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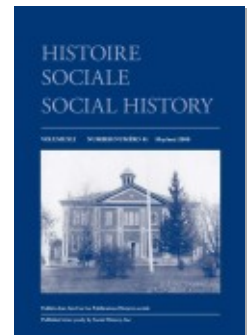
## "He was determined to go": Underage Soldiers in the Canadian Expeditionary Force

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# “He was determined to go”: Underage Soldiers in the Canadian Expeditionary Force

TIM COOK\*

*As many as 20,000 underage soldiers served overseas in the First World War, but their service has often been overlooked because it has been difficult to distinguish them from their older comrades. Adolescents often lied about their age in order to enlist, impelled by a sense of adventure, peer pressure, and fierce patriotism. Studying the reaction of young soldiers to the war effort, as well as their interaction with parents, society, and the military forces, reveals that, despite the agony of parents and the problems underage soldiers sometimes presented for the military establishment, young Canadians were approvingly incorporated into and constituted an important part of Canada's war effort.*

*Jusqu'à 20,000 soldats d'âge mineur ont servi à l'étranger durant la Première Guerre mondiale, mais leur participation est souvent passée inaperçue compte tenu de la difficulté de les distinguer de leurs camarades plus âgés. Les adolescents mentaient souvent sur leur âge afin de s'enrôler, poussés par le goût de l'aventure, la pression de leurs pairs et la fièvre du patriotisme. On constate en étudiant la réaction des soldats adolescents à l'effort de guerre et leurs rapports avec leurs parents, la société et les forces militaires qu'en dépit de l'agonie des parents et des problèmes que ces soldats représentaient parfois pour l'establishment militaire, les jeunes Canadiens étaient intégrés favorablement à l'effort de guerre du Canada et en représentaient un volet important.*

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THOUSANDS of adolescents fought with the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) during the Great War. Historians have overlooked their service because it has been difficult to distinguish them from their older comrades, since most of these young soldiers lied about their age in order to enlist. A sense of adventure, peer pressure, and fierce patriotism impelled young and old to serve. Most underage soldiers who enlisted were 16 or 17 (and later 18 when age requirements were raised to 19), but at least one cheeky lad enlisted at only 10 years old, and a 12-year-old made it to the trenches.<sup>1</sup>

As many as 20,000 underage soldiers served overseas.<sup>2</sup> Canadians under the age of 19 constituted an important segment of the population during the Great War, one of the most traumatic experiences in Canadian history, but their history remains largely unknown.<sup>3</sup> Studying the reaction of these soldiers to the war effort and their interaction with parents, society, and the military forces reveals that young Canadians were approvingly incorporated into and became a significant part of Canada's war effort.

### Enlistment

The British and Canadian military had a long history of accepting into the ranks a small number of boy soldiers and sailors in apprenticeship roles, often as buglers, drummers, and young sailors. These boy soldiers and sailors, some as young as 10 or 12, were taken on strength with the regiment or ship, where they were part of the regimental family, eating, serving, and sleeping in the same barracks. Within the family officers tended to take a paternal attitude to these boys, and educational activities were offered or foisted on them to improve their lot in life.<sup>4</sup> Strict discipline and corresponding punishment for flouting regulations were also a part of their service in the rigid hierarchy of military service.<sup>5</sup>

1 Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House, 1993), p. 279.

2 See the conclusion for an analysis of available data.

3 No work specifically analyses Canadian children and the Great War, although segments of that experience can be gleaned from surrounding texts, especially those relating to social reform, welfare, and purity movements. For a recent important work that offers some insight into the role of children, see Desmond Morton, *Fight or Pay: Soldiers' Families in the Great War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004); also see Barbara Wilson, *Ontario and the First World War, 1914–1918: A Collection of Documents* (Toronto: Champlain Society for the Government of Ontario, University of Toronto Press, 1977); William Raynsford and Jeannette Raynsford, *Silent Casualties: Veterans' Families in the Aftermath of the Great War* (Madoc, ON: Merribrae Press, 1986).

4 A. C. T. White, *The Story of Army Education, 1943–1963* (London: George G. Harrap, 1963), chap. 2–3.

5 A. W. Cockerill, *Sons of the Brave: The Story of the Boy Soldiers* (London: Leo Cooper, in association with Secker & Warburg, 1984), pp. 41–44.

They were also in harm's way, with boy sailors fulfilling a variety of roles on a ship and drummer boys leading men into battle.

In Canada, the King's Regulations and Orders for the Canadian militia specified that boys of "good character" between the ages of 13 and 18 could be enlisted as bandsmen, drummers, or buglers.<sup>6</sup> However, since the Canadian permanent force was a mere 3,000 before the war, there were very few boy soldiers, although the various and scattered militia units across the country had no compunction about turning to juveniles to fill their always thin ranks. Still, the vast majority of the thousands of adolescents who would enlist in the Great War were not pre-war boy soldiers, but chose to serve for a variety of reasons.

To understand the role of serving adolescents in the Great War, one must acknowledge the constructed nature of childhood.<sup>7</sup> For much of the nineteenth century, little thought or worry was given to the emotional life of young people or the necessity of a childhood filled with play and exploration. Childhood was hard and dangerous in working-class families. All children, no matter their class or ethnicity, were sadly acquainted with death in and out of the workplace. Few families escaped the tragedy of losing children or siblings to disease or accident. Education remained a privilege for most, with youngsters often pulled from schools to support the family. Yet these pre-war working boys and adolescents were also toughened by their hardship, and it was not uncommon for them to mobilize in the workplace, demanding greater rights.<sup>8</sup> Despite their age, they were tough customers who eagerly embraced all aspects of their emerging masculinity, smoking, drinking, and fighting in a rough-and-tumble environment.

At the time, there was no accepted classification for what age designated a child or adolescent, although the state — both at the federal and provincial levels — attempted to define young Canadians through the creation of various forms of legislation. Since 1871, legislation had required that students stay in school until the age of 12, but by the decade before the

6 *King's Regulations and Orders* (1910), para. 243, 246. The *Militia Act* of 1904, which had amended that of 1868 and drew upon the long traditions of the citizen-soldiers in the Canadas and before that in New France, provided for a *levee en masse* for all male inhabitants of Canada between the ages of 18 and 60. See J. L. Granatstein and J. M. Hitsman, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 64–65.

7 For an analysis of children in Canadian history, see Cynthia Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth: Adolescence and the Making of Modern Canada, 1920 to 1950* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), and *Nations Are Built of Babies: Saving Ontario's Mothers and Children* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993); Robert McIntosh, *Boys in the Pits: Child Labour in Coal Mines* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000); Neil Sutherland, *Children in English-Canadian Society: Framing the Twentieth Century Consensus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976); Joy Parr, *Labouring Children: British Immigrant Apprentices to Canada, 1869–1924* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

8 For an example of boy miners, see McIntosh, *Boys in the Pits*, chap. 7–8.

war this had been raised to 14 or 16, depending on province, as well as on city and rural jurisdictions.<sup>9</sup> However, many young people left school before the legislation allowed and were employed in full-time jobs. There was legislation to control youth from flooding the market, both for their health and to defend against a dilution of the work force, but this, too, was applied differently across the country, no doubt affected by provincial economies.<sup>10</sup> While labour laws varied, delinquent children and adolescents were defined and normalized in the 1908 *Juvenile Delinquents Act*, in the attempt to punish transgressive behaviour by youthful deviants. Under the act, delinquents were classified as between the ages of 7 and 16 (18 in some provinces), but children under 12 were treated more leniently under the law.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in the eyes of probation officers and the courts, adolescents fell somewhere between the ages of 12 and 18. While state actors attempted to define childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, the constructed nature of these classifications was also shaped by region, class, and ethnicity. Most young Canadians were involved in adult activities long before the age of 18. Any attempt to define youth invariably led legislators into contested terrain, although 21 was the required age of adult citizenship.<sup>12</sup>

Since the late nineteenth century, women's groups, educational reformers, and a constellation of reform-minded Canadians had aimed to improve the lot of children's and adolescents' health and spiritual well-being, no matter their age.<sup>13</sup> These groups engendered vast improvements in society and helped to shape the nature of childhood by demanding that the state and society recognize the difference between adolescence and adulthood. While many adolescents were rescued from the gutters, some would soon march straight into the trenches.

Canada went to war in August 1914, carried forward by a swell of patriotic excitement. For some boys in menial jobs or back-breaking work, the transition from a brutal, dangerous industrial profession to the military

9 Marta Danylewycz and Alison Prentice, "Teachers' Work: Changing Patterns and Perceptions in the Emerging School Systems of Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century Central Canada," *Labour/Le Travail*, vol. 17 (Spring 1986), p. 140; R. D. Gidney, *From Hope to Harris: The Reshaping of Ontario's Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 13.

10 Robert McIntosh, "Boys in the Nova Scotian Coal Mines, 1873–1923," in Nancy Janovicek and Joy Parr, eds., *Histories of Canada's Children and Youth* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 77.

11 Joan Sangster, *Girl Trouble: Female Delinquency in English Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002), pp. 15–16.

12 See Robert McIntosh, "Constructing the Child: New Approaches to the History of Childhood in Canada," *Acadiensis*, vol. 28, no. 2 (Spring 1999), for an overview of the literature.

13 See Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985); Sharon Anne Cook, *Through Sunshine and Shadow: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union, Evangelism, and Reform in Ontario, 1874–1930* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995); Comacchio, *Nations Are Built of Babies*.

was viewed as a safe move, especially since few expected the war to extend past Christmas. Trading coal dust for healthy marching did not raise the objections of many in society. Soldiers, both young and old, spoke approvingly of having three solid, if monotonous, meals. The \$1.10 a day for privates, plus the chance to serve a seemingly noble cause, were also incentives that drew lads from across the country.

Like all Canadians, adolescents had a myriad of reasons to enlist. "When the war broke out . . . . The country went mad!" recalled Bert Remington, who immediately enlisted at age 18, but with a physical appearance, in his words, of "five foot nothing and 85 pounds."<sup>14</sup> Adolescents were just as susceptible to the hyper patriotism of the period, yet, unlike older men, most did not have good jobs or a family to temper the heady thoughts of serving King and country. Added to these factors was the inherent belief by most young people that they were nearly indestructible.<sup>15</sup> Others had prewar militia training that made them more inclined to serve and fight, and before the war some 40,000 school boys had enrolled in the cadets, an institution accused by critics of militarizing childhood and adolescence.<sup>16</sup>

Even those youth who did not march in khaki or carry the .22 cadet Ross rifle had, for the most part, been raised at home and in school on stories of victorious campaigns that had won Britain her empire. While class mitigated some of the messages, insofar as boys and adolescents of working-class families would likely be engaged in paid work rather than education, much of the popular culture of literature, music, and toys for male children was infused with ideals of manliness. Military service in the imperial ranks caught the imagination of most boys at one time or another. Parades, marches, and flag-waving were all normal activities at school or in the community. When war came, many adolescents were eager to carve out their own heroic future.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the sense of naive adventure and pre-war masculine culture, one cannot discount genuine patriotism and a belief in the widely disseminated liberal ideals underpinning the British war effort. Later in the war, some youngsters ached to avenge the loss of an older sibling or a father.

