



The battle for Kitcheners' Wood. Just before midnight on 22 April 1915, the 10th and 16th CEF Battalions carried out Canada's first major attack of the war when they entered a small wood west of St. Julien. The two battalions took and held the wood but suffered nearly 75 per cent casualties doing so. (From *Canada in Flanders*)

Turner's request for assistance, the 1st Brigade was released from corps reserve and ordered to report to him. Early in the evening, however, the French asked for Canadian support in a counter-attack they were planning and the 10th and 16th CEF Battalions were ordered "to clear" Kitcheners' Wood,* a straggling copse west of St. Julien. Just before midnight the two units, with a total strength of about 1,600 officers and men, moved forward with bayonets fixed to carry out Canada's first attack of the war. Coming under intense enemy artillery and machine-gun fire, they managed to occupy most of the wood at a cost of three quarters of their strength and by dawn on 23 April were holding a line on the southern edge of the wood. The French never put in an appearance.

For its part the 1st Brigade had received orders to stand to arms. Shortly after 8 P.M., the 2nd and 3rd Battalions were directed to move forward from Vlamertinghe to the 3rd Brigade Headquarters at Mouse Trap Farm, midway between Kitcheners' Wood and the hamlet of Wieltje. Their route took them across the German front, where they came under artillery and some small-arms fire, and they frequently had to take cover. Lieutenant Victor Van Der Smissen of A Company, a 21-year-old recent RMC graduate whose father was a professor at the University of Toronto, was somewhat dismissive of his first time under fire:

While I was lying on my tummy trying to look as if I were in Canada or some other remote place a bullet whistled over my head, and I heard a noise in my pack. When I came to open it, I found that a bullet had penetrated the heels of a new pair of socks and had gone through my tooth-brush pasted ready for use.⁴¹

* This name did not derive from Field Marshal Kitchener but from the fact that military cooks obtained wood for fuel and slaughtered livestock in this wood.

Private Harold Peat of C Company was not nearly as nonchalant when he recalled that night march:

As we crossed the Yser Canal we marched in a dogged and resolute silence. No man can tell what were the thoughts of his comrades. We have no bands, nor bugles, nor music when marching into action. We dare not even smoke. In dark and quiet we pass steadily ahead. There is only the continued muffled tramp – tramp – of hundreds of feet encased in heavy boots.

To the far right and to the far left shells were falling, bursting and brilliantly lighting up the heavens for a lurid moment. In our immediate sector there were no shells. It was all the more dark and the more silent, for the noise and uproar and blazing flame to right and left.

We reached the top of the grade, when suddenly from out of the pit of darkness came a high explosive shell. It landed in the middle of our battalion. It struck where the machine gun section was placed, and annihilated them almost to a man.

Not one of us wavered; not one of us swerved to right or left, to front or back. We kept on. There was hardly one who lost his step. The commanders whispered in the darkness, "Close up the ranks." The men behind those who had fallen jumped across the bodies of their comrades lying prone, and joined in immediately behind those in the forward rows.

The dead and wounded lay stretched where they had fallen.⁴²

Unfortunately, Captain George S. Ryerson, the son of the Royals' surgeon in the 1885 campaign, and Lieutenant Maydo Macdonald, commanding the battalion machine-gun section, were killed by this shelling. Besides enemy fire, there was also a distinct and disturbing smell of chlorine in the night air and the darkness was

frequently pierced by explosions, flares and the flames of the town of Ypres, which was burning. Nobody appeared to know what was happening and Private George Patrick remembered that "everything seemed to be confused."⁴³ Lieutenant Herbert Alley of A Company, a 20-year-old former law student at Osgoode Hall, started to get a bad feeling and began to think that "we hadn't a hope in the world." But he took his men "forward just the same, because that was orders" and his men followed, although he knew that "they must have had the same feeling as I did."⁴⁴

When the two battalions reached Turner, he ordered the 2nd Battalion to support the 10th and 16th Battalions at Kitcheners' Wood and the 3rd Battalion to entrench around Mouse Trap Farm as part of a new defence line, known as the GHQ Line. The 2nd Battalion went forward as ordered, suffering heavy casualties as they did so, and established a line extending from the right of the 16th Battalion. The battalion's right flank was about 500 yards west of St. Julien, which was defended by the 13th Battalion. This gap had to be closed and at 4 A.M. on Friday, 23 April, Turner ordered Lieutenant-Colonel Rennie to send two companies to seal it. Rennie chose Major G. E. Kirkpatrick and C Company under Captain John Streight, and D Company under Captain Charles Morton to carry out this task. They were accompanied by at least two of the battalion's four Colt machine guns.

