

Armistice 1918: The Liberation of Mons

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Introduction

There was no pause on 2 November 1918 after the 4th Canadian Division captured the French city of Valenciennes located 19 miles (30 km) southwest of Mons, Belgium. Valenciennes was the Canadian Corps' last set-piece attack of the war. Although in retreat, the German army kept up stiff resistance while many villages in this coal-mining district were liberated during this period of mobile warfare. The Germans withdrew during the night of 4 November but left some units entrenched in rifle pits east of the Aunelle River, which marked the Franco-Belgian border in General Henry Horne's First Army sector. The 4th Canadian Division's 11th and 12th Canadian Infantry Brigades (CIBs) were to secure the Grande Honnelle River, some 500 yards east of the Aunelle, its tributary.¹ The 3rd Canadian Division's 8th CIB would protect their flank.

¹ War Diary [WD], 4th Canadian Division, November 1918, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4861, File 166, Library and Archives Canada [LAC].

On 5 November, the First Army's Canadian and XXII Corps launched attacks at 5:30 a.m.² Machine gun fire prevented the 75th and 87th Battalions from capturing Marchipont on the Belgian side of the Aunelle. The 75th was withdrawn in the afternoon. Under cover of darkness, 87th troops crossed the chest-deep, muddy-bottomed Aunelle at 6:00 p.m., then dashed through a turnip field to capture the village of 125 inhabitants.³ These were the first Canadian troops to encamp on Belgian soil that autumn. They withdrew from Marchipont to permit a protective barrage to dispatch the enemy nearby.⁴ The next morning the 102nd Battalion re-occupied the village before 7:00 a.m., later capturing Baisieux on the eastern bank of la Petite Honnelle River.⁵ The 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles (CMR) crossed the Aunelle and Grande Honnelle Rivers over mined road bridges to secure bridgeheads before capturing the intact Belgian frontier town of Quiévrain in the early evening.⁶ Crossing the Aunelle had "marked the first recovery of occupied Belgian territory by Canadian Troops."⁷ During the next four days, the Canadian Corps pressed forward, reconnoitring and clearing Belgian villages. Infantry patrols and cavalry kept in contact with the enemy. The Corps pushed on towards the high ground east and northeast of Mons.⁸

² Report on First Army Operations 26 August – 11 November 1918, Part VI, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 5068, LAC.

³ A. Fortesque Duguid, *History of the Canadian Grenadier Guards 1760-1964* (Montreal: Gazette Printing Company, 1965), p. 219; James Humphrey, *The Golden Bridge of Memoirs* (Don Mills, ON: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1979), pp. 54-8; and WD, 87th Infantry Battalion, November 1918, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4944, File 455, LAC.

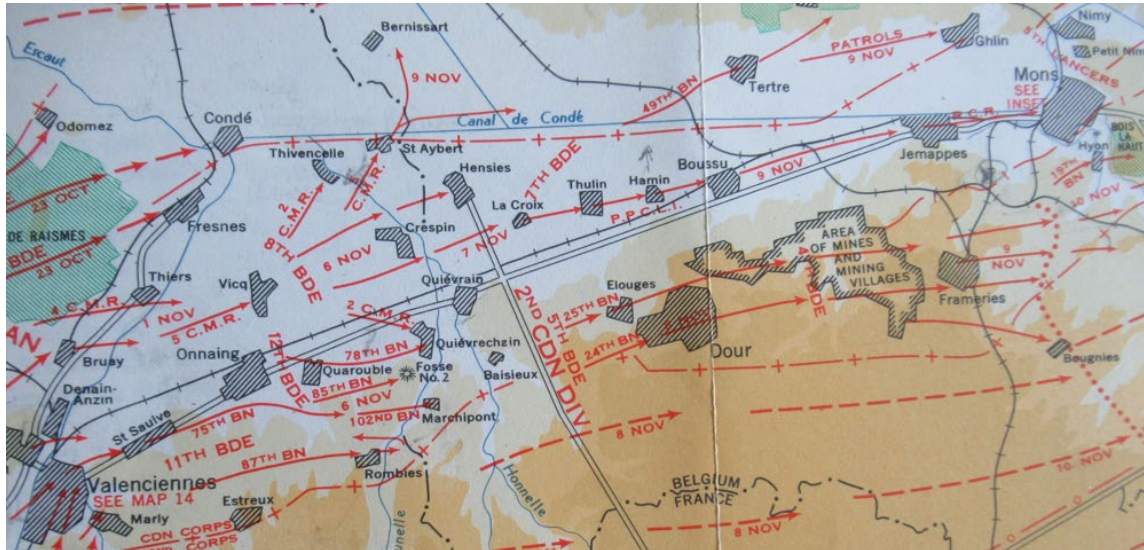
⁴ J.F.B. Livesay, *Canada's Hundred Days: With the Canadian Corps from Amiens to Mons, Aug. 8-11 November 1918* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1919), p. 375; and Duguid, *History of the Canadian Grenadier Guards 1760-1964*, p. 219.

⁵ WD, 102nd Battalion, November 1918, Appendix B, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4945, File 456, LAC; and WD, 4th Canadian Division, November 1918, Appendix 1, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4861, File 166, LAC.

⁶ G. Chalmers Johnston, *The 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles (British Columbia Horse) in France and Flanders* (Vernon, BC: Vernon News Printing & Publishing, 1932; reprint, Uckfield, UK: Naval & Military Press, 2015), pp. 71-2; and WD, 2nd CMR, November 1918, Appendix B, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4947, File 466 part 2, LAC.

⁷ Charles Grafton, *The Canadian "Emma Gees": A History of the Canadian Machine Gun Corps* (London, ON: Canadian Machine Gun Corps Association, 1938; reprint, Uckfield, England: The Naval & Military Press, 2015), p. 206.

⁸ Extract from Report – First Army, RG24-C-1-a, Volume 448, File HQ-54-21-1-210, LAC.



Map 1. Canadian Corps Advance November 1918.⁹

The identity of the first Canadian soldier to enter the fifteenth-century Gothic *Hôtel de Ville* in the heart of Mons and sign the Golden Book of Mons on 11 November has been debated since the early 1920s. In the 1930s both the Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR) and the 42nd Battalion regimental histories claimed their officers were the initial ones to inscribe their names in the Golden Book. The debate continues today. According to a recent article, two 42nd Battalion officers “had the distinction of being the first Allied soldiers to sign the book.”¹⁰ Consequently, a thorough examination of the 7th CIB battalions in the last days of the war and in particular, the early hours of 11 November, is necessary to determine who signed the Golden Book of Mons first.

In the 1930s, Horace Singer compiled the history of the 31st Canadian Battalion. He observed that “As the years pass the accuracy of certain details [of an action] becomes

⁹ G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1964).

¹⁰ Earl Chapman, “‘Hostilities Will Cease... and Troops Will Stand Fast...’ Mons, Belgium, 11 November 1918,” in *The Black Watch and the Great War: Rediscovered Histories from the Regimental Family*, ed. Fraser Brown and Derek Patrick (Perth, Scotland: Tippermuir Books, 2020), p. 373.

impaired. ... The only reliable authority, therefore, is the regimental War Diary.”¹¹ However, although historical military narratives such as war diaries and regimental histories are invaluable for understanding the day-to-day operations, they cannot always be trusted for their accuracy. In regimental histories, for instance, there can be a “tendency to exaggerate achievements.”¹² Moreover, war diaries were usually written by “junior officers far from the front” occasionally composed days later and “were thus liable to be inaccurate.”¹³ Mistakes in military documents become apparent upon investigation into troop maneuvers in and around Mons leading up to the 11 November Armistice. Taking into account Belgian records from the 1920s and 1930s Golden Book enquiries, the 1928 Arthur Currie libel trial transcripts, and veterans’ reminiscences it is clear that conspicuous errors and misconceptions exist in authorised narratives from army headquarters down to battalion level.

The Final Advance

The Canadians made progress south of the Mons-Condé Canal with little opposition from German machine-gun posts. Columns of troops in their pursuit to Mons, a city of some 30,000 inhabitants and refugees, tramped along roads crowded with lorries, ambulances, horse transport, and gun carriages.¹⁴ The Valenciennes-Mons Road was pockmarked with mine craters, causing traffic blockages and detours. Canadian sappers were kept busy filling in the enormous holes.¹⁵

The 7th CIB’s Brigadier-General John Clark on 7 November assigned the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI) to lead the advance. Squadrons of the 5th

¹¹ Horace Singer, *History of the 31st Canadian Infantry Battalion C.E.F.*, ed. Darrell Knight (Calgary, AB: Detselig, 2006), p. 25.

¹² Roman Jarymowycz, *The History of The Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) of Canada Volume 1: 1759-1939* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2023), p. ix.

¹³ Tim Cook, “Literary Memorials”: The Great War Regimental Histories, 1919-1939, *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association/Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, Volume 13, No. 1, (2002): p. 180.

¹⁴ D. J. Corrigan, *The History of the Twentieth Canadian Battalion (Central Ontario Regiment) Canadian Expeditionary Force in the Great War, 1914-1918* (Toronto: Stone & Cox, 1935), p. 284.

¹⁵ Derek Grout, *Thunder in the Skies: A Canadian Gunner in the Great War* (Toronto: Dundurn, pp. 2015), pp. 407-08.

(Royal Irish) Lancers from Brig.-Gen. John Bell-Smyth's 3rd Cavalry Brigade were attached to the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions.¹⁶ The Patricias cleared the village of Boussu before daylight on 9 November, later capturing St. Ghislain and other villages. They moved into the large mining village of Jemappes, 2 miles (3.2 km) west of Mons, by 2:00 p.m.¹⁷ They were relieved the next morning after No. 2 Company commanded by Captain Kenneth Burness repelled five counter-attacks between 8:00 p.m. on 9 November and 2:00 a.m. on 10 November. Corporal Percy Carleton was the sole fatality.¹⁸ This action occurred in Faubourg de Bertaimont, some 200 yards south of the Dérivation de la Trouille, the diverted section of the Trouille River coursing along Mons' southern boundary.¹⁹

Meanwhile, the 49th Battalion on 9 November had crossed the Haine River and the Mons-Condé Canal north of Thulin and headed northeastward towards Mons, which was mostly surrounded by water barriers. They were relieved on 10 November by the 157th Brigade, 52nd Division (VIII Corps) after advanced guards had established posts north and west of Ghlin.²⁰

On the morning of 10 November Canadian Corps commander, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie consulted with 3rd Canadian Division commander Major-General Frederick Loomis about taking Mons. To avoid casualties, they planned a "reconnaissance and peaceful penetration" employing an encircling strategy. There would be no assault on Mons, just probing incursions.²¹ Batteries from the 3rd Battalion

¹⁶ WD, 2nd Canadian Division, 9 November 1918, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4847, File 117, LAC. The 2nd Canadian Division relieved the 4th Canadian Division on the night of 6-7 November.

¹⁷ 3rd Canadian Division Report on Operations Forêt de Raimses To Mons 22-10-18 – 11-11-18, RG9 III-D-2, Volume 4796, File 75, LAC.

