The Canadian Mounted Rifles (CMR) when the 1st Battalion was re-named), and three batteries (C, D, and E) of the Royal Canadian Field Artillery (RCFA).
- ◆ The RCFA left Canada 21 January 1900, with the CMR following on 27 January, and the RCD on 21 February. The RCFA reached South Africa on 6 February, CMR on 28 February, and RCD on 21 March. All three units served in South Africa until 8 January 1901. This contingent was accompanied by 21 Canadian artificers, who travelled with the RCD, and a second YMCA representative.

The 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles (CMR) and 10th Canadian Field Hospital (CFH)

- ◆ The Canadian government offered to raise a third contingent for service in South Africa in early 1901, but the British Government did not take it up, replying that there was no need.
- ◆ In November 1901, however, the British government requested a four-squadron regiment of mounted rifles. In a departure from previous practice, the unit was recruited as an integral part of the British Army, though retaining its Canadian identity. Moreover, while the Canadian Department of Militia and Defence would equip and train the unit, the British would pay its costs.
- ◆ The response from the public was so enthusiastic that Ottawa, realizing there was surplus space on the troopships, offered to raise another two squadrons.
- ◆ Originally referred to as the Canadian Yeomanry, when the unit finally sailed from Canada in January 1902 it was a six-squadron regiment of 901 officers and men known as the 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles (2nd CMR). Together with the 64 personnel of the 10th Canadian Field Hospital, it formed the third Canadian contingent.
- ◆ The 2nd CMR was raised like previous contingents from across the country but included a significant number of returning veterans of early Canadian contingents, particularly where officers and senior NCOs were concerned. Approximately 22% of the unit's soldiers were veterans of the South African campaign.

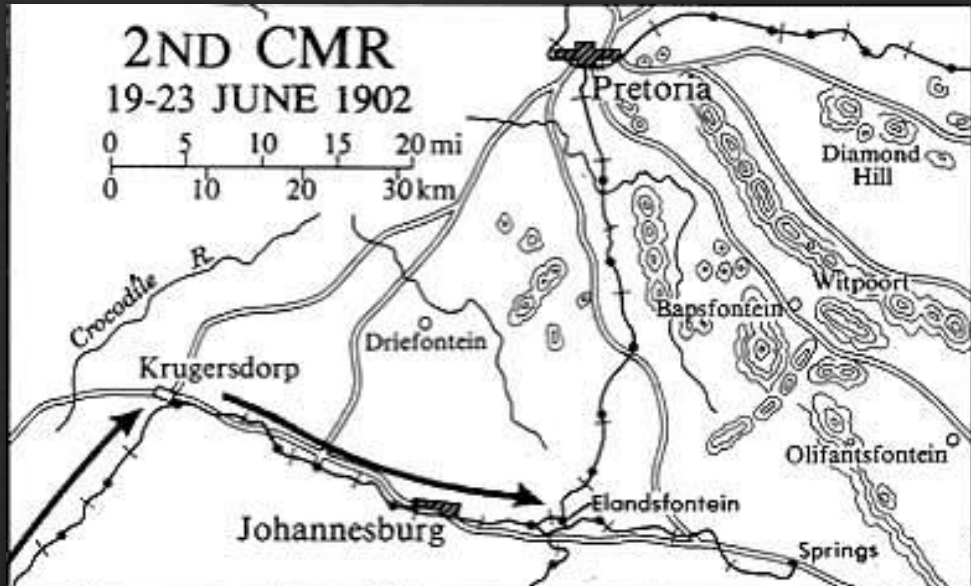
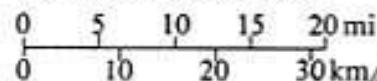
The Prelude to the Battle