Kirkpatrick, a former insurance executive, had about 225 men under his command when he went forward just after dawn. Unfortunately there was little cover and the ground over which he advanced was under German observation and swept by heavy German machine-gun and artillery fire. "The machine gun fire was hellish," recalled Private Howard Peat, and it "seemed as if no one could live in such a hail of lead."⁴⁵ Captain Streight, commanding C Company, was wounded but decided to continue in action. A 34-year-old lumber merchant from the village of Islington on the outskirts of Toronto, Streight was a veteran of South Africa. He was also an inspiring officer: "I'd have followed him to Hell and then back," commented one of his men.⁴⁶

The two companies took heavy casualties before reaching their objective. All attempts to advance beyond the right flank of the 2nd Battalion were stopped cold by heavy machine-gun fire and Kirkpatrick ordered his men to dig in to the north and west of St. Julien. By this time most Canadian soldiers had thrown away the miserable MacAdam shovel but they did what they could with whatever came to hand. The ground was flat with very little cover and the best they could do was to fall back to a shallow trench and scrape it about two or three feet deep, throwing the spoil up as a breastwork. Eventually they placed their dead in front of this trench for additional protection because, as Private Eric Seaman noted, fatal casualties "couldn't suffer any more."⁴⁷ The corpse of one young officer was in front of Seaman's position, and on the unfortunate man's arm was an expensive wristwatch, a novel and prize item in 1914. Seaman was proud that none of his comrades stole it and it remained there throughout the battle.

"It was a veritable inferno": The 2nd battle of Ypres, Friday, 23 April 1915

At 8 A.M. Kirkpatrick sent a message to 3rd Brigade Headquarters:

The enemy are too strong to dislodge, well entrenched. I will work to entrench ST. JULIEN TO FARM* and await orders. Need ammunition and stretcher bearers. If any troops available we need more here say a ½ battalion working out [west] from ST. JULIEN.⁴⁸

By 9.40 A.M. the battalion signallers had managed to get a telephone line through to Kirkpatrick and he again requested ammunition. Two parties were quickly dispatched to him with 27,000 rounds. Before this was delivered a messenger arrived at 3rd Brigade Headquarters with a second note from Kirkpatrick reporting that his men were entrenching but lacked proper tools, and that his casualties included four officers and approximately half of his men. Although he lost contact with the 13th Battalion in St. Julien, Kirkpatrick's force continued to hold out in their exposed position but began to run short of water. Captain Charles Morton, commanding D Company, remembered that during the morning the German shelling was extremely heavy:

It was a veritable inferno; shell after shell broke around us continuously, half-a-dozen at a time, from 7 a.m. til 1 p.m., all sorts of conditions of shells – "Johnsons," "Whistlers," shrapnel and God knows what not. I had been attending to wounded men with the help of two chaps of the 2nd Battalion, who were mortally wounded on the job: they fell by my side and gave me an unpleasant twenty minutes until they were beyond help. I crawled away and a few minutes later was hit myself in the right thigh by shrapnel. I tried to carry on but could not stand, so I crawled about 75 yards to a tree trunk which had been felled, and hugged the leaside of it until 9 p.m. when I was picked up by the stretcher. You may believe me, it was not pleasant to lie there helpless, expecting every minute to be landed on by one of the shells that were incessantly bursting around me.⁴⁹

While Kirkpatrick's men were trying desperately to hang on, A and B Companies of the Toronto Regiment dug in around the 3rd Brigade Headquarters, where they came under intermittent German artillery fire. Lieutenant Van Der Smissen of A Company occupied a listening post with five men somewhat north of the main company position. He stood behind his soldiers, tempting fate as he was only covered from the waist down, directing their fire whenever the enemy appeared. Suddenly, one of his men remembered, a heavy German shell "hit with a tremendous

* The co-ordinates for this farm were probably in the original message but have been omitted in the copies that have survived.