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STRATEGIC VALOUR: THE IMPACT OF VICTORIA CROSS WINNERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the link between three famous Canadian Victoria Cross winners whose valorous actions and leadership at the tactical level had significant operational and strategic impact contributing to the Allied final victory in the First and Second World Wars. The problem is that the heroic stories of Canada's Victoria Cross recipients are often told in isolation from the wider operational context in which they occur, making it difficult to link singular acts of bravery to their impact on the outcome of the battle or campaign they took place within. This thesis looks to integrate the well-known tactical stories of selected VC recipients with the operations and campaigns they formed part of.

The two famous Canadians examined as case studies during the First World War are from the fledgling Royal Flying Corps (RFC), and a company commander in The Royal Canadian Regiment (The RCR). Captain William Avery Bishop, VC, better known as Billy Bishop, won his Victoria Cross for using his plane to attack a German aerodrome and grounded aircraft before they could get into the air on 2 June, 1917, leading to the doctrine of air superiority. The other is Lieutenant Milton F. Gregg, VC, who won his Victoria Cross for his actions and leadership in late 1918, both of which had an effect on the outcome of the Battle for Cambrai, a critical German operational node. The third and final famous Canadian examined as a case study during the Second World War is a tank hunter from the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada. Private Ernest Alvia “Smokey” Smith, VC, won his Victoria Cross by defeating an enemy counter attack contributing to the overall drain of enemy resources while helping fix German forces in Italy.

Each of these case studies demonstrates how valourous tactical actions and/or leadership have had an operational or strategic impact.

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of conflicts there has always been the opportunity or requirement for soldiers, sailors, and aviators to face their fears to accomplish their mission. Overcoming fear has been called many things from bravery to courage. Napoleon Bonaparte the French general and Emperor is famously quoted as saying, "A soldier will fight long and hard for a bit of colored ribbon." During the Crimean War the United Kingdom War Department, the Secretary of State for War, the Duke of New Castle, Prince Albert, and Queen Victoria were all involved in the creation of a new British award for bravery that did not have a rank level associated with it. This new award would be in line with Napoleon's *Legion d'Honneur* and the *Medaille Militaire*. The French were not alone in recognizing bravery regardless of rank, the Russians and Austrians already had awards as well. Queen Victoria herself played a critical role in supporting the change from the originally suggested name, "the Military Order of Victoria" to "the Victoria Cross." She also made a significant change to the design of the medal by altering the motto that was to be embossed from, "for the brave" to "for valour." This was the first time that valour was raised to a position above courage and bravery. The newly created Victoria Cross was created to honour and recognize all ranks. The criteria for its awarding were officers or men who had served in the presence of the enemy and had performed some signal act of valour or devotion to their country.[1]

Noted historian and Victoria Cross winner Sir John Smythe, VC, breaks down the number of Victoria Cross recipients saying in 1963 totals were as follows, "Between 1854 and August 1st, 1914, 522 VCs were awarded; between August 2nd, 1914, and April 30th 1920, there were 633; and between May 1st, 1920, and December, 1938 there were five. In the Second

[1] Warrant dated January 29th, 1856 by Queen Victoria

World War there were 182; and since then there have been four."[2] In addition, New Zealand has awarded its own Victoria Cross once[3] and Australia has awarded four of its own Victoria Crosses.[4] Canada has yet to award its own Victoria Cross however, it recognizes those already awarded to Canadians by England. The New Zealand, Australian, and Canadian Victoria Crosses maintain an almost identical appearance and awarding criteria. Smythe points out the changes over the years for the awarding of the Victoria Cross stating that, "It must be remembered however in comparing the earlier wars with the wars of 1914-1918 and 1939-1945 that in the former the VC and the DCM were virtually the only decoration which could be won by gallantry on the field of battle."[5] He goes on to say that, "later on there were the DSO, MC, MM, DSC, DSM, DFC, IDSM, etc… Had these decorations existed in the time of the Indian Mutiny, for instance, they would undoubtedly have been awarded on many occasions instead of the VC."[6]

Canada's first Victoria Cross was awarded to Lieutenant Alexander Roberts Dunn[7] for his service during the "Charge of The Light Brigade" in the Crimean War. His citation from the London Gazette reads as follows:

> "For having in the Light Cavalry charge on the 25th October, 1854, saved the life of Serjeant Bentley, 11th Hussars, by cutting down two or three Russian Lancers who were attacking him from the rear, afterwards cutting down a Russian Hussar, who was attacking Private Levett, 11th Hussars."[8]

Before the Boer War in South Africa there was a total of five Victoria Crosses awarded to Canadians, another five were awarded as part of the Boer War. A further 73 would be awarded the Victoria Cross in the First World War and 16 in the Second World War. A total of 99

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[2] John Smythe, The story of the Victoria Cross. London: Frederick Muller, 1963, 17
[3] New Zealand and the Victoria Cross https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/victoria-cross/nz-vc-winners accessed 27 April 2017
[4] Victoria Cross for Australia http://www.defence.gov.au/events/VC/ accessed on 27 April 2017
[5] John Smythe, The story of the Victoria Cross. …, 17
[6] Ibid.
[7] Christopher McCreery, The Canadian honours system. Toronto: Dundurn, 2005,151
[8] The London Gazette, February 24, 1857.

Victoria Crosses have been awarded to Canadians.[9] All of the recipients demonstrated valour in the face of the enemy with incredibly courageous acts under the most enduring of circumstances.

One of the most influential experts on warfare is Carl Philipp Gottfried von Clausewitz a Prussian aristocrat and Cavalry Officer. He lived during the late 1700s and early 1800s and was influenced by the great military minds of his time and antiquity. In addition, he used the campaigns of Napoleon and Frederick the Great to help influence his ideas. He turned these observations and ideas into the famous series of books called, "*Vom Kriege*" or "On War." Clausewitz introduced the western world to two of the now widely accepted distinct levels of war called: strategy, and tactics. He defines strategy as, "coordinating each of them [engagements] with the others in order to further the object of the war."[10] Clausewitz defines tactics as, "the planning and executing these engagements themselves."[11] These concepts have been expanded and are now represented by three commonly recognized levels of warfare: strategic, operational and tactical. Strategic level is essentially what goals a nation wants to accomplish and how it will use its resources to accomplish those goals. The operational level is taking the strategic goals and turning them into specific tasks or missions, for a given theatre, and the tactical is where actions are taken by individual soldiers, sailors, and aviators and their units to conduct their respective missions.

The Victoria Cross in essence recognizes the gallant execution of tactical actions in the face of the enemy. However, valorous action and leadership at the tactical level matters beyond earning gallantry decorations. The actions themselves often had significant operational and

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[9] Canadian Victoria Cross winners, http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/medals-decorations/canadian-victoria-cross-recipients

[10] Carl Von Clausewitz, "On War, translated and edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret." Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 84 (1976), 128

[11] Ibid.

strategic impact and contributed to the Allied final victory. The problem is that the heroic stories of Canada's Victoria Cross recipients are often told in isolation from the wider operational context in which they occur, making it difficult to link singular acts of bravery to their impact on the outcome of the battle or campaign they took place within. This thesis looks to integrate the well-known tactical stories of three famous Canadian VC recipients with the operations and campaigns they formed part of. The result suggests that courageous junior leadership can change the course of a battle or campaign and even effect change on the profession of arms itself.

The first case study comes from the First World War from the fledgling Royal Flying Corps (RFC). Captain William Avery Bishop, better known as Billy Bishop, won his Victoria Cross for using his plane to attack a German aerodrome and grounded aircraft before they could get into the air on 2 June, 1917. This use of the airplane as an offensive weapon, not simply for reconnaissance or spotting for artillery, was revolutionary and finally achieved Trenchard's intent of taking the fight to the enemy. Using this idea allowed for the creation of air superiority doctrine which would be critical in enabling the winning of the artillery duel while protecting one's own force. The effects of his actions would change the face of warfare. In addition, Bishop would provide a needed morale boost to the RFC, Canada, and the Commonwealth.

The second case study will focus on Lieutenant Milton Fowler Gregg and his winning of the Victoria Cross during the operations which occurred 28 – 30 September, 1917, during the First World War, as a part of the Canadian Corps fighting to breach the last effective line of German defences in front of Cambrai, France. Gregg's actions, commanding a company while forming the lead element of the entire British Expeditionary Force, were critical to mission success. The taking of Cambrai broke the back of the German defence and it was reported on

German radio that Berlin was seeking an end to the war shortly afterward.[12] Gregg would go on to serve the Country as a Member of Parliament and as a Cabinet Minister.

The final case study is from the Second World War and focuses on Private Ernest Alvia Smith otherwise known as Smokey Smith. Smith won his Victoria Cross in October 1944, when elements of the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada crossed the Savio River and were cut off. Smokey stood over a wounded comrade and acted as a one man army defeating a large counter attack. His actions were incredibly brave and in part enabled the British 8th Army to secure Cesena as part of the large plan to drain German resources into the Italian peninsula and then destroy them. Smith would go on to act as a good will ambassador for Canada both at home and abroad.

All of these case studies are different however, in each of them the VC recipient went on to have a long life of service to Canada and Canadians. It is unclear if the internal courage and strength of will required to win a VC or the opportunity presented for further service that made these three specific VC winners into humanitarians. Regardless, each of these case studies demonstrates how valourous tactical actions and/or leadership can have strategic or operational impact.

[12] Jack Lawrence Granatstein, The Greatest Victory: Canada's One Hundred Days, 1918. 2014, 144

CHAPTER 2 – CASE STUDY ON CAPTAIN WILLIAM A. BISHOP, VC

The first case study this paper will examine is Captain William A. Bishop, VC, a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) during the First World War. His valourous action had a strategic or operational impact because it inspired a new way of warfare while providing a critical boost to the morale of the war effort. The story of the spring 1917 Battle for Arras and the circumstances leading up to Bishop's dawn raid that June are well-known from both the Allied and German perspectives. Bishop's action proved an essential air-warfare concept surrounding the problem of how best to win and maintain air superiority over the battlefield to enable decisive victory on the ground. However, Bishop's influence on air-land battle doctrine has been largely overshadowed by controversy that surrounds his flying record. For the sake of completeness this chapter must address that controversy. The controversy highlights the core problem of this thesis that dramatic acts of individual heroism often conceal more important questions about the operational impact of those acts. Nowhere is this more the case than when discussing the top fighter aces of the Great War.