- ◇ By late March 1902, the nature of the war had changed dramatically. The British had sectioned off large portions of the *veldt* with long lengths of barbed wire strung along railway lines, connected by as many as 8000 specially-built blockhouses. This fencing of territory to control access and movement ultimately enclosed more than 23,656 square kilometres of the Transvaal and 27,358 square kilometres of the Orange Free State. Approximately 50,000 troops manned the blockhouse lines, while another 80,000 mounted troops pursued the Boers, attempting to trap them inside these enclosures. The trap was not complete, however, as there were several gaps in the network of blockhouses. One of these was in western Transvaal, an area described by one author as being half the size of the Canadian province of New Brunswick.
- ◇ The 900-strong 2nd CMR had arrived in the region in mid-March 1902, and took part early in their deployment in a major offensive involving 16,000 troops. The operation drove 2500 Boers into the far western reaches of the Transvaal, a particularly desolate area. Efforts to locate and engage the fleeing Boers continued in the weeks that followed.
- ◇ Early on the morning of 31 March, a column that included 2nd CMR embarked on a 65-kilometre search for Boers along the bed of the practically dry Brak Spruit, which ran off the much larger Hart's River. By mid-morning, the scouts had struck a fresh trail, apparently made by a small number of Boers.
- ◇ Sensing an easy victory, the column went off in pursuit, leaving 2nd CMR to follow, escorting the slow-moving baggage train. Prospects seemed good, but the Boers, in fact, outnumbered the British force, and had the advantage of terrain.
- ◇ As the Boer attack developed, the British commander, Colonel Cookson, decided to set up a defensive position around a farm called Boschbult. By the time the Canadians arrived with the baggage train, the Boers were beginning to push back the British defence.

(Credit for this account, which has been lightly edited, belongs to the Canadian War Museum)