¹⁸ Kenneth Burness, MG30 E100, Volume 17, Cobourg trial transcripts Volume 3, pp. 1270-75, LAC.

¹⁹ Ralph Hodder-Williams, *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry 1914-1919* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923), p. 399.

²⁰ Nicholson. *Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919*. pp. 478-79; and WD, 49th Battalion, Operations Report for November 7-11, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4940, File 440, LAC.

²¹ Currie to Maj.-Gen. Sydney Mewburn, 17 March 1919, 1980226-282, 58A 1 61.11, Canadian War Museum (CWM).

Canadian Machine Gun Corps would cover and assist the 7th CIB troops in the approach of Mons.²²

The RCR, preparing to surround Mons from the north and northeast, ferried D Company troops across the Mons-Condé Canal at Jemappes on 9 November.²³ Before dark on the following day, D Company overcame enemy machine guns and artillery fire while capturing Ghlin 2 miles northeast of Mons.²⁴ In the early evening Lieutenant Donald Shields, a B Company platoon commander, attempted to traverse the Canal du Centre over a damaged bridge 1,000 yards northeast of Mons. As he and his small patrol crawled across the twisted wreckage, the hidden enemy opened fire, killing Shields and Privates Mel Cady, Frank McLean, and Thomas Stevens.²⁵ Other B Company troops commanded by Lieutenant John Miller attempted the crossing further south over the intact Porte du Parc bridge but were met with continuous rifle and machine gun fire until midnight.

The 42nd Battalion had come into action south of the Mons-Condé Canal at daylight on 10 November, a foggy and rainy day. A high-velocity shell burst in the farrier's shop at the transport lines in Jemappes killing six soldiers while injuring another six.²⁶ The Germans had installed artillery within Mons in the cobblestoned Grand Place, Place d'Avesnes, and Boulevard Dolez.²⁷

²² Grafton, *The Canadian "Emma Gees,"* p. 209.

²³ R. C. Fetherstonhaugh, *The Royal Canadian Regiment 1883-1933* (London, ON: The Royal Canadian Regiment, 1936; reprint, Fredericton, NB: Centennial Print, 1981), p. 372.

²⁴ 3rd Canadian Division Report on Operations Forêt de Raimses To Mons 22-10-18 – 11-11-18, RG9 III-D-2, Volume 4796, File 75, LAC.

²⁵ Milton Gregg, Statement Regarding Activities of the Royal Canadian Regiment during 48 Hours Preceding Armistice 1918, MG30 E100, Volume 18, File 60, LAC; Fetherstonhaugh, *The Royal Canadian Regiment 1883-1933*, p. 373; and Currie to Martin King, 29 March 1928, MG30 E100, Volume 18, File 61, LAC.

²⁶ Beresford Topp, *The 42nd Battalion, C.E.F. Royal Highlanders of Canada in the Great War* (Montreal: The 42nd Battalion, 1931), p. 288. Privates Arthur Stanley and Alexander Burnside were killed instantly. Privates Andrew Lowe, Allan McPhie, John Hylands, and James Mahood died of their wounds. See Jarymowycz, *The History of the Black Watch*, p. 250, which identifies Lowe and McPhie.

²⁷ Émile Dony, *La Bataille de Mons (9-11 novembre 1918), et la Délivrance par la 1^{re} Armée Britannique*, (Mons: Léon Dequesne, 1918), p. 19, MG30 E249, Volume 1, LAC.

No. 4 Company, PPCLI—within sight of the Mons railway station—was to be relieved. At their request, the 42nd Battalion permitted the Patricias' company to remain.²⁸ The 42nd Battalion's D Company advanced at 1 p.m. encountering strong resistance from enemy machine-gun fire, which targeted all roads. A small patrol ducked into a brick building, but a shell burst overhead killing Lance-Corporal Bernard (Bob) Jones and Private Thomas Mills.²⁹ Corporal Will Bird crawled through a cabbage patch that afternoon and came upon a German machinegun post. Bird's accurate aiming with rifle grenades eliminated the deadly rearguard.³⁰ The companies halted until darkness fell although the dense shelling and machine-gun fire abated at 5:00 p.m. Meanwhile, scouts crept forward behind houses, climbing fences and garden walls.

Most bridges across the canals surrounding Mons had been destroyed on 8 and 9 November.³¹ The open country west of Mons south of the Mons-Condé Canal where both the Valenciennes-Mons Road and Valenciennes-Mons railway ran, was the only place Mons could be approached overland. It was on this narrow corridor between the canal and the Trouille River that 42nd Battalion's D Company commander Capt. William Grafftey along with Lieut. David Handy's No. 16 Platoon headed towards the outskirts of the city. Under the cover of Lewis guns engaging enemy positions the two officers and twenty-five men crossed a farmyard, stumbled over railway tracks and, leapfrogging No. 4 Company, PPCLI, pushed through to the Mons railway station at sunset. They infiltrated the city at 11:00 p.m., installing a post on Boulevard Gendebien. By midnight D Company was stationed on the boulevard and adjoining Place Léopold on the western boundary of Mons.³² It was the first time since 1914 that armed kilties were seen in the city.

²⁸ Hodder-Williams, *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry 1914-1919*, pp. 399-400.

²⁹ Will Bird, *Ghosts Have Warm Hands: A Memoir of the Great War 1916-1919* (Nepean, ON: CEF Books, 1997), pp. 156-57.

³⁰ Bird, *Ghosts Have Warm Hands*, p. 158.

³¹ Nicolas Mignon, "Les Jours les Plus Longs? Le Vécu des Montois dans les Dernières Semaines de la Guerre et Leur Expérience de l'Armistice," in *14-18 La Grande Guerre à Mons et dans sa Région*, ed. Pierre-Jean Niebes et al. (Waterloo, Belgium: Avant-Propos, 2015), p. 200.

³² Dony, *La Bataille de Mons et la Délivrance*, p. 24; and William Grafftey, MG30 E100, Volume 17, Cobourg trial transcripts Volume 3, p. 1169 and p. 1188, LAC.

Scouts from the 42nd Battalion's A Company commanded by Lieut. James Montgomerie established an outpost south of Mons. They came under heavy machine-gun fire from houses on the northern bank of the Dérivation de la Trouille near Avenue de Bertaimont and Mont Panisel to the southeast. Enemy machine guns were well camouflaged along the Trouille watercourse and all access roads on the western and southern edges of Mons.³³ Machine-gun fire killed A Company's Privates Joseph Daigle and Benjamin Brigden during the afternoon of 10 November.³⁴ Canadian artillery could not effectively engage the machine guns because only shrapnel was permitted on the outskirts of Mons. Fighting patrols maintained their positions; ready to rush the demolished bridges after dark.³⁵

Early on 9 November, the 2nd Canadian Division's 4th CIB had overtaken the 5th CIB and entered Frameries. On the eastern outskirts of the town Lieut. Charles Smith, an Indigenous 18th Battalion officer personally thwarted the firing of a road mine and later disposed of a machine gun crew.³⁶ The next morning the 18th Battalion patrols approached Hyon, southeast of Mons.³⁷ A troop of Canadian Light Horse and an 18-pounder field artillery battery were attached to the unit.³⁸ While attempting to secure the 3rd Division's right flank the 19th and 20th Battalions were held up all day by machine-gun fire and artillery fire from Bois la Haut (the region's highest hill, 2,000 yards southeast of Mons). The 19th Battalion suffered 57 casualties.³⁹

³³ Dony, *La Bataille de Mons et la Délivrance*, p. 19.

³⁴ The 42nd Battalion diarist incorrectly noted that Jones, Mills, Daigle, and Brigden were killed trying to capture machine-gun posts.

³⁵ 3rd Canadian Division Report on Operations Forêt de Raimses To Mons 22-10-18 – 11-11-18, RG9 III-D-2, Volume 4796, File 75, LAC; and Paul Hutchison, MG30 E100, Volume 17, Cobourg trial transcripts Volume 3, p. 1212 and p. 1219, LAC.

³⁶ Charles Denton Smith, London Gazette, Supplement 31680, 9 December 1919; and WD, 18th Battalion, November 1918, Appendix 9, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4926, File 399, LAC.

³⁷ 2nd Canadian Division Narrative of Operations from 13 March to 11 November 1918, MG30 E6, Volume 3, Folder 21, LAC.

³⁸ David Campbell, *It Can't Last Forever: The 19th Battalion and the Canadian Corps in the First World War* (Waterloo, ON; Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2017), pp. 477-78.

³⁹ John A. Cooper, *Fourth Canadian Infantry Brigade: History of Operations April 1915, to Demobilization* (London: Charles and Son, n.d.), p. 42.

The enemy was preparing to withdraw during the afternoon. According to German prisoners, orders they had received on the 9th stated that Mons was to be evacuated by 5:00 p.m. on the 10th. Nevertheless, a strong rearguard delaying force remained in Mons and Bois la Haut until 11:00 p.m.⁴⁰