William Avery Bishop was born in Owen Sound in 1894, to William A. and Margaret Bishop. He was the third of four children sired by William Sr, the Registrar of Grey County. Bishop quickly established himself as an excellent shot and rider. In 1911 he followed his brother Worth into the Royal Military College (RMC) in Kingston, Ontario starting 28 August of 1911.[13] In his own words he believed his parents encouraged his attendance at RMC because, "they did think, for some reason or other, that a little of the discipline at the Royal Military College would do me a lot of good – and I suppose it did."[14] Bishop's record says little about him being a particularly strong student but his son William Arthur highlighted, "On the "crime"

[13] William Avery Bishop, Personnel File. Library and Achieves Canada, 9
[14] William A. Bishop, Winged Warfare (Toronto: McClelland, Goodchild & Stewart Publishers, 1918), 18

side, Bishop's record contained more entries: A series of breach-of-discipline, conduct unbecoming-of-an-officer, encounters with authority, and an unusual ability to get involved in mishaps and accidents."[15] Bishop's time at RMC has turned into an urban legend within the Cadet Wing and into popular history, but Royal Canadian Air Force pilot, noted aerial historian, and staunch supporter of Bishop, David Bashow, challenges this myth. According to the myth Bishop was forced to leave RMC due to allegations of cheating. However, Bashow reveals that Bishop was not forced to leave but rather repeat his first year.[16] The 1914 British Declaration of War against Germany caused many fourth year RMC students to withdraw early preventing them from graduating but allowed for an early deployment overseas. Billy Bishop counted among them.[17]

Bishop immediately enrolled in the Mississauga Horse cavalry regiment where he believed that his expert level of marksmanship and skill at riding would make him a valuable asset to the Canadian First Contingent.[18] However, an untimely case of pneumonia stopped Bishop from deploying overseas. When Bishop was released from hospital he transferred to the 7th Canadian Mounted Rifles mobilized out of London, Ontario.[19] Bishop finally arrived in England, at Plymouth harbour on 23 June and was soon after at the Shorncliffe Cavalry Camp.[20] He quickly determined that a life in the trenches would be dirty, filthy and without glory. Military historian Richard Goette notes how, "Bishop did not react well to the horrid conditions

[15] William Arthur Bishop, The Courage of the Early Morning: A Son's Biography of a Famous Father, the Story of Billy Bishop (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1965), 2
[16] David Bashow, "The Incomparable Billy Bishop: The Man and the Myths," CMJ, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Autumn 2002), 55
[17] William Avery Bishop, Personnel File. Library and Achieves Canada, 9
[18] Dan McCaffery, Billy Bishop Canadian Hero (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1988), 10-11
[19] Brereton Greenhous, The Making of Billy Bishop: The First World War Exploits of Billy Bishop, VC (Toronto: The Dundurn Group, 2002), 34
[20] Dan McCaffery, Billy Bishop Canadian Hero …, 21

of wetness, mud and rats in the [training] trenches, and he soon fell ill."[21] He had also seen the RFC planes returning from a mission and the idea of being clean and comfortable while fighting the enemy appealed to him greatly. While in hospital recovering from an illness contracted while training in the damp English countryside, Bishop met an officer from the RFC who was able to describe the comfortable life of an airman. Bishop attempted to transfer but was unable to become a pilot. However, a position as an observer was offered to him that he quickly accepted, and on 1 September, 1915, he joined 21 Squadron RFC to commence his training.[22]

Bishop's keen eye sight and skill at riding gave him a critical advantage in the air. As an observer he was required to fly over enemy lines to locate and plot enemy artillery positions and other targets to allow for Allied artillery to engage more accurately. Once the friendly artillery was engaging an observer would then communicate corrections back to the gun line. Given how artillery so dominated the Western Front, air observation quickly became the most essential Royal Flying Corps function. In addition, to locating enemy positions and adjusting fire for the artillery, air observers used cameras to photograph the landscape, gather intelligence on enemy movements and positions, and to develop more accurate maps enabling more precise artillery fire. Bashow comments that as an observer, "Bishop flew many missions deep into enemy territory, conducting forward artillery observations and photo-reconnaissance of the lines, and also fighting patrols designed to keep enemy aircraft at bay."[23] His photographs were so good that they would be used by the observer schools to instruct students on what the ideal photographs looked like.

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[21] Richard Goette, "Billy Bishop: Leader of Men? Examining the Leadership Characteristics of Canada's Greatest Air Hero" Neither Art, Nor Science – Selected Canadian Military Leadership Profiles, Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2007, 45

[22] Ibid.

[23] David Bashow, The Knights of the Air: Canadian Fighter Pilots and the First World War (Toronto: McArthur & Company, 2000), 103

Airplanes during the First World War were not the robust flying machines of today, engine-powered, manned flight had only begun in 1903. The technology and flying machines of 1914-18 were fragile and the methods and means for both flying and landing them were constantly improving. It was not uncommon for the wings to fall off an airplane in the midst of a dive or for pilots to have hard landings at this time when the principles of flight were still in their infancy. Bishop remembers, "I injured my knee after an observing trip one day, when the pilot crashed the machine in landing, and while I did not have to go to hospital with it, it gradually grew worse until May, 1916, when I had to lay up several months for repairs."[24] The months he spent laid up were in England and would prove pivotal.

During his months off recovering, Bishop met Lady St. Helier. Bashow and many others who have written on Bishop all agree that his meeting of St. Helier had a profound impact on his career and life. St. Helier was a seventy-year old, wealthy, and influential hospital volunteer who had a gift for meeting people and was likely the most influential hostess in London according to C.S. Forrester.[25] She even remembered meeting Bishop's father the Grey County Registrar on a visit to Canada before the war.[26] The story of St. Helier and Bishop's relationship was highlighted by William Arthur Bishop, Billy's son, when he relates an exchange between his father and St. Helier. "In a rare sentimental moment this indomitable woman told Bishop: "You are the kind of grandson my son would have given me if he had lived." This led Bishop to calling Lady St. Helier "Granny" and for her to introduce Bishop as her "grandson.""[27] Brereton Greenhous, a leading skeptic of Billy Bishop, describes how the, "cosmopolitan blueblood, whose only son died of typhoid in India in 1904, aged twenty-two, virtually adopted the

[24] William A. Bishop, Winged Warfare …, 29
[25] Brereton Greenhous, "Billy Bishop – Brave Flyer, Bold Liar," CMJ, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Autumn 2002),63
[26] Bashow, David. The Knights of the Air: …, 104
[27] William Arthur Bishop, The Courage of the Early Morning…, 41

mannerly, good-looking twenty-two-year-old Canadian as an honorary grandson."[28] St. Helier introduced Bishop to London's high society and to the Royal family at a time when policy was decided in the parlour as much as it was in the office. Greenhous suggests that, "St. Helier who pulled the strings that got him [Bishop] a leave to Canada – a rare privilege for an inconsequential subaltern who had been overseas for less than a year. That furlough enabled Bishop to become formally engaged to [Thomas Eaton's granddaughter] Margaret Burden."[29] Once Bishop returned from Canada it is unclear if it is St. Helier who pulled strings to have him accepted into pilot training[30] or if it was Bishop's direct application to Lord Cecil at the War Office.[31]

Regardless of how he became accepted, Bishop's instructors and some historians, like Bashow, argue that he took to the sky and learned the art of flying quickly, "he received his pilot's brevet on December 9, 1916 after only 18 hours and 30 minutes of solo flying time. In 1916 the average amount of time required to achieve this milestone was 25 hours."[32] Bishop's son mentions that his father's approach to aerial combat and flying was, "an airplane was little more than a mobile gun-mount, and rather an unwieldy one – until the prey came into sight."[33] Once he completed his training Bishop was given the opportunity to fly at night as part of the English defence force that was responsible for protecting the island from German Zeppelin raids coming across the English Channel. This service allowed Bishop to accumulate considerable hours of flying and navigating experience before being sent to the front lines in France. This

[28] Brereton Greenhous, The Making of Billy Bishop…, 45
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] David Bashow, The Knights of the Air…, 103
[32] Ibid. 104
[33] William Arthur Bishop, The Courage of the Early Morning…, 47

combination of additional flying experience matched with his marksmanship later became a winning combination in combat.

In the new year of 1917 Bishop was posted to 60 Squadron and as Bashow puts it, "he arrived at the bleak, forlorn, half-deserted village of Izel les Hameau on March 17. He was joining a scout unit with a formidable fighting reputation and a history of resolute warriors, including the illustrious Captain Albert Ball."[34] No sooner had he arrived when in his own words, "The squadron commander had been killed the day before I arrived from England, and the new one arrived the day after. It rather pleased and in a sense comforted me to know that the new commander was also going over in a single-seater for the first time when I did."[35] Bishop's new commander was Major Jack Scott who Greenhous describes as, "a man of character and presence, a barrister, Sussex squire and fox-hunting man with a host of friends, many in high places. He was obviously ambitious and determined that the squadron [60th] should be the best in France."[36] Those high places included the aristocrats in London along with many of the higher ranking officers now in Scott's chain of command. 60 Squadron formed part of III Brigade of the RFC, led by Colonel (Acting Brigadier General) J.F.A. Higgins. III Brigade was assigned to support the British Expeditionary Force's Third Army, then commanded by General Sir Edmund Allenby. All RFC formations at the front also reported to the Officer Commanding the Military Wing of the RFC, General Hugh Trenchard.[37] On 25 and 31 March, 1917, Bishop recorded his first two aerial victories, both of which were witnessed. Greenhous believes that, "Bishop had

[34] David Bashow, The Knights of the Air…, 104
[35] William A. Bishop, Winged Warfare …, 44
[36] Brereton Greenhous, "Billy Bishop – Brave Flyer, Bold Liar," CMJ, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Autumn 2002), 63
[37] Brereton Greenhous, The Making of Billy Bishop…, 60

impressed Scott with his first two unquestionable victories and, from that point on, the latter was increasingly generous in assigning credit to his protégé."[38]

April of 1917 is known by many airpower scholars as "Bloody April" due to the horrendously high casualty rate of pilots. The casualty rate was roughly 600 percent per year or roughly a two month life expectancy for pilots. The casualties caused during the month of April were so high that replacement pilots were being killed faster than they could meet all the other pilots in the squadron. The loss rates were no accident, given the intense British and Dominion fighting then ongoing in the Arras sector where the RFC struggled to keep superior German air forces from interfering with the ground battle. The entire RFC was having a hard time adjusting to the stress of aerial combat and started to show signs such as stomach ulcers, alcoholism, and extreme mental disorders. In other Squadrons there were missions aborted early or mechanical failures, rampant drinking before, during, and after missions, and in one Squadron the entire unit defied an order to attack on a dangerous mission.[39] Greenhous attributes these casualty figures to several factors, "German aircraft were better, German tactics were better, and Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen was becoming a legend on both sides of the front."[40]

Into this quagmire Bishop returned for his second operational tour in France, this time as a pilot. Goette and other historians agree that, "the British needed heroes to counter the exploits of German aces like… Richthofen, popularly known as the "Red Baron." For a time, Englishman Albert Ball filled this role, but he was soon killed. Ball's death left Canadian pilot Billy Bishop as the top scoring living ace in the RFC."[41] Ball and Bishop had crossed paths several times,

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[38] Brereton Greenhous, "Billy Bishop – Brave Flyer, Bold Liar," CMJ, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Autumn 2002), 63
[39] David Bashow, The Knights of the Air…, 112
[40] Brereton Greenhous, "Billy Bishop – Brave Flyer, Bold Liar," CMJ, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Autumn 2002), 63
[41] Richard Goette, "Billy Bishop: Leader of Men? …, 48

once in London before Bishop deployed to France, [42] and again on 5 May at 60 Squadron. Bishop's son recalls the story his father told him about how Ball first suggested that he and Bishop carry out an early morning raid against a German aerodrome. Ball wanted to follow Trenchard's direction to seize the initiative through offensive action whenever possible.[43] Sydney Wise, the official Royal Canadian Air Force historian goes one step further saying, "The attack had its origin in Bishop's brief association with Captain Albert Ball…During a visit to 60 Squadron on 5 May Ball had invited Bishop to join him in a surprise raid on a German aerodrome with the object of destroying aircraft on the ground."[44] Sadly Bishop in his own words states he would never get the chance to conduct the mission with Ball, "who came back to France in the late spring and was killed within a few weeks, had brought down twenty-nine machines as a member of "our" squadron. That was an inspiration in itself."[45]

Bishop later found the opportunity to carry out the plan that he and Ball had discussed. Bashow describes how, "at a mess party on the night of June 1, Bishop debated the merits of such a mission the following morning with Grid Caldwell, Jack Scott, and William Fry, who was now Bishop's deputy flight commander."[46] However, none of his compatriots were willing to agree with Bishop's plan that night at the mess. So despite Bishops VC citation saying, "who had been sent out to work independently,"[47] Bishop tried to get someone else to join him. Bishop even went so far as to try again, "asking again in the early morning hours of 2 June, Fry again said no, this time citing his head ache from the party the night before. Undaunted Bishop took off

[42] William Arthur Bishop, The Courage of the Early Morning…, 52
[43] David Bashow, The Knights of the Air…, 112
[44] S.F. Wise, Canadian Airmen and the First World War: The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force, Volume I (Toronto: University of Toronto Press [UTP] and the Department of National Defence [DND], 1980), 412
[45] William A. Bishop, Winged Warfare …, 41
[46] David Bashow, The Knights of the Air…, 114
[47] The London Gazette, 11 August 1917, no.30228

at 3:57 am."[48] According to Bishop he flew towards Cambrai which according to his VC citation was, "at least twelve miles the other side of the [front] line."[49] He goes on to say "but, on reaching the place, I saw there was nothing on the ground. Everyone must have been either dead asleep, or else the station was absolutely deserted."[50] Bishop flew on to the east side of Cambrai, which served as a major German base and railhead in occupied northern France. There he found an active enemy aerodrome at what historians believe was Estourmel. Upon spotting enemy aircraft on the landing strip Bishop immediately launched his attack, in his combat report the raid went as follows:

