

A Veteran of the Great War – Colonel Frederick Fieldhouse Clarke, DSO, MBE, VD

None of my family lost their lives in either of the world wars but a number did serve. As a young lad visiting grandparents in Montreal West, I was aware that my Grandpa Clarke was referred to as the Colonel but only much later did I hear the story of his life and service. In particular we have 67 pages of his unpublished memoirs of his life and military service.

Frederick Fieldhouse Clarke was born August 22, 1878 in Hamilton, Ontario. He was active in the Canadian Militia at an early age, joining the 13th Regiment as a private in 1892. When he moved to Toronto to attend university he transferred to the 48th Highlanders in 1895. He attended the School of Practical Science (now Engineering) class of OT0 but his studies were delayed when in 1899 he transferred to the Royal Regiment of Canada for active duty as Lieutenant posted garrison duty in Halifax during the Boer War. When the Boer War ended in 1902 he returned to civilian life, graduating as a civil engineer in 1903..

In 1914 F. F. Clarke was a Major in the militia and Adjutant to the York Rangers. He was working as a surveyor for the Canadian Northern Railroad in northern Quebec. We pick up the story of his call to duty in the words of his own memoirs.

I was working with a survey party at Assumption in Quebec when I noticed great excitement around the hotel and men talking about la guerre which meant to me, the war. There was no talk of a war when I left Toronto a few days before and I got a man who could speak English and he told me England was a war against Germany. I took the next train to Toronto and found lots of excitement there. Canada was to send a Division of 28,000 men fully equipped to help and help to fight under their own General. I got in touch with my C.O. Lt. Col A, G.Nicol and he said a meeting of officers was called at St Paul's Hall (Editor's note: Yonge & Yorkville approximately) in Toronto headquarters and I was told to take charge. I told the officers that the Yorks were called up in a long wire from Sam Hughes, our Minister of Militia and to prepare for a volunteer battalion of 1,000 men. ...Single men were to be given preference and to try to keep the ages down to 45.



Colonel F. F. Clarke, D.S.O., M.B.E.,VD
Who commanded the 127th Battalion, C.E.F (2nd Battalion Canadian Railway Troops), and later the York Rangers (two battalions)

Because the Toronto Armories on University Avenue were so crowded the Yorks ended up camping and training at the Long Branch Rifle Range, fifteen miles to the west of the city core.

On August 12th the Canadian Expeditionary Force was put on pay and allowances and my 800 men ordered to a new camp which the Government bought at Valcartier, north of Quebec City

We marched to Toronto in very much better shape that we came out. At the corner of Simcoe St and Queen St, we were met by the Brass Band of the 12th York Rangers. The four city units stationed at the armouries were recruiting and training men for that Battalion and when they heard our band playing the old familiar march of the Yorks they broke parade and ran down to Queen St and climbed a fence in front of Osgoode Hall to cheer us on as we passed. We reached Cherry Street Railway Yards by 10:00 a.m. and the men rested until we could get our train spotted.

The train cars were not well prepared and there was no provision for cooking and hot water for a two day journey, in fact no rations had been arranged for.

I telephoned Coles Caterer In Toronto and arranged with the manager to prepare as quickly as possible and deliver to the train at least 1,500 sandwiches. ... I also phoned Gilbert House in Trenton, since I knew the clerk well. I explained what had happened and asked him to send a truck to gather baked beans, bread, jam, cheese and butter and get milk cans full of hot coffee, perhaps in Belleville, and get them to the C.N.R. station. ...

With food in hand they arrived at Valcartier at 11 am the next morning. This was the first organized unit to depart Toronto for the War. My grandfather's memories include many vivid descriptions of the organization and

disorganization of the camp as well as the problems with Sam Hughes, Minister of Militia. But Major Clarke was not to go with the 4th Battalion of the Yorks as part of the first Division of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Rather he was assigned to Lt General Sir William Otter who had been called out of retirement and had been given the position of Officer-in-charge of Internment Operations under the Department of Justice. Major Clarke returned to Toronto to await further orders.

In December 1914 he was instructed to take a special train of eighty prisoners north to Cochrane with a Militia Guard of three officers, a Doctor and twenty men. From there the train was augmented with supplies of every sort: food, tools, hardware, building materials, heaters with the intention of going to Hearst 100 miles to the west along the C.N.R. line, but they never got there.

The train pulled out ploughing about three feet of snow off the track and making about twenty miles per hour. We made a stop at the Groundhog River.... We moved west again, fighting the snow until we reached the Kapuskasing River about 72 miles west of Cochrane. I was soon told that the engine was finished having used all the water in the tank.