7th CIB's Entry into Mons

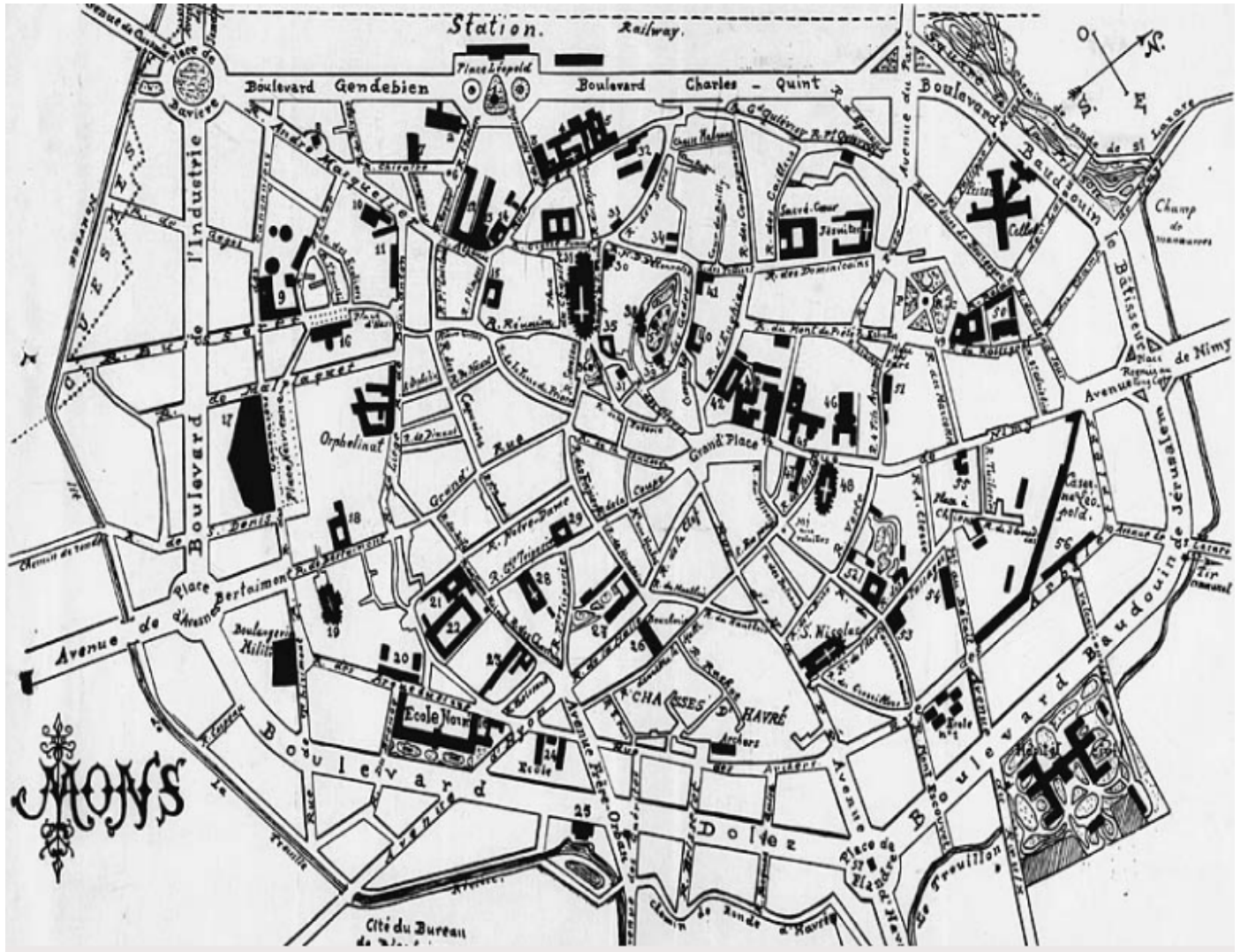
Grafftey and Sergeant John Gibson confronted no enemy as they moved towards the centre of Mons. The 42nd Battalion's regimental history claims that, before returning to their company headquarters on Boulevard Gendebien by 1:00 a.m. on 11 November, they reached "a point halfway through the Grande [*sic*] Place."⁴¹ However, when testifying in April 1928 at the Arthur Currie libel trial in Cobourg Ontario, Grafftey acknowledged that the two of them had "gone about halfway to the Grand Place."⁴² Then three D Company platoons fanned out and mopped up the city on their way to Place de Flandre, the battalions' final objective at the eastern edge of the city. No. 15 Platoon proceeded northeast on Boulevard de la Prison (boulevard Baudouin), and No. 14 Platoon through the centre of the city. No. 16 Platoon threw five or six grenades at an evacuated machine gun post near Place de Bavière before heading southeast to Place Nervienne. Four prisoners were later detained.⁴³

⁴⁰ 2nd Canadian Division Narrative of Operations from 13 March to 11 November 11 1918, MG30 E6, Volume 3, Folder 21, LAC.

⁴¹ Topp, *The 42nd Battalion, C.E.F. Royal Highlanders of Canada in the Great War*, p. 292.

⁴² William Grafftey, MG30 E100, Volume 17, Cobourg trial transcripts Volume 3, p. 1177, LAC. Both a pretrial examination for discovery and a fourteen-day trial (16 April to 1 May 1928) were held in Cobourg.

⁴³ E.A.E. Hublard, *A Glimpse of the Historical Town of Mons*, trans. J.D. Lhoneux (Mons: Camille Leich, 1919), p. 58; Topp, *The 42nd Battalion, C.E.F. Royal Highlanders of Canada in the Great War*, p. 292; and William Grafftey, MG30 E100, Volume 17, Cobourg trial transcripts Volume 3, p. 1171, LAC.



Map 2. Mons Streets.⁴⁴

Shortly before 2:00 a.m. Capt. Eric Finley commanding C Company, 42nd Battalion met Grafftey at Place de Bavière. Later, C Company established a position northeast of Mons on the high ground past the Canal du Centre. Finley's troops did not face any hostile action.⁴⁵ At 2:00 a.m. Capt. Alfred White commanding No. 4 Company, PPCLI arrived in the city, without engaging the enemy.

⁴⁴ WD, 3rd Brigade, CE, November 1918, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4992, File 646, LAC.

⁴⁵ Eric Finley, MG30 E100, Volume 17, Cobourg trial transcripts Volume 3, pp. 1237-40, LAC.

At about 2:30 a.m. enemy machine guns guarding the bridgeheads south of Mons were cut off allowing A Company, 42nd Battalion to enter the city over the Dérivation de la Trouille. The demolished bridges forced Lieut. Paul Hutchison and his A Company platoon, accompanied by Lieut. Montgomerie, to improvise a narrow footbridge to permit the company to set foot in Mons about 3:00 a.m.⁴⁶ They pressed forward in the dark along Avenue d’Hyon.⁴⁷ Hutchison recalled:

As we went through the streets of the city, my men ran their bayoneted rifles along the grills of the lower windows, cellar windows, of the houses. The city was very quiet at this point, shelling and machine-gunning from the enemy had stopped some time before and, eventually, as a result of the bayonets on the grilled windows of the cellars, the citizens of Mons streamed out.⁴⁸

The liberated citizens offered Hutchison’s platoon hot coffee. It was now 5:00 a.m. Elsewhere cautious soldiers used their rifle butts to knock on doors, inquiring if any Germans were present.

Capt. William Home’s A Company, RCR (temporarily attached to Lieut.-Col. Royal Ewing’s 42nd Battalion) passed through the PPCLI with orders to infiltrate Mons from the south. At 3:00 a.m. they were directed to head into Mons at 5:00 a.m. and report to Grafftey’s headquarters.⁴⁹ The company encountered no opposition. Years later, Home recalled:

I got instructions from Colonel Ewing to be prepared to move in about 3.30 in the morning ... We moved in this boulevard. We’d no sooner got into the outskirts and daylight was just breaking when the windows opened

⁴⁶ WD, Narrative of Operations 42nd Canadian Battalion RHC 9-November 1918, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4938, File 433, LAC; and Paul Hutchison, MG30 E100, Volume 17, Cobourg trial transcripts Volume 3, p. 1214, LAC.

⁴⁷ They probably also crossed over the destroyed bridge at the corner of Cuesmes and rue de St. Denis. See RG9 III-D-2, Volume 4796, File 75, LAC.

⁴⁸ Paul Hutchison, *CBC Flanders’ Fields*, RG41, B-III-1, Volume 13, LAC.

⁴⁹ WD, RCR, November 1918, Appendix 2, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4911, File 345, LAC.

up, the Belgium [*sic*] flags came out and people streamed out into the streets.⁵⁰

Home entered Mons about 5:00 a.m. via Avenue de Bertaimont, making his way to Grafftey's headquarters near Place de Bavière. It is plausible that he had ordered a scouting party to advance over the Trouille at Avenue de Bertaimont after 3:00 a.m., the time when the 42nd Battalion's A Company moved into Mons avenue d'Hyon.

In the early hours of 11 November, once the enemy fire had diminished after 1:00 a.m., Lieut. W. Martin King's No. 5 Platoon in RCR's B Company forged ahead along the undamaged Porte du Parc bridge spanning the 50-foot-wide Canal du Centre. No casualties were incurred as they entered Mons. Lieut. Miller together with company headquarters followed King.⁵¹

During an early 1960s interview for Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) Radio's *Return to Mons*, King recounted:

Approximately I would say at two o'clock in the morning we went over the bridge. The platoon sergeant and I tripped over a rope or a wire and our fear was that the bridge was mined. So we put a man on so that everybody stepped over, and I might say that the engineers, on exploring it the next day, found that the bridge was mined, but either it had short-circuited or one contact was missing. From all intents and purposes, we were in the city. It was, I wouldn't say, a difficult task. It was more of an awkward task. Of course, it was a nerve-racking thing because it was all done in the dark. The soldiers' boots on the cobblestones just sound like you could hear them from miles away.⁵²

⁵⁰ William Home, *CBC Flanders' Fields*, RG41, B-III-1, Volume 13, LAC.

⁵¹ Fetherstonhaugh, *The Royal Canadian Regiment 1883-1933*, p. 374. The RCR's diary incorrectly stated King served in A Company. See WD, RCR, November 1918, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4911, File 345, LAC.

⁵² King, W. Martin. *CBC Return to Mons*, audio consultation copy A1 2022-02-0001, LAC, CD. *Return to Mons* was a one-hour CBC radio program that was broadcast on Remembrance Day, 1962. It is based on tape-recorded reminiscences from Canadian veterans and Belgian civilians who were in Mons on 11 November 1918.

In a letter dated March 1928, King wrote that his platoon and company headquarters infiltrated Mons at about 2:30 a.m. on 11 November without casualties.⁵³ Sergeant-Major William Clark claimed they “marched across the canal in fours, the men with their rifles slung.”⁵⁴ Lieut. King led his platoon down Avenue du Parc, right on Rue des Dominicains and then left along Rue des Compagnons to the Grand Place. No enemy fire was heard in the city.⁵⁵ The patrol had walked five city blocks from the intersection of Boulevard Charles-Quint and Avenue to Parc to the *Hôtel de Ville*. Meanwhile, Lieut. Miller set up company headquarters at the junction of Boulevard de la Prison and Avenue du Parc, halting there until 9:30 a.m. before proceeding southwards in the direction of the Grand Place.⁵⁶

During the night of 10-11 November, D Company, RCR left of B Company, crossed the Canal du Centre on a heavily damaged road bridge fighting their way to secure Nimy and Petit Nimy north of Mons.⁵⁷

4th CIB’s Overnight Advance

As darkness fell on 10 November a half-hour bombardment forced the Germans to begin withdrawing from Bois la Haut. Southeast of Mons, three patrols from C Company, 19th Battalion met with heavy machine-gun fire before reaching Hyon at 1:45 the next morning.⁵⁸ Machine-gun detachments were broken up by 3:15 a.m. in Bois la Haut.

The 20th Battalion reached the Mons-Givry Road about 10 p.m. and pressed onwards another 1,500 yards to Saint Symphorien, occupying it by 2:00 a.m. on the morning of 11

⁵³ Martin King to Arthur Currie, MG30 E100, Volume 18, File 61, LAC.

⁵⁴ William Clark, MG30 E100, Volume 17, Cobourg trial transcripts Volume 3, p. 1555, LAC. The RCR’s regimental history incorrectly stated they scrambled across a “broken-down canal bridge.”

⁵⁵ Fetherstonhaugh, *The Royal Canadian Regiment 1883-1933*, p. 374. In fact, King had turned left along rue d’Enghien, not rue des Compagnons which runs into rue d’Enghien.

⁵⁶ William Clark, MG30 E100, Volume 17, Cobourg trial transcripts Volume 3, p. 1556, LAC.

⁵⁷ 3rd Canadian Division Report on Operations Forêt de Raimses To Mons 22-10-18 – 11-11-18, RG9 III-D-2, Volume 4796, File 75, LAC.

⁵⁸ Campbell, *It Can’t Last Forever*, pp. 479-80.

