

Correspondance de guerre d'Émile Martin (1914-1916)

Introduction

This presentation documents the journey of Emile Martin, a francophone, during the early years of Canada's participation in the First World War (1914-1918). Emile Martin's postal correspondence records his experiences as one of the very first members of the Royal 22^e Regiment; from his training in Canada to his death on the battlefield in Europe.

Historical context

On August 4, 1914, when Canada joined Britain to fight Germany, French Canadians were almost completely absent from the ranks of the Canadian Army. Camp Valcartier was designated as the place for mobilization on August 6, 1914. The first contingent from Valcartier left for England on October 3, 1914, and comprised 32,665 soldiers, including 1,245 French Canadian volunteers. The latter were distributed among the anglophone battalions. The Minister of Militia and Defence, Sam Hughes, dismissed the French-speaking senior officers of the Permanent Militia from the contingent. Captains Hercule Barré and Émile Ranger attempted to form an exclusively French-speaking battalion, but they were only permitted to establish two french-speaking companies within the 14th Battalion.

A group of Quebec politicians and businessmen noted that the integration of French Canadians into the permanent army was necessary for national unity; they decided to finance the creation of a francophone unit. Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Leader of the Official Opposition, wrote a letter to Prime Minister Robert Borden, explaining the need for a francophone unit in order to recruit members of the French Canadian population. On October 20, 1914, the government finally approved the creation of a French Canadian battalion which was established the following day.

The battalion was first known as the "Régiment Royal Canadien Français." The battalion adopted the designation "22^e" because it was the 22nd Battalion authorized to take part in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. However, the official designation of the battalion was the 22nd Infantry Battalion (French Canadian).

The new battalion began training in October 1914 in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Québec. It was composed of 1,024 soldiers and placed under the command of Colonel Frédéric Gaudet. However, the lack of space at Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, combined with its proximity to Montréal, gave rise to several desertions and cases of indiscipline, which prompted Colonel Gaudet to request a transfer to a more appropriate location. Finally, on March 12th, the Colonel's request was accepted and the battalion was transferred to Amherst, Nova Scotia.

On March 3rd, 1915, the 22nd Battalion received its colours. Abbé Doyon, after having consecrated the colours, declared: "It is above all a matter of national existence: for French Canadians, it is a matter of life or death as a national entity, as a nation on the continent of North America."

During the First World War, the 22nd Battalion fought the Germans on two fronts. Being the only French-speaking Battalion in an army of seven million British soldiers, their actions were closely monitored and the slightest failures were disproportionately reported.

First battles in Belgium (1915-1916)

The 22nd Battalion embarked for England on May 20, 1915 on board the RMS Saxonica. Together with the 5th Brigade of the 2nd Canadian Division near, the 22nd Battalion was deployed to the trenches near Ypres in Flanders (Belgium) on September 20, 1915. On February 26, 1916, Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas-Louis Tremblay became the commander of the 22nd Battalion. The 22nd Battalion remained in the Belgian trenches until March 1916, during which time they fought trench warfare and made several raids. The soldiers of the 22nd Battalion also underwent their first gas attack at Vierstraat.

Correspondance de guerre d'Émile Martin (1914-1916)

The Battle of the Somme (1916)

On September 15, 1916, the 22nd Battalion took part in its first large-scale offensive at the corps level in Flers-Courcelette. Lieutenant-Colonel Tremblay was aware of the importance of this operation and, at the end of the orders, added: "This is our first major attack. It must be a success for the honour of all Canadians which we represent in France." In spite of suffering many casualties, the attack was a military success. Several newspapers from around the world paid tribute to the valour of French Canada after the capture of the village of Courcelette.

Outline of the Exhibit

The exhibit documents the experiences of Emile Martin, a soldier in the 22nd Battalion, through his continuous correspondence with his family which illustrates both his love of them and the generosity of his pen. The material is presented chronologically.

Making of this collection

The author acquired a family archive, comprising a set of 53 mailings, one printed document, and four handwritten documents. Twenty six of the most significant items were selected to relate the participation of Émile Martin in the war effort. Although some documents are not in pristine condition, this exceptional selection provides a first-hand account of the legendary Battalion's journey during the early years of its existence.

Items Displayed

The richness of this presentation lies in the quality of the whole. Viewed individually the components of this exhibit contribute little to the story of the 22nd Battalion but when viewed collectively they present a valuable account of its early years. One soldier cannot win a war. It is the actions of whole battalions which win wars. And, just as some individuals in an army perform exceptional feats, some of the elements exhibited are of exceptional importance.

1. Pages 2, 3 and 4: Previously, only 10 copies were known of the circular mark of the Saint-Jean Military Post Office. This archive adds 15 previously unknown copies. Two registered letters, two envelopes and two "patriotic" postcards are to be found in this presentation.
2. Page 6: Envelope frank at the triple letter rate with a combination of several special features: ink filaments on two stamps from a booklet and a handwritten entry "War-Tax" on one of them. All posted on the third day of the new war tax rate.
3. Page 15: A letter with the inscription "KILLED IN ACTION" is not exceptional, but in the context of a continuous correspondence, it is a plus that cannot be ignored.

References:

- Military Archives, Government of Canada Veterans affairs Canada
- <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/fra/recherche-forme>
- <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/detail/497541?Emile%20Martin>
- Canadian Military Postal Marking 1881-1995 volume 1, W.J. Bailey & E.R. Toop, 1996, Canada
- Canada's 1891 Census <https://www.ancestry.ca/>
- Côte-des-Neiges Cemetery <http://www.notredamedesneigescemetery.ca/>
- Wikipédia https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_22e_R%C3%A9giment

Acknowledgments to the following people for their assistance in editorial research and editorial work

Jean-Guy Dalpé, Hugo Deshayé, Luke de Stéphano, Michel Taillon, Dudley Nash, Kathy Hartley; Reference Librarian, Harry Sutherland Philatelic Library, Toronto, Canada, Corporal Érick Jacques; Archives of the Royal 22^e Régiment, Québec.