They tried to use the prisoners to fill the engine water tank with pails from the river but at minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit and winter gear not yet issued the task was impossible, It was agreed that the engine return to Cochrane for another tank of water. They settled in for the night but no train appeared in the morning. So they began to clear trees on the south side of the track opposite MacPherson siding and start a campsite. Days went by without a train and so Major Clarke, having scouted out the land, decided it was suitable for their purposes. By the time the train did return the camp was laid out and a row of cabins built. They called it Kapuskasing Camp and it's arguably the first internment camp in Canada. http://www.ontarioplaques.com/Plaques/Plaque_Cochrane08.html



This post card from F. F. Clarke shows the camp likely in the spring or summer of 1915. from the rail embankment with the Kapuskasing River in the foreground. The inked annotation shows the sawmill.

In the early summer, the Turks (internees) built me a six room cottage on an island in the river. I was advised by the Camp Sgt Major to pay no attention, he was sure I would get a surprise.

As his family consisted of four young boys the six rooms were no doubt required though my father being only three had no real memory of it. But families of the militia did join their men and by spring there was a small community which included 42 children. F. F. Clarke's memoirs describe how the Community grew and his role as commandant, postmaster, justice of the peace, etc.

But my surprise was in discovering who that Camp Sergeant Major was.

Following a Remembrance Day service only a year or so ago Jill Klaehn and I traded stories of the WWI veterans in our families. We discovered that both grandfathers served at Kapuskasing camp



The next Sunday I brought in this picture of the Militia Guard Kapuskasing Camp 1915. My grandfather Major F. F. Clarke is front row dead centre and immediately to the right (his left) is Jill's grandfather, Sergeant Major Harry Bernard Lowe.

Here they are in close up



The camp was the first real settlement in what became Kapuskasing. The internment camp later became a federal experimental farm within which is a small cemetery where internees who died are buried. The farm closed in March 2014.

<http://www.kapuskasingtimes.com/2014/01/16/back-to-our-roots-town-officially-declares-interest-in-farm>.

A museum located in railway cars on MacPherson siding tells the story of the camp and early days in Kapuskasing. .

Late in 1915 Major Clarke, newly promoted to Lt. Colonel, returned to Toronto to take charge of the recruiting of the 127th Battalion, mainly from York County They soon recruited 1,000 men and in the spring of 1916 they were billeted for training in the Kodak buildings on Weston Road.

<http://www.ca.kodak.com/CA/en/consumer/guideToBetterPictures/estores/index.jhtml?style=&cat=11&subCat=17>

There are archival photographs of the battalion at this site.

http://www1.toronto.ca/city_of_toronto/city_clerks/toronto_archives/files/images/kodak_heights_officers.jpg

The battalion marched from Newmarket to the Weston Road site, a considerable distance, and their progress was much celebrated.

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=22&dat=19160407&id=kXpGAAAAIBAJ&sjid=nCgDAAAAIBAJ&pg=6885,6775331>

The memoirs describe the field kitchens and order of March depicted in this posting on Flickr likely wrongly labelled as 1918. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/tinhutjohn/3161798366/in/photostream/>

After more training at Camp Borden in July 1915 the battalion was ordered overseas. Because of F. F. Clarke's engineering skills and the fact that the unit had many men who had been employed in railway and construction trades they were reorganized as the 2nd Battalion, Canadian Railway Troops.

While in camp in England he became very ill.

I was six weeks in hospital and my right leg went up with poor circulation. I got worse and was moved out of the ward to die. Miss McDougal was looking after me and I told her I would come out O. K. She thought she knew better, In ten days I was sitting up So I was taken back to the General Ward again. I applied for a Medical Board and was discharged for light duty.

While the memoirs don't really explain the medical problem the Archives Canada has 71 pages of digitized accessible documents, among them the hand written medical records which clearly show the diagnosis: pleurisy and phlebitis. My grandfather basically kept his command by faking being fit for duty until eventually he fully recovered.

On January 11, 1917, they crossed the English Channel for France. Except for one brief period the unit never served with the Canadian Corp but was assigned to the British Army servicing the line in Flanders and France. Their specialty was laying and maintaining the light railways that brought munitions and supplies from railheads to just behind the front lines. These railways and the 2nd Battalion were subject to artillery shelling and bombing from the air. They also built and repaired bridges, mainline track and other installations. The work is described in mind-numbing detail in the war diary of the 127th Battalion written in 1957 by Lt Colonel H. M. Jackson. Among the many achievements was the development of new track laying techniques so that the 2nd Canadian Railroad Battalion laid the most track in a day of any on the British front, 6,000 feet per day versus 1,000 feet for British units. In the approximate two years on the Western Front Lt Colonel Clarke was mentioned in dispatches on three occasions. As a result he received the Distinguished Service Order (D.S.O.) in January 1, 1918 and a Bar to the D.S.O. on July 23, 1918. The first D.S.O. was awarded for signal bravery on the Ypres front in 1917

The second D.S.O. came as a result of the last real enemy offensive of the war when the front was broken near Amiens. The 2nd Canadian Railway Troops were ordered into action as infantry. The citation to the Bar to the D.S.O. as recorded in the battalion history reads:

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty during a hostile attack lasting for four days. He organized from his battalion sixteen Lewis gun teams (Editor's note: Lewis guns were light machine guns), and made all arrangements for ammunition and supplies to be brought up to the front line by his own lorries. Except for the higher direction of the defence (sic), the unit was entirely self-contained. The promptitude and alacrity with which this unit responded for volunteers, the splendid manner with which the defense was organized, the coolness and sustained enthusiasm displayed by all ranks under his command, were largely due to the courage of the Commanding Officer.