> "I fired on 7 machines on the aerodrome, some of which had their engines running. One of them took off and I fired 15 rounds at him from close range 60 ft. up and he crashed. A second one taking off, I opened fire and fired 30 rounds at 150 yards range, he crashed into a tree. Two more were then taking off together. I climbed and engaged one at 1,000 ft., finishing my drum, and he crashed 300 yards from the aerodrome. I changed drums and climbed E[ast] a fourth H[oslite] A[ircraft] came after me and I fired one whole drum into him. He flew away and I then flew 1,000 ft. under 4 scouts at 5,000 ft. for one mile and turned W[est] climbing. The aerodrome was armed with one or more machine guns. Machines on the ground were 6 scouts (Albatros Type I or II) and one two-seater."[51]

In Bishop's VC citation it goes into greater detail saying, "he attacked…from about fifty feet, and a mechanic, who was starting one of the engines, was seen to fall." Once Bishop had made it far enough away from the aerodrome, he adds in his book that, "the thrills and exultation I had at first felt, had all died away, and nothing seemed to matter but this awful feeling of dizziness and the desire to get home and on the ground."[52] According to Bishop's VC citation he evaded, "four hostile scouts [that] were about 1,000 feet above for about a mile of his return journey, but they would not attack."[53] Bashow goes on to say Bishop then, "returned to Filescamp Farm with a lot

[48] David Bashow, The Knights of the Air…, 114
[49] The London Gazette, 11 August 1917, no.30228
[50] William A. Bishop, Winged Warfare …, 186
[51] William A. Bishop, No 60 Squadron air combat report, 2 June 1917, Air 1/1225/204/5/2634/60
[52] William A. Bishop, Winged Warfare …, 191
[53] The London Gazette, 11 August 1917, no.30228

of battle damage to his aircraft after being airborne for 1 hour and 43 minutes."[54] This dawn raid was the first of its kind to be conducted and would soon become a staple in the Allies' war effort. Orders from 9 (HQ) Wing dated 7 June, 1917, encouraged pilots to make low-flying attacks against enemy aerodromes in the same manner that Bishop had done. The method constituted an efficient means of winning and maintaining air superiority over the battlefield, by taking the fight to the enemy's home airfields.[55] The inspiration that Bishop's attack generated in both the RFC and Allied forces cannot be understated. The fact that he conducted the raid in the first place has however, come under scrutiny.

There are two very different perspectives when it comes to the question of Billy Bishop. The first is championed by historians like David Bashow who supports the official account recorded by Wise saying that Bishop did conduct the raid but will also admit that, "Billy Bishop was certainly self-oriented and ambitious, but that did not make him a fraud."[56] Brereton Greenhous represents the critical opposition. Greenhous challenges Bishop's bold claims about the daring raid, suggesting that he fabricated the story, along with many of his other aerial victories. Greenhous argues that, "he [Bishop] not only got away with them, but also managed to accumulate a VC, two DSOs, a DFC and an MC in the process."[57] Greenhous is particularly skeptical of the 2 June, 1917, story, "since the award of a VC has always been, except in this one unique case, based on irreproachable evidence from two or more witnesses."[58] Both groups of historians have done a significant amount of additional research to support their side of the debate. Unfortunately, the majority of the primary source material that could corroborate the

[54] David Bashow, "The Incomparable Billy Bishop: The Man and the Myths," CMJ, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Autumn 2002), 57
[55] S.F. Wise, Canadian Airmen and the First World War: …, 413
[56] David Bashow, "Billy Bishop, VC – Lone Wolf Hunter ~ The RAF Ace Re-examined, Reviewed" CMJ, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Autumn 2014), 82
[57] Brereton Greenhous, "Billy Bishop – Brave Flyer, Bold Liar," CMJ, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Autumn 2002), 62
[58] Brereton Greenhous, "Billy Bishop – Brave Flyer, Bold Liar," CMJ, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Autumn 2002), 62

German side of the story was destroyed by the bombing campaigns of the Second World War. Bishop's critics continued to cite the lack of precision around the airfield location, statistical anomalies in Bishop's performance, the fact that so many of his victories were unwitnessed, his rascal like past, the relationships between Lady St. Helier, Bishop, Jack Scott, Whitehall, Buckingham Palace, and Canadian Parliament, and finally, the lack of German reporting of both downed aircraft and the 2 June attack as grounds for skepticism. Bishop's defenders acknowledge how the German Aces Association met with and invited Bishop to join their number after the war, [59] his experience as a rider, an expert shot with incredible eyesight, and how his lone hunter tactics allowed for him to take on a greater number of enemy planes. Bishops supporters also contend that the real value of the 2 June, 1917, raid was to inspire others to emulate Bishop's behavior and establish the RFC and later RAF doctrine for maintaining air superiority.[60] The debate may never be settled but something that both camps can agree upon is what Bishop contributed to following the war and his being awarded the Victoria Cross.

Bishop flew from 2 June until 16 August, 1917, when General Trenchard, feeling the pressures of politics and wanting to make sure that Bishop did not suffer the same fate as Ball, had the then undisputed Empires ace-of aces removed from combat.[61] Bashow writes that, "Bishop had accomplished a significant act of valour, and a highly inspirational one, not just to 60 Squadron but to the entire Royal Flying Corps."[62] This act raised the morale of the Empire both at home and abroad, it also followed on the heels of the Battle of Arras where the Canadian Corps successfully captured Vimy Ridge and the British and Dominion forces won their first

[59] David Bashow, "Billy Bishop, VC – Lone Wolf Hunter ~ The RAF Ace Re-examined, Reviewed" CMJ, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Autumn 2014), 84
[60] David Bashow, "Billy Bishop, VC – Lone Wolf Hunter ~ The RAF Ace Re-examined, Reviewed" CMJ, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Autumn 2014), 84
[61] David Bashow, "The Incomparable Billy Bishop: The Man and the Myths," CMJ, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Autumn 2002), 57
[62] David Bashow, The Knights of the Air…, 115

unquestionable victory.[63] When Bishop returned to Canada it was front page news across the country. Headlines like, "The Young Hero," "Famous Canadian Aviator," and "Greatest Air Fighter" to name a few, graced the newsstands.[64] Bishop was a ray of light and gave Canadians hope despite, the looming conscription crisis, the failing railways, the pending collapse of Russia as an ally, and the disheartening stream of casualty reports. [65] On his return home Bishop was put to work on a tour in the United States with the task of helping organize US aircraft production. The secondary purpose of his visit was to help increase enlistment numbers and support for the Allied war effort.[66] Bashow notes that it did not take long for Bishop to return to his scoundrel like ways, "at a speech to the Canadian Club in Montreal, some inappropriate remarks about the woeful unpreparedness of American industry for war production landed him in trouble, and he was nearly court-martialed."[67]

Bishop went back to the Western Front in 1918 and finished the First World War as a Lieutenant-Colonel and the Commanding Officer of his hand-picked 85 Squadron. He was credited with a total of 72 victories to his name and later became instrumental in the creation of the fledgling Royal Canadian Air Force. Bishop served again in the Second World War as an Air Marshal and Director of Recruiting for the Royal Canadian Air Force. Bashow calls him an, "extraordinary booster of morale and a tireless campaigner for the nation and the war effort, again inspiring many citizens to service."[68] Following the end of the Second World War Bishop remained a central figure in the creation of the United Nations Civil Aviation Organization

[63] Brereton Greenhous, The Making of Billy Bishop…, 65
[64] Ibid, 170
[65] David Bashow, "Billy Bishop, VC – Lone Wolf Hunter ~ The RAF Ace Re-examined, Reviewed" CMJ, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Autumn 2014).
[66] David Bashow, The Knights of the Air…, 117
[67] Ibid.
[68] David Bashow, "Billy Bishop, VC – Lone Wolf Hunter ~ The RAF Ace Re-examined, Reviewed" CMJ, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Autumn 2014), 55

(ICAO) in 1947.[69] The creation of the ICAO was arguably Bishop's largest contribution to civilian life and the betterment of society. Indeed, Bishop and all three of the Canadian VC recipients considered in this thesis, led extraordinary lives of service to Canada in the years after their famous acts of courage.

Bishop's largest contribution to military life was not simply championing the creation of the Royal Canadian Air Force but in advocating the idea of how flexible air power can be in contributing to victory. By conducting much of his hunting over the town of Cambrai, Bishop is engaging the enemy above a critical rail node which will be illustrated in this paper's second case study. His actions are focused on ensuring that the Allies have freedom in the use of the sky, or as it is more commonly called, air superiority. Gaining and maintaining air superiority allows the Allies three key advantages. First it allows them to take pictures of the ground and enemy positions, to win the intelligence war. Secondly it allows air observers to find and engage enemy positions, while denying the enemy the same ability. Thirdly it allows airplanes to be used in a ground attack role to engage and destroy enemy targets. On the battlefields of the Frist World War it was the dominance of artillery that was the most important advantage. Unknown at the time, having air superiority over places like Arras, and Cambrai would be critical for enabling future operations in those areas. In addition to enabling air superiority, Bishop became a symbol as historian John MacFarlane puts it, "the great Canadian First World War flying ace whose great bravery has never been questioned, is another [example] where political considerations played an important role. Bishop was encouraged by his superiors, who were eager for a

[69] David Bashow, "Billy Bishop, VC – Lone Wolf Hunter ~ The RAF Ace Re-examined, Reviewed" CMJ, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Autumn 2014), 55

Canadian hero, and his VC remains the only one awarded without a single witness to corroborate the action."[70]

Most historians agree that Bishop was an incredibly brave man who in the words of his son recalling a story his father once told him, ""How," asked Bishop's mechanic, "could a bullet hit there [his windshield] without hitting there" – and he tapped Bishop's flying helmet. "Oh, it grazed me," said Bishop, showing a groove in the leather of his headgear."[71] Bishop certainly became the public hero that the Royal Flying Corp, the British and Canadian Expeditionary Forces, the nation and the Empire needed and he enjoyed the role. He proved invaluable to the cause in both World Wars and help shape the face of aviation long into the future. These opportunities as a public figure all became possible as a result of his determination and inventive thinking that led to the early morning raid against that German aerodrome on 2 June, 1917. Despite the controversy that surrounds the legend of Billy Bishop, it is clear that his actions had far reaching strategic and operational impact both during the First World War not only in 1917 but also, as we will see in the second case study, in 1918 and into modern times.

[70] John MacFarlane, Triquet's Cross : A Study of Military Heroism. Montreal: MQUP, 2009. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed March 14, 2017), 58
[71] William Arthur Bishop, The Courage of the Early Morning…, 63

CHAPTER 3 – CASE STUDY ON LIEUTENANT MILTON F. GREGG, VC

The second case study this paper will examine is Lieutenant Milton F. Gregg, VC, a company commander in The Royal Canadian Regiment (The RCR) during the First World War. His valourous actions and leadership in late 1918 made a strategic and operational impact by substantially affecting the outcome of the Battle for Cambrai. This impact on the greater battle will be illustrated by outlining the circumstances surrounding Gregg's actions. This study will be done by using various Canadian War Diaries and numerous other sources to create a holistic understanding. To ensure this and the impact that his actions had, this case study will first introduce the reader to certain aspects of the Great War before delving into greater detail.