14 Daphne Read, ed., *The Great War and Canadian Society: An Oral History* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1978), pp. 90–91.

15 David Silbey, *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War, 1914–1916* (London and New York: Frank Cass, 2005), p. 81.

16 On the cadet movement, see Desmond Morton, "The Cadet Movement in the Moment of Canadian Militarism, 1909–1914," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2 (Summer 1978), pp. 56–69.

17 For the influence of pre-war literature and military messaging, see Mark Moss, *Manliness and Militarism: Educating Young Boys in Ontario for War* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001); Michael Paris, *The Great War and Juvenile Literature in Britain* (Westport, CN: Praeger, 2004).

One letter of the era from John Wright to Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden provides insight into other motivations:

I am only a boy of 16 years and want to give my life for my country. I have tried many times and failed . . . My Dad has been to the Front and now he is back again, and you have taken my brother, and now I am the only one left to do something for my country. And, Sir, if you only knew how I am going crazy to do something to gain honor. I am strong and healthy, I have never had any sickness in my life. I was just reading the paper this morning and saw that you said 'Canadians must hold the line.' They cannot do it without men. Please will you give me a position in that line. I don't call myself a man but I might help to hold that line. So please give me a chance, the line is more valuable than my life.<sup>18</sup>

Wright was not accepted into the ranks, despite his heart-felt desire to serve his country.

Multiple layers of masculinity thus drove adolescents to enlist. Like young John Wright, who ached for honour, sacrifice, and an opportunity to prove his manhood, young boys instantly became men in their own eyes and those of others by signing their names to the legally binding attestation form. A 16-year-old student was treated the same as the 25-year-old baker or the 29-year-old clerk. In moving from short pants to military trousers and puttees, an adolescent moved from being a boy to a man.

This embracing of adulthood began with enlistment. Across the country, hopeful men of all ages made their way to the armouries. While militia orders stipulated that recruits were to be between the ages of 18 and 45, overage and underage Canadians provided fabricated birth dates for official documentation to serve.<sup>19</sup> There was a loop-hole, however, as adolescents under the age of 18 could enlist if they had a parent's signed letter of consent.

Many parents waived their right to veto their son's choice. Activist and author Nellie McClung was filled with fear and anger when she watched the "first troops going away. I wondered how their mothers let them go." But then her son, Jack, who was also there to see the soldiers off, turned to her with expectant eyes, asking, "Mother, when will I be eighteen?"<sup>20</sup> It was a blow and a realization that the war would affect everyone,

18 Library and Archives Canada [hereafter LAC], MG 30 E100, Sir Arthur Currie papers, vol. 3, file A-H, John C. Wright to Sir Robert Borden, April 18, 1918.

19 See Directorate of History and Heritage, 74/672, Edwin Pye papers, folder 4, Militia Order No. 372, August 17, 1914.

20 Nellie McClung, *The Next of Kin: Those Who Wait and Wonder* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1917), pp. 33, 48.

but especially the mothers left behind, forced to wait, worry, and watch their eager sons enlist for war. Jack would eventually serve overseas, with McClung's blessing; he survived, although in his mother's eyes he lost his youth on the battlefields of the Western Front.

Jack was lucky; thousands did not return. Percy McClare, who enlisted in April 1915, six weeks after his seventeenth birthday, wrote a pleading letter to his mother asking that she sign the consent form. He had been impressed by a recruiting sergeant who informed McClare "that the men at the [front] are happy as can be . . . Said they had a Jolly time. All I need is your concent [*sic*]." <sup>21</sup> His mother eventually agreed to his service, as did many parents, who were no doubt pressured by patriotic messages in speeches and posters. As one recruitment poster aimed at the "Women of Canada" demanded: "When the War is over and someone asks your husband or your son what he did in the great War, is he to hang his head because you would not let him go?" <sup>22</sup> Many parents did not need such shaming techniques, as they firmly believed in the war, but it is also clear that some parents allowed their underdeveloped and too-young sons to enlist because they assumed their boys could not possibly be accepted into the ranks of men. <sup>23</sup> Most were soon shocked to find their sons in uniform. McClare served and, as the sergeant noted, was indeed happy in the ranks; but he was killed a month after arriving on the Western Front. Many parents and adolescent soldiers spent what was left of their lives regretting their choices. Young Private Donald Gordon marched with the 8th Battalion and had lied about his age when he enlisted against his parents' wishes. On April 15, 1915, a sniper's bullet took his life. Among his personal possessions was a Bible with the inscription: "Goodbye, Mother, Forgive me." <sup>24</sup>

While adolescents showed up at recruiting stations clutching letters of consent, often they were turned down because of their size or unsuitability for soldiering. The age requirement of at least 18 seems to have been used as a guide rather than a rule, however, and no one in the heady patriotic environment of 1914 and 1915 inquired too deeply about the influx of adolescents into the ranks. Perhaps the arbitrary assignment of an age — 18 and later 19 — seemed at odds with the situation of most adolescents who were out of school and working in the capacity of

21 Dale McClare, *The Letters of a Young Canadian Soldier during World War I* (Kentville, NS: Brook House Press, 2000), p. 1.

22 Toronto, Archives of Ontario, C232-2-0-4-263, "To the Women of Canada" [poster]. See also Jeff Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship during Canada's Great War* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996), p. 42.

23 Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies, 1914-16* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp. 182-183.

24 Bruce Tascona, *Little Black Devils* (Winnipeg: Frye Publications for Royal Winnipeg Rifles, 1983), p. 77.



young adults. Whatever the case, thousands of youths disregarded the rule, which was almost impossible to enforce since few recruits had birth certificates, and no one was required to produce one as proof of age. One should also not discount the prevalence of Canadians who did not know their own birth date. Nonetheless, bluster and brass often allowed many youngsters to elude serious scrutiny during the already inconsistent enlistment process, although parents had the right to pull their underage sons from the forces until the summer of 1915, when this privilege was quietly dropped after a court ruled that the militia had made a pact with a soldier, no matter his age.<sup>25</sup>

Queuing before the recruiting sergeant could be a nerve-wracking exercise. Forty-nine-year-olds with newly dyed hair and 16-year-olds standing erect and sweating under a borrowed jacket and bowler hat watched anxiously as recruiting sergeants jotted down their names and birth dates. Depending on the circumstances of the unit, and especially if it needed more men to hit its quota to go overseas, recruiting sergeants often turned a blind eye to an obviously too-young lad or the deeply lined face of an older man.

Some boys did not know the age requirements and so gave honest responses to the question of their birth date, revealing that they were 16 or 17, or occasionally even younger. One official CEF report noted that underage soldiers who were later questioned about how they got overseas gave consistent responses: these new recruits, when they had given their proper age, were told to “run around the block, think over [their] age, and come back again.”<sup>26</sup> Most did, offering a birth date that fell within the required age range. Yet most adolescents knew that they had to be 18 or 19 to enlist. A study at the end of the war noted that, when the underage soldiers came forward with their real ages, as indicated on their birth certificates, a comparison with the initial attestation paper revealed that ages had most often been inflated to 19.<sup>27</sup> Another study of these soldiers indicated that the number of recruits who gave their age as 19 was out of proportion to any other age group represented in the British Expeditionary Force, likely because it consisted of several age groups, including those who were 16, 17, and 18.<sup>28</sup>

Not all had their wishes come true. Thomas Raddall, who would later become an eminent Nova Scotia novelist and historian, remembered wearing his first pair of trousers at age 15. Having shed his children's

25 Colonel A. F. Duguid, *Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War, 1914–1919, General Series, Volume I* (Ottawa: J. O. Patenaude, Printer to the King, 1938), pp. 430–431; LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 2893, 160–33, clipping, *Montreal Gazette*, October 18, 1916.

26 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 37, 8–2–10, 2 pts., Officer in charge of Medical Board Department, Folkestone, to Director of Recruiting, August 22, 1916.

27 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 1765, file U–I–13, pt. 16, Captain G. A. Dann to OC, YSB, September 13, 1918.

28 Richard Van Emden, *Boy Soldiers of the Great War* (London: Headline, 2005), p. 33.

clothes, he walked confidently into a recruiting station. "Several boys from Chebucto School had [already] done so and gone overseas," he recounted in his memoirs. "One of our neighbour's sons had enlisted at sixteen and was killed in France at seventeen. But I was recognized by the recruiting sergeant who knew my father [who would be killed overseas], and he told me bluntly to go back to school."<sup>29</sup> However, even if a soldier was turned down, since there was no cross-referencing of rejected men, a determined youth could and did move from regiment to regiment in search of one that needed to fill its quota. Rejection for an obstinate youth only meant a trip down the street or re-enlisting on another day, with a different sergeant and under a new name, and it was not uncommon to find soldiers who tried to enlist two or three times before they were accepted. Of the several thousand soldiers rejected as unfits and misfits in 1914 at the Valcartier training camp, a recent study suggests that hundreds enlisted later in the war when the forces were more desperate for men.<sup>30</sup>

The act of enlistment was a two-step process, and being accepted by officers and sergeants did not guarantee service. Recruits still needed to pass a medical examination. The quality of the inspecting medical officers varied at the armouries and depots across the country. Throughout the war, several hundred thousand potential recruits were turned down by medical officers — and this number might have been as high as 40 per cent of all who attempted to enlist.<sup>31</sup> Anything from poor eyesight to flat feet to bad teeth could keep a man out of the service. Age was a factor, but it stopped fewer men than it should have. It was not an easy task to distinguish adolescents from men. A husky farm boy or a lad who had been working at hard labour for years might be in far better shape than a pasty 20-year-old bank clerk. A gangly boy might not stand out, especially in mid-1915 when height requirements were dropped to 5 feet to allow the malnourished and malformed to enlist. Even so, it was not easy to justify the enlistment of Private Russell Mick with the 224th Battalion on March 17, 1916. He was allowed through at the age of 16, weighing 80 pounds and suffering from "infantile paralysis," which left him largely incapable of movement.<sup>32</sup> After arriving in England and going almost directly to a hospital, he was eventually returned to

29 Thomas H. Raddall, *In My Time: A Memoir* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976), pp. 42–43.

30 I would like to thank Nicholas Clarke for sharing with me some of his research for his ongoing dissertation on rejected volunteers from the CEF.