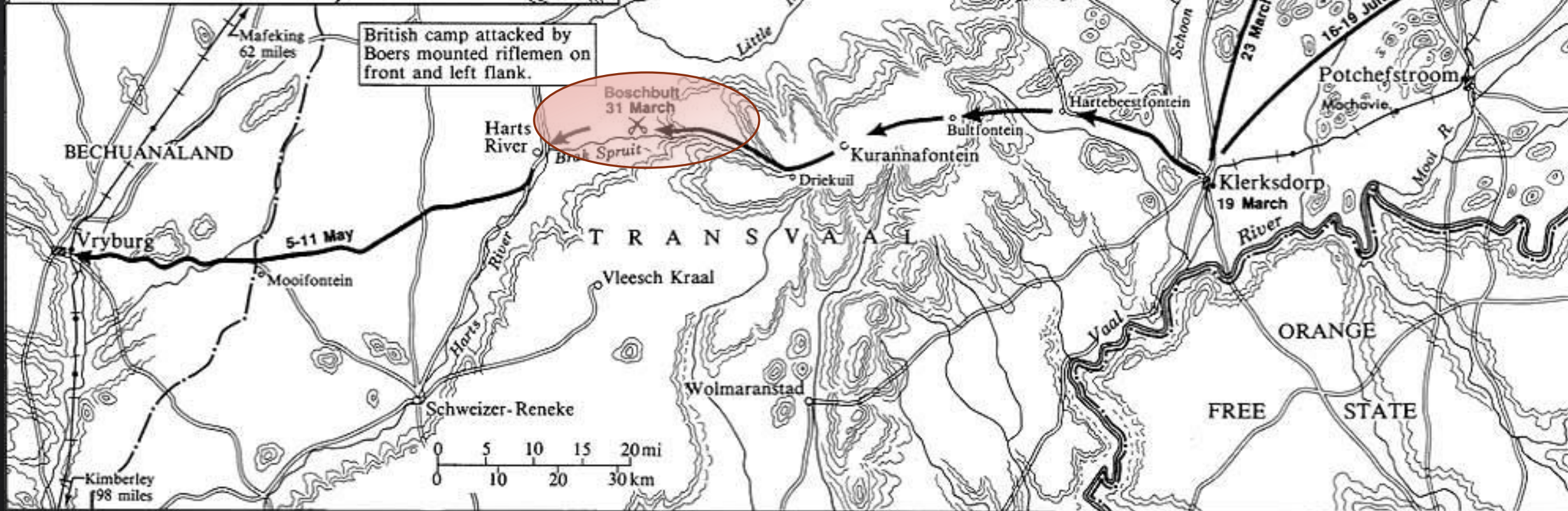
2ND CMR

19-23 JUNE 1902



2ND CANADIAN MOUNTED RIFLES

19 MARCH - 16 JUNE 1902



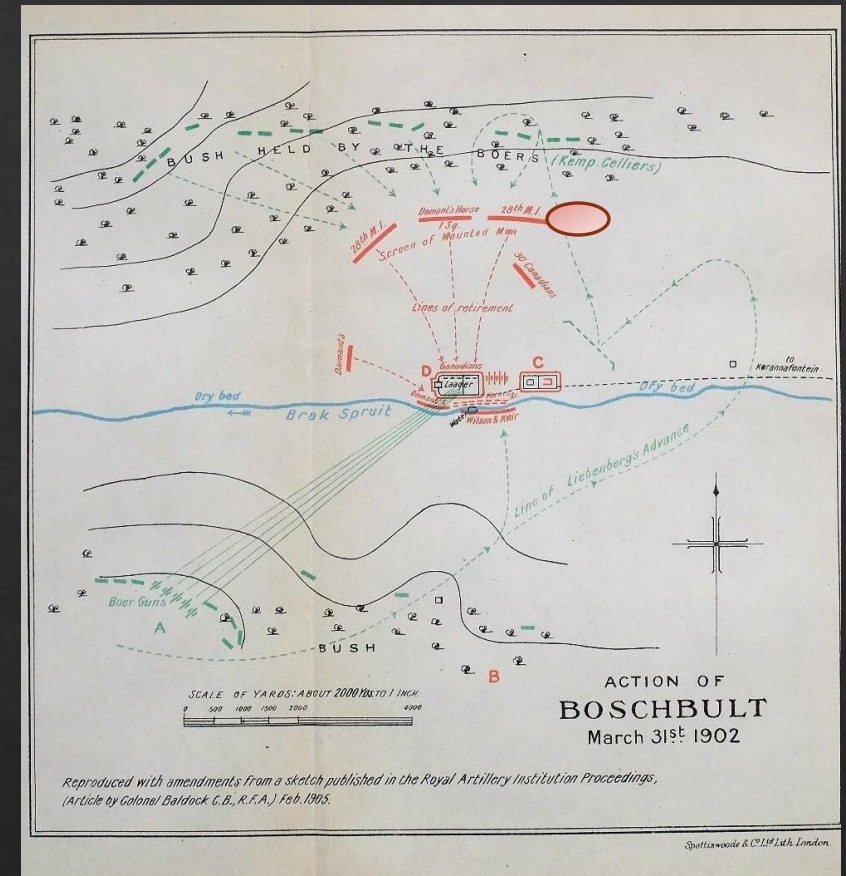
Boschbult (Hart's River) – 31 March 1902

- ◇ As part of Colonel Cookson's column, elements of 2nd CMR helped fend off an attack on a poorly sited bivouac site near Hart's River
- ◇ The Boer force that attacked the column was made up of 2500 seasoned men, described by one source as, "the flower of the Boer Army"
- ◇ In his after-action report, the commanding officer of 2nd CMR, Lieutenant Colonel T.D.B. Evans, wrote that "While the camp was being attacked, Lieut Carruthers' party (about 21 men of the 3rd and 4th troops, "E" Sqn) had moved off to the right of the farm. Sergt Hodgins with another small party of the 3rd and 4th Troops, "E" Squadron, was to the right of Lieut. Carruthers. Still further to the right was a detached post of about 75 Mounted Infantry. Several hundred Boers swept down on this post on the right, stampeding the Mounted Infantry, who galloped through the line occupied by our men."