The First World War was a devastating conflict on a global scale. Its effects are still felt today across many countries throughout the world. One particular period that stands out is the Hundred Days Offensive. During this period the Allies decisively defeated the German Army and drove it out of occupied France and Belgium culminating on 11 November. This period ended with the Armistice that we still celebrate every year on Remembrance Day. During the Hundred Days Offensive, much of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) experienced a significant degree of tactical and operational success. The Australian and Canadian Corps stood among formations within the BEF that demonstrated particular capacity for innovation on the battlefield. Both Corps used very different methods to achieve success. The Australians for example used a ghost style of infiltration to slowly erode and then destroy the German's forward forces.[72] The Canadians on the other hand, used coordinated and well-planned set-piece attacks to destroy enemy frontline and counter attacking forces. The Canadian system enabled junior commanders to understand the higher commander's intent and timings related to the plan to give

[72] Shane B. Schreiber, Shock army of the British Empire: the Canadian Corps in the last 100 days of the Great War. St. Catharines, Ont.: Vanwell Pub., 2004, 13

the greatest chance for success. Historian and retired LCol Shane Schreiber attribute set-piece attacks to Sir Arthur Currie's leadership which allowed Canadian combined arms teams to gain tactical superiority.[73] In the most basic sense this tactical superiority was generated at the platoon and company level where 40 to 200 well-led soldiers, employed the ground, no small amount of courage, and supporting direct and indirect fire to suppress the enemy while they maneuvered to destroy them. In essence, the modern infantry tactics still employed by the Royal Canadian Infantry Corps today took clear shape in the last years of the Great War and helped win the war in 1918.

The efforts of Lt. Milton F. Gregg's "D" Company of The RCR from 27 – 30 September, 1918, offer an excellent example of that war-winning system. During that action Gregg demonstrated extraordinary leadership under intensely demanding circumstances contributing to his company's tactical victory west of Cambrai. As previously stated it is important to understand how the stage was set at the strategic level and the events leading up to Gregg's actions on 28 September, 1918. His actions, however brave, occurred during the critical culminating period in the last days of the First World War creating the conditions for Gregg and his soldiers to make history. Currie gave his subordinates increased flexibility to conduct operations and his junior leadership, like Gregg, rose to the occasion. Schreiber argues that this was due to Currie's control of and flexibility with Canadian doctrine.[74] Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, commander of the BEF, needed to break critical German defensive positions at Amiens and Cambrai to erode the German Army's will and capacity to fight. Canadian historian and prolific writer Jack Granatstein expresses the reasons why the Canadian Corps was so effective and given some of the toughest missions. He believes that it was due to the excellence

[73] Ibid, 11-12
[74] Ibid, 12

in leadership, size, and strength of the Corps, and the desire of Sir Arthur Currie to take on and win the critical battles which made it shock troopers of the BEF.[75] Haig assigned the Canadian Corps to some of the most difficult and important tasks of the Hundred Days offensive. Looking back now it becomes clear that the strategic stage had been set for Gregg to lead his company through a mission that could impact the German outlook on the war and their losing the will to fight.

Canadian historians including J.L. Granatstein, G.W.L. Nicholson, J.F.B. Livesay, Tim Cook, and Schreiber all agree that in July of 1918 Sir Douglas Haig, faced increased pressure to deliver a victory from the War Office and to minimize casualties.[76] That year the United States Army in Europe grew to number over a million men, leading many Allied politicians and generals to believe that despite the limited time available for the Americans to prepare the conditions were right for the Allies to break through the German line and bring the war to a conclusion before 1919. By July 1918, the Germans had attempted to and failed at one last desperate offensive on the Western Front at Amiens. Allied high command assessed the Germans intent was to drive a wedge between the French and British Armies. Both the Allies and the Germans had been stretched thin by the offensive, which had cost the Germans one million men.[77] Even with these losses the Germans still had enough resources to retain the initiative if given the opportunity.[78] In late July 1918, the Allied generals agreed a major offensive was required to deny the Germans the time they needed to regroup. What started 8 August, 1918, with the BEF counter-offensive to stabilize the front east of Amiens, became known as the beginning of the Hundred Days Offensive that ultimately defeated the German Army. The

[75] Jack Lawrence Granatstein, The Greatest Victory: Canada's One Hundred Days, 1918. 2014, 121-122
[76] Shane B. Schreiber, Shock army of the British Empire…, 8
[77] Ibid, 9
[78] John Frederick Bligh Livesay, Canada's Hundred Days. T. Allen, 1919, 3-4

carefully planned attack by the BEF led by the Canadian and the Australian Corps, was one where all the elements of a combined arms team were brought together, including infantry, tanks, engineers, backed by highly mobile field and medium artillery linked together with improved signals and transport capacity to enable the various arms to synchronize their efforts in time and space. This synchronization and mobility took the 1917 British and Dominion set-piece attack system to a new level in 1918. In August 1918, Sir Arthur Currie laid out clear initial, intermediate, and final objectives with the hope of potentially breaching the forward German defences and maneuvering beyond them into open warfare.[79] The signals-empowered close cooperation of the infantry and artillery, coupled with more tanks and aircraft, allowed for the systematic destruction of enemy defences enabling the Allies to advance and destroy their buckling opponent's fighting power.

The successful Canadian, Australian, and French assault east from Amiens, dealt a powerful blow to the German Army making an important psychological impact it had on German high command. The Canadian Corps took over 5,000 prisoners and 161 guns not to mention the number of German troops killed and wounded.[80] General Erich Ludendorff described the day as the black day of the German Army where everything that he feared could go wrong did at the same time.[81] General Ludendorff's loss of confidence was compounded when he informed Kaiser Wilhelm of the devastation caused by the Canadian attack. The Kaiser did not take the news well, and understood that his options were evaporating rapidly and that the war needed to end.[82]

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[79] Shane B. Schreiber, Shock army of the British Empire…, 26
[80] Gerald WL Nicholson, Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 2015, 408
[81] Erich Ludendorff, My War Memories, quoted Nicholson, Gerald WL. Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 2015, 408
[82] Ibid.

The success of the attack was exactly what Sir Douglas Haig had hoped for and it reaffirmed his faith in the Canadian Corps and its commander Sir Arthur Currie. It also maintained the Canadian Corps' position as one of the vanguard formations in the BEF that would be used in a major offensive. In late August the Supreme Allied Commander, Marshal Ferdinand Foch and Haig looked for a way to maintain the momentum gained on 8 August. They decided to advance on all fronts with the intent to keep the enemy on the move.[83] The next step was to shift the Canadian Corps back to the Arras sector to mount a major drive on the critical northern rail node for the Hindenberg Line at Cambrai. This rail line was the lynch pin of the German defense in North-Western Europe and its loss would deal a crippling blow at the operational and strategic level by reducing German capacity to shift forces by rail to other threatened sectors. The German Army knew this and positioned defending divisions and obstacles around it with the express intent of holding this vital ground and maintaining the last complete defensive line before Germany.[84] Standing in the way of the Canadian Corps getting to Cambrai was the Drocourt-Queant (DQ) Line, Canal-du-Nord, and the Marcoing Line, all of which were daunting obstacle belts manned by some of the most powerful enemy formations on the Western Front. Thankfully the Canadian Corps was significantly larger than its British counter parts, giving it the strength to handle one of the toughest missions on the British and Dominion front. Granatstein points out how Currie insisted on keeping the Canadian Corps a Corps instead of allowing it to become and Army. Currie would argue that there were not enough staff trained officers to run an army and that the Corps was fighting very well together.[85] Haig knew that the Canadian Corps with its extra artillery, engineers and larger infantry brigades,

[83] Shane B. Schreiber, Shock army of the British Empire…, 71
[84] Ibid, 73
[85] Jack Lawrence Granatstein, The Greatest Victory…, 84

along with the professionalism of its soldiers and officers, was the right formation for the job.[86] Haig even went so far as to personally give his instructions to Currie in the presence of Army Commander General Horne, in doing so Haig by-passed a level in the chain of command.[87] Haig's plan was for the Canadian Corps to be reinforced with other British Divisions and attack south of the Scrape River, eastwards from Arras to breach the DQ line, Canal-du-Nord, and the Marcoing line. The enemy manning those obstacles had to be killed and defeated before the Corps could seize Cambrai and head southward sweeping down behind the Hindenburg line.[88]

The amount of personal faith that Haig placed in Currie and the Canadians would not be in vain. The Canadian Corps launched the first phase of its assault from Arras towards Cambrai on 26 August, 1918, in what would initially be known as the battle of Scarpe and later as the battle of Arras.[89] By 2 September, 1918, the Canadian Corps had successfully broken the DQ line as they advanced down the Cambrai road. By 4 September, 1918, the Canadians won the heights commanding the west side of Canal-du-Nord where they paused to reconstitute and prepare the next set-piece attack to cross the canal and seize the Boulon Wood heights beyond it, all while bypassing the flooded marsh lands in the northern portion of their sector. The Germans destroyed all crossing points over the canal turning it into a major obstacle, covered by small-arms and artillery fire. Granatstein describes how much confidence Horne had in Currie by his allowing the Canadian Corps to plan and execute all of their own attacks. [90] Currie planned the various objective lines for his divisions and back-briefed both Horne and then Haig, both would eventually give their approval.[91]

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[86] Shane B. Schreiber, Shock army of the British Empire…, 20-22
[87] Ibid, 72
[88] Future policy of Operations, dated 25 August 1918, "CCGS War Diary," Vol 36 NAC RG 9 Vol 4789 file 2
[89] Gerald WL Nicholson, Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919…, 427
[90] Jack Lawrence Granatstein, The Greatest Victory…, 86
[91] Shane B. Schreiber, Shock army of the British Empire…, 99

The backbone of the Canadian Corps was the infantry brigades. The Royal Canadian Regiment formed part of the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade (7CIB) within the 3rd Canadian Division (3 Cdn Div) during 1918. The RCR were in good company alongside other battle-proven units in 7CIB, which included the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI), the 42nd (Black Watch) Infantry Battalion, and the 49th (Loyal Edmonton) Infantry Battalion. The veteran brigade had been part of the assault at Somme, Vimy Ridge, Hill 70, Passchendaele, and Amiens. This fighting had developed and hardened the soldiers and officers. It came at a high price in casualties across all rank levels. The list of officers proceeding into action dated 27 September, 1918, reveals the gaps torn in the regimental leadership in August and September that had not been replaced. The RCR Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Willets, had his Adjutant Captain McCrea and the Medical Officer, Captain D.D. Freeze, and Chaplain, A.E. Andrew, as the only captains within the regiment. All of the company commanders, support platoon commanders, and rifle platoon commanders were listed as lieutenants.[92] Lt M.F. Gregg, MC is listed as the Officer Commanding "D" Company. This list demonstrates that many of the officers within The RCR, and likely across the 7CIB, were operating at levels higher than their rank would indicate. It also demonstrates that the officers who had not become casualties had done so because of skill at arms and effectively leading their men in combat, not to mention a healthy dose of luck. This sentiment is especially true of Gregg who had previously won the Military Cross with bar for his valour and leadership in bombing actions on 25 August, 1917,[93] and 26 August, 1918,[94] respectively.