31 See Ian Hugh MacLean Miller, *Our Glory and Our Grief: Torontonians and the Great War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), pp. 76–80; for the British process, which was similar to that of the Canadians, see J. M. Winter, *The Great War and the British People* (London: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 48–64.

32 Herbert Bruce, *Politics and the Canadian Army Medical Corps* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1919), p. 45; LAC, RG 150, accession 1992–93/166, box 6153–40, Mick Russell.

Canada as an “undesirable.” As one overseas report lamented after seeing the same undesirable men return to England with new battalions, it was “practically impossible to absolutely prevent reenlistment, as this may be done under an assumed name.”<sup>33</sup> Mick, for instance, remained undeterred, even after he was singled out in the House of Commons as representative of the poor screening process in Canada. He re-enlisted less than a year later, after having grown two-and-a-half inches and, presumably, finding new ways to hide his disability.

The medical screening process remained notoriously unreliable throughout the war. A cursory visual inspection of the naked body was a humiliating event: sunken chests were poked, genitals examined, flat feet kneaded, eyesight tested through distance charts.<sup>34</sup> Thomas Rowlett, an underage signaller, enlisted in Nova Scotia with two pals. Both naked friends were asked the same question by the medical officer: “Are you 19 years old?” Both replied in the affirmative. To the taller one the medical officer nodded; the other he rejected with a dismissive glance.<sup>35</sup> While medical officers were experienced in sizing up a man or boy with a glance and a bit of prodding, this haphazard approach led to regular complaints in England that the weak, too-youthful, and aged were being accepted into the ranks. One diligent medical officer in England was nearly apoplectic about the nature of the recruits by the end of 1915. He lamented that he had examined a tunneller, C. J. Bailey, who had deformed feet, with most of the toes amputated; a J. J. McDonald of the 4th Company, Canadian Engineers, who was missing both of his thumbs; and the 79-year-old W. J. Clements, who had “advanced arterosclerosis” and was barely able to stand erect.<sup>36</sup>

The problem of keeping unfits and undesirables (as the army in England called them) out of the service eventually rose to epidemic proportions, and by the end of 1916 there was a failed attempt to punish medical officers in Canada by having them pay the \$120 cost of returning unfit men across the Atlantic. This was never implemented, as it was seen by military officials in Canada as detrimental to the already strained recruiting effort.<sup>37</sup> More successful was an order from the Overseas Ministry that a second examination be carried out on troops before they stepped off the boats

33 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 30, 8–1–60, Adjutant General, Canadian Militia, to Director of Recruiting and Organization, CEF, December 20, 1915.

34 Ilana R. Bet-El, *Conscripts: Lost Legions of the Great War* (Stroud, UK: Sutton Publishers, 1999), pp. 33–35.

35 Thomas P. Rowlett, “Memoirs of a Signaller, 1914–1918” (Canadian War Museum Library, unpublished memoir, n.d.), pp. 12–13.

36 LAC, RG 9, III, 8–2–10, 2 pts., Officer in charge of Medical Board Department, Director of Recruiting to Carson, July 12, 1916.

37 Sir Andrew Macphail, *Medical Services: History of the Canadian Forces* (Ottawa: F. A. Acland, 1925), pp. 157–158.

in England.<sup>38</sup> However, this generally did not include the underage soldiers, who were often considered good troops; they would wait in England, training for battle, until the day they came of age. Although the age requirements under the *King's Orders and Regulations*, which had guided recruitment in Canada, stipulated 18 to 45, when soldiers arrived in England the rules were modified to meet British standards. Not only were the Canadians forced to undergo new and more relevant training to survive the trenches, but the age requirement for advancing to France was set at a minimum of 19 to a maximum of 42. That left thousands, especially those young Canadians who had enlisted at 18, unable to advance legally to France. Most units did their best to ignore the rules, especially if an 18-year-old was considered a good soldier.

Searching letters from desperate parents evoking their rights under the law continued to pluck underage soldiers from their units, however, until the summer of 1915. Roy Macfie, who served with his two brothers, wrote home shortly after arriving in England: "There are two of the Cook boys from Loring here, and their mother sent to the General and told him that they were underage, and were not to go to the front so I think they will be sent home, they won't like it."<sup>39</sup> Sapper J. E. Lowe was likely even younger than the Cook brothers, having enlisted at 15 (although, of course, lying on his attestation paper, which gives his age as 18) as a bugler in a pioneer battalion. After six weeks in England, the tough little Lowe, who stood 5 feet, 3 inches but had been a pre-war miner, was sent home.<sup>40</sup>

While an undisclosed number of young Canadians were pulled from the ranks, either because of parents' letters or by officers who now realized that the firing line was not the place for an adolescent, hundreds and then thousands of underage soldiers pleaded and cajoled their way into overseas service. Some openly threatened that, if sent home, they would only sign up again under an assumed name. Many officers relented and allowed the adolescents to continue serving, but others would have none of it, and those under age were put on ships and sent home.

Youth has never liked to be told how to act, and this was especially true for those returned to a country gripped with hyper-patriotism as exhibited through war posters, recruiting sergeants, politicians, and patriotic groups that assaulted every young man with the same message: do your bit. One student at the University of Saskatchewan wrote to his mother that he had

38 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 30, 8–1–60, Director of Recruiting and Organization to Carson, June 5, 1916.

39 John Macfie, *Letters Home* (Meaford, ON: Oliver Graphics, 1990), p. 12.

40 See LAC, RG 150, Accession 1992–93/166, box 5768–11, John Lowe; L. C. Giles, *Liphook, Bramshott, and the Canadians* (Preservation Society, 1986), postscript.

been pressured to enlist because the other students “make you feel like two cents if you don’t.”<sup>41</sup> Eminent Canadians roared that “to live by shirking one’s duty is infinitely worse . . . than to die.”<sup>42</sup> Many men, both young and old, would have echoed Armine Norris’s statement, “I enlisted because I hadn’t the nerve to stay at home.”<sup>43</sup> Norris was no coward and would be awarded the Military Cross for bravery in battle before being killed during the last months of the war.

The returned patriotic youth did not last long under this pressure. Opportunities were available to fight the “Hun” from the classroom floor through the writing of vitriolic essays, by throwing their increasing weight behind raising funds through the various patriotic movements, and, towards the end of the war, by working as “Soldiers of the Soil” to help farmers bring in the crops, but they could not avoid the increasingly aggressive questions and disapproving stares that lumped them together with other perceived slackers. Many re-enlisted, often under assumed names and against their parents’ wishes. Enlisting under a false name meant that a soldier was effectively cut off from his loved ones. There would be no letters home, no news of the family, no death benefits should the worst occur. Those at home might never know what had happened to their sons should they fall in battle.

### Overseas

The Canadian Division arrived in France in February 1915 and was joined over the next year and a half by three more divisions to form the Canadian Corps, some 100,000 men strong. From the start, the Canadians soon encountered the harsh subterranean world of the Western Front. Million-man armies constructed vast trench systems in aerially eviscerated farmers’ fields. The infantry had to endure rats, lice, and frozen feet in the winter and the same insect and rodent tormentors, as well as flies and thirst, in the summer. All year round there was the constant wastage of the trenches, where men were killed by shell and bullet, sickness and poison gas.

In the firing line, an underage soldier was expected to be a soldier just like his elder mates. Certainly there was no distinction for the other death-dealing weapons that indiscriminately took lives in fearful numbers. Among the ranks, however, underage soldiers sometimes were treated differently by older men who often took younger ones under their wing.

41 John Thompson, *Harvest of War: The Prairie West, 1914–1918* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1978), p. 42.

42 Quote by Robert Falconer, president of the University of Toronto, cited in Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship*, p. 23.

43 Armine Norris, *Mainly for Mother* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, n.d. [1919]), p. 133.

Canon Scott recounted the actions of one officer, who told Scott about his encounter with a young lad in his company:

[We] had to hold on, in a trench, hour after hour, under terrific bombardment. [The officer] was sitting in his dugout, expecting every moment to be blown up, when a young lad came in and asked if he might stay with him. The boy was only eighteen years of age, and his nerve was utterly gone. He came into the dugout, and, like a child clinging to his mother, clasped the officer with his arms. The latter could not be angry with the lad. There was nothing to do at that point but to hold on and wait, so, as he said to me, "I looked at the boy and thought of his mother, and just leaned down and gave him a kiss. Not long afterward a shell struck the dugout and the boy was killed, and when we returned I had to leave his body there."<sup>44</sup>

Occasionally, very young soldiers were seen almost as mascots. Sergeant F. W. Bagnall remembered being worried about one 14-year-old in the ranks and his propensity to fall asleep while on sentry, which could result in a death sentence under military law. Although the lad displayed great bravery in battle, even winning a Distinguished Conduct Medal for going to the aid of a wounded soldier while under fire, he, like many adolescents, had the physiological disadvantage of needing more sleep due to a still-developing body. Bagnall recounted that before "the kid" was pulled out of the line for being too young, "every one made a fuss over him."<sup>45</sup>

In the mud and misery of the front-line trenches, officers often ensured that underage soldiers were excluded from the most dangerous duties like trench-raiding, but there were few safe places at the front. Infantryman William Now remembered that his commanding officer had removed an underage soldier from the front-line trenches to carry water in the rear. One night Private Now trudged toward the forward trenches and passed the young lad's "two horses lying dead on the cobbles and the cart all smashed up . . . the boy was not to be seen. He had evidently been picked up. I hoped that he had only been wounded and would survive but it was almost too much to expect. I could not see how he could have escaped, except by a miracle. Some Mother's Boy."<sup>46</sup> While some adolescents were put in "bomb-proof" jobs in the rear, more often underage soldiers were treated the same as their older companions.

44 Frederick G. Scott, *The Great War as I Saw it* (Ottawa: CEF Books, reprint 2000), pp. 94–95.

45 Ex-Quaker, "Not Mentioned in the Dispatches," *North Shore Press*, 1933, p. 57.

46 William Now, *The Forgotten War* (self-published, 1982), p. 30.

The trenches were foreign and frightening to Private J. D. Thomson of the 102nd Battalion, who wrote home a month before Vimy Ridge about his experiences in the trenches:

water dripping through in places, and the mud in the bottom two inches deep . . . . We got a few sand bags which were lying in the corner, spread them in the mud, laid our rubber sheet on top, used our packs for pillows, lay down, and put the two blankets, (which we carried), over us with our coats on top, before we went to sleep my chum said, "Will you ever forget this Christmas Eve?"