Boschbult (Hart's River) – 31 March 1902

- ◆ “Lieutenant Carruthers, assisted by Sergt. Perry, Corpl. Wilkinson, Lance-Corpl. Bond and Private McCall, kept his men in hand, dismounted them, and formed them in a half-moon shape to face the Boers.”
- ◆ “Sergt. Hodgins, whose men were being swept off in the stampede, rallied about ten of them and dismounted to meet the attack.”
- ◆ Lying prone in the long grass, they forced the Boers to seek shelter in a screen of trees. A ferocious and extended battle ensued, although given the Canadians' lack of shelter and the overwhelming numerical superiority of the attacking Boer force, it was apparent that it was only a matter of time before they would be overrun.



Boschbult (Hart's River) – 31 March 1902

- ◆ The Canadians fought until their ammunition was exhausted. By this point, 17 out of the 21 were either killed or wounded. Sergt. Perry, although badly wounded, fought until he was killed. Corporal Wilkinson was wounded in the arm and fought until shot through the eye; he then threw the bolt of his rifle into the long grass to render it useless to the enemy. Private John Minchin, wounded in 6 places, fired his last shot when the Boers were only 25 yards away, and then did the same.
- ◆ Another soldier, Private Charles Napier Evans, fighting alongside his brother, was mortally wounded through the bowels, but secured and used up another bandolier of ammunition, and broke his rifle during the Boers' final rush so that it would not be captured.
- ◆ Lieutenant Colonel Evans noted in his report that, "The splendid stand made by Lieut Carruthers' party without cover of any kind, and against overwhelming odds, was well worthy of the best traditions of Canada and the whole Empire."



Boschbult (Hart's River) – 31 March 1902

- ◆ The general battle continued for another hour. Other Canadian elements were engaged, including 200 Canadians on the right flank in improvised trenches that came under heavy fire from a Boer charge, which was broken up by a British pom-pom, and another group near a farmhouse on the camp site that repelled a Boer attack without difficulty.
- ◆ The Boers eventually gave up the attack as evening approached, likely due to a shortage of ammunition.
- ◆ The entire battle was approximately 3 hours long – while it had been the result of poor planning, sloppy scouting, and inadequate defensive preparations, the Canadians' heroism was the one bright spot.
- ◆ Lord Kitchener's dispatch singled out the Canadians, on whom, "the heaviest loss fell", and commended them for their "utmost bravery and determination", noting that there, "have been few finer instances of heroism in the course of the whole campaign".

APPENDIX D.

SECOND CANADIAN MOUNTED RIFLES

COMMISSIONED OFFICERS AND MEN KILLED IN ACTION, OR OF DISEASE, AND THE CAUSES OF DEATH, AND THE DATES OF DEATH, AND THE WOUNDS RECEIVED IN ACTION, OR OF DISEASE.

Name.	Cause of Death.	Date of Death.
Moore, R. J.	Dysentery.	19-3-02
Perry, J. C.	Killed in action at } Boschbult. }	31-3-02
Sherritt, A.		
Peters, W. T.		
Vollrath, W.		
Huston, M. G. A. . .		
Evans, C. N.		
Milligan, W. P. K. ...	Died of wounds received in action at } Boschbult. }	1-4-02
West, A.		2-4-02
Campbell, D. H.	Killed in action.	2-4-02
Knisley, W. A.		
Day, T. B.	Enteric.	17-4-02
Leslie, W. J.		27-4-02
Howard, F. S. McL...	Died of wounds received in action at Boschbult.	21-4-02
Drury, J.		
Margeson, J. R.	"	22-5-02
Banfield, E. S.		5-6-02
Hunter, W. H.	Died of wounds received in action at Boschbult.	30-6-02