[92] The RCR War Diary List of Officers proceeding into action 27 Sep 1918
[93] London Gazette, 25 August, 1917. Issue No. 30251, 8827
[94] London Gazette, 1 February, 1919. Issue No. 31158, 1632

On 25 September, 1918, 7CIB issued B.W. Instruction No. 1 which outlined how the brigade would advance to relieve 4 Cdn Div after the latter crossed the Canal du Nord and seized the Bourlon Wood heights controlling the east bank. This instruction was the initiation directive for the assault towards Cambrai and represented a lot of hard work by the Corps, Division, and Brigade commanders and staff officers. Granatstein describes the area around Canal du Nord as flooded ground and as an impassable morass.[95] Currie believed he had found the key to unlocking the German defence, a dry portion of the still unfinished canal to the south. This portion of dry land would allow the Corps to conduct an assault without having to cross a water feature at the same time. [96] Once the relief in place was completed, 7CIB would continue the attack as the left hand brigade for 3 Cdn Div as the Canadian Corps stormed the last German defences baring the approach to Cambrai.[97] Currie understood the importance having artillery superiority would play in this mission as the entire Corps advancing on such a small axis could be devastated by enemy fire.[98] To counter this threat a counter battery fire plan was created that used aircraft to find gun positions and then gas shells to deny the guns to the Germans.[99] As Currie's plan was executed his lead divisions, 1 and 4 Cdn Divs, advanced against Bourlon wood in a well-planned set piece attack but were unable to set the conditions for the subsequent relief in place. When 7CIB arrived on 27 September, 1918, they discovered this. However, 4 Cdn Div could cover 7CIBs launch off points enabling the beginning of 7CIB's advance.[100]

The German high command understood the critical enabler that railways were for moving soldiers and supplies at the strategic and operational levels. Cambrai is the intersection of

[95] Jack Lawrence Granatstein, The Greatest Victory…, 122
[96] Ibid.
[97] 7CIB War Diary B.W. Instructions No. 1
[98] Jack Lawrence Granatstein, The Greatest Victory…, 124
[99] Ibid, 125
[100] Gerald WL Nicholson, Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919…, 448

multiple rail lines behind the Hindenberg defence system. Therefore, the Germans reacted vigorously to the Canadian advance on Cambrai by ordering Crown Prince Rupperecht's Army group to quickly reinforce the area. In addition, every reserve formation was moved to around Cambrai to protect the German vital ground. The weight and intensity of the August and September fighting convinced the Germans that the Canadian Corps was not four divisions, but twelve. This caused the Germans to deploy three new divisions on 28 September and four more on 29 September, 1918.[101] This redeployment of forces pulled German reserves from across the Western Front weakening all of the other German positions affirming the importance of Cambrai to the German high command, as per Haig and Foch's plan. German doctrine recognized the value in having multiple layers in a defence and having specialized soldiers to carry out key tasks, including special machine gun companies to reinforce the infantry divisions. These companies normally had above-average soldiers and equipment trained to sight and employ machine guns to their maximum effective use. These units proved to be very cohesive and seemingly immune to the moral problems that faced the larger German Army. While still near full strength they would be a most determined foe during the Hundred Days.[102]

General Ludendorff wrote about his frustrations in his memoires stating, "In the direction of Cambrai, on the 27th, a strong enemy attack gained ground beyond the Canal [-du-Nord], although every possible step had been taken to resist them. Further south the Vesle, the front held."[103] Ludendorff goes on to say, "In Champagne and on the western bank of the Meuse a big battle had begun on the 26th of September, French and American troops attacking with far-reaching objectives. West of the Argonne we remained masters of the situation, and fought a fine

[101] Ibid, 454
[102] Shane B. Schreiber, Shock army of the British Empire…, 104
[103] Erich Ludendorff, My war memories, 1914-1918. Vol. 1. Hutchinson & co., 1919,718-719

defensive battle…[and] held their thrust."[104] General Ludendorff, as the default German supreme commander, had the unfortunate task of advising the German politicians that the war would have to end.[105] This once again is a clear indication of how the Germans viewed Cambrai as vital ground and why their intention was to hold it at all costs despite being pulled in different directions by the BEF and American Armies. The effects of the attack also shed light on the frustration of the German Army that despite knowing where and when the Canadians were going to attack they were powerless to stop the inevitable onslaught.

The German Army was on the verge of collapse and its high command grew frustrated at their inability to stop the Canadian advance towards Cambrai and its rail lines. Yet while victory loomed near, much hard fighting remained. Somewhat fresher German units, including their special machine gun companies, still formed a cohesive and prepared defence line west of the city. It was in this context that the Royal Canadian Regiment opened its assault on the Marcoing Line in front of Cambrai. Haig's faith in Currie's Canadians had been well placed.

At 0530 on 28 September, 1918, The RCR was the lead battalion, of the lead brigade, of the lead division, of the lead Corps. It advanced against a well defended and vital enemy position of the Marcoing line south of Raillencourt on the outskirts of Cambrai.[106] Gregg's Company, "D" Company, attacked alongside "A" and "C" Companies with "B" Company in reserve.[107] At first, the RCR advanced across dangerously flat ground but encountered little opposition capturing approximately fifty soldiers and two guns. This advance had gone well due to the overwhelming artillery support provided by the rolling barrages. However, as they pressed on

[104] Ibid, 718-719
[105] Ibid, 718-722
[106] The RCR Narrative of Operations, 28th, 29th, 30th, September, 1918, 1
[107] Ibid.

they met stiff enemy resistance from flanking machine gun fire on both sides,[108] uncut wire obstacles, and Germans in houses along the road ways.[109] On the left flank three tanks were pushed forward to aid in the breakthrough, but they were quickly taken out by machine gun and large caliber gun fire from the south of St. Olle.[110]

By 0850 the initial positions within the Marcoing Front line had been captured by The RCR, however, they had become pinned down by intense fire from directly in front of them by the Marcoing Support line and also from the North in the vicinity of Sailly.[111] On the right flank, closest to Cambrai, "D" Company was also held up and it is during this critical time that Lt. Milton F. Gregg crawled forward alone through thick uncut wire.[112] Gregg's VC citation goes on to say upon finding a gap in the German wire, "he subsequently led his men, and forced an entry into the enemy trenches."[113] The company entered into the enemy trench system and began killing all who did not surrender. When "D" Company started to be forced back due to a lack of grenades,[114] Gregg recognized the criticality of the situation and despite being wounded returned alone through the gap in the wire to retrieve more ammunition and grenades.[115] Gregg's VC citation goes on to describe Gregg as having, "rejoined his party, which by this time was much reduced in numbers.[116] The citation goes on to say Gregg then, "in spite of a second wound, he reorganized his men and led them with the greatest determination against the enemy trenches, which he finally cleared."[117] Over the course of 28 September, 1918, Gregg single handedly, "killed or wounded 11 enemy and took 25 prisoners, in addition to 12 machine guns

[108] Gerald WL Nicholson, Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919…, 448
[109] The RCR Narrative of Operations, 28th, 29th, 30th, September, 1918, 1
[110] Ibid.
[111] Gerald WL Nicholson, Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919…, 448
[112] Ibid, 449
[113] The London Gazette, Jan 1919, Issue No. 31108, 306
[114] The RCR Narrative of Operations, 28th, 29th, 30th, September, 1918, 1
[115] The London Gazette, Jan 1919, Issue No. 31108, 306
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid.

captured."[118] Gregg's actions allowed for the continued advance of the Canadian Corps.[119] 7CIB had to stop and reorganize before it was able to re-launch an assault. At 1900 a second assault was launched with two battalions up, the PPCLI on the left, and the 49th Battalion on the right. Despite hard fighting 7CIB was able to secure the Marcoing line between the Arras and Bapaume roads[120] and 1,000 yards of railway.[121] The RCR would consolidate for the night of 28 September, 1918, with two companies in the Marcoing Support line and two in the Marcoing Front line.[122]

During 29 September 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade (8CIB) advanced directly on Cambrai astride the Arras road while the 7CIB pushed northeast towards Tilloy in an attempt to surround Cambrai. This was done with the 42nd and 49th Infantry battalions leading on the left and right respectively, the PPCLI in a supporting role, and The RCR in reserve awaiting further orders.[123] The attacks by the 42nd and 49th Infantry battalions met heavy resistance and were only able to secure to the Cambrai-Douai road.[124] The RCR received orders the night of 29 September to continue the advance with 4 Cdn Div on 7CIBs left flank and 8CIB on the right. The plan was for the 42nd and 49th Infantry battalions to hold their positions while The RCR and PPCLI advanced capturing the towns of Ramillies and Tilloy and its surrounding high ground respectively.[125] The plan placed The RCR on the far left flank of 3rd Division, requiring them to ensure coordination between the neigbouring 10th Bde from 4 Cdn Div. This created additional planning and coordination challenges on top of the regiment's primary focus of preparing for an attack. By the end of the day on 29 September The RCR had suffered so many casualties that it

[118] Ibid.
[119] Jack Lawrence Granatstein, The Greatest Victory…, 131-132
[120] Gerald WL Nicholson, Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919…, 449
[121] 7CIB War Diary 26-28 Sep 1918
[122] The RCR Narrative of Operations, 28th, 29th, 30th, September, 1918, 1
[123] 7CIB B.W. Instructions No. BM.100.3, 29 September 1918
[124] 7CIB War Diary, 29-30 September 1918
[125] 7CIB B.W. Instructions No. BM.100.4, 29 September 1918

was necessary to reorganize down to three rifle companies to continue the advance on 30 September. Despite his own wounds Gregg continues to lead "D" Company as it reorganized and prepared for its next action.

Again the advance started at 0530 the next day and was immediately met with intense machine gun fire on both flanks, most notable to the north. The RCR continued to push forward and took considerable casualties with its position eventually becoming untenable. 4 Cdn Div began to fall back due to the heavy resistance it encountered. The RCR was given incorrect information around 1200 and 1600 about the location of friendly troops and both times caused a renewed offensive to end abruptly as machine guns opened fire, stopping the advance.[126] According to Gregg's VC citation he remained, with "his company in spite of wounds, he again on 30 September led his men in attack until severely wounded."[127] By the end of the day on 30 September, 1918, The RCR held its position and waited to assist in the forward passage of lines of 9CIB.[128] The Germans fought desperately now, to cover what was soon to become a general retreat. The rail hub used by German logisticians to move men and material within the Western Front had been lost. The Allies had breached the Hindenburg line despite everything the German Army had placed to defend it. Little now stood between the advancing Allied armies and Germany itself.

During the month of October the German Army continued to conduct a full scale withdrawal from the advancing BEF and Allied forces. Although the Germans were being beaten back they were such professionals that they maintained control and stopped the withdrawal from becoming a full scale route while making sure that the Allies paid for every meter they gained.

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[126] The RCR Narrative of Operations, 28th, 29th, 30th, September, 1918, 1
[127] The London Gazette, Jan 1919, Issue No. 31108, 306
[128] The RCR Narrative of Operations, 28th, 29th, 30th, September, 1918, 2

This led to the Canadian Corps expecting to receive contact from the enemy daily around mid-morning with resistance increasing until the advance stalled around early afternoon with the Germans counter attacking around 1500. The next morning the advance would commence again, finding that the Germans had slipped away during the night.[129] Currie wanted to go faster, but resisted the urge to ensure that supply lines could support the advance and sensed that the end of the war was near. Also, he and commanders at all levels wanted to take every measure to limit casualties. The German Army would continue this fighting withdrawal until nearly the end of October 1918 where it would attempt a final stand at the Hermann line, Mount Houy, and Mons. Finally in November, the Germans admitted defeat and came to the negotiating table.

The Royal Canadian Regiment made a significant contribution to that outcome. Over the course of the four days of fighting from 27 – 30 September The RCR suffered casualties totaling three officers and 31 other ranks killed in action and 16 officers and 185 other ranks wounded in action. Listed among the dead in the war diary is Lt. R. Duplissie a platoon commander for "D" Company. Gregg and a second platoon commander, Lt. J.S. Millett, are listed as wounded in action. In addition, the Commanding Officer, LCol C.R.E. Willets, was wounded and his Adjutant, Capt F.D. McCrea was killed. [130] Despite the casualties, The RCR strictly adhered to General Currie's idea of capturing lessons learned. By 3 October, 1918, the then Commanding Officer created and signed what would be called an After Action Review (AAR) that outlined the actions of the Regiment over the last few days and drew out the important lessons learned.[131] The professionalism of the soldiers and officers was once again displayed by creating this document and capturing these hard fought lessons learned. Despite the significant casualties to all ranks the survivors took on roles of more responsibility immediately.

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[129] Shane B. Schreiber, Shock Army of the British Empire…, 119
[130] The RCR War Diary 24-30 Sep 1918
[131] The RCR Narrative of Operations, 28th, 29th, 30th, September, 1918, 2

Lt Milton F. Gregg was given a rare stage to lead his company during the day of 28 September, 1918. Multiple strategic and operational lines of importance intersected ranging from the importance that the German Army placed on Cambrai to the methodology used by Sir Arthur Currie in fighting the Canadian Corps to the trust placed in Currie by Sir Douglas Haig. Gregg being a young man, who had already demonstrated his luck and courage under fire, on multiple occasions, by being recognized with a Military Cross twice, was able to once again show his courage and leadership. This time he led his company in a critical action as part of the leading tactical element in a much larger action. His company was only successful because of his actions, which in turn translates to The RCR and the 7CIB only being successful because of his actions. Finally his success can be taken a few steps further to say it enabled the 3 Cdn Div, and indeed the Canadian Corps, in surrounding and then capturing Cambrai. The capture of Cambrai denied vital ground in North West Europe to the German Army making its position untenable. Following the fall of Cambrai, the German Army would fight a rear guard action as it withdrew for almost a month before it would attempt a final stand at the Hermann line, Mount Houy, and Mons.