- London Gazette 30813 26 Jul 18.

A fuller accounting is given in pages of the history starting on page 103 which has been excerpted and is on line at <http://www.cefresearch.ca/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?t=124>

In 1919 Frederick Fieldhouse returned to Toronto and resumed his work with the railway as Chief Land Surveyor and Property Commissioner, Canadian National Railways. Returning to militia duty he was promoted full Colonel in 1922 to command the York Rangers (two battalions) for two years. He worked with ex-serviceman organizations and was one of the founders of the Canadian Legion, serving as its First Grand Commander,

When war broke out on 1939 he was seconded to the Department of Munitions and Supply in which role he was in charge of establishing prisoner of war camps and laying out air fields and other military installations across Canada. For these services he was awarded an M.B.E. (Member of the British Empire.).

Colonel Frederick Fieldhouse Clarke, having served King and Country through three wars, died in 1970 at the age of 92.

RESOURCES CONSULTED

Memories of Col. Frederick Fieldhouse Clarke, M.B.E,D.S.O. AND BAR, V.D (Family Document)
The 127th Battalion, C.E.F 2nd Battalion Canadian Railroad Troops; Lt-Col. H. M. Jackson, M.B.E. ED
Obituary, Montreal Gazette – July 4, 1970

Various Web Sites

- <http://www.canadiangreatwarproject.com/searches/soldierDetail.asp?ID=168541>
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/127th_Battalion_\(12th_York_Rangers\),_CEF](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/127th_Battalion_(12th_York_Rangers),_CEF)
- <http://qyrang.ca/about/history/#archives1>
- <https://matthewkbarrett.wordpress.com/2014/08/25/the-commandant/>
- <http://www.cefresearch.ca/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?t=124>
- <https://www.flickr.com/photos/tinhutjohn/3161798366/in/photostream/>
- <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=22&dat=19160407&id=kXpGAAAAIBAJ&sjid=nCgDAAAAIBAJ&pg=6885,6775331>
- <http://www.ca.kodak.com/CA/en/consumer/guideToBetterPictures/eStores/index.jhtml?style=&cat=11&subCat=17>
- http://www1.toronto.ca/city_of_toronto/city_clerks/toronto_archives/files/images/kodak_heights_officers.jpg

127th YORK RANGERS
Unit OVERSEAS BATTALION Rank Lt. Col Name CLARKE, F. F.

OFFICERS' DECLARATION PAPER.
CANADIAN OVER-SEAS EXPEDITIONARY FORCE.

QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED BY OFFICER.

(ANSWERS.)

1. (a) What is your Surname? CLARKE
(b) What are your Christian Names? FREDERICK FIELDHOUSE

2. (a) Where were you born? (State place and country) CITY OF HAMILTON, ONTARIO, CANADA
(b) What is your present address? 137 SHELDRAKE BLVD., TORONTO, ONTARIO, CANADA

3. What is the date of your birth? AUGUST 22nd, 1878

4. What is (a) the name of your next-of-kin? A. V. CLARKE
(b) the address of your next-of-kin? 137 SHELDRAKE BLVD, TORONTO, ONTARIO
(c) the relationship of your next-of-kin? WIFE

5. What is your profession or occupation? ENGINEER & SURVEYOR

6. What is your religion? UNITARIAN

7. Are you willing to be vaccinated or re-vaccinated and inoculated? YES

8. To what Unit of the Active Militia do you belong? 12th Regt. York Rangers

9. State particulars of any former Military Service: 19 years in Militia Regt.
3 years in Royal Can.Regt.

10. Are you willing to serve in the CANADIAN OVER-SEAS EXPEDITIONARY FORCE? Yes

The undersigned hereby declares that the above answers made by him to the above questions are true.

[Signature] (Signature of Officer.)

CERTIFICATE OF MEDICAL EXAMINATION.

I have examined the above-named Officer in accordance with the Regulations for Army Medical Services.

I consider him fit for the CANADIAN OVER-SEAS EXPEDITIONARY FORCE.

Date: 12th NOVEMBER 1915

Place: ST. PAULS HALL, TORONTO, ONT.

*Insert here "fit" or "unfit."
LT-COL. Medical Officer.

M. F. W. 51.
2000-1-15.
H. Q. 1772-39-917.

*See Myocard sent for
with 47th Batta CEF
Sept 1914*

TRIPPLICATE

14th Bn. C.E.F. Hospitalizing Camp.