November.⁵⁹ The 6th CIB pushed through the 4th CIB at 8:00 a.m. and continued eastward to Bois d’Havr  and Bois du Rapois dealing with more rearguard machine-gunners using artillery and trench mortars. Maj.-Gen. Henry Burstall’s 2nd Canadian Division line reached the centre of Bois d’Havr  at 9:00 a.m. outflanking Mons from the east.⁶⁰

At 5:30 a.m. while still quite dark and misty in the village of La Bascule on the eastern outskirts of Mons, 18-year-old Belgian Georges Licope stepped outside into his yard. He chatted with 5th (Royal Irish) Lancers and then 19th Battalion soldiers, including Lieuts. Joe O’Neill, Harold Stuart, and Charlie Mitchell.⁶¹ In a 1968 letter to Brig.-Gen. John Stewart (a signatory of the Golden Book) and Licope reminisced about events on the last day of the war. “[M]y very good friend Joe O’Neill, M.C. who, in his capacity of Lieutenant acting as leader of the “C” Company 19th C.I.Bn. brought freedom home at day-break of 11 November.”⁶²

The Armistice Day Golden Book Signings

Gerald Nicholson, the Canadian Expeditionary Force official historian, included a footnote regarding the Canadian officers who were the first to reach the *H tel de Ville* in the Grand Place on 11 November and the first to sign the Golden Book of Mons (the city’s formal guest register) on the 5:00 a.m. page.

A spirited controversy later developed between the R.C.R. and the 42nd Battalion over who was first to reach the centre of Mons. In the city’s *Golden Book* the signature of Lieut. W.M. King (an officer of the R.C.R. company attached to the 42nd [sic]) appears before those of the 42nd Battalion’s Lieuts. L. H. Biggar and J. W. Cave. Biggar, however, disputed

⁵⁹ Corrigall, *The History of the Twentieth Canadian Battalion*, p. 280; and WD, 20th Battalion, November 1918, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4930, File 409, LAC.

⁶⁰ 2nd Canadian Division Report of Operations, The Advance to Mons, RG24-C-1-a, Volume 448, File HQ-54-21-1-210, LAC.

⁶¹ Georges Licope, *My Own Souvenirs of the Battle of Mons 11 November 1918*, MG30 E206, LAC; and Georges Licope, “The Double Miracle of Mons: Where Our War Began It Ended,” in *The Great War ... I Was There!* John Hammerton (ed.) Part 47, c1939, pp. 1867-71, D 640 A2 G743, CWM.

⁶² Georges Licope to Brig.-Gen. J.S. Stewart, MG30 E249, Volume 1, LAC.

this evidence, averring that he signed well down on the page so that a suitable inscription could subsequently be inserted above. The weight of testimony by the Burgomaster of Mons and members of his council favours the R.C.R. claimant.⁶³

A rivalry to be the first into Mons had emerged among the 7th CIB's battalions. Sergeant George Tizard in the 42nd Battalion declared, mistakenly, "By 4.00 the Battalion had entered Mons; a couple of hours later, the Royal Canadian Regiment woke up to the fact that the 42nd had gotten into Mons before them." Tizard quipped that the RCR was "the supposed premier regiment of the 7th Brigade."⁶⁴ A headline in a troop newspaper distributed to Canadian soldiers proclaimed, "Princess Pats and Montreal Kilties First in City."⁶⁵ The RCR, although not mentioned in the article, had crossed into Mons in the early hours of 11 November.

The RCR war diary claimed Lieut. King's platoon was first to reach the Grand Place that morning where he penned his name in the Golden Book. The RCR's regimental history elaborates on this important occasion: The civic Chief of Police met King in the Grand Place and escorted him to the *Hôtel de Ville* where he met members of Mons' city administration. These French-speaking Belgians invited him to sign the Golden Book of Mons. After affixing his signature, the bespectacled Lieut. King gathered his platoon, turned left onto rue d'Havr  and proceeded towards the eastern outskirts of Mons where 42nd Battalion troops were heading.⁶⁶ Further on in the *Return to Mons* radio broadcast King recounted reaching the GrandPlace on the morning of 11 November:

There I encountered the Prefect of Police, and he said, "Would you come in and sign the Golden Book of this city?" He just appeared out of the dark somewhere, and I said, "Yes, but it'll have to be quick." So I signed this book – in the usual French fashion, kissing one another on the cheeks and

⁶³ Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919*, p. 481. The RCR's A Company, not B Company where King served, was attached.

⁶⁴ Peter Hart, *The Last Battle: Victory, Defeat, and the End of World War 1* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 342-43.

⁶⁵ Fred James, *Canadian Daily Record*, 20 November 1918, page 6, D 501 C32, Volume 6, CWM.

⁶⁶ WD, RCR, November 1918, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4911, File 345, LAC; and Fetherstonhaugh, *The Royal Canadian Regiment 1883-1933*, p. 375.

so on. And then I went out and got our platoon situated on the other side of the city.⁶⁷

RCR veteran Dudley Spencer related his understanding of the Golden Book signings while being interviewed for the 1960s CBC radio series *Flanders' Fields*:

Lieutenant King and his platoon had gone in on a further reconnaissance and here they were intercepted by different people and they went into the, ... Town Hall, and there he signed the Golden Book, this Lieutenant King. We got the credit but there was a little thing there, it was supposed to have been the 42nd but it was Lieutenant King of the RCRs with a handful of his platoon that really got into that.⁶⁸

The 42nd Battalion war diary reported battalion signal officer Lieut. Louis Biggar and battalion scout officer Lieut. Jordayne Cave were the initial officers to enter the *Hôtel de Ville*. They were there to establish battalion headquarters and install telephone communication. These two officers, contends the diarist, were the first British troops to sign the "Gold Book." The 42nd Battalion's regimental history recounts that the (acting) Burgomaster and the members of the Council guided Biggar, Cave, signallers, and other headquarters staff to the Council Chamber. According to the war diary, the Golden Book had been retrieved "from the vaults where it had lain for over four years."⁶⁹

Hutchison was interviewed in the early 1960s regarding his participation in the last days of the war:

Q. I believe that there has been a running controversy for a great many years that Lieutenant Biggar and another officer of the 42nd signed the Golden Book at the City Hall of Mons, did they not? **A.** Biggar did but the other officer who signed was not one of our batallion [*sic*]. He came in later. Biggar went to the Town Hall, the Hotel de Ville, and they brought out the book for him to sign and he was a junior officer and he was smart

⁶⁷ King, Martin. CBC *Return to Mons*, audio consultation copy A1 2202-0001, LAC, CD.

⁶⁸ Dudley Spencer, CBC *Flanders' Fields*, RG41, B-III-1, Volume 18, LAC.

⁶⁹ WD, 42nd Battalion, November 1918, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4928, File 433, LAC; and Topp, *The 42nd Battalion, C.E.F. Royal Highlanders of Canada in the Great War*, p. 294.

enough to sign on the third line, leaving the two spaces for Sir Arthur Currie and the RCO [*sic*] to sign, and this other bloke came along ... and he signed on one of the blank lines. Q. The RCRs are going to be very angry with you for saying that. I thought there was another officer with Biggar, I thought there were two of them that signed, Biggar and somebody else. They claim they left room for Currie and the big-wigs and maybe an inscription and that an RCR guy came along later and just signed in the spot. A. I don't think it was an RCR. My recollection of it was that it was an Army Service Corps fellow.⁷⁰

Hutchison's recollections break down under scrutiny. Nobody from the Army Service Corps signed the Golden Book. No doubt veterans misremembered since "It is not easy to cast the mind back fifty years ... It is hard to remember what one saw and felt in enough detail to form a vivid picture."⁷¹

Around 8:00 a.m., the Mons aldermen received Major George Blackstock (Deputy Assistant Adjutant General of the 3rd Canadian Division) and Lieut. L. Deckers a Belgian liaison officer and interpreter.⁷² Blackstock added his name to the right of Lieut. King's name and Deckers added his to the right of Lieut. Biggar's name. Earlier, two RCR officers had signed their names on the open page; Harry Brealey a lieutenant in C Company, which had followed on behind B Company into Mons, and Lieut. Harry Barker the battalion's intelligence officer.

Five more Canadians, Captains Morris Thomas, Donald Malcolm, Frank Knight, William Mackenzie, and Lieut.-Col. William Gibsone accompanied by Belgian interpreter Lieut. A. Michel affixed their signatures on the second page of the 5:00 a.m. signings. The four captains served in Canadian Field Ambulances. Jean Lescarts, Burgomaster of Mons, countersigned this sheet on 29 November.

⁷⁰ Paul Hutchison, *CBC Flanders' Fields*, RG41, B-III-1, Volume 13, LAC.

⁷¹ E.L.M. Burns, *General Mud: Memoirs of Two World Wars* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1970), p. xi.

⁷² Dony, *La Bataille de Mons et la Délivrance*, p. 28.

The 1923 RCR-Initiated Golden Book Enquiry

In August 1923, Maj. Harry Cock (the RCR's second-in-command in November 1918) wrote a letter to Lescarts, soliciting accounts about events on 11 November 1918 in the Square (Grand Place) and at the *Hôtel de Ville*. The officer mentioned that there was "considerable discussion" about who had initially arrived at the *Hôtel de Ville* that morning to sign the Golden Book. Either Lieut. King from the RCR or Lieuts. Biggar and Cave, from the 42nd Battalion, had the distinction of being the first to sign the book. The mayor and his colleagues (the Burgomaster and aldermen) were asked to provide "the true story of what happened" that morning.⁷³

Alderman (*échevin*) Victor Maistriau wrote down his recollections of 10-11 November 1918. He recalled that at 5:00 a.m. on 11 November, the aldermen and municipal secretary escorted Lieut. King into the Council Chamber. King was first to sign the Golden Book in their presence ("*le lieutenant King, qui a, le premier, signé le livre d'or de la Cité, devant nous*"). They offered King a glass of wine, congratulating him for being the first officer to be welcomed. Maistriau was certain that other officers were not received at the *Hôtel de Ville* before King nor at the same time as him ("*il est certain que nous ne les avoir y pas reçus, ni avant le lieutenant King, ni en même temps que lui*"). He did not know if other officers arrived in the Square before King.⁷⁴

Municipal secretary Gaston Talaupé composed his recollections of 11 November 1918. He insisted Lieutenant King was the first to appear at the *Hôtel de Ville* on 11 November at 5:00 a.m. Talaupé and the three aldermen welcomed King who was the first to sign the Golden Book ("*qui s'est présenté le premier à l'Hôtel-de-Ville de Mons ... le Lieutenant King et, le premier, il fut invité à signer le livre d'or de la Ville de Mons que je détenais*"), which had been in Talaupé's possession—it had not been retrieved from a vault as erroneously claimed by the 42nd Battalion. King had informed the Belgians that he had been ordered to proceed to Place de Flandre. Talaupé instructed their clerk Jean Boulson to act as a guide for King's platoon along rue d'Havré. A few hours later Lieuts.

⁷³ Letter to Mons Mayor, 11 September 1923, RG24-C-6-e, Volume 1822, File GAQ-5-34, LAC; and Fetherstonhaugh, *The Royal Canadian Regiment 1883-1933*, p. 375.

⁷⁴ Letter from Victor Maistriau, 4 September 1923, RG24-C-6-e, Volume 1822, File GAQ-5-34, LAC.