After the First World War Milton F. Gregg, VC, went on to serve as the Sergeant in Arms for the House of Commons from 1934 – 1944. He would then enter public life as a member of parliament representing York – Sunbury, New Brunswick for the liberal party from 1947 until he finally lost his seat in 1957. During his time in office he was a very influential figure holding a cabinet portfolio for the duration of his service in the public sector. He was the Minister of Labour, the Minister of Veterans Affairs, and the Minister of Fisheries.[132]

[132] Parliament of Canada Biography of Gregg, Hon. Maj. Milton Fowler, http://www.lop.parl.gc.ca/ParlInfo/Files/Parliamentarian.aspx?Item=a4d3c335-a113-49aa-8fcc-188edfff9c3a&Language=E&Section=ALL, accessed on 3 May 2017

Although, 28 September, 1918, is not known within the German Army with the same infamy as 8 August, 1918, the actions by the Canadian Corps maintained the momentum that ultimately shattered the German Army's resolve and capacity to continue fighting. The loss of Cambrai was a devastating blow to the German war effort in North-Western Europe, one that they would never recover from. The battle forced the German retreat that culminated infamously at Mons on 11 November. It is possible that without Lt Milton F. Gregg's actions The RCR or 7CIB would have eventually been successful in breaching the Marcoing line, and with its breach capture Cambrai. However, it is almost certain it would have cost more lives, potentially given the Germans more time to organize a defense, and the war would have continued on longer than it did. Gregg's VC citation recognizes this when it says, "this officer saved many casualties and enabled the advance to continue."[133] Not all valourous actions have positive strategic effects, but when the conditions are right, and capable leaders are empowered like Lt. Milton F. Gregg on 28 September, 1918, his valourous leadership and actions did have a strategic or operational impact.

[133] The London Gazette, Jan 1919, Issue No. 31108, 306

CHAPTER 4 – CASE STUDY ON PRIVATE ERNEST A. "SMOKEY" SMITH

The third and final case study this paper examines is Private Ernest Alvia "Smokey" Smith, VC, a tank hunter in the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada during the Second World War. His valourous tactical actions had a strategic and/or operational impact when they contributed to the overall drain of enemy resources while helping fix German forces in Italy. Smith went on to leverage the opportunity presented by his winning of the VC to enable a life of service to the Canadian Armed Forces, Canada, and the Commonwealth. Smith's life changed people, young and old, across the globe by planting the seeds of how citizenship and community service make the world a better place. This case study is based on primary source material from War Diaries along with newspaper articles and other secondary sources to illustrate Smith's actions, their operational context, and their long reaching effects. The case study will begin with a brief explanation of the state of the war effort in and around Italy, 1944. Before expanding in to Smokey's actions in Italy and later in life and the lasting affect they had on people's lives.

By 1944, France, Great Britain, and the Commonwealth have been at war with the German war machine since 1939. The German way of fighting, the "blitzkrieg," has proven to be brutally effective and for the first couple of years Germany seemed unstoppable. When Japan attacked the United States in 1941 causing devastation to the Pacific fleet it also brought the US into the war while continuing to give the Axis the appearance of a Juggernaut. Following the second battle of El Alamein in 1942 the tide finally started to shift in favour of the Allies. Allied planners were preparing for an invasion in Europe to deliver a killing blow to Germany but needed to draw German divisions away from central Europe before this could be

accomplished.[134] They selected landing a force in Sicily with the intent of toppling the Italian government, but ultimately to pull and then fix German forces into the Mediterranean. The fighting was hard and fierce as the Allies landed in Sicily and began slowly working their way up the Italian boot. With Italy surrendering in Sept 1943 the hope was that the Italians might turn and fight the Germans, or at least the German forces would take over the defensive positions. Thankfully for Allied planners the German forces immediately took over the defence of the Italian home land. Even following the fall of Rome on 5 June, 1944, the German forces showed no signs of giving the Allies any reprieve from the vicious fighting which marked the Italian campaign. They sent additional divisions to Italy in an attempt to stop the attacking Allied forces. On 6 June, 1944, the Allies were finally able to land in Normandy to take pressure off of the Russians on the Eastern front because of the destruction of German resources by the Italian campaign.[135]

The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada (Seaforth), as part of the Second Canadian Infantry Brigade (2 CIB), within the First Canadian Division (1st Cdn Div), as part of Canadian Corps, was part of the British 8th Army fighting up the Italian boot. The professionalism of the German Army that contributed greatly to their initial offensive success was just as effective in the defence. The German Army used the natural obstacles of Italy in the form of mountains and rivers to slow down the advance while they attrited the Allies. The Germans did not have the initiative and had to constantly react to the Allies as they advanced up the Italian boot. It appears the Wehrmacht used the weather to help them with the defence of Italy, planning attacks when the weather would be favourable and defense when it would not. In addition, to the natural

[134] Lee Windsor, "Overlord's Long Right Flank: The Battles for Cassino and Anzio, January-June 1944." Canada and the Second World War: Essays in Honour of Terry Copp (2013): 219-237, 4
[135] Ibid, 14-15

obstacles they fortified the peninsula along lines of razor wire, mines, trenches, bunkers, and ground emplaced tank turrets. Covering these obstacles or manning the defenses were hardened veterans from units like the German Paratrooper or 1st Fallschirmjäger Division along with the 26th Panzer Division and 29th Panzer Grenadier Divisions. Across these man-made and natural obstacles the Canadian Corps advanced. Jack Granastien and Desomond Morton describe the common sentiment of the advance saying, "Progress unfortunately was slow. The rains had come, turning the dust of summer into the mud of October and November. Tanks sank to their bellies in the ooze. The Germans, bruised though they were, remained "right foot soldiers" themselves, and the Wehrmacht had lost none of its skill in defence."[136] This slow going but steady advance is exactly what Allied planners were hoping for from the Italian campaign. It would force the Germans to react, by sending more uncommitted forces from Europe to try and defend Italy.[137]

Between June and September of 1944 the Canadian Corps fought continuous battles against consecutive German defensive lines. The lines Arezzo, Imgard, Olga, and Paula all had to be breached before the imposing Gothic Line could be reached. In turn, each line fell to the advancing Allied forces leading to a week long battle on the Gothic Line. The Canadian Corps was paid tribute by their Army Commander for the aggressive and active role they had in taking the Gothic Line, with General Hoffmeister, a former CO of the Seaforths, being singled out for his division's role.[138] The next major line of German defence was the Rimini Line, which took its name from a nearby town, and took the better part of September 1944 to breach. Upon breaching the Rimini line the Canadian Corps continued to push up the eastern edge of the Italian Peninsula

[136] J.L. Granastien, and Desmond Morton, A Nation Forged in Fire: Canadians and the Second World War 1939 – 1945. Toronto, Lester & Orpen Dennys Limited, 1989, 149
[137] Lee Windsor, "Overlord's Long Right Flank …, 6
[138] G.W. Nicholson, The Canadians in Italy 1943-1945: G W. Nicholson. Ottawa: Cloutier, 1957, 524

and by mid-October the Canadian Corps had reached the Donegaglia River and was preparing to advance and cross the Savio River. The German General attempting to slow the Allied advance was Field Marshall Kesselring who was being forced to shift his forces laterally to reinforce against breaches in his lines. Kesselring was being slowly beaten back; his only hope would be the autumn rain.[139] Nicholson describes the effect of the unusually high volume of rain that fell on the ground when he says, "The normal water gap was about 50 feet at Cesena. But the sudden spates caused by heavy rains falling over the extensive river basin could quickly produce a torrent threatening to overtop the great earthen dykes, whose crests were 300 feet apart."[140]

The Savio connected the town of Cesena to the Adriatic and was heavily defended by the Germans because it formed, along with a number of parallel flowing rivers a natural military barrier baring Allied penetration into the main Po Valley plain. The Savio bridges in the area were all destroyed by either Allied bombing or German demolition charges making it critical for the Allies to find and secure bridgeheads to cross the high-dyked river and keep up the pressure on German forces in northern Italy. The high water saturated the flood control dykes on both sides making bridge-laying difficult.[141] The first elements across the Savio River were from the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI), at roughly 1130 on 20 October, 1944. They had been tasked to attempt a small crossing to determine how much the enemy intended to contest the river. If opposition proved light, the PPCLI would continue to advance to the next river line. If the Germans revealed they wanted to fight along the Savio, the balance of 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade, the Seaforths and the Loyal Edmonton Regiment (Loyal Eddies) would join the fight, conducting a forward passage of lines on the eastern bank before moving

[139] Ibid, 525
[140] Ibid, 585
[141] Ibid.

across the river to secure the western bank and create a bridgehead.[142] The PPCLI encountered heavy resistance that evening from enemy forces well-entrenched on the west bank of the Savio and ready to fight bitterly to stop any crossing attempt. The resistance was so fierce that it forced the PPCLI to withdraw from the eastern bank of the river as well.

Lance Goddard highlights how the decision was made to move the crossing site further up river after the Seaforth's saw the fire the PPCLI encountered at their crossing site. The new site was a few hundred meters south of the where the PPCLI made their attempt.[143] By 1210, 21 October the Commanding Officer of the Seaforths issued a warning order to his companies preparing them to cross the Savio. The plan according to the Seaforth's war diary was for the Seaforths and the Loyal Eddies to cross the river at night and cut the main road west of the river. The Seaforths were to attack on the right in two phases. Phase I consisted of "B" and "D" companies crossing the river and establishing small foot holds. Once they had a secure footing, Phase II would commence with "C" and "A" companies crossing and expanding the bridgehead large enough to protect the Engineers as they built a crossing point for the battalion's support weapons and tanks. To assist "C" company in holding its ground until the crossing point could be prepared, the newly created Seaforth tank hunting platoon was attached. Dancocks describes the tank hunting platoon as, "a newly created… comprised of sixteen soldiers, equipped with four PIATs... Their tactics were simple: Hawkins anti-tank grenades would be used to immobilize the tank, which would then be knocked out by a PIAT, and the crew dispatched with

[142] Seaforth Highlanders of Canada War Diary 20 October 1944 at 1130hrs
[143] Lance Goddard, Hell & High water: Canada and the Italian Campaign. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2007, 219

Tommy guns."[144] Sections of this platoon were assigned to cover the roads leading into the battalion's defended zone on which enemy armour might approach.

By 1700 that night all the company commanders passed on their orders and regrouped at the headquarters to conduct final coordination measures, despite harassing fire from German machine guns and mortars. "B" and "D" Companies crossed their lines of departure at 2000 and were immediately engaged by heavy mortar fire. The Seaforths responded by returning mortar fire to allow the companies to gain a footing on the eastern bank. German resistance stiffened as the Loyal Eddies met heavy resistance to the south of the Seaforths and had to push another company forward. By 2330, the Seaforth "B" and "D" companies secured portions of the high flood dyke on the western bank. "C" and "A" companies along with an engineer reconnaissance party advanced to expand the bridgehead and to find a crossing point for the armoured forces. The rain increased in volume and the Savio River began to rise as "C" and "A" companies crossed. Around the same time, the engineers discovered enemy mines on the dyke banks that caused minor casualties and slowed their work. Meanwhile "C" and "A" companies reached their objectives, not long before 0230 on 22 October, and prepared for enemy counter attacks.