Thomson had enlisted at 16 and was fighting in the trenches by 17. In his unguarded letter, he wrote: "I am a mere boy, but I thought I was a man, and now I know I have to stick to it." He signed his letter, "Not a Hero."<sup>47</sup>

Thomson was not a hero in the conventional sense, but heroic nonetheless. The quiet courage of doing one's duty while sick with fear was a trait not unique to underage soldiers, but countless references bear witness to how adolescents stuck it out. The story of the Owen brothers bears repeating. Three brothers enlisted, all underage: James was in the trenches before he was 16; his twin brothers, Iorwerth and Cecil, enlisted prior to their seventeenth birthday. The three sturdy farm lads, all between 5 feet, 6 inches and 5 feet, 7 inches, had enlisted on the same day, adding between two and three years to their ages. They fought together in the 15th Battalion, and their first major battle was on the Somme, a bloody attack against a fortified trench system on September 26, 1916. Private James Owen later wrote that, during the night before the assault, "fear had my stomach tied in a knot. I could not eat and I remembered thinking that I was much too young to die. I felt that if I was older, say twenty, and had seen something of life, I would not mind as much . . . . I also doubted my ability to engage a full grown German with the bayonet, but felt a bullet would make us more equal."<sup>48</sup> He made a promise to himself to keep one round in the chamber at all times. One can only wonder how many boys, despite their training and bravado, worried about how they would fare in battle against grown men. James survived the battle, although he was wounded; one of his brothers was not so lucky and was later found among the slain.

47 Norah L. Lewis, ed., *"I want to join your club:" Letters from Rural Children, 1900–1920* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996), pp. 220–221. For the experience of the trench soldier, see Richard Holmes, *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front, 1914–1918* (London: HarperCollins, 2004); Denis Winter, *Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War* (London: Penguin Books, 1979).

48 Canadian War Museum, 2002063–002, Owen Brothers papers, 436743, "The Somme" by Private James Hector Owen.

While some underage soldiers were awarded gallantry medals, including 17-year-old Tommy Ricketts of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, a Victoria Cross recipient, more often the young soldiers simply did their duty. Herbert McBride recounted that, of the four other soldiers on his machine-gun crew, all were underage. "Some had enlisted at sixteen and not one of them was of voting age."<sup>49</sup> None was a medal winner; nor did any ever crack in battle. All four would be killed by the end of the war. For those who survived, observed Private J. E. Cromwell, a 16-year-old in the No. 2 Construction Battalion, "You grew up in a hurry."<sup>50</sup> R. E. Henley of the 42nd Battalion enlisted at 13 years old, was caught and sent home, then re-enlisted. Finally making it to France, he reported, "I was scared and stayed scared all the time. But a scared soldier lives longer."<sup>51</sup> He survived, although he was wounded twice in battle.

Young soldiers continued to serve and endure with the help of their mates. The comradeship of the trenches was a key component in constructing and supporting the will to keep fighting through the most dire of circumstances. Not to let down one's companions drove many soldiers to hold on past their limits. It was no different for young soldiers, and perhaps even more important, since there was a desire among most adolescents to live up to the ideals of the masculine soldier. A. E. Fallen, a 17-year-old infantryman serving with the 52nd Battalion, remembered his first time in the line, standing in mud and slush and wondering to himself, "I hope to God I can stand this . . . I would have hated like hell to have cracked up as a kid."<sup>52</sup> He found the strength to endure, serving through some of the toughest battles of the war.

Issues of masculinity remained important for the young soldiers. There were norms and regulations to follow in emulating the masculine ideals. Young soldiers did not like to stand out as anything other than a companion in the ranks. Some obviously overcompensated. Nineteen-year-old Private John Lynch recounted that he and other young soldiers "wanted to impress the world with their toughness. We cursed louder, drank harder and behaved in a very boisterous manner, putting on a front for the veterans of the outfit, many of whom were older than our fathers."<sup>53</sup> While service conferred adulthood on young men, sometimes they felt the need to prove it. But the army saw no distinction and paid young lads as much as older men. As well, the young soldiers received the

49 Herbert McBride, *A Rifleman Went to War* (Plantersville, SC: Thomas Samworth, 1935), p. 7.

50 Calvin Ruck, *The Black Battalion, 1916–1920: Canada's Best Kept Military Secret* (Halifax: Nimbus Publications, 1987), pp. 45–46.

51 Cockerill, *Sons of the Brave*, p. 139.

52 LAC, RG 41, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, research transcripts for radio program *Flanders Fields*, vol. 15, 52nd Battalion, A. E. Fallen, 3/1–2.

53 John W. Lynch, *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, 1917–1919* (Hicksville, NY: Exposition Press, 1976), p. 59.



same rights and privileges in the trenches. The daily issue of rum, in itself a tool for reinforcing discipline, hierarchy, and masculinity, was not denied to underage soldiers. Signaller William Ogilvie, who had enlisted at the age of 17 from Lakefield, Ontario, testified, "We juniors learned the ropes from our older and more experienced comrades and though we younger ones were far from serious drinkers, we were now caught up by the challenge."<sup>54</sup> The act of drinking was often understood to be one of the distinguishing marks between men and boys. Army-issued rum was powerful, syrupy, over-strength spirit that burned, as one soldier remarked, as if "he'd swallowed a red-hot poker."<sup>55</sup> After the first few sputtering attempts, an infantryman learned to hold his rum, and these young soldiers soon measured up to the group's expectations.

While rum was not withheld, neither was enfranchisement. "We had scores of fellows who had not yet reached voting age. We knew at least two who celebrated their sixteenth birthdays in France," remarked Fred Noyes, a stretcher-bearer. "Many gave 'official' ages which wouldn't have stood the test if the authorities had cared to investigate . . . A remarkable feature of the election was the voting of our teen-old youngsters."<sup>56</sup> As well, young soldiers were sometimes elevated in rank above their older peers. Although it appears uncommon, there were cases like Corporal J. G. Baker of the 15th Battalion, who, at the age of 17, would have been in charge of a dozen men, all likely older.<sup>57</sup> John Hensley enlisted at the age of 16 in Halifax, serving through two years of warfare before he was killed at Passchendaele at the age of 18. During that time, he had risen to the rank of captain, responsible at times for 200 men in his company.

Of course, not all young soldiers survived the emotional and mental rigours of the trenches. Lieutenant William Gray recounted watching one adolescent come unstrung during a heavy drumfire bombardment: "He laughed rather hysterically and babbled incoherently. Suddenly he jumped up, climbed into the open, his sole thought to get away but there, a scant hundred yards, we saw him fall."<sup>58</sup> While anecdotal evidence

54 William Ogilvie, *Umty-Iddy-Umty: The Story of a Canadian Signaller in the First World War* (Erin, ON: Boston Mills Press, 1982), p. 40.

55 LAC, RG 41, vol. 8, 7th Battalion, J. I. Chambers, 1/7. For the importance of rum to soldiers, see Tim Cook, "'More as a medicine than a beverage': 'Demon Rum' and the Canadian Trench Soldier in the First World War", *Canadian Military History*, vol. 9, no. 1 (Winter 2000), pp. 7–22.

56 F. W. Noyes, *Stretcher Bearers at the Double* (Toronto: Hunter Rose Company, 1937), pp. 175, 183. For soldiers' voting, see Desmond Morton, "Polling the Soldier Vote: The Overseas Campaign in the Canadian General Election of 1917," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 10 (1975), pp. 39–59.

57 Desmond Morton and Glenn Wright, *Winning the Second Battle: Canadian Veterans and the Return to Civilian Life, 1915–1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), p. 74.

58 William Gray, *A Sunny Subaltern: Billy's Letters from Flanders* (Toronto: McClelland, Goodchild & Stewart, 1916), p. 164.

suggests that young soldiers often had a better chance of withstanding the psychological pressures of war, many soldiers eventually broke under the prolonged stress. One report on British courts martial revealed the shocking statistic that 32 minors had been executed during the war, and that 10 of them had used shell shock as a defence for why they had deserted from the front.<sup>59</sup> None of the 25 Canadians executed was underage, but for all soldiers, from the young in the prime of their lives to the ancient 39ers (the nickname for older men who had lied about their age), enduring the strain of war depended on the man, the circumstances, and the ability to draw on those internal and external resources.<sup>60</sup>

With the constant lack of sleep, the never-ending agony of scratching at lice, and the threat of dismemberment by shell fire, many soldiers eventually began to pray for their release from the front lines. Unlike older soldiers, however, underage ones had an escape route, since by 1916 trench rumours had swirled through the ranks passing on valuable information that underage soldiers could reveal their age and be pulled from the line. Corporal Harry Hillyer wrote to his sister about her son, only a few months before Hillyer was shot in the head and killed in battle:

How old is Eddie? You know if he is under 18 you can claim him out by writing to the OC of the Regiment. I think you would be wise in doing so if his age warrants it as the fighting is liable to increase in fierceness from now on, in fact, we have noticed the difference already. This has happened in 3 cases quite recently in our own regiment. One of the boys claimed out is one of our best scouts but he is to go just the same although he was very loathe to leave us. Of course, it is immaterial to me, but if he was my brother I would not let him go through what is in store for us here.<sup>61</sup>

Adolescents who had enlisted and embraced the army life, who had even lied to get into it, were torn in a silent battle between doing their duty and supporting their comrades, and the release that they would have received by revealing their real age.

Bert Warren, who had enlisted at 17 in Toronto, recounted the horrific fighting at Passchendaele at the end of 1917. After surviving his first tour in the slush-filled trenches inhabited by the dead and barely living, Warren and a fellow underage soldier emerged from the quagmire frozen, terrified,

59 Gerald Oram, *Military Executions during World War I* (London: Palgrave, 2003), p. 62.

60 On Canadian executions, see Andrew B. Godefroy, *For Freedom and Honour? The Story of the 25 Canadian Volunteers Executed in the First World War* (Nepean, ON: CEF Books, 1998); Teresa Jacobelli, "Arbitrary Justice? A Comparative Analysis of Canadian Death Sentences Passed and Death Sentences Commuted during the First World War" (MA thesis, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2004).