Biggar and Cave showed up at the *Hôtel de Ville*, assuming that they were the first Canadians to arrive at the *Hôtel de Ville*. Talaupe promptly corrected them before presenting the Golden Book for their signatures. Both are signed below Lieut. King's name. The two 42nd Battalion officers established a military post, likely in the Salle des Sacquiaux. Later, the four Belgian officials received Maj. Blackstock of the general staff and Lieut. Deckers.⁷⁵

Alderman Léon Save wrote a brief statement to the Burgomaster, noting that Lieut. King was the first Canadian officer to appear at the *Hôtel de Ville* on the morning of 11 November. King was the first to sign the Golden Book ("*Il a signé le premier le livre d'Or*") before leaving for Place de Flandre.⁷⁶

Charles Piolunowski, Director of Relief Works for Allied prisoners and deportees, informed the Burgomaster that around 3:00 a.m. on 11 November, he and his colleague Robert De Groot left their office on rue Lamir (five blocks from the *Hôtel de Ville*) where they had remained overnight. On their way to De Groot's home on Avenue de Bertaimont, they heard someone shouting that the Allies were at the Bertaimont bridge. At the house, the two civilians discovered the door open and two German soldiers inside who immediately gave themselves up. Accompanied by the prisoners, they met RCR soldiers on the avenue and guided them to the Grand Place where the chief of police led them to the *Hôtel de Ville*.⁷⁷ Several of the RCR officers and the prisoners were directed to the Committee room. The two civilians were shown into the Council Chamber where they found some ten or twelve people including the aldermen, Talaupe, several clerks, and officials. Piolunowski noted that King was present, but could not verify that he was the only Canadian officer in the Council Chamber at that time. He was adamant that neither Biggar nor Cave, being 42nd officers, was in attendance.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Letter from Gaston Talaupe, 8 September 1923, RG24-C-6-e, Volume 1822, File GAQ-5-34, LAC.

⁷⁶ Letter from Léon Save to Jean Lescarts, 8 September 1923, RG24-C-6-e, Volume 1822, File GAQ-5-34, LAC.

⁷⁷ The RCR soldiers may have been an advanced guard of A Company, entering Mons around the same time as Lieut. Hutchison's platoon. This aligns with Home's recollection that (some of) his men advanced at 3:30 a.m.

⁷⁸ Letter from Charles Piolunowski to Jean Lescarts, 14 September 1923, RG24-C-6-e, Volume 1822, File GAQ-5-34, LAC.

On 15 September 1923, Lescarts replied to the RCR's letter of enquiry. The testimonies of Maistriau, Talaupé, and Save were enclosed with his letter. These documents along with the position of the signatures in the Golden Book of Mons were, according to Lescarts, proof that Lieut. King was the first officer to present himself that morning at the *Hôtel de Ville* ("*le lieutenant KING s'y est présenté le premier, le 11 novembre au matin*"). Lieuts. Biggar and Cave arrived there after him ("*et que les lieutenants BIGGAR et CAVE y sont arrivés après lui*") as well as staff officer Maj. Blackstock and Lieut. Deckers.⁷⁹ Nine days later, Lescarts sent a similar letter which included Piolunowski's declaration. King did not accompany Biggar and Cave into the *Hôtel de Ville* as is stated in the Black Watch regimental history.⁸⁰ None of the Mons bureaucrats who documented their accounts of the early morning signings mentioned Lieuts. Brealey and Barker signed the Golden Book although these civilian witnesses referred to Blackstock and Deckers who likely signed after them. Brealey and Barker, conceivably two of the RCR officers sequestered with the prisoners in the Committee room, were later invited to sign the book.

Before the Currie libel trial, information regarding orders, casualties, and the securing of Mons was collected. In March 1928, in a letter to Currie, Maj. Cock wrote about his recollections while serving in the RCR during the advance to Mons. He included, "Actually the 42nd Bn., were the first to enter the city but Lt. M. King of the R.C.R. with his platoon was the first to reach the square where he was greeted by the Mayor & City Council & was the first to sign the Golden Book."⁸¹ The 42nd certainly deserves the credit for being the first Canadian unit into Mons. Indeed, Brig.-Gen. Stewart paid tribute to the 42nd Battalion stating "they did extra good and great work entering that town."⁸²

⁷⁹ Letter from Jean Lescarts, 15 September 1923, RG24-C-6-e, Volume 1822, File GAQ-5-34, LAC.

⁸⁰ Jarymowycz, *The History of the Black Watch*, p. 224 and p. 277.

⁸¹ Letter to Arthur Currie, 29 March 1928, MG30 E100, Volume 18, File 60, LAC.

⁸² John Stewart, *CBC Flanders' Fields*, RG41, B-III-1, Volume 21, LAC.

The 1931 42nd Battalion-Initiated Golden Book Enquiry

In September 1931 Louis Biggar wrote the Mons' Burgomaster requesting a copy of the Golden Book page containing the 5:00 a.m. signatures. Burgomaster Victor Maistriau replied a month later sending Biggar the September 1923 testimonies of Save, Maistriau, Talaue, and Piolunowski plus a copy of the Golden Book page. Based on these documents, Maistriau determined Lieut. King appeared at the *Hôtel de Ville* first, whereas Biggar and Cave got there second and third (*"Il résulte de ces documents que le Lieutenant King s'y est présenté le premier, qu'en compagnie du Lieutenant Cave, vous y êtes arrivés deuxième et troisième"*).⁸³

In December 1931, Biggar wrote a letter to Beresford Topp in Ottawa about his September enquiry into the Golden Book of Mons. Topp, who had also served in the 42nd, authored the regimental history of the 42nd Battalion, which had been published that year. Biggar's letter contained the various attestations from the Mons bureaucrats. Biggar admitted that "All of these tend to prove that Jim [Cave] and I were wrong in stating that we were the first to sign the Book, and yet I am still unconvinced." He acknowledged that "it does seem tough to have the Regiment take second place in the disputed honour."⁸⁴ Fortuitously, Biggar met Cave in Pasadena, California in November 1931, while both were working in Los Angeles. They believed that there had been "no previous signature of any Canadian officer ahead of ours." In fact, the former 42nd Battalion officers claimed they left "quite a lot of room" above their signatures at the Belgians' request.⁸⁵ (But their signatures are more than three-quarters down from the top of the page.) It should be recalled that Gaston Talaue had been compelled to correct Biggar and Cave thirteen years previously that they were not the first Canadians to enter the *Hôtel de Ville*.

⁸³ Letter from Victor Maistriau to Louis Biggar, 15 October, 1931, RG24-C-6-e, Volume 1822, File GAQ-5-34, LAC.

⁸⁴ Letter from Louis Biggar to Beresford Topp, 14 December 1931, RG24-C-6-e, Volume 1822, File GAQ-5-34, LAC.

⁸⁵ Letter from Louis Biggar to Beresford Topp, 14 December 1931, RG24-C-6-e, Volume 1822, File GAQ-5-34, LAC.

Georges Licope's Narratives

Georges Licope, who met British and Canadian troops on 11 November outside Mons, became the curator of the Mons War (Memorial) Museum. An inveterate letter writer, he corresponded with Canadian veterans for many years. Based on official documents he received from archives in Ottawa, Licope compiled a report on the Canadians' advance from the Belgian border to Mons.

According to Licope, during the night of 10-11 November, Lieut. King's platoon crossed the Porte du Parc bridge onto Avenue du Parc (later Avenue des Canadiens) and—contrary to the RCR regimental history—turned right on rue de Mont de Pieté (later Rue du 11 Novembre). They arrived at the Grand Place at 3:10 a.m. Auxiliary policeman Van Col stepped out of the darkness and requested that King meet the civic dignitaries at the *Hôtel de Ville*. Victor Maistriau (representing the absent Burgomaster Lescarts) and other city officials welcomed King. He was asked to sign the Golden Book and was offered a glass of champagne to celebrate the event. Cutting short his visit, King and his platoon left to secure the Place de Flandre junction. During the night, D Company, 42nd Battalion had cleared the southern parts of Mons.⁸⁶ By dawn, 42nd Battalion troops had reached the Grand Place already crowded with jubilant civilians.⁸⁷

Licope named those who sat waiting or sleeping in the tallow candle-lit Burgomaster's office: the Mons municipal secretary Gaston Talaupé, his son, aldermen Léon Save, Victor Maistriau, and Henri Rolland (senator and alderman who had not recorded his recollections of 11 November). Lescarts was at home seriously ill.⁸⁸ The fourth alderman Fulgence Masson had been deported to Germany in April 1918 where he remained incarcerated until the end of the war.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Georges Licope, *Last Progression of the Canadian Corps in November 1918 from the Belgian Border Till Mons and the Cease Fire*, (1968), p. 3, MG30 E206, LAC.

⁸⁷ Georges Licope and Jean-Léon Charles, *Battles of Mons 1914 (UK) – 1918 (CA) – 1944 (US)*, Historical Narrations to SHAPE Officers -Belgium, (July 17th 1971), p. 3, D 546.M2 B4 L5 1971, CWM.

⁸⁸ Licope and Charles, *Battles of Mons 1914 (UK) – 1918 (CA) – 1944 (US)*, p. 3, D 546.M2 B4 L5 1971, CWM.

⁸⁹ Don Farr, *Mons 1914-1918: The Beginning and the End* (Solihull, UK: Helion & Company, 2008), p. 166.

In a letter to Brig.-Gen. Stewart in October 1968, Licope mentioned "Lieut. Col. Martin King, who was the very first to sign the Golden Book and who was then a Lieutenant in the R.C.R."⁹⁰ In another 1968 description of the liberation of Mons Licope repeated that Lieut. King was the very first Canadian officer to reach the Grand Place before 5:00 a.m., at which time he was invited to sign the Golden Book.⁹¹

Gaston Talaupé's Journal

Archivist Pierre-Jean Niebes examined documents from the state and city archives in Mons, including Gaston Talaupé's journal, to produce a chronology of commemorations that took place in Mons commencing on 11 November 1918.

The municipal secretary, Gaston Talaupé, testifies: "Mr. Save, Maistriau, Rolland and myself slept at the city hall the night of 10-11 November 10. ... At 5:00 a.m. we have already been up for some time and we learn that the police saw an English patrol pass on the Grand Place at 3:10 a.m."⁹²

Unlike Licope, Talaupé did not identify King as part of the patrol in the Grand Place at 3:10 a.m. Nevertheless, according to Talaupé's September 1923 statements, King signed the Golden Book at 5:00 a.m.

On 11 November 1918 at 5:00 a.m. officers of the Canadian Corps of the British Army were received at the town hall by Victor Maistriau, ... and his colleagues. Lieutenant Martin King of the Royal Canadian Regiment was the first to sign the town's Golden Book.⁹³

In other words, King was not the only Canadian officer inside the *Hôtel de Ville*. Another source affirms the police saw the first Canadian patrol pass through the Grand

⁹⁰ Georges Licope to Brig.-Gen. J.S. Stewart, 18 October 1968, MG30 E249, Volume 1, Georges Licope Folder, LAC.

⁹¹ Georges Licope, *My Own Souvenirs of the Battle of Mons 9-11 November 1918*, 4, MG30 E206, LAC.