"C" company had the newly formed tank hunting platoon attached to it for this operation as it was expected to face the stiffest resistance. LCol H.P. "Budge" Bell-Irving, CO of the Seaforths, observed that "Getting there and staying there were two acutely different problems."[145] During this crossing the river had risen so much and the banks were so slippery that only the PIAT and anti-tank mines could be carried across. Captain George Brown remembered it was, "hard to get anything across. So they'd [the Seaforths] get over to the other

[144] Daniel G Dancocks, The D-Day Dodgers: The Canadians in Italy, 1943-1945. Toronto, Ont.: McClelland & Stewart, 1991, 363
[145] Ibid.

side without their heavy guns; all they had was their small arms. They wouldn't have their supporting guns, mortars, and they wouldn't have any vehicles to help them, and tanks couldn't get across until a bridge had been built."[146] "C" Company and the tank hunting platoon would have to hold their ground against enemy counter attacks without the benefit of friendly tanks or anti-tank guns until the engineers completed their difficult task

At the same time river crossing assaults that were taking place within 2 CIB attacked across the Savio below Cesena, the main British 8th Army assault across the upper river in the Apennine foothills met with success. In the official history of the Canadians in Italy, Nicholson writes, "Four miles downstream [north], 71 tanks of the 18th and 20th New Zealand Armoured Regiments began firing in simulated support of an infantry assault crossing north of San Martino in Fiume."[147] The 6th New Zealand Infantry Brigade and the 4th New Zealand Armoured Brigade were about a mile and four miles north of the Seaforth crossing point. The concentrated push by elements of the 8th Army would have had the effect of pulling the German forces in multiple directions. The Kiwis were not bogged down in the way that E.L.M. "Tommy" Burns, the commander of 1st Canadian Corps, remembers the ground where the 2 CIB was operating, "A great part of this area was reclaimed marsh, with a network of drainage canals banked high on the sides – and ditches, most of which became tank obstacles when it rained. And it did rain – earlier and more heavily than could have been forecast from the meteorological records."[148] Burns goes on to add "the soil was a light clay, made slippery by even a light shower. When there was much rain it became so soft that wheeled vehicles and even tanks sank deeply into it

[146] Ibid.
[147] G.W. Nicholson, The Canadians in Italy 1943-1945…, 586
[148] Eedson Louis Millard Burns, General Mud: Memoirs of Two World Wars. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1970, 208-9

and could not move."[149] To solve this problem, "the only practicable routes for movement of vehicles were the few and indifferently paved roads – and of course, the enemy could readily build a strong defence against armour which was confined to the roads."[150] Smith's VC citation describes the weather saying, "torrential rain had caused the Savio River to rise six feet in five hours and the soft vertical banks made it impossible to bridge the river."[151]

The expected German counter attack came in "C" company's area around 0230 the morning of 22 October. It began with what Goddard describes as, "three Mark V Panther tanks, two self-propelled guns [StuG assault guns based on pictures], and nearly thirty infantrymen to the Cesena-Ravenna road."[152] Although the attack had been expected it happened so quickly after "C" company secured its objective that Nicholson describes that the tank hunting platoon had "barely time... to set out and camouflage its Hawkins grenades and get its PIATs into position covering the likely approaches."[153] Smith's VC citation expands saying, "the situation appeared almost hopeless."[154] Dancocks describes the initial actions saying, "Smith hurried into a field with a PIAT team. He left a single man and a PIAT there, then crossed the road with his injured friend, Private Tennant and fetched another PIAT. The two Seaforths just got into position when the Panther approached, it's machine-guns raking the roadside ditches."[155] Dancocks description does not go into the detail of the citation, where it elaborates on the situation saying, "Under heavy fire from the approaching enemy tanks, Private Smith, showing great initiative and inspiring leadership, led his PIAT group across an open field to a position

[149] Ibid.
[150] Ibid.
[151] London Gazette, no.36849, 20 December 1944
[152] Lance Goddard, Hell & High water …, 220
[153] G.W. Nicholson, The Canadians in Italy 1943-1945…, 586
[154] London Gazette, no.36849, 20 December 1944
[155] Daniel G Dancocks, The D-Day Dodgers…, 364

from which the PIAT could best be employed."[156] The citation goes on to describe Smith, "Leaving one man on the weapon, Private Smith crossed the road with a companion, and obtained another PIAT."[157] According to multiple sources the approximate range required to ensure a total kill of an enemy tank with a PIAT was 100 yards, well inside the effective range of the Panther's pair of MG 34 machine guns. Nicholson says that, "Almost at once a Mark V came lumbering down the road, sweeping the ditches with its machine-guns, and wounding Smith's companion [Private Tennant]."[158] Dancocks captures Smith's immediate reaction, "Tennant was hit, and Smith jumped onto the road in clear view of the fifty-ton tank. At a range of only thirty feet, he fired his PIAT knocking out the Panther."[159] Nicholson continues the story saying, "the [PIAT] bomb stopped the Panther, and its driver made frantic but futile efforts to turn around and retreat. Immediately ten German infantrymen tumbled off the back of the tank and charged Smith with machine pistols and grenades."[160] Smith's reaction was immediate and, "without hesitation he moved into the centre of the road, shot down four of them with his tommy gun, and dispersed the remainder."[161]

The counter attack had just begun when Smith and the tank hunting platoon faced more German armoured fighting vehicles in the form of tanks, assault or self-propelled guns supported by infantry pressing down the road.[162] "One of the self-propelled guns was destroyed, and Smith was under intense fire as he fought beside his wounded friend. The Germans were driven back, and as another tank moved into the area to fire on the Canadians, Smith destroyed it with another

[156] London Gazette, no.36849, 20 December 1944
[157] Ibid.
[158] G.W. Nicholson, The Canadians in Italy 1943-1945…, 587
[159] Daniel G Dancocks, The D-Day Dodgers…, 364
[160] G.W. Nicholson, The Canadians in Italy 1943-1945…, 587
[161] Ibid.
[162] London Gazette, no.36849, 20 December 1944

PIAT shell."[163] Nicholson records that the counter attacking Germans realized the threat they faced and adjusted their tactics accordingly, "a second tank now opened fire from a safe distance and more Grenadiers began closing in on Smith…[who] replenishing his ammunition from his wounded comrade in the ditch he continued to protect him, fighting off the enemy with his sub-machine gun."[164] Smith's VC citation adds that while this tank was engaging from a safe distance, "Private Smith, still showing utter contempt for enemy fire, helped his wounded friend to cover and obtained medical aid for him behind a nearby building. He then returned to his position beside the road to await the possibility of a further enemy attack."[165] Eventually the Germans withdrew and "C" Company's objective and the bridgehead were made safe until reinforcements could arrive.

Smith seemingly single-handedly defeated the counter-attack, although there is no mention of him by name in the Seaforth's war diary. The war diary does mention the fierce counter-attack consisting of a troop of Panther tanks, self-propelled guns and supporting infantry which were driven off by the tank hunting platoon supported by "C" company's platoons.[166] The official history written by Nicholson credits Smith's actions along with the rest of the tank hunting platoon for the destruction of the counter attacking forces when he says, "In addition, to the tank put out of action by Smith the Seaforth platoon had knocked out with their PIATs and mines a second Panther, a half-track, a scout car and two self-propelled guns."[167] The fighting lasted for roughly four hours and had destroyed the enemy's counter attack in such an unexpected manner that it caught everyone off guard. Smith's VC citation summarizes the action as follows, "Thus, by the dogged determination, outstanding devotion to duty and superb

[163] Lance Goddard, Hell & High water…, 220
[164] G.W. Nicholson, The Canadians in Italy 1943-1945…, 587
[165] London Gazette, no.36849, 20 December 1944
[166] Seaforth Highlanders of Canada War Diary 22 October 1944 at 0610
[167] G.W. Nicholson, The Canadians in Italy 1943-1945…, 587

gallantry of this private soldier, his comrades were so inspired that the bridgehead was held firm against all enemy attacks, pending the arrival of tanks and anti-tank guns some hours later."[168] Chris Vokes, the Commander of 1st Cdn Div recalls how Smith, "personally blasted several enemy tanks off a main road, at close range, with his PIAT gun. That he was not himself blasted down in any one of the many enemy machine-guns bursts from the tanks is a minor miracle."[169] Vokes goes on to say that Smith's actions, "exemplifies what is involved in the winning of a Victoria Cross…one must not only exhibit extraordinary bravery but must effectively complete an action which has a positive, important effect on the battle. Smith's valorous little personal war did just that. The rest of us were able to Press On because of it."[170]

Smith's actions allowed the rest of the Canadian Corps to press on, 2 CIB went on to expand their bridgehead according to Dancocks, "more than a mile wide and up to 1,400 yards deep in the Seaforth sector. But everyone – two full battalions – on the far side of the Savio was cut off, because it was proving impossible to build a bridge in the face of near-flood conditions."[171] This situation was a cause for great concern at both the divisional and corps levels. The largest gun that had been ferried across the Savio were 2-pounder anti-tank guns which according to the Seaforth's war diary went to "A" and "C" companies.[172] The underlying issue was the lack of a crossing site within the protection provided by the bridgehead. Without a crossing point to begin building a bridge it was impossible to send heavy guns, vehicles or tanks across the Savio river to support the troops already across. In the Seaforth's war diary it is possible to see the frustration of the author who on the morning of 22 October records how the engineers could not find a crossing point and two days of work will be required to build a bridge,

[168] London Gazette, no.36849, 20 December
[169] Chris Vokes, with John P. Maclean, Vokes: My Story. Ottawa: Gallery Books, 1985, 181
[170] Ibid.
[171] Daniel G. Dancocks, The D-Day Dodgers…, 365
[172] Seaforth Highlanders of Canada War Diary 23 October 1944 at 0515

only to record on the morning of 23 October that bridging operations are to be discontinued due to the undermined banks.[173]

Other elements of the 8th Army were having greater success up river. The British established a crossing at the main highway abutments at Cesena, in support of the Polish and V Corps crossings up stream. The Germans would have to withdraw or be flanked. Nicolson describes the initial indications that the Germans had shifted position when he writes, "signs of the impending retirement were apparent on the 1st Canadian Division's front on the 23rd. The 26th Panzer Division's forward zone was inactive, and in the afternoon German shelling of the river ceased sufficiently for the 3rd Field Company R.C.E. to start bridging operations."[174] A patrol from the West Nova Scotia Regiment (West Novas), also from 1st Cdn Div, determined late 23 October that the Germans had withdrawn completely leading to a slow pursuit on 24 October.[175] Goddard tells us that, "the Germans began pulling back to their defensive line, which spanned the Italian peninsula from Bologna in the west to Commacchio in the east. Americans were pressing hard towards Bologna forcing German reinforcements to be committed from the east coast."[176] The slow withdrawal under contact by the Germans is exactly what General Brooke's was hoping for. Canadian Historian Lee Windsor describes Brooke's "strategic vision" for the Italian campaign as the intent of "drawing in and bleeding German reserve strength."[177] Historian and Victoria Cross recipient Sir John Smythe, VC, describes the results of Smokey's actions saying, "No further attack developed and the battalion was able to consolidate the bridgehead position so vital to the success of the whole operation, which led to the eventual capture of San

[173] Seaforth Highlanders of Canada War Diary 22 October 1944 and 23 October 1944
[174] G.W. Nicholson, The Canadians in Italy 1943-1945…, 592
[175] Daniel G. Dancocks, The D-Day Dodgers…, 366
[176] Lance Goddard, Hell & High water…, 221
[177] Lee Windsor, "Overlord's Long Right Flank: The Battles for Cassino and Anzio, January-June 1944." Canada and the Second World War: Essays in Honour of Terry Copp (2013): 219-237, 6

Giorgio Di Cesena and a further advance to the Ronco River."[178] The prolific historical and fictional author James Holland expands on this idea writing, "on 25 October, Kesselring authorized a withdrawal that von Vietinghoff had already begun – this time some twelve miles to the River Ronco."[179] With the Germans withdrawing Goddard goes on to say that, "by 25 Oct the crossings over the Savio were secure and the pursuit to the Ronco River had begun."[180] All of these actions are designed to ensure that the Allies continue their slow march north, while the German forces in Italy were never given a reprieve and were destroyed forcing the deployment of fresh forces from Europe and Poland, aiding both the landings at Normandy and the Eastern front.[181]