61 Norma Hillyer Shephard, ed., *Dear Harry: The Firsthand Account of a World War I Infantryman* (Burlington, ON: Bringham Press, c2003), p. 204.

and bewildered. His companion, who was smaller than Warren, who himself weighed a mere “128 pounds soaking wet,” remarked, “I just made two trips, my first and my last. I’m going to write my father to get me out.” He scribbled a letter off to his parents that night, but the unit went back into the fighting: “he didn’t come out, a direct hit, never found anything of him.”<sup>62</sup> Private James Owen, while recovering from the wound he received on the Somme, took the opportunity to write to his mother that she present his birth certificate to the military authorities for his release. He was not sure whether he would get his “ticket or not,” but it was worth trying. He did, returning to his mother, who was still dealing with the reality that one of her other sons would never come home. Hundreds of others followed Owen. Many justified revealing their age because they had done their duty and it was time for others to fill their place. Others neither needed nor cared about justification and only wanted out. Either way, by late 1916 there was an appreciation that the Canadian forces had a problem with thousands of underage soldiers serving in the ranks.

### **Removing Underage Soldiers from the Trenches**

In July 1916 J. W. Carson, the Canadian Minister of Militia’s representative in England, notified the British War Office that he often received letters from parents claiming that their sons “are under age and joined without their authority” and now wanted them removed from the firing line.<sup>63</sup> The War Office wrote a sharp letter back to Carson, noting the regulations under Army Council Instruction No. 1186, which stated, “if a soldier is under 17, he will be discharged; if over 17 but under 18, he will be posted to a reserve unit; if over 18, but under 19, posted to a reserve unit until 19 and sent overseas.”<sup>64</sup> These rules seemed clearly delineated, except that the War Office consistently broke them and was caught deceiving British Members of Parliament when assuring them that no underage soldiers were in the trenches. Parents of British soldiers who applied to have their sons removed from the firing line were routinely ignored; in other recorded cases, commanding officers refused to allow young soldiers to leave a unit or turned a blind eye to requests after following the wishes of soldiers who refused to go. Since 1915 a heated and rancorous public debate had raged in the United Kingdom about underage soldiers. Crusading MPs in the House of Commons demanded answers from the War Office.<sup>65</sup> The issue would not be resolved until 1917, when the War

62 LAC, RG 41, vol. 10, 20th Battalion, Bert Warren, 2/10–11.

63 LAC, RG 9 III, vol. 36, file 8–I–125, J. W. Carson to Secretary, War Office, Whitehall, July 13, 1916.

64 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 36, file 8–I–125, Army Council Instruction No. 1186 of 1916, June 13, 1916.

65 Van Emden, *Boy Soldiers*, pp. 178–182.

Office clamped down on units that allowed underage soldiers to serve near the firing line.

In Canada, by contrast, there was barely a whisper about the underage soldiers in the first two years of the war. Not until April 25, 1916 was the question even raised in the House. The prime minister was asked if there were any underage soldiers in the CEF, to which he replied that he “always understood that the policy is not to enlist boys under eighteen years of age.” His confusion over the age of recruits, 18 or 19, can be excused, since different units were following the Canadian or British regulations, but he agreed to look into the case. He appears to have never reported formally back to the House. However, this was enough for the MPs, and only a few sporadic additional questions arose over the next two years.<sup>66</sup> A question was again directed to the government on February 1, 1917 about an underage soldier, Noel Gazelle, who had enlisted at 16 but lied saying he was 18. The responsible minister, A. E. Kemp, noted that, because he had lied in a “legally binding” document, he was, in effect, trapped in the CEF.<sup>67</sup> Again, the House seemed to accept the answer, and few MPs raised any objections to a government that refused to allow its underage soldiers to leave the service while noting that its policy was not to enlist minors. In comparison to this disregard about allowing adolescents to fight the Empire’s wars, raging debates stretched for days and pushed advocates to hysterical heights over whether soldiers should be allowed to purchase beer in the army wet canteens.<sup>68</sup> That the issue of beer polluting boys’ bodies seemed far more troubling than sending adolescents into the firing line to kill or be killed is an indication of how Canadians viewed the role of underage soldiers in the ranks. It perhaps also reveals that the social activists drawn to temperance issues were not comfortable enough about extending their objection to the patriotic, and increasingly desperate, need to acquire more men in the ranks.

In mid-1916 the Allies were reeling on all fronts, their armies battered. More soldiers were needed to replace those chewed up in the maw of war, and so the forces began to lessen enlistment restrictions that had kept men out in the past.<sup>69</sup> Height requirements dropped and even hitherto discriminations against visible minorities were modified to encourage enlistment.

<sup>66</sup> Hansard, *House of Commons Debates*, April 25, 1916, p. 3049.

<sup>67</sup> Hansard, *House of Commons Debates*, February 1, 1917, p. 338.

<sup>68</sup> For example, Hansard, *House of Commons Debates*, April 26, 1917, pp. 806–841.

<sup>69</sup> For enlistment, see C. A. Sharpe, “Enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914–1918: A Regional Analysis,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4 (1983–1984); Robert Craig Borden and Donald Loveridge, “Unrequited Faith: Recruiting the CEF, 1914–1918,” *Revue internationale d’histoire militaire*, vol. 51 (1982); Paul Maroney, “‘The Great Adventure’: The Context and Ideology of Recruiting in Ontario, 1914–17,” *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 77, no. 1 (1996), pp. 62–98.

While age was not reduced, adolescents continued to find ways through the screening process. With thousands of young Canadians already overseas and more joining during the desperate recruiting drives of early 1916, it is clear that the issue of youth was wilfully ignored in the name of supporting the war. Or was it simply not seen as an issue? With most adolescents out of school and working by age 16, parts of Canadian society seem not to have viewed these adolescents as boys, but as men. This might have been further supported in the patriotic atmosphere of Canada, where every man was needed for service; boys would do as well as those of legitimate age. For instance, it was not uncommon for newspapers to praise the valour of young soldiers serving overseas. The *Globe* noted that Driver H. E. Brouse, a 15-year-old from Kingston, whose brother was a successful local hockey player, had been seriously wounded with the 72nd Battery, Canadian Field Artillery. The paper noted rather triumphantly that he was "Kingston's youngest soldier at the front."<sup>70</sup> The public elevated these young warriors into heroes, and the adolescents gladly accepted the mantle.<sup>71</sup>

New battalions raised from mid-1915 onward consisted of a shocking number of underage soldiers. An analysis of several dozen battalions in November 1916 revealed significant problems with the quality of the recruits: 45 per cent of the infantrymen in the 32nd Battalion and 44 per cent in the 92nd were classified as unfit, overage, or underage; the 69th Battalion, the worst, reached 53 per cent.<sup>72</sup> Among these unfits were hundreds of underage Canadians, who made up the highest grouping of unfits at 38 per cent, followed by overage men at 24 per cent, with the remainder falling under an assortment of maladies, deformities, and medical problems from flat feet and defective vision to weak hearts and tuberculosis.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, reports acknowledged that, despite the high number of underage men, these were only the recruits who could be identified. It was suspected that dozens of additional boys in each battalion were slipping through the hurried examinations.

Studies like these indicated that, by the end of 1916, some 5,020 identified adolescents were already in England, having been placed in reserve and training units until they reached the required age of 19.<sup>74</sup> Officers in the training camps, which were beginning to overflow with these lads, were looking for guidance on what to do with them. While these adolescents

70 "Kingston's 15-year-old Soldier is a Casualty," *Globe* [Toronto], November 21, 1917, p. 13.

71 Morton and Wright, *Winning the Second Battle*, p. 25.

72 LAC, RG 9, III-A-I, vol. 90, 10-12-15, Reid, Adjutant General to Perley, OMFC, November 9, 1916.

73 LAC, RG 9, III-A-I, vol. 90, 10-12-15, Adjutant General, Report, November 8, 1916; Thacker to Deputy Minister, February 9, 1917.

74 LAC, RG 9, III-A-I, vol. 90, 10-12-15, Reid, Adjutant General to Perley, OMFC, November 8, 1916.

had been allowed to enlist in Canada at the age of 18 and even younger, an attempt to discourage this practice and unify the Canadian and British standards resulted in an OMFC order of December 1916 that stipulated that only 19-year-old troops would be accepted into the ranks (except for 18-year-old buglers). It proved to be too little, too late, since these had been the informal rules in place in England since the start of the war.<sup>75</sup>

After the OMFC acknowledged the problem, a new order went out to the various Canadian commands and training units in January 1917 that all boys under 16-and-a-half, who were not buglers or drummers, were to be returned to Canada. Hundreds of boys were sent home.<sup>76</sup> There was a brief, mean-spirited attempt to have them pay their own ocean fare, but senior officials intervened and refused to punish patriotic youth, no matter how short their service.<sup>77</sup> Those older than 16 were to be attached to the 5th Division. As well, some 1,500 underage soldiers were also employed in the Forestry Corps, both in England and in France, but on the continent they were to be identified and only used in bush work far behind the lines.<sup>78</sup> By mid-1917 the Overseas Minister, Sir A. E. Kemp, noted in the House of Commons that, of the 63,046 men who had been discharged from the CEF, only 1,977 had been underage.<sup>79</sup> The vast majority of these boys remained overseas or in Canada, kept in uniform because of their usefulness.

Parents intervening to pull their children out of the line continued to experience difficulty.<sup>80</sup> Identifying a boy under 19 and even presenting evidence of his age did not always result in his release. Many overseas units ignored the OMFC order, delaying until evidence (usually a birth certificate) was presented to them on the Western Front. However, the wait could be weeks or months, and identified underage boys were being killed as their departure orders were delayed.<sup>81</sup> Private William Woods recounted the story of two young soldiers pulled out of the firing line by his battalion commander to comply with the OMFC rules during the battle of Fresnoy in May 1917:

Some lads who were under age had been held back at the horse lines during this attack but someone ordered two of these boys to carry water up to us

75 See Directorate of History and Heritage, 74/672, Edwin Pye papers, folder 4, OMFC Routine Order 45, December 18, 1916.

76 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 2893, 160–33, memorandum, November 9, 1916; vol. 2750, 55–33, HQ–39–1–13, January 19, 1917; vol. 436, file 413–1, from OMFC to Adjutant General, January 19, 1917.

77 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 436, file 413–1, Canadian Discharge Depot at Buxton to COMF, Argyll House, January 31, 1917.

78 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 2750, 55–33, A.G.4b.Canadians, 5–1–7, January 2, 1917.

79 *Hansard, House of Commons Debates*, July 6, 1917, p. 3096.

80 *Hansard, House of Commons Debates*, July 31, 1917, p. 4001.

81 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 2859, 7–33, A. G. To G. O. C., September 20, 1917.

apparently without thinking that there would be no communication trenches through the previous No Man's Land. One of these boys came through with two cans of water and he was crying, his mate had been killed on the way in.<sup>82</sup>

Reacting to the stalling tactics of front-line units, Adjutant-General P. E. Thacker ordered in October 1917 that, upon receiving a communication by a guardian that a soldier was underage, a unit was to withdraw the soldier in question from the firing line.<sup>83</sup> Despite GHQ's insistence, some units continued to contravene the order.