⁹² Pierre-Jean Niebes, "*La mémoire de la Grande Guerre à Mons (1918-1927)*," *Mémoires et publications de la Société des sciences, des arts et des lettres du Hainaut*, 105, (2010): p. 105. (Author's translation)

⁹³ Niebes, "*La mémoire de la Grande Guerre à Mons (1918-1927)*," pp. 105-06. (Author's translation)

Place at 3:10 a.m., followed by other detachments a few minutes later (*“suivie par d’autres détachments quelques instants plus tard”*).⁹⁴ In all probability, the RCR patrol accompanied by Piolunowski into the *Hôtel de Ville* were these Canadian officers.

The Mons Carillon

Hutchison described some of the events of his battalion during the morning of 11 November:

With the first streaks of dawn, the inhabitants, ... poured out of their cellars with great cries of *“Les Américains!”* (until corrected by the Canadian Jocks!). Le Carillon pealed forth from St. Wandru and the famous Belfry, ... a white-bearded old Belgian Senator piloted the 42nd Signal Officer [Biggar] to the 15th Century Hotel de Ville in order that he might sign the Golden Book of Mons and take over the ancient building as the battalion’s headquarters.⁹⁵

In fact, the people of Mons had begun to emerge into the dark between three and four in the morning.⁹⁶

Talaupe wrote in his journal that at 6:15 a.m. the national flag was raised and the carillonneur Fernand Redouté was playing tunes.⁹⁷ The commencement of the carillon’s bells inside the seventeenth-century Belfry by Redouté is clear evidence that Mons had finally been secured. Victor Maistriau (91 years old when interviewed in the fall of 1961 for *Return to Mons*) recalled the last day of war: “At five in the morning, it was very dark. I heard beautiful music and I knew this was liberation. Our carillonneur was playing ‘O Canada’ by candlelight. It was as though the Angels of Mons were playing.”⁹⁸ The 20th Battalion historian recorded “About 5:30 a.m. ... a carillon of the belfry played

⁹⁴ Nastassia Sersté, “La Présence des Soldats Canadiens à Mons, de la Libérations à la Démobilisation,” in *14-18 La Grande Guerre à Mons et dans sa Région*, p. 225.

⁹⁵ Paul Hutchison, *Five Strenuous Years: The McGill Chapter of Alpha Delta Phi During the Great War* (Montreal: n.p., 1920), p. 245.

⁹⁶ Mignon, “Les Jours les Plus Longs?,” p. 203.

⁹⁷ Niebes, “*La mémoire de la Grande Guerre à Mons (1918-1927)*,” p. 106.

⁹⁸ Maistriau, Victor. *CBC Return to Mons*, audio consultation copy A1 2202-0001, LAC, CD.

Tipperary.”⁹⁹ The diarist for the *Congrégation des Filles du Sacré-Coeur* noted they woke up at 5:30 a.m. and felt a sense of security during the silence. A while later, “We notice the [carillon] chimes soon followed by the sound of the bells.”¹⁰⁰

According to the 42nd Battalion’s war diary, “Battalion headquarters moved to MONS and was established in the Hotel de Ville at 06.30 hours.”¹⁰¹ Additionally, the diary reported that the city was completely mopped up and posts installed by 6:00 a.m.¹⁰² Other sources contend that Canadian troops were in full possession of Mons earlier that morning. Currie’s diary entry for 11 November 1918 states that the 3rd Canadian Division reported the complete capture of Mons by 4:30 a.m.¹⁰³ A month before the 1928 libel trial Currie wrote: “Mons was completely in our possession at 4.30 A.M.”¹⁰⁴ During the trial, Grafftey testified that three 42nd Battalion platoons were at Place de Flandre by 4:30 a.m.¹⁰⁵ The carillon’s forty-seven bells ringing after 5:00 a.m. lends credence to a 4:30 a.m. deliverance.¹⁰⁶ The 42nd Battalion’s Pipe Band played through the streets of Mons at 7:00 a.m.

As stated by Hutchison, Biggar arrived at the *Hôtel de Ville* sometime after the first streaks of dawn. During the libel trial, Grafftey explained that dawn or daybreak was between 6:30 and 7:00 a.m. Maistriau remembered it was very dark at 5:00 a.m. and Licope recalled that at 5:45 a.m. “it was still almost dark.”¹⁰⁷ It is apparent that Biggar turned up at the *Hôtel de Ville* about 6 a.m. The 42nd Battalion’s regimental history provides further evidence:

⁹⁹ Corrigall, *The History of the Twentieth Canadian Battalion*, p. 281.

¹⁰⁰ Farr, *Mons 1914-1918*, p. 155.

¹⁰¹ WD, Narrative of Operations 42nd Canadian Battalion RHC 9-11 November 1918, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4938, File 433, LAC.

¹⁰² The brigade also claimed Mons was cleared by 6:00 a.m. See WD, 7th CIB, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4894, File 284, LAC.

¹⁰³ *The Selected Papers of Sir Arthur Currie: Diaries, Letters, and Report of the Ministry, 1917-1933*, ed. Mark Humphries (Waterloo, ON: LCMSDS Press of Wilfred Laurier University, 2008), p. 138; and WD, 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, November 1918, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4855, File 146, LAC.

¹⁰⁴ Currie to Lieut.-Col. Bertram Hooper, 27 March 1928, MG30 E100, Volume 18, File 60, LAC.

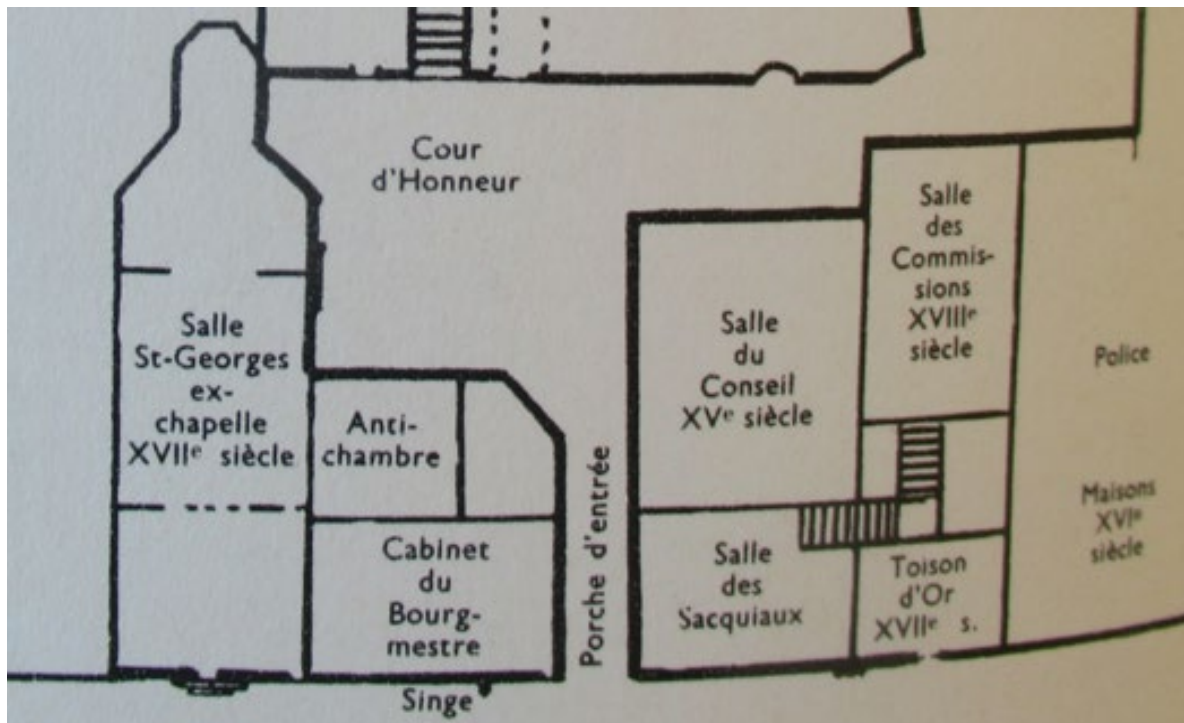
¹⁰⁵ William Grafftey, MG30 E100, Volume 17, Cobourg trial transcripts Volume 3, p. 1172, LAC.

¹⁰⁶ The loud cheering in Hyon heard by Licope in La Bascule about 5:00 a.m. corroborates a 4:30 a.m. liberation. See Licope, “The Double Miracle of Mons,” pp. 1868-69.

¹⁰⁷ Licope, “The Double Miracle of Mons,” p. 1869.

Lieutenant L. H. Biggar, M.C., and Lieutenant J. W. Cave, M.C., were the first officers of the Battalion to actually enter the Hotel de Ville, where they went to establish Battalion headquarters and to install telephone communication. This, of course, was long after the companies had passed through Mons and were established in the outpost line east of the town.¹⁰⁸

Since Biggar and Cave entered the *Hôtel de Ville long after* the city had been secured (4:30 a.m.) then it is reasonable to assume that they came in around 6:00 a.m., signed the Golden Book, and then established battalion headquarters in the Salle des Sacquiaux by 6:30 a.m. This aligns with Talaupé's 1923 declaration that the two officers appeared a few hours after King left for Place de Flandre. Grafftey met Ewing at battalion headquarters sometime after 7:00 a.m.¹⁰⁹



¹⁰⁸ Topp, *The 42nd Battalion, C.E.F. Royal Highlanders of Canada in the Great War*, p. 294.

¹⁰⁹ William Grafftey, MG30 E100, Volume 17, Cobourg trial transcripts Volume 3, p. 1172, LAC.

Mons' *Hôtel de Ville* ground floor.¹¹⁰

Cease Fire

At 2:15 a.m. on Monday 11 November, Allied and German plenipotentiaries assembled in Maréchal Ferdinand Foch's railway carriage 2419D, in the Forest of Compiègne near the village of Rethondes (42 miles (68 km) northeast of Paris). They began affixing their signatures to the Armistice text at 5:20 a.m. (French time), with 5:00 a.m. as the agreed official time.¹¹¹ A wireless message proclaiming the news was transmitted from the Eiffel Tower at 5:45 a.m. The Armistice notification reached Horne's headquarters at 6:20 a.m.¹¹² At 6:30 a.m. — after 1,561 days of the war — First Army's forty-five-word "Hostilities will cease at 1100 hours" Armistice message was telephoned to Canadian Corps headquarters in Valenciennes. Staff officer Lieut.-Col. Allan Magee received the call and immediately relayed the edict by telephone to the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions operating in the forward zone. The written directive was then delivered to Currie (billeted across the street from Corps headquarters) at 6:45 a.m.¹¹³ At 7:45 a.m. Biggar received a *hostilities will cease* telephone call. He left the *Hôtel de Ville*, riding a bicycle to the outskirts of Mons to disperse copies of the cease-fire message.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Henri Hennebert, *L'Hôtel de Ville de Mons*, 1949, MG30 E249, Volume 1, LAC.

¹¹¹ Harry Rudin, *Armistice 1918* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1944), p. 381; and Matthias Erzberger, *Erlebnisse im Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1920), p. 336. Foch wrote the signing began at 5:10 a.m. See Ferdinand Foch, *The Memoirs of Marshal Foch*, trans. T.B. Mott (London: William Heinemann, 1931), p. 569. Admiral Rosslyn Wemyss wrote the Armistice was signed at 5:10 a.m. See Victoria Wemyss, *The Life and Letters of Lord Wester Wemyss Admiral of the Fleet* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1935), p. 394.