King George VI personally decorated Smokey Smith with the Victoria Cross on 18 December, 1944, at Buckingham Palace.[182] By this time, Smith had established a history of trouble with authority and a tendency for having too much of a good time. He had been promoted and demoted between Sergeant and Private, mostly for indulging in too much to drink. Smith remembers LCol Bell-Irving, a fellow British Columbian, telling him he had a serious choice ahead of him. Smith recalls Bell saying, "You can go into any Legion in the country and men will buy you drinks to hear about what you did to win your VC, and you will end up a drunken sod. Or you can become a national heritage and a shining example to the youth of Canada. Serve your country well and honestly, my friend."[183] Smokey was not only advised about the choice of service he now faced by his CO, but he was also asked directly by the Queen Mother. David

[178] John Smythe, The story of the Victoria Cross. …, 411
[179] James Holland, Italy's Sorrow: A year of war, 1944 – 1945. Harper Collins Publishers, 2008, 418
[180] Lance Goddard, Hell & High water…, 221
[181] Lee Windsor, "Overlord's Long Right Flank: The Battles for Cassino and Anzio, January-June 1944." Canada and the Second World War: Essays in Honour of Terry Copp (2013): 219-237, 14-15
[182] John Smythe, The story of the Victoria Cross…, 411
[183] Thomas Glen Lockhart, Last Man Standing: The Life of Smokey Smith, VC, 1914 – 2005. Victoria: Friesen Press, 2013, 51

Carrig writing for *The Province* following speaking with Smith wrote, "On that day [18 December, 1944], Smokey pledged to her [the Queen Mother] he would always show up for military or government events when called on. It was a promise made by a man known for his lack of respect for authority."[184] Smith was a man of his word and upon returning to Vancouver after the war he was featured in government advertising to sell war bonds.[185] In addition, he flew to London, England every two years at the expense of the British Government to meet with the Queen and other members of an elite fraternity, winners of the Victoria Cross.[186]

Years later, when the Korean War broke out from 1950 – 1953 Canada once again called for volunteers for the army. Smokey immediately answered the call, re-enrolling with the expectation that he would once again be facing the enemy on the front lines. Unfortunately for Smith this was not to be the case and he would later say, "I joined up to fight and never would have re-enlisted if I'd known otherwise."[187] Smith was promoted to Sergeant and assigned to both training and organizing the young soldiers destined to fight on the Korean peninsula. Smokey excelled in training the new recruits and passed on a great deal of Canadian traditions and military experience both on and off the battlefield before retiring in 1964.[188] Following his retirement Smith increased his list of recurring public service commitments beyond his bi-annual trips to Buckingham Palace.

Smith's other commitments grew as numerous as they were diverse. He spoke to Canada's youth about the fundamental Canadian values like service before self, unity, and

[184] David Carrig, "A hero keeps his promise" The Province, 1 May 2005
[185] David Carrig, "Forgotten landing" The Vancouver Courier, 16 July 2003
[186] Ibid.
[187] Thomas Glen Lockhart, Last Man Standing…, 49
[188] Ibid, 50

citizenship, and was often interviewed for high school papers.[189] Carrig points out that, "On Remembrance Day, Smith is usually in Ottawa for the national ceremony, while the walls of his television room are covered with photographs of him shaking hands with the Queen Mother…and other members of the royal family, including Princess Margaret…the Queen and Prince Phillip."[190] Thomas Lockhart's father served with Smokey and Thomas was so enamored by Smith after meeting him at their local Legion that he later wrote *Last Man Standing: The Life of Smokey Smith, VC, 1914 – 2005* in an attempt to capture the impact Smith had on so many lives. Lockhart says, "Smokey gave solidly and unstintingly of his time and energy representing Canadian service personnel, veterans, British Columbians, and Canadians in general at literally countless historic and commemorative events."[191]

Smith was a staunch supporter of the Legion becoming an Honorary President for Life of the British Columbia/Yukon branch[192] and a Pukka Sapper for the Canadian Military Engineers.[193] In addition, to becoming an Honorary President, Smith attended ceremonies big and small to spread his message of Canadian values. Karin Mark writing for the *Maple Ridge Pitt Meadows* talks about how Smokey rode into town on, "The 180-seat Car CP 102 bearing the name Ernest "Smokey" Smith, VC [as it] made a 20-minute stop at the Port Haney station to a reception arranged by the local Royal Canadian Legion branch 88."[194] Smokey also did a considerable amount of work for the Department of Veteran Affairs. Smith was a key part of the Canadian delegation to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission which was responsible for returning the body of the Unknown Soldier back to Ottawa before its consecration and

[189] Thomas Glen Lockhart, Last Man Standing…, 51
[190] David Carrig, "Forgotten landing" The Vancouver Courier, 16 July 2003
[191] Thomas Glen Lockhart, Last Man Standing…, 50
[192] Ibid, 51
[193] The Canadian Military Engineers Association https://cmea-agmc.ca/pukka-sapper-sgt-ernest-alvia-smoky-smith-vc-cm-obc-cd-retd accessed 27 April 2017
[194] Karin Mark, "Victoria Cross recipient visits Port Haney," Maple Ridge Pitt Meadows News, 3 December 2003

internment in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.[195] Following the final laying to rest of the Unknown Soldier, Smith despite having fought in Italy, traveled that fall to Hong Kong for another event honouring veterans. He would then be preparing to travel to France and Belgium in support of Veteran Affairs.[196] Smith would continue to travel across the globe whenever the country asked, participating in the Battle of Vimy Ridge's 50th Anniversary, along with the 50th and 60th Anniversaries of the D-day landings in Normandy. He acted as an ambassador for Canada to countries like Japan and Burma during ceremonies when he was invited.[197] In a very real way, Smith became the representative of all Canadian veterans.

Smith's selfless commitment of time was recognized by the Government of Canada when he was appointed to the Order of Canada on 15 November, 1995. The citation reads:

> One of Canada's Victoria Cross recipients, he has been a life-long goodwill ambassador, representing the country with distinction. A participant in commemorative events and ceremonies around the world, especially during the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, he is greatly respected by people from all walks of life as a champion of the rights and memories of veterans.[198]

He was also recognized by the Royal Military College of Canada when he was awarded a honourary doctorate in military studies in January of 2001. Smokey was committed to the service before self, traveling to Italy until the year before he died. Lockhart recalls, "His last visit in 2004 to Cesena he was treated like royalty but still didn't let his accomplishments change the man he was."[199]

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[195] Thomas Glen Lockhart, Last Man Standing…, 51
[196] Bill Cooney, ""Smokey" Smith remembered locally," The Saint Croix Courier, 16 August 2005
[197] Thomas Glen Lockhart, Last Man Standing…, 52
[198] Governor General of Canada's website https://www.gg.ca/honour.aspx?id=6849&t=12&ln=Smith accessed 27 April 2017
[199] Thomas Glen Lockhart, Last Man Standing…, 52

Upon Smokey's death in 2005 the Prime Minister of Canada, Paul Martin said, "Mr Smith inspired fellow Canadians everywhere – in action and on the home front. To generations of Canadians Smokey Smith stood for courage and resolve at a time of great need, an example of strength of character, loyalty and duty."[200] Smith's body laid in state on Parliament Hill on 11 August, 2005, an honour that is normally reserved for senior government officials, before being transported back to the Seaforth's Armoury for another day of lying in state before being buried on 13 August.[201] Stephen Thorne writing for the *Globe and Mail* after Smokey's death captures beautifully the sentiment that, "His actions that rainy night, when he single-handedly fought off German tanks and dozens of troops on a road beside the Savio River, were hailed as an inspiration to all his countrymen for time immemorial."[202]

Smith's actions on the night of 21-22 October, 1944, were incredibly brave as he risked great personal danger to defend his wounded comrade and his unit's tenuous bridgehead. His actions had a strategic impact through defeating an overwhelming counter attack, and contributing to Eighth Army's wider operational containment efforts in northern Italy, pinning and draining enemy resources and preventing their movement to more decisive theatres. Smokey continued to have a national impact through his life of service and involvement in various organizations, his countless hours supporting, mentoring, and encouraging Canada's youth, and as an ambassador for Canadians and their Armed Forces.

[200] Peter O'Neil, "Military funeral planned for last Victoria Cross winner" National Post, 4 August 2005
[201] National Post Obituary 9 August 2005
[202] Stephen Thorne, "Ernest (Smoky) Smith, Victoria Cross Winner 1914 – 2005" Globe and Mail, 4 Aug 2005

CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION

Although the requirements for the Victoria Cross are still the same today as when they were initiated, it has become increasingly difficult to earn one since the introduction of the unique Canadian honours and awards system. Had this system been in place in 1914, many early Canadian Victoria Cross recipients might have received lesser decorations in recognition for their actions.

In summary, the first case study focused on Captain William A. "Billy" Bishop, VC, who flew scout airplanes during the First World War. Bishop was a flight leader who planned and then executed a daring early morning raid on a German aerodrome. Bishop's actions on 2 June, 1917, when he flew alone over enemy lines before dawn to find and then attack enemy aircraft was superbly courageous. Bishop's actions raised the morale of the Royal Flying Corps, the British Expeditionary Forces, and the Dominion at a time when each was in desperate need of a hero. Bishop served again in the Second World War, helped create the RCAF, and the ICAO. He also inspired a change in the way airplanes were used to fight wars and the importance of air superiority, which continues to this day. Bishop's actions definitely had a positive strategic or operational impact on the First World War and beyond.

The second case study examined Lieutenant Milton F. Gregg, VC, who led a company of The RCR during the Hundred Days Offensive. Gregg's company was the leading edge of the BEF during the final assault on Cambrai. Gregg's actions on 28 September, 1918, were incredibly brave. He single handedly found a gap in the defensive wire and led his company through allowing them to advance. With ammunition low and the enemy closing in, Gregg returned back through the wire to retrieve more ammunition and grenades. He then returned to his company allowing them to continue the assault. All of this was done despite being wounded

several times. Gregg's actions contributed to the speed with which Cambrai was liberated after four long years of German occupation. Cambrai, due to its rail nodes, was so critical to the German war effort in north-western Europe that it acted like a lynch pin for the Hindenburg line. Its loss, and the casualties suffered there, dealt a crippling blow to the German war effort and directly contributed to Berlin seeking an Armistice. Gregg would continue to serve Canada in the House of Commons as the Sergeant at Arms during and after the Second World War, followed by holding the seat for York – Sunbury, New Brunswick. While acting as a Member of Parliament Gregg was also a cabinet minister for three different portfolios. Gregg's actions had a positive and definite strategic and operational impact on the First World War and beyond.

The third and final case study examined Private Ernest A. "Smokey" Smith, VC, who was a tank hunter in the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada during the Second World War. Smokey as part of the tank hunting platoon was the only anti-tank defence the Seaforths had protecting their bridgehead across the Savio River. Smith's actions on 21-22 October, 1944, where he acted like a one man army engaging, destroying, or driving off tanks, self-propelled guns, and a platoon of infantry is what legends are made of. Smith stopped the enemy's counter attack with such violence and in such an unexpected manner he drained significantly more resources from the German defence than anyone anticipated helping contribute to the overall theatre plan of holding German divisions in Italy. Smokey re-enrolled in the Armed Forces again during Korea when he worked as trainer and organizer for soldiers deploying. When Smith finally took off the uniform he would continue to serve Canada as a good will ambassador all over the world and to Canadians from their veterans and Armed Forces. His message of Canadian values, citizenship, and community service was being spread until just before his death. Smith's actions had a

strategic and operational impact on the battlefield in 1944 and continue to have an impact to this day.

This paper demonstrated in all three of these case studies how the valourous tactical actions had strategic or operational impact and contributed to the Allied final victories in 1918 and 1945. It has expanded the narrative beyond the heroic actions to ensure the readers can appreciate the larger theater, operational, or strategic contexts in which these actions occurred. It is clear in all three cases that junior leaders can change the course of a battle or campaign and even affect the profession of arms itself. The three men considered here all survived to live full lives of service to others, offering some clue about their spirt and leadership. Field Marshal Montgomery once said, "Though other considerations have their importance, the one, dominant factor in winning a battle is morale; and the VC is the outcome, as well as the outward symbol, of a high state of morale in the individual and nearly always in the unit also. Men who win the VC certainly help to win battles." [203]

[203] John MacFarlane, Triquet's Cross: A Study of Military Heroism. Montreal: MQUP, 2009. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed March 14, 2017), 58

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