Front-line units were loath to lose these well-trained soldiers. Other officers worried that, if a soldier could be pulled out of the line for claiming to be underage, there would be a loop-hole for thousands and a convenient holiday from the front lines for thousands more who might abuse the system. Private Douglas Campbell, who had enlisted at the tender age of 14 years and 3 months and gave his occupation as farmer's son, was held back in his unit several times, despite a series of warning letters from GHQ. In the end, he was released; perhaps at 5 feet, 9 inches, he seemed a far cry from a boy, and his medical discharge papers noted, "he is sixteen years of age but looks older."<sup>84</sup> In contrast, Private F. H. McGregor of the 102nd Battalion had enlisted at 15 after his father had been killed during the Battle of Second Ypres. At 17, he was pulled from the line; while his battalion did not want to let him go, the commanding officer finally agreed to allow him to leave because of his service and that of his family's sacrifice.<sup>85</sup> With GHQ pressing the issue from late 1917 onwards, hundreds of additional underage soldiers began to stream from the front lines to the rear.

If soldiers were to be withdrawn from the firing line and even from the rear areas, where were they to go? Some remained in France, sometimes even in battalion headquarters always within range of shellfire. More often they went to work on the lines of communication, the rear logistical areas, either bringing up supplies, supporting the infrastructure, or working in bases. Yet experienced combat soldiers were too important to be transformed into glorified scullery maids or regimental clerks, and most were pulled back to England to continue their training until they reached the appropriate age of 19, when they were sent back to their units. The temporary loss of the boys from the front was an impediment to operational efficiency, but one that would be overcome with the natural

82 Canadian War Museum, 58A 1.8.5, William Woods papers, "A Private's Own Story of the First World War," p. 11.

83 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 1087, file 252-4, pt. 2, Adjutant General to A. A. G. GHQ, 3rd Section, October 4, 1917.

84 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 2750, 55-33, Disposal of Minors, May 17, 1917; RG 150, 1992-93/166, box 1428-42, D. C. M. B. Campbell.

85 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 2275, file 5-30, pt. 2, Field Cashier to AA and QMG, 4th Canadian Division, August 17, 1917.

aging process. Young soldiers pulled out of the line in 1915 and 1916 would be back within a year or two, in time for the costliest fighting of the war.

Throughout 1915 and 1916 the underage soldiers were spread among units throughout England, receiving the same training as older men. However, in early 1917 at Shorncliffe, one of the primary Canadian camps, an 18-year-old was put on fatigue duty in a wet canteen, serving beer to his companions. Temperance groups reacted violently when word leaked out. They were already furious that beer was served at all in camps, but even more so upon hearing that “boys who volunteered to fight are really made into bar-tenders.”<sup>86</sup> The adjutant-general of the forces responded quickly, ordering that underage soldiers could no longer serve in wet canteens, but this embarrassing incident was also an impetus for galvanizing support for the creation of a separate battalion, a unit to train and care for the adolescents in isolation from older men.

There had been discussions at least as far back as September 1916 that a special Canadian unit be formed to service the needs of these young warriors.<sup>87</sup> In fact, at the end of December 1916, the 34th Battalion at the Brighton Area camp had some 800 underage soldiers in it, acting informally as a “boys’ battalion.”<sup>88</sup> However, one inspection of its soldiers revealed that many were “immature lads” who needed assistance in developing their size and strength. It was argued that a special training programme of “deep breathing and running exercises,” when combined with “rifle exercises and bayonet fighting,” would develop them into fighting men. Even though some of these young soldiers were nearing 19, the inspector warned that “at present it would be unfair and unwise to expect that these boys could take a place alongside of mature men and be able to carry on.”<sup>89</sup> A more intensive and specialized programme was required. Another 1,800 boys were thought to exist in other infantry battalions, the numbers down from only a year earlier, as many had hit the required age of 19 and gone overseas.<sup>90</sup> While various initiatives had been quashed in the past, the wet canteen issue had forced the army’s hand. On July 28, 1917, a special boys’ battalion was formed and was soon renamed the Young Soldiers Battalion (YSB).<sup>91</sup>

86 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 1478, 144–1, Adjutant-General to GOC, Shorncliffe, May 21, 1917. For the wet canteen as a lightening rod for conflict, see Tim Cook, “Wet Canteens and Worrying Mothers: Soldiers and Temperance Groups in the Great War,” *Histoire sociale/Social History*, vol. 35, no. 70 (June 2003), pp. 311–330.

87 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 37, 8–2–10, 2pts., OHMS, Folkestone to Colonel Frank Reid, BBC 1481 [ca. September 1916].

88 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 2893, 160–33, A.19–2–31, December 15, 1916.

89 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 2893, 160–33, A.19–2–31, Major W. O. White, General Staff, to General Staff, 5th Canadian Division, January 25, 1917.

90 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 2893, 160–33, A.19–2–31, Formation of Boys’ Battalion, December 12, 1916.

91 LAC, RG 9, III–A–1, vol. 90, 10–12–8, Order 2483, September 18, 1917.



The YSB was commanded by Colonel D. S. Mackay, a doctor in civilian life and former commanding officer of the South Saskatchewan Reserve Battalion. By the end of summer, orders were posted that all infantry units were to transfer their underage soldiers to the YSB. Although the strength of the YSB was only 1,000 soldiers at maximum, those who could not fit in its ranks could be attached to the Canadian Army Medical Corps (CAMC) or railway and forestry units, but only in units situated out of harm's way.<sup>92</sup> Adolescents in other arms of the military, like the artillery or engineers, either resided in the reserve units or, in the last year of the war, found their way into the YSB. At the CAMC, these youth were trained as orderlies; in the railway and forestry corps, they were engaged in hard labour. They also freed up older men to move to the front.<sup>93</sup>

Despite natural aging, the number of enlisted boys rarely diminished in England since minors continued to arrive from Canada. In a three-month period, from October to December 1917, some 568 identified minors got off the transport ships and were almost immediately sent back to Canada.<sup>94</sup> That number, incredibly, would only have included those under 17-and-a-half, which meant that several times that number, all under 19, had also arrived and were fed into the training camps in England. It seemed the recruiters in Canada were taking anyone who applied in the months before conscription was brought into full effect. However, parents tracked down many of these boys, demanding their return. Again, the authorities in England blamed their counterparts in Canada for not being diligent or stringent enough during the selection process, as many of the under-17 recruits were obviously too young for service. While the overseas ministry and its general staff resented the burden of the underage soldiers, units in the firing line continued to acknowledge their value as fighting men.

For those young infantrymen older than 17-and-a-half but younger than 19 who arrived from Canada, or those coming from the camps or fighting units, their home would likely be the Young Soldiers Battalion. The training in England with the YSB was a mixture of military discipline, physical fitness, and education.<sup>95</sup> Creating an environment where proper morals could be inculcated was important to Mackay, and he established "cheerful, well furnished reading and games rooms."<sup>96</sup> The boys had access to a dry canteen filled with candy and treats, but the alcohol-serving wet

92 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 2994, 16–13, Transfer of Boys to CAMC, October 5, 1917.

93 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 2859, 11–33, A.G.3 to CGS, June 10, 1918.

94 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 2859, 11–33, Brigadier-General, Adjutant-General, Canadians to Secretary, Militia Council, December 29, 1917.

95 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 4708, 90/21, Young Soldiers' Battalion historical record, December 8, 1918. For details on training, see the YSB's War Diary in RG 9, III, vol. 4952.

96 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 4708, 90/21, Young Soldiers' Battalion historical record.

canteens were out of bounds. It is unclear what some of the combat veterans thought of this concern for their welfare, especially after enjoying the privilege of the daily rum ration, but perhaps it was a fair trade for getting out of the trenches.

Weak, reedy boys were quickly transformed into hardened young men. The military training included bombing, musketry, and anti-gas precautions. The intensity was a shock to more than a few adolescents coming straight from Canada. "One day we were taken out to be taught bayonet-fighting," recounted Keith Fallis of the YSB. "They had straw men there. After you had done a certain amount of training about how to hold your rifle, then you had to practice taking a run and a jab at this straw man. 'In, out, and on guard,' is what the sergeant would shout. We were instructed to aim for the throat and stomach. I think more than half of us just couldn't eat our supper that evening."<sup>97</sup> Officers and NCOs offered detailed lectures on how to survive on the Western Front: it was old-hat for some of the young combat veterans who had been pulled from the trenches, but an eye-opening experience for adolescents who had just arrived from Canada.

As in France, the young soldiers were subject to the full military law. While Mackay evidently cared for his boys, he was a strict disciplinarian who handed out punishments when warranted. But the colonel was no martinet. When two of his soldiers had their belts stolen and were then arrested for being improperly dressed, he refused to charge them, as they were "smart, bright boys" who did not deserve this harassment.<sup>98</sup> Mackay held his ground even though the camp headquarters was demanding punishment to enforce discipline. Private C. A. Stranger, a long-service veteran who had enlisted at 15, had been pulled back from his unit in France to the YSB in early 1918. Unhappy at being away from the firing line, he deserted to go back to the front. He was caught and returned to the YSB, where the OC only gave him a slap on the wrist, even though headquarters again demanded that "severe disciplinary action . . . be taken against him." Mackay refused, not wanting to "break the splendid spirit shown by this man."<sup>99</sup> In other cases, Mackay worried about punishing youngsters who were "very 'childish' and not fully developed mentally."<sup>100</sup> A few of these young soldiers were sent home on his orders rather than be transferred to the front, where he believed they would not survive.

97 Read, *The Great War and Canadian Society*, p. 132.

98 RG 9, III, vol. 1768, file U-1-13, pt. 31, OC, YSB, to HQ, Bramshott, May 17, 1918.

99 RG 9, III, vol. 1765, file U-1-13, pt. 16, report, July 5, 1916; Ferguson to HQ, Cdn Troops, Bramshott, August 5, 1918.