Individual Stories – Lieutenant Bruce Carruthers

- ❖ Queen's South Africa Medal clasps "Cape Colony", "Paardeberg", "Driefontein", "Johannesburg" and "South Africa 1902". Named to **7479 SEJT. B. CARRUTHERS. R^L CANDN: REG^T**
- ❖ On his second tour in South Africa, as a Lieutenant in 2nd CMR, Carruthers led the rear-guard defence mounted by elements of 3 and 4 Troops of "E" Squadron at Boschbult on 31 March 1902, and was Mentioned in Dispatches for his gallantry during the battle



Individual Stories – Lieutenant Bruce Carruthers

- ◆ From Kingston, Ontario, born 1863
- ◆ An 1883 graduate of the Royal Military College, Kingston (college #82)
- ◆ Commissioned into the 21st Lancers, and served in the latter for 4 years before returning to Canada and becoming an officer in Kingston's 14th Princess of Wales Own Regiment
- ◆ Resigned his commission to join the Royal Canadian Regiment at the outbreak of war, serving as a Sergeant in D Company through all the unit's engagements

The Connecting file, Vol. X, No. 3, July, 1931 OUR "OLD TIME" PHOTOGRAPH PAGE



Subordinate Staff of the 2nd Special Service Battalion, R.C.R., and the Queensland Mounted Infantry, Belmont, South Africa, 1899.
R.C.R. Front Row (left to right): Col. Serjt. Young, Col. Serjt. Eustace, Sig. Serjt. Carruthers, Q.M. Serjt. Reading, O.R.C., Col. Serjt. Thompson and Serjt. Bugler Tresham.
Centre Row: R.S.M. Borland, W.O., R.Q.M. Serjt. Galloway, Arm. Serjt. Hoad, Pioneer Serjt. Medhurst and Transport Serjt. Lebelau.
Back Row: Col. Serjt. Davis, Col. Serjt. Lefleur, Col. Serjt. Charlton and O.R. Serjt. Potter.
Note: Col. Serjt. J. S. Campbell and Col. Serjt. W. Holmes were absent when this picture was taken.

Signals Sergeant Carruthers in South Africa, 1899 (circled)

Individual Stories – Lieutenant Bruce Carruthers

- ◆ Carruthers returned to South Africa as a Lieutenant with 2nd CMR
- ◆ His heroism at Boschbult was feted in Canada, and he returned to a hero's welcome in Kingston, receiving a "Sword of Honour" from the city
- ◆ Carruthers' experience with signalling in South Africa caused him to lobby for the establishment of a Canadian signal corps on his return to Canada, and he ultimately founded what is now the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals, the oldest signals corps in the Commonwealth, in October 1903
- ◆ He sadly died of tuberculosis, while still a relatively young man, aged 47, on 21 October 1910
- ◆ He was given a military funeral in his hometown of Kingston, and is buried there in Cataraqi Cemetery



Captain Carruthers c. 1903

Individual Stories – Sgt Campbell Perry

- ◆ Queen's South Africa Medal clasps "Cape Colony", "Paardeberg", "Driefontein", "Transvaal" and "South Africa 1902". Named to **7091 PTE. J.C. PERRY. R^L CANDN: REG^T**
- ◆ Perry was killed in action at Boschbult on 31 March 1902, and was Mentioned in Dispatches for his gallantry during the battle.



Individual Stories – Sgt Campbell Perry

- ◆ Born in Orillia, Ontario c. 1878
- ◆ A pre-war member of B Sqn Royal Canadian Dragoons in Winnipeg, Manitoba
- ◆ Served in A Company of the Royal Canadian Regiment until August 1900, when he was invalided back to England with enteric fever
- ◆ Re-enlisted with 2nd CMR, serving as a Serjeant with regimental #157
- ◆ Perry was killed in action on 31 March 1902, and he is buried in the Ottosdal Garden of Remembrance, Ottosdal, South Africa



Individual Stories – Pte Percy Kelly

- ◆ Queen's South Africa Medal clasps "Cape Colony", "Orange Free State", "Johannesburg", and "Diamond Hill". Named to **163 PTE. P.H. KELLY. THE CANDN: M.R.**
- ◆ Kelly served as a hospital orderly at Boschbult on 31 March 1902, and was Mentioned in Dispatches and promoted to Corporal for his gallantry during the battle.