¹¹² Don Farr, *The Silent General: Horne of the First Army* (Solihull, England: Helion & Company, 2009 reprint), p. 251.

¹¹³ Robert Sharpe, *The Last Day, the Last Hour: The Currie Libel Trial* (Toronto: The Osgoode Society, 1988), pp. 151-54. The Armistice message was telegraphed at 7:00 a.m. and resent at 9:59 a.m. by wireless telegraphy. See MG30 E100, Volume 17, Cobourg trial transcripts Volume 1, pp. 414-17, LAC.

¹¹⁴ Jarymowycz, *The History of the Black Watch*, p. 277; and Paul Hutchison, *CBC Flanders' Fields*, RG41, B-III-1, Volume 13, LAC.

The objectives of the 28th and 31st Battalions of the 6th CIB that morning were Havré, the Canal du Centre, bridgeheads across the canal, and Bois du Rapois.¹¹⁵ As part of a five-man patrol, Private George Price (A Company, 28th Battalion) crossed a steel drawbridge to reconnoitre the village of Ville-sur-Haine on the far side of Canal du Centre. A sniper fatally shot Price outside the Lenoir's home at 71 rue de Mons (demolished in May 1984). Private Art Goodmurphy and a neighbour, twenty-three-year-old nurse Alice Grotte, carried Price into the house where Alice applied first aid. Price died minutes later at 10:58 a.m.¹¹⁶

The 5th Lancers' A Squadron, the first British troops to pass through Mons since 1914, was ordered at 7:00 a.m. to seize the high ground around Saint-Denis. They reached Saint-Denis at 9:45 a.m.¹¹⁷ By 11:00 a.m. when the cease-fire came into effect, the Canadians had captured St. Symphorien, Havré, and other villages and woods.¹¹⁸ The 58th Battalion heard heavy explosions east of the front line; the enemy was busy destroying ammunition supplies. The 116th Battalion established an outpost line on the outskirts of Casteau on the Armistice Line, 5 miles (8 km) northeast of Mons.

A 7th CIB ceremonial parade was held in the Grand Place. Brig.-Gen. Clark handed over the city to the municipal dignitaries. At 11:00 a.m. "Present Arms" was issued and the bands played "God Save the King" and the national anthems. Solemn speeches were

¹¹⁵ WD, 6th CIB, November 1918, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4891, File 273, LAC; and *The History of the 28th (Northwest) Battalion, C.E.F. (October 1914 – June 1919)*, ed. D. G. Scott Calder (Regina, Sask: Regina Rifle Regiment, 1961), pp. 235-36.

¹¹⁶ Arthur Goodmurphy, *CBC Flanders' Fields*, RG41, B-III-1, Volume 12, LAC; and Macintyre, Duncan. 1968. "The Last Casualty." *The Legionary*, November, pp. 14-17. Licope recorded Grotte's story for Macintyre. Madame Grotte-Buick died in August 1969.

¹¹⁷ John Keegan, "Return to Mons," *Purnell's History of the First World War*, Volume 7, No. 15, (1971): p. 3031.

¹¹⁸ George Price is buried in the St. Symphorien Military Cemetery. Nearby is Private John Parr, the first BEF soldier killed in the First World War. See Andrew Rawson, *British Expeditionary Force: The Final Advance September to November 1918* (Yorkshire, England: Pen & Sword Military, 2018), p. 203.

made and a march past ensued while fifteen airplanes flew overhead.¹¹⁹ Later, Clark entered the *Hôtel de Ville* where, in the presence of thirteen aldermen and municipal councillors, he and eight other 7th CIB officers, including its four battalion commanders, inscribed their names on a new page of the Golden Book (marked 11:00 a.m.) dedicated to the 7th Brigade. George Little, acting PPCLI battalion commander, remarked that the Golden Book page he signed did not display the order in which the battalions had arrived in Mons.¹²⁰ Both the 49th and PPCLI commanders' signatures are above the signatures of the 42nd and RCR officers on that page. Lescarts was adamant that the keys to the city were not presented to Brig.-Gen. Clark, as claimed by the 42nd Battalion.¹²¹

Shortly after noon, *Le Collège des Bourgmestre et Échevins* issued a proclamation that was addressed to the residents of Mons.¹²² It includes: "*3^e division canadienne, au prix de lourds sacrifices, (at the cost of heavy sacrifices) a pénétré dans la ville à 3 heures du matin.*" Currie disagreed with this translated statement when the poster was exhibited during the Cobourg trial. He explained that those sacrifices were incurred from 1 November onwards, not only on the last day of the war.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Morrison: *The Long-Lost Memoir of Canada's Artillery Commander in the Great War*, ed. Susan Raby-Dunne (Victoria, BC: Heritage House Publishing, 2017), pp. 234-35; and Dony, *La Bataille de Mons et la Délivrance*, p. 28.

¹²⁰ George Little, CBC *Flanders' Fields*, RG41, B-III-1, Volume 18, LAC.

¹²¹ Letter from Jean Lescarts, 15 September 1923, RG24-C-6-e, Volume 1822, File GAQ-5-34, LAC; and WD, 42nd Battalion, November 1918, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4928, File 433, LAC.

¹²² MG30 D77, Volume 51, LAC;

¹²³ Sharpe, *The Last Day, the Last Hour*, p. 204.

A LA POPULATION DE MONS

Après 51 mois de souffrances causées par l'occupation inique, impitoyable et insolente de l'armée allemande, la Ville de Mons est enfin délivrée par l'héroïsme de l'armée britannique, qui, à l'heure de l'armistice, termine la série de ses victoires dans les lieux mêmes où, le 23 août 1914, elle entra en contact avec l'ennemi.

La 3^e division canadienne, au prix de lourds sacrifices, a pénétré dans la ville à 3 heures du matin, vengeant ainsi, par un éclatant succès, la retraite de 1914. **GLOIRE ET RECONNAISSANCE A ELLE !**

L'armistice est signé. L'armée allemande a capitulé; la force brutale est anéantie; la justice et le droit triomphent. La Belgique sort grandie et fortifiée de la terrible épreuve qu'elle a traversée.

La population a supporté avec confiance et courage les souffrances de l'occupation. Nous sommes convaincus que dans la joie du triomphe, elle observera la dignité et la mesure qu'elle a toujours conservées.

Nous comptons sur la bonne volonté de tous pour que l'ordre soit observé. Nous invitons aussi la population à se remettre, le plus tôt possible, au travail. Les ruines infligées par la guerre sont grandes, et la coopération de toutes les bonnes volontés, de toutes les énergies est nécessaire pour guérir rapidement les plaies qu'elle a causées.

En cette heure solennelle, notre gratitude infinie va aux Armées Alliées et, parmi elles, du fond du cœur, à notre vaillante Armée Belge et au Roi, son héroïque chef.

Vive le Roi ! Vive la Patrie Belge !

Le Secrétaire communal,

Gaston TALAUPE

Mons, le 11 Novembre 1918.



Le Collège des Bourgmestre et Echevins :

Jean LESCARTS
Fulgence MASSON
Léon SAVE
Victor MAISTRIAU
Henri ROLLAND

Mons. — Imprimerie Arthur PRINCELLE, rue de Houdain, 28

Less than an hour before the Armistice came into effect, 3rd Canadian Division general staff requested 3rd divisional formations and a squadron of 5th Lancers attend the Canadian Corps commander's formal entry into the Grand Place at 3:30 p.m. Each

infantry battalion would supply 100 all ranks.¹²⁴ That afternoon the pipe and brass bands struck up the Belgian national anthem in the roped-off square, which was overflowing with thousands of Mons' residents. The waiting soldiers stood at attention for quite some time.¹²⁵ The 5th Lancers formed the escort for Currie's official arrival with his generals and staff officers.

The acting Burgomaster, Victor Maistriau and civilian dignitaries formally welcomed the Canadian liberators. After the troops marched past the review platform Currie and his officers entered the Council Chamber in the *Hôtel de Ville* where he presented his pennant as a memento of the occasion. Maj.-Gen. Edward Morrison, commanding the Canadian Corps artillery, wrote in his memoir:

It was quite an historic scene, ... standing around the great carved council table, ... a few sputtering candles in a quaint old candelabra, which was the only means of lighting, and which served only to make the darkness visible in the great wainscoted room.¹²⁶

Currie, Morrison, and Loomis inscribed their names in the Golden Book below the written inscription on the 3:00 p.m.-designated page. Currie recorded the signing ceremony in his diary.¹²⁷ Another sixteen Canadian officers added their names on the following two pages. The commanders of the 42nd and 49th Battalions, Ewing and Robert Palmer, wrote their names for the second time. In all, thirty-seven Canadian officers signed the book.¹²⁸ Nobody from the 2nd Canadian Division signed it that day. But on 15 November at 1:00 p.m., Horne and Burstall along with eight British, Canadian, and Belgian officers signed their names on a new page.

The Aftermath

¹²⁴ Urgent Operations Priority, RG9 III-C-4, Volume 4268 Folder 24, File 6, LAC.

¹²⁵ Clarence Elder, "At 11 a.m. It Went Quiet," in *Battle Lines: Eyewitness Accounts from Canada's Military History*, J.L. Granatstein and Norman Hillmer (eds.), (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2010), p. 206.

¹²⁶ *Morrison*, p. 236.

¹²⁷ *The Selected Papers of Sir Arthur Currie*, p. 139.

¹²⁸ Maistriau, Rolland, Save, Talaue, and twenty-five other Belgian officials also signed it.

When Currie rode into Mons for the 3:30 p.m. march past on 11 November, he spotted dead Germans and assumed there had been street fighting.¹²⁹ However, there had been no fighting through Mons on 11 November. This was contrary to First Army's report that at 4:30 a.m. two companies had cleared machine gun posts; the Canadian Corps' diary statement that the enemy had offered an obstinate and resolute resistance in the city; and the 3rd Canadian Division's diary claiming a machine gun and its crew were captured after a short fight.¹³⁰ During the Cobourg libel trial, the 7th CIB infantry officers including Grafftey, Finley, Little, Hutchison, and White testified that they entered the city without encountering any opposition.¹³¹

There were five German bodies strewn in the gutters and sidewalks along Avenue de Bertaimont and many more near the railway station (see Map 3). The inhabitants had kicked some of the corpses. The most feasible cause of German deaths on Avenue de Bertaimont was the brief field artillery shelling on the afternoon of 10 November by batteries of the 8th Army and 9th Brigades, CFA that targeted the Dérivation de la Trouille Canal.¹³² Unfortunately, some shells fell inside the city injuring citizens and setting several houses on fire.¹³³ William Breckinridge of the 42nd Battalion wrote that early in the morning of 11 November four German prisoners had been killed by civilians.¹³⁴ No. 4 Company, PPCLI had driven back a party of thirty Germans near the Mons' railway station early on 10 November.¹³⁵ This may have accounted for some of the

¹²⁹ *The Selected Papers of Sir Arthur Currie*, p. 138; and Livesay, *Canada's Hundred Days*, p. 138.