100 RG 9, III, vol. 1530, file 4-7, OC 8th Res Cdn BN to HA, 2nd C.R. Bde, February 2, 1918.

This paternalism was not coddling, which would never have been endured by youths who had recently embraced manhood, but an attempt to guide the soldiers to maturity. It was noted in battalion records that there was never an epidemic of bad discipline in the YSB. Colonel Mackay was firm if understanding, and he soon quieted down, in the words of one soldiers' publication, the "young monkeys [who] were a source of worry to many a commanding officer when scattered through the training camps."<sup>101</sup> He started building morale and confidence by getting new, matching uniforms. Then he pushed hard and succeeded in convincing authorities that growing adolescents had different dietary requirements than older men and was able to arrange for an official supplement to their rations.<sup>102</sup>

Mackay and his officers often exhibited a genuine paternal instinct towards their young soldiers. This was not unique within the YSB, as good officers also cared for their men in the field.<sup>103</sup> In the YSB, however, officers were often called on to perform parental roles. One indignant mother demanded that the commanding officer give her son, Private Gilbert Taylor, a stern talking to since he was spending his pay with "terrible extravagance." Mackay did, later writing to assure her that her son blamed his monetary exuberance on visits to London, and a fetching girl he had met while there, but promised to continue sending \$15 a month of his assigned pay to his mother.<sup>104</sup>

In other cases, the senior officers of the YSB intervened to ensure that their young charges did not marry during their periodic leaves to the big city. Since commanding officers had to authorize marriages, they often withheld this permission until their young soldiers had a chance to ponder the consequences. At other times, as was the case with Private George Clifford, the OC refused to authorize the marriage unless "circumstances demand it" through a pregnancy. They did not, and Clifford remained single, although he had contracted a serious case of venereal disease by the end of the war.<sup>105</sup> He was in a minority, however. While there were occasional cases of syphilis among the adolescents, the VD cases within the YSB only ran at 2 per cent, about seven times less than the average for older Canadian troops.<sup>106</sup> There did not appear to be any

101 RG 9, vol. 4751, "The Young Soldiers' Battalion," *The Bramshott Souvenir Magazine*, p. 122.

102 RG 9, III, vol. 1765, file U-1-13, pt. 14, YSB to HQ, Canadians, Kimmel Park, October 30, 1918.

103 See Gary Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches: Officer-Man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the British Army in the Era of the First World War* (London: Macmillan, 2000).

104 RG 9, III, vol. 1766, file U-1-13, pt. 19, Mrs. Sarah Taylor to OC, YSB, August 12, 1918.

105 RG 9, III, vol. 1767, file U-1-13, pt. 29(b), Captain, YSB to OC, 21st Reserve BN, June 28, 1918; RG 150, 1992-93/166, box 1799-25, George Clifford.

106 See the medical returns in RG 9, III, vol. 1763, file U-1-13, pt. 5. For venereal disease rates in the CEF, see Jay Cassel, *The Secret Plague: Venereal Disease in Canada, 1838-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), p. 123.

extra worry or fear that these lads were contracting diseases, and no extra precautions were taken, even though Mackay hinted at his worry about the boys' "morals". The young soldiers continued to be treated as men insofar as there were no restrictions on their seeing the opposite sex.<sup>107</sup>

In addition to protecting the young soldiers' bodies, the senior staff of the YSB were also eager to see their charges prosper intellectually. School studies were encouraged through the Khaki University programme, which educated more than 50,000 Canadians during the war. One report noted, "All kinds of men are being reached .... There are ... quite a number of school boys trying to complete Jr. Matric[ulation] ... and keen young fellows looking ahead to the days when they will have to resume civilian employment."<sup>108</sup> In fact, there was a designated battalion schoolmaster who helped 64 adolescents pass Grade 4, with 21 having been deemed illiterate before enlisting.<sup>109</sup> Hundreds of other young soldiers were taught at more advanced levels. Schooling was important, and Colonel Mackay noted that, through education, his boys would "be more useful citizens on their return to civil life."<sup>110</sup> Like other soldiers in the CEF, the adolescents also received spiritual guidance, with mandatory church parades on Sunday.

Despite this education and training, the young soldiers moved inexorably towards their nineteenth birthday and their inevitable transfer to the front. Throughout the period of the YSB's existence, some 568 soldiers travelled through its ranks, eventually to serve in Europe.<sup>111</sup> The parades transferring the adolescents to new units were trying for officers and men, and by 1918 they occurred daily. When soldiers reached 18 and nine months, they spent a final three months of intense training in a reserve unit before being sent to fighting units at the front. One British major in command of a boys' battalion offered some insight into the process:

It was a parade which I hated, they were such lads, and one found oneself drawn to them; and one hated to think, after the happy days we had spent together, that they were once more on the way to the Front Line with all its horrors. It was indeed strange, and almost unbelievable, looking at their youthful faces, to realize that all had served in the trenches and that Fate had decreed that they should again be due to return to them.<sup>112</sup>

107 RG 9, III, vol. 2220, file 1-26, pt. II, Young Soldiers' Battalion, October 21, 1918.

108 LAC, MG 30 D115, Henry Marshall Tory Papers, vol. 7, file 13, Laddie Millen, YMCA, Shorncliffe, May 22, 1918.

109 RG 9, III, vol. 4708, 90/21, Historical Record, Young Soldiers' Battalion, December 8, 1918.

110 RG 9, vol. 4751, "The Young Soldiers' Battalion," *The Bramshott Souvenir Magazine*, p. 122.

111 Report of the Ministry, *Overseas Military Forces of Canada 1918* (London, 1919), p. 24.

112 Van Emden, *Boy Soldiers*, p. 257.

While the army always needed recruits, and there was an ethos that exerted enormous pressure on officers to return men to the firing line, Mackay refused to let all adolescents approaching 19 go overseas. While many pink-faced youths had become sturdier and more sure of themselves, there were dozens who had not overcome their genetics or malnourished childhood. Private C. H. Russell, who was about to turn 19 in the last months of the war, was examined and found to be only 4 feet, 11 inches tall and to weigh 110 pounds. Although he was already a combat veteran and had been wounded in France, Mackay refused to allow him to go back into the firing line.<sup>113</sup> No one at GHQ questioned his decision. In fact, Mackay's success with his young charges, both in instilling military discipline and training and in helping them grow into adulthood, was acknowledged by the General Staff, which noted that "minors are much better taken care of in the Young Soldiers' Battalion than at their Reserve Battalion."<sup>114</sup>

By the summer of 1918, there was also a constant stream of requests by Canadian parents for their sons to be returned to them. Private John E. Rice had enlisted at 16 in January 1918, adding 16 months to his age. His angry mother wrote to the YSB in July of that year that "they had no right to except [*sic*] him in the first place . . . He is under age and we need him on the farm. He can help our country by doing his work on the farm at home." Rice's parents had been trying to track him down for months, but had no idea "how to get him out."<sup>115</sup> His mother's persistence may have gotten him out of the ranks more quickly than most adolescents, and he was labelled "unserviceable" after his mother passed along his birth certificate and notarized declaration attesting to his age. John Rice was sent home in late September and discharged formally on November 20, 1918.<sup>116</sup>

Dozens of other letters were sent from parents to have their sons returned home. Most took a more conciliatory tone, with much of the discourse infused with patriotism. Parents reasoned that their sons had the courage of their convictions to serve their country, but were now needed at home. Parents often reinforced their request by highlighting their own patriotic war work and noting that they had already contributed other sons or, in the case of a wife, sometimes a husband to the war effort. Most of the letters came from rural families imploring the military to release their sons for essential war work on the farm, especially from elderly or sick parents who could not find farm hands. Others, like Charlotte Sinclair, offered a "mother's pleading" to let her son Joe come home for a visit. He had enlisted underage, and she was desperate

113 RG 9, III, vol. 1763, file U-1-13, pt. 2, CO, YSB to GOC, Kimmel Park Camp, November 7, 1918.

114 RG 9, III, vol. 3111, file 24-36, Brigadier General, General Staff to Adjutant-General, May 11, 1918.

115 RG 9, III, vol. 1764, file U-1-13, pt. 7, W. Schoolery to YSB, n.d. [received July 6, 1918].

116 RG 150, 1992-93/166, box 8222-50, J. E. Rice personnel file, 3033011.

to see him before he went to France. "I don't want to take him out of the army, all I am asking is if he can be let to go home for a while. I think my prayer should be granted as I have already lost two of my sons." Mackay was forced to turn down her impassioned request, but wrote revealingly, clearly trying to find a military reason for his discharge, that, if she could provide more details, he would take up her request again.<sup>117</sup> Joseph Sinclair was not demobilized until after the Armistice.

There were other heartbreaking appeals, like that of Florence Brown, who had one son killed in action and pleaded for her other boy, Harold, to be returned to her, for now "he is all I have in this world . . . I think that I have done my part in giving all for King and country. I am a lonely mother and no means to support myself." She hoped that, at 17 years old, Harold could be sent home: "I can not see why I can't have him back with me again."<sup>118</sup> Although Harold, at 5 feet, 3½ inches, had served on the Western Front with the 2nd Battalion for over a year and had been with the YSB since January 1918, his mother's request was denied. Eliza Butler offered a no less moving plight. She was deaf and isolated on a farm with an abusive husband. Her four sons had all enlisted, no doubt looking for an escape from their father's cruelty. "When they were home they were a protection to me, but I am very nervous of being alone." She hoped her boy, S. W. Butler, could be sent home: "I have had a very hard and unhappy life ever since, and if my youngest son was home with me, he would be a comfort and protection for me."<sup>119</sup> Butler was not returned to his mother until after the Armistice.

In cases where underage soldiers were training in England, often a year or two away from being sent to the front, it was hard to justify why they could not be sent back to Canada. Most often parents expressed a hope that the young soldier be returned home, but similar pleas were also made by sisters, aunts, legal guardians, and even older brothers serving in the trenches, who did not want their younger siblings to experience what they were enduring.

By June 1918 there were 1,269 identified soldiers under 18: 755 were in the YSB, 136 in forestry units, 131 in the medical corps, 99 in reserve units, and another 148 in other units. There were also 1,392 aged 18: 203 in the YSB, 212 in the medical corps, 80 in forestry units, 809 in reserve units, and 88 elsewhere.<sup>120</sup> No one knew how many more adolescents were overseas, but the "problem" was taking care of itself as they aged into men, or

117 RG 9, III, vol. 1767, file U-1-13, pt. 30, Charlotte Sinclair to War Office, June 6, 1918; RG 150, 1992-93/166, box 8942-46, Joseph Sinclair, 722296.

118 RG 9, III, vol. 1768, file U-1-13, pt. 33, Mrs. Florence Brown to OC, YSB, June 7, 1918; RG 150, 1992-93/166, box 1149-4, H. L. Brown, 746432.