Individual Stories – Pte Percy Kelly

- ◆ Born in Walthamstow, Essex, England c. 1872
- ◆ Was working as a baggageman for the Canadian Pacific Railway when he enlisted in the 1st CMR in Regina, Saskatchewan in January 1900
- ◆ Re-enlisted in the 2nd CMR in Virden, Manitoba in December 1901, with regimental # 353
- ◆ Kelly, along with two surgeons, attended to the wounded during the whole engagement while under a constant shell and musketry fire
- ◆ He returned to England after the war

Individual Stories – Cpl John Gunn

- ◆ Queen's South Africa Medal clasps "Cape Colony", "Transvaal", and "South Africa 1902". Named to **60 CORPL: J.G. GUNN. CAN: FIELD HOSP:**
- ◆ Gunn was wounded in action at Boschbult on 31 March 1902 while tending the wounded, the only member of the 10th Canadian Field Hospital to be wounded during the conflict.



Individual Stories – Cpl John Gunn

- ◆ Gunn was born in Brecon, Wales in 1878
- ◆ A medical student, with previous service in Number 6 Bearer Company, he enlisted in 10th Canadian Field Hospital in January 1902 for service in South Africa
- ◆ He was singled out in the unit after-action report, along with three other members of the unit, for his pluck and gallantry in dressing and attending to the wounded under a heavy shellfire, during which 8 horses were killed on the ambulances during the battle
- ◆ Gunn became a physician after returning to Canada, and re-enlisted during the First World War, serving as a Captain in the CAMC
- ◆ He served in France as Medical Officer for the 60th Bn CEF, for the 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles, and with the 8th Canadian Field Hospital before falling ill in late 1916, and he spent the remainder of the war serving in England