¹³⁰ Extract from Report – First Army, RG24-C-1-a, Volume 448, File HQ-54-21-1-210, LAC; WD, Canadian Corps General Staff, November 1918, microfilm reel T-7179, LAC; and Extract from Narrative 3rd Canadian Division War Diary, RG24-C-1-a, Volume 448, File HQ-54-21-1-210, LAC.

¹³¹ Daniel Dancocks, *Sir Arthur Currie: A Biography* (Toronto: Methuen, 1985), p. 248; and John Swettenham, *To Seize the Victory: The Canadian Corps in World War I* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1965), p. 15.

¹³² WD, 8th Army Brigade CFA, November 1918, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4964, File 526, LAC; and WD, 9th Brigade CFA, November 1918, RG9 III-D-3, Volume 4970, File 548, LAC.

¹³³ Dony, *La Bataille de Mons et la Délivrance*, p. 29.

¹³⁴ William Breckinridge, *From Vimy to Mons: A Historical Narrative* (n.p., 1919), p. 245.

¹³⁵ Lieut. Marcus Hancock, PPCLI citation, *The London Gazette*, Supplement 31680, p. 15384, 10 December 1919.

“oodles of dead Boche” in the railway yard where they made their last stand.¹³⁶



Map 3. Mons City Plan (November 1918), locations of German dead.

¹³⁶ Mons City Plan, R13740-33-1-E, Volume 4, LAC.

The Centenary Investigation

At the centenary of the Armistice, The Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) of Canada investigated the 5:00 a.m. signatures of the Golden Book. An analysis of the inscription along with Biggar and Cave's names revealed, "The ink marks [made by Biggar and Cave] appear to come from the same pen used by the City of Mons official."¹³⁷ This observation and an examination of the 42nd Battalion's war diary led them to conclude that Biggar and Cave had signed the Golden Book first.

However, Talaupé had the Golden Book in his possession that morning, whereas the war diary declared it was immediately retrieved from a vault. Inexplicably, both Biggar and Cave "claim to have gone to the vault."¹³⁸ As well, Biggar insisted the inscription ("the frills") was "most definitely added after we signed."¹³⁹ In this scenario, Biggar and Cave signed the Golden Book and the inscription was then added using the same pen. Why did the officials leave such a large gap above Biggar's signature permitting room for King's name? Furthermore, this means King would have signed after 6:00 a.m., the time when Biggar and Cave were establishing headquarters.

The First Signature

It is possible that King—the first Canadian to reach the Grand Place—was pressed for time and initially deferred writing his name in the Golden Book when approached by officials at the *Hôtel de Ville*. He could have departed immediately with his platoon to establish an outpost in Place de Flandre as ordered. Sometime after 4:30 a.m., with his position consolidated and Mons cleared, King could have retraced his steps to the *Hôtel de Ville* to sign the blank page of the Golden Book. However, this clearly contradicts King's first-hand account from *The Return to Mons* program.

¹³⁷ Eric Booth, "Signing the City of Mons Golden Book," *Canada's Red Hackle*, No. 031, (March 2019): p. 28.

¹³⁸ Letter to Mons Mayor, 11 August 1923, RG24-C-6-e, Volume 1822, File GAQ-5-34, LAC.

¹³⁹ Letter from Louis Biggar to Beresford Topp, 14 December 1931, RG24-C-6-e, Volume 1822, File GAQ-5-34, LAC.

The most credible scenario has King entering the Grand Place after 3:00 a.m. where he was directed to the *Hôtel de Ville*. King inscribed his name on a blank page of the Golden Book about halfway down and left quickly to rejoin No. 5 Platoon, as he stated in the *Return to Mons* interview. Almost three hours passed before Biggar and Cave arrived at the *Hôtel de Ville* to establish the 42nd Battalion headquarters and were invited to sign the Golden Book. After the municipal officials realised that Canadian troops had liberated Mons, they penned an inscription above the signatures that included: *l'honneur de recevoir les premiers officiers du Corps canadien* (the honour of receiving the first officers of the Canadian Corps). The sixty-eight-word inscription was purposely spaced to extend down to King's signature.

The fact that King signed the Golden Book first is endorsed by the written testimonies from the 1923 and 1931 enquiries when Mons' officials, eyewitnesses to the signings, identified King as the first officer to pen his name. Furthermore, Piolunowski, who had arrived after 3:00 a.m. was in the Council Chamber at the same time as King. Aldermen Save and Talaupé independently wrote that King signed the Golden Book before leaving for Place de Flandre. According to Talaupé, both Biggar and Cave appeared at the *Hôtel de Ville* a few hours after King. Georges Licope never wavered from insisting that King was the first to sign the Golden Book although he was not a spectator to the signings.

Although not infallible, an impartial source—the Mons civilian eyewitness accounts chronicled five years after the signings—should take precedence over the diary and regimental history accounts. Lieut. King, who was the first officer to enter the Grand Place in the early hours of 11 November, should be granted the honour of having been the first Canadian soldier to sign the Golden Book of Mons, which had finally been opened to the city's liberators after fifty-one months of German occupation.

Conclusion

As this article has demonstrated, detailed tracking of the Canadians during the last week of the war uncovers inaccuracies in narratives from army headquarters down to battalion level. Indeed, during the Cobourg libel trial, Lieut.-Col. Ewing admitted, "We

have found quite a number of mistakes which I did not know existed, in the war narrative and diary.”¹⁴⁰

The author of the First Army Report claimed that fighting took place in Mons throughout the night of 10-11 November until sometime after 4:30 a.m. Under cross-examination at the Cobourg trial, Capt. Eric Finley refuted this claim stating he had not seen any fighting after midnight.¹⁴¹ Misunderstanding or misremembering 7th CIB troop maneuvers may have led to similar erroneous assertions of combat within Mons recorded by the Canadian Corps and 3rd Canadian Divisional diarists.

Errors are embedded in war diaries and regimental histories. Inevitably, once a military operation is documented in print, it is deemed authentic. Erroneous, biased, or exaggerated information can be perpetuated in the historiography of the First World War, undermining research. Therefore, these military records must be viewed “with circumspection.”¹⁴²

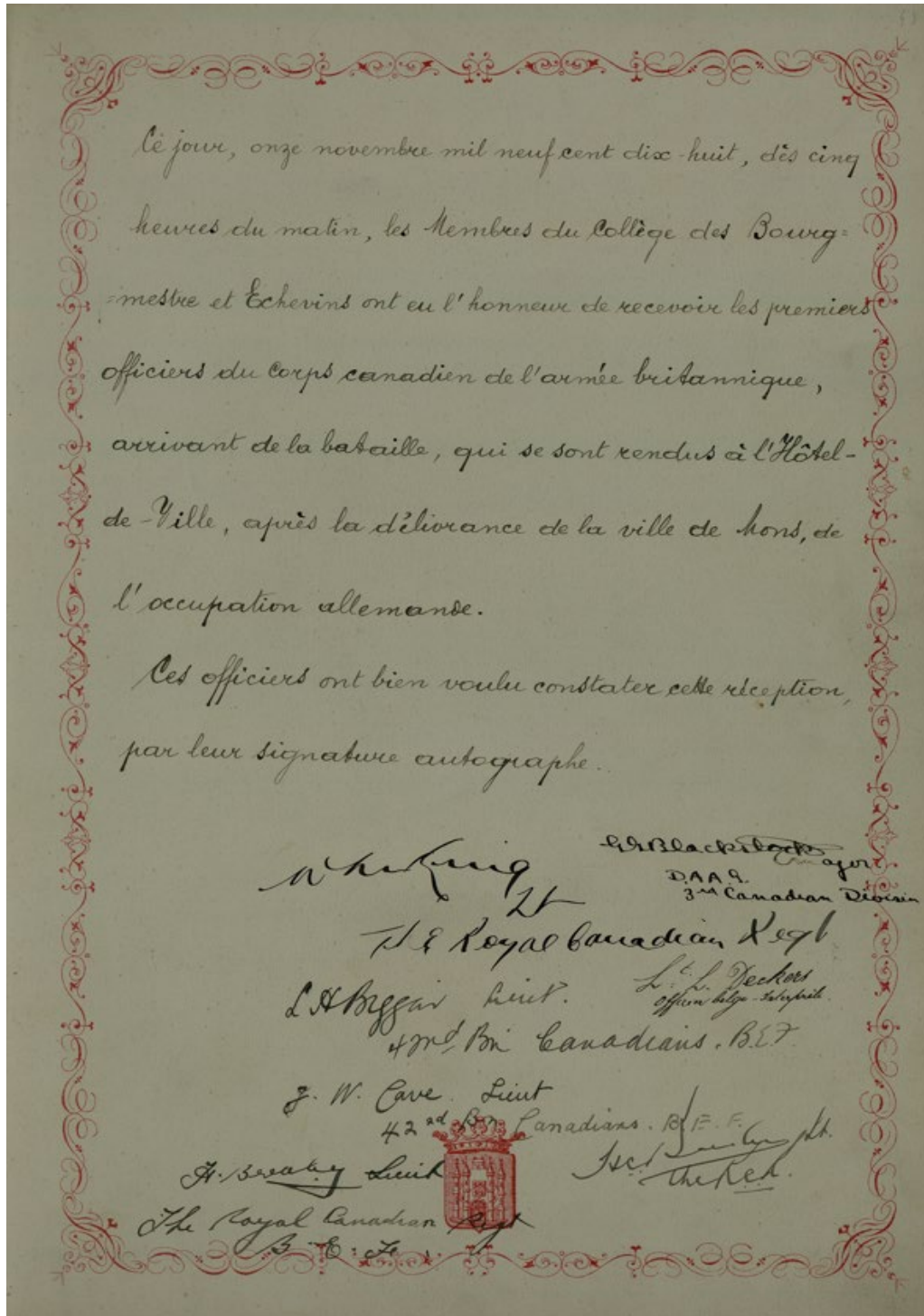
Thankfully, errors can be uncovered by ongoing First World War scholarship as historians exercise caution by evaluating the credibility of first-hand accounts and corroborating the subject matter with other bona fide sources. Otherwise, factually flawed material gives rise to problematic or unequivocally incorrect conclusions. When feasible, a transnational approach is optimal when attempting to resolve a disputed issue such as the signing order of the Golden Book of Mons. It is imperative that the writer of history has trustworthy primary sources to accurately analyse and interpret the military’s past events.

¹⁴⁰ Royal Ewing, MG30 E100, Volume 17, Cobourg trial transcripts Volume 3, p. 1304, LAC.

¹⁴¹ Eric Finley, MG30 E100, Volume 17, Cobourg trial transcripts, Volume 3, p. 1249, LAC.

¹⁴² William Stewart, *The Hardest Battle: The Canadian Corps and the Arras 1918 Campaign* (Warwick, England: Helion & Company, 2023), p. XXV.

Appendix: The Golden Book Signings



Golden Book Signatures from 11 November 1918 at 5:00 A.M. Source: Corentin Rousman, Curator, Memory and Military History at the Mons Memorial Museum.

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