119 RG 9, III, vol. 1768, file U-1-13, pt. 33, Eliza Butler to OC, YSB, March 19, 1918.

120 RG 9, III, vol. 2859, 11-33, Adjutant-General, Canadians to CGS, June 3, 1918.

remained forever adolescents as they were killed and struck off strength. The steady pressure from parents forced Overseas Minister Sir A. E. Kemp to issue an order in June 1918 that all adolescents under 17 be returned automatically to Canada, and those under 18 returned to Canada if parents requested. The minister especially wanted to grant releases to those young soldiers who had “served in France or are not presently employed in any particularly useful occupation.”<sup>121</sup>

For the first time, the Canadian military authorities in France did not object. The Allies had weathered the storm of the German March 1918 Offensive that had been launched behind a fury of shells, poison gas, and new infiltration tactics, but it had been a near-run. The British had been pushed back across the front, and in their desperation had been forced to call up 18-year-olds who were not fully trained. One study has suggested that 10,000 underage British boys were killed in fighting during the last year of the war, many of whom would have fallen during the chaotic battles in the first half of 1918.<sup>122</sup> The Canadian Corps had luckily missed much of the fighting, and Corps Commander Sir Arthur Currie had avoided the desperation of turning to underage soldiers by breaking up the 5th Division in England for additional reinforcements. The Canadians did not have to raid their underage soldiers, and many were soon being sent home, although not those who were over 18.<sup>123</sup>

By October 1918, with the Germans being pushed back on all fronts in renewed heavy fighting, Colonel Mackay recommended that his unit be disbanded and that the young soldiers be sent back to Canada. Constant letters from mothers demanding to know why their sons were being sent overseas at 19, when conscription under the *Military Service Act* was only taking 20-year-olds, left him convinced that his young soldiers should not bear the brunt of having enlisted before conscription.<sup>124</sup> Mackay told his superiors that, while the Khaki University courses had been useful, his “boys” should be returned to Canada to “settle their minds down to some kind of civil employment.” To appease some of the more diligent army administrators, he also proposed, “If the war continues long enough, then these men can be given the privilege of re-enlisting on attaining the age of 20 years.”<sup>125</sup> Mackay’s recommendation carried weight,

121 RG 9, III–A–I, vol. 90, 10–12–8, Minister, OMFC to Secretary, Argyll House, June 5, 1918.

122 Van Emden, *Boy Soldiers*, pp. 260, 265, 300.

123 For Currie’s courage in breaking up the 5th Division, see Hugh M. Urquhart, *Arthur Currie: The Biography of a Great Canadian* (Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1950), pp. 205–206; Tim Cook, “The Butcher and the Madman: Sir Arthur Currie, Sir Sam Hughes and the War of Reputations,” *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 85, no. 4 (December 2004), pp. 693–719.

124 The *Military Service Act*, which resulted in conscription of Canadian males aged 20 to 45, categorized the manpower available, with those single men aged 20 to 24 being the first conscripted. See Granatstein and Hitsman, *Broken Promises*, chap. 3.

125 RG 9, III, vol. 2220, file 1–26, pt. II, Young Soldiers’ Battalion, October 21, 1918.

and it went all the way up to the minister, who signed off on it at the end of October.<sup>126</sup>

In early November the 981 members of the YSB moved to Kinmel Park in North Wales to begin demobilization. Inevitable delays were brought on by a shortage of shipping and strikes, and the young soldiers waited in the dreadful shantytown that sprang up around Kinmel. The food was bad; the accommodations were worse. Drill was half-hearted and disrupted as soldiers were less willing to engage in mindless activity.<sup>127</sup> The Armistice of November 11 did nothing to ease tensions, and bad feelings erupted into a riot ten days later.

Members of the YSB had been invited to a dance. Cleaned up and eager to meet some women, a group of young soldiers arrived at the dance, but were barred from entry by British officer cadets. The Canadians, many of them combat veterans, reacted badly. They fortified and armed themselves with alcohol, fence posts, and bricks, and then stoned the building. Shattered window panes alerted the British soldiers and women inside to the angry mob. A company of British officer cadets was called out with bayonets fixed and faced down the Canadians. The soldiers of the YSB were not cowed and refused to back down. There were some skirmishes, with both sides suffering casualties — some sustained bayonet wounds, others brick lacerations to the head, and one poor British cadet was disarmed and non-fatally run through with his own bayonet. After some bruises and blood, the young Canadians were eventually persuaded by their officers to return to their barracks, but with 65 panes of broken glass and the remnants of some 400 dishes lining the floor, the Canadians had made their point.<sup>128</sup> The British high command heard it. Most of the young Canadians were fast-tracked through the demobilization process and sailed home within a week.<sup>129</sup>

## Conclusion

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, tasked with caring for the graves of over a million British and Commonwealth service personnel, has a total of 1,412 identified Great War Canadian adolescents under the age of 19 in its care. Of these, 1,027 were 18 years old, 296 were 17, 75 were 16, and 14 of the dead were aged 15.<sup>130</sup> Most were killed on the Western Front. Since only about 61 per cent of the total CWGC entries

126 RG 9, III-A-I, vol. 90, 10-12-8, Thacker to Minister, OMFC, October 30, 1918.

127 Desmond Morton, “‘Kicking and Complaining’: Demobilization Riots in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1918–19,” *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 61 (1980), pp. 334–360.

128 For the YSB riot, see LAC, RG 24, vol. 1841, file GAQ 10-34F, Disturbances in Canadian Camps and Areas, 1918–1919.

129 The YSB was officially disbanded on December 7, 1918.

130 I am indebted to Richard Holt for compiling and helping to interpret the information from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.



show the age of death, however, it would be logical to assume that about 2,270 underage soldiers died during the war. Of course, the number was likely higher, since soldiers who enlisted at 16 or 17 but were killed at 19 would not be classified as underage soldiers in this exercise. They warrant some acknowledgement, even if their number is unquantifiable. Since there were roughly 60,000 Canadian deaths for those in service, one in 26 was an underage soldier. Extrapolating again, of the 424,000 Canadians who served overseas, one in 26 would yield a number of almost 16,300 underage servicemen. Yet many of these underage soldiers never made it to France, and it is therefore likely that they would not have suffered the same casualty rate as those who lie buried in the CWGC cemeteries. Thus the figure of total underage enlistees under 19 was even higher, likely over 20,000. While these figures are necessarily soft, considering that underage soldiers often enlisted using a false age, it is clear that the country had relied heavily on its adolescents during the Great War.

These underage soldiers grew proficient at hiding themselves in their units to escape detection during the war. However, in the postwar years, the adolescents were left increasingly in the forefront of the ever-dwindling ranks of surviving veterans as their more elderly comrades succumbed to age. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, as the last veterans marched into history, it appeared that these now ancient heroes representing the great mass of veterans were all boys when they fought in the Great War. That, of course, is untrue: the average age of the Canadian Great War soldier was 26.3.<sup>131</sup> But the notion of wasted youth, of a lost generation, remains a powerful trope surrounding the Great War.<sup>132</sup> The war “murdered the nation’s youth and turned youth into murderers,” recounted one bitter veteran in his postwar memoirs.<sup>133</sup> The loss of more than 60,000 Canadians, and perhaps especially those who were underage soldiers, forever marked a generation.

Most veterans survived, however. Crashing back to Canada in wave after wave in 1919, they found jobs scarce in the postwar years as a country mired in debt was little able to fulfil its promise of creating a “land fit for heroes.” Furthermore, an 18-year-old who had seen two years in the trenches, prematurely aged and perhaps embittered, did not easily return to being a stock boy or even to live under his parents’ roof and rules. There were also the wounded, among whom there would have

131 Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, p. 278.

132 For a discussion of the lost generation and the war dead, see Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997).

133 Pierre Van Paassen, *Days of Our Years* (New York: Hillman Curl Inc., 1939), p. 81.

been some 6,500 underage adolescents.<sup>134</sup> Some would never be the same. William Mansley had enlisted at 14 in the second year of the war. At 4 feet, 11 inches and 95 pounds, he could not deny his youth, but still he served in the trenches with the Royal Canadian Regiment, even if it was only for the last three months of the war and to escape a jail term for stealing a bike. While in the trenches he suffered no physical wounds, but remained psychologically scarred and unable to hold down a job after the war, even though other veterans often tried to intervene on his behalf. In 1930 he wrote to Sir Arthur Currie, his former corps commander, “[O]wing to my age and sacrificing all in life, all I have now is my discharge and medals.”<sup>135</sup>

At least some of the underage soldiers who served in the trenches never recovered from their ordeals. These adolescents sacrificed their youth; others, their middle and old age as well. Meacham Denyes had enlisted underage and served with the 102nd Battalion in the summer of 1918 until his death on the battlefield. A postwar commemorative text reflecting on his service observed, “[N]ow that we are at peace again it seems inconceivable that young students barely on the threshold of manhood should take part in such indescribable carnage.”<sup>136</sup> Indeed, while these young Canadians faced the firestorm of combat, they were fully supported by a constellation of groups at home, which, despite postwar regret, had actively facilitated the service of these young soldiers. The patriotic discourse during the war encouraged and pressured young men to enlist and urged their parents not to hold them back. The increasingly unlimited war effort was supported by politicians, leaders of society, and even the clergy. The recruiting sergeants and medical officers who turned a blind eye to a nervous boy with no facial hair and an undeveloped body were clearly accountable, but they too had been pressured by their society to take all who could carry a rifle. Of course, the lads themselves must be held responsible for their own actions, as they presented themselves time and time again to enlist, refusing to be infantilized. We cannot, however, read history backwards through the lens of the twenty-first century, which includes Canada’s well-respected recent record of attempting to ban child soldiers around the world and to provide support to those brutalized by war. While Canada has its own past of child soldiers, this history must be understood within the context of the time.

134 The ratio of death to wounded was about one in four during the Great War, and surprisingly consistent among most armies.

135 LAC, MG 30 E100, Sir Arthur Currie Papers, vol. 23, file 92, Mansley to Currie, January 23, 1930 and February 17, 1930; RG 150, 1992–93/166, 5904–14, W. T. Mansley.

136 Walter S. Herrington and Rev. A. J. Wilson, *The War Work of the County of Lennox and Addington* (Napanee, ON: The Beaver Press, 1922), p. 211.

Yet this aspect of the war remains largely unknown. While the young trench soldiers played a part in the conflict, the role of children in a patriotically infused, total war environment was even more encompassing. We know very little about this children's war, but we can recognize the 20,000 underage soldiers who enlisted in the CEF during the Great War, as well as the more than 2,000 who were left behind, buried in war cemeteries for King and country. Perhaps saddest of all are those young Canadians who lie in graves bearing false names, whose parents never had a chance to say goodbye. It is perhaps fitting to end with one of those young soldiers left behind: Private W. E. Dailey was 16 years old when he was killed on the Somme. His tombstone in the Sunken Road cemetery contains the words: "Mother's darling."<sup>137</sup>

137 Martin Gilbert, *The Battle of the Somme: The Heroism and Horror of War* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006), p. 177.