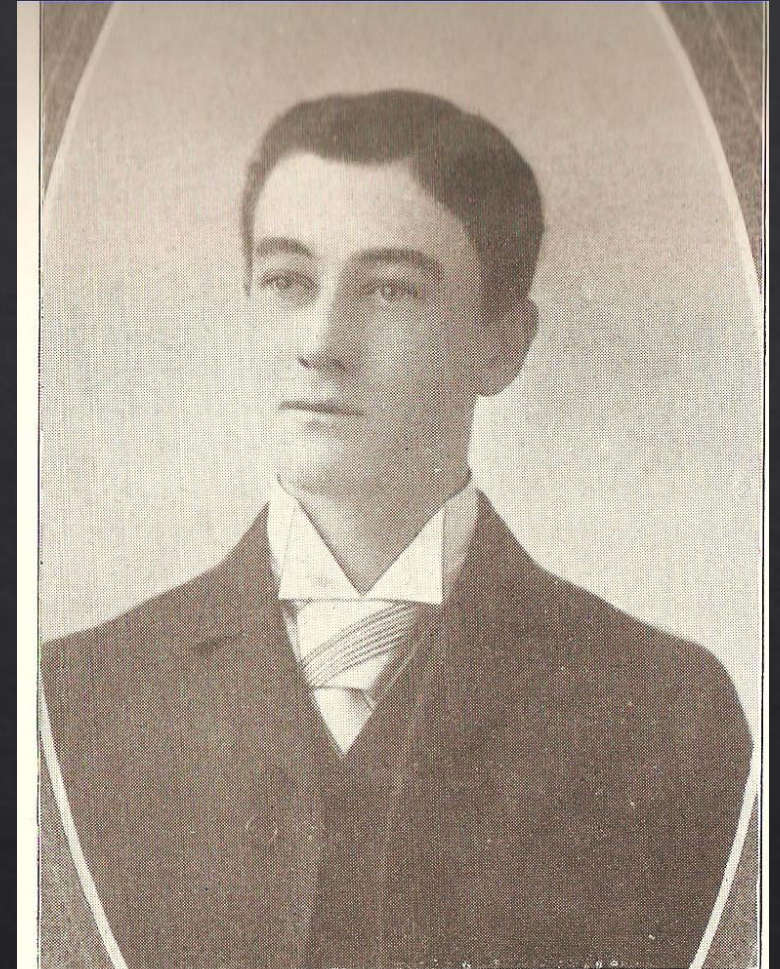


Canadian Casualties, Honours and Awards

- ◆ Overall Canadian casualties for the battle included 13 killed or died of wounds, and 42 wounded
- ◆ Sergeant Perry, along with Private Evans and Sergeant Lee, were mentioned for gallantry and good service in action in the Army Orders, South Africa, No. 532, April 21, 1902.
- ◆ The following N.C.O's. and men were promoted for distinguished gallantry in the field—Army Orders, South Africa, No. 532, April 21, 1902:
 - No. 352 Private P. H. Kelly (promoted Corporal).
 - No. 166 Corporal J. A. Wilkinson (promoted Sergeant).
 - No. 252 Lance Corpl. J. C. Bond (promoted Corporal).
 - No. 185 Private G. McBeth (promoted Corporal)
- ◆ Lord Kitchener's dispatches of 8 April 1902 mentioned Lieutenant Carruthers' exploit, but suggested he was one of those killed in the action. A later dispatch, on 1 June 1902, mentioned Surgeon Major J.A. Devine, Lieut B. Carruthers, Cpl J.A. Wilkinson, LCpl J.C. Bond, Pte G. McBeth, Sgt J.C. Perry, Pte P.H. Kelly, Pte C.N. Evans, and Sgt H.A. Lee.

Impact of the battle/home front reaction

- ◆ News of the 2nd CMR's heroics at Hart's River renewed public awareness of the conflict and pride in Canada's contributions, and facilitated recruitment of a final contingent (3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th CMR, which arrived in South Africa too late to see action)
- ◆ Besides extensive newspaper coverage, men who had fought in the battle were commemorated in publicly commissioned artwork, statues, and even verse – Canadian poet John Ewan wrote a poem titled 'Little Hart River', which I have reproduced in its entirety on a later slide
- ◆ The comportment of Carruthers and his men in the battle also maintained and enhanced the reputation of the Canadian Army – the Minister of Militia, F.W. Borden, commented in the House of Commons that, "Canadians are maintaining the reputation that they have already earned in South Africa and they continue to prefer death to surrender."



Private Evans, of Port Hope, Ont., a Harts River hero,
who refused to surrender and was shot.

QSA to 2nd CMR and 10th CFH

- ◆ A total of 3802 Canadians received the QSA for service in South Africa (this number reflects the recipients who served in the units of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd contingents)
- ◆ QSA medals to 2nd CMR are relatively common and appear for sale regularly, normally named either to the recipient's first unit of his service (if a veteran of the 1st or 2nd contingents – approximately 200) or to CANADIAN M.R. (approximately 700).
- ◆ QSA medals to the 10th Canadian Field Hospital are extremely scarce; of 68 issued, I have only recorded 7 appearing in either sales or institutional collections over the last 30 years. They are normally named CAN: FIELD HOSP: , but I have seen one late issue medal impressed to CANADIAN F.H.



Little Hart River

by John A. Ewan

'Give it them lads', cried Carruthers,
 And the rifles answered his words.
As the lessening band of brothers,
 Sighted for two hundred yards.

But the last fusillade fairly stopped them,
 They staggered, then halted, then wheeled,
And Johnny just said: "We've stopped them"
 And sank on the spot where he'd kneeled.

They could die, but they could not surrender,
 Could not smirch Canada's name.
And we who survive will remember
 Their deed, their death and their fame.

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