

# An unusual farmer: Brigadier-General Dennis C. Draper, C.M.G., D.S.O. & bar



Sergeant D.C. Draper and his team from the *Victoria Rifles*, winners of the Caron Cup 1908 – a national target-shooting competition between militia units (photo BCHS)

**By Jocelyn Vachon**

**A**t the time of the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Canada was propelled onto the international stage. The Sutton region indubitably reflected the Canadian fervor for the war effort at that time. Today, all that seems left are somewhat forgotten memorials in Europe and Canada, bearing the names of Suttonites that paid the ultimate price. As for all of us, whether we realize it or not, we are still experiencing many of the positive and negative repercussions of that conflict.

Among several of the notable local figures that gained distinction during that unparalleled period was Dennis Colburn Draper from Sutton Junction. Draper's name appears no less than 8 times in the official *London Gazette* for devotion and bravery in combat. What were the exploits that attracted so many citations? What were his motivations? How did this farmer become a Brigadier-General? Did he survive the war? Let us examine the history.

The descendants of French Huguenots that had immigrated to the USA in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Drapeau family (renamed Draper in America) settles in Sutton around 1840. Dennis, the middle child between two sisters, is born in 1875 to John and Harriet Draper.

Industrious by nature, the Draper family quickly builds a prosperous mixed farming operation in the area. After first graduating from Sutton High School, Dennis later studies Law at McGill University in Montreal. His love of the outdoors and his admiration of the military, however, cut his law studies short and he quickly follows his dreams of a military life by joining the militia of the *Victoria Rifles* of Montreal and the 43<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of Ottawa.

A few years later, Dennis returns home to Sutton Junction to take over the family farming operation. In 1911, he becomes a Major and Musketry-Instructor of a local cavalry unit - the *13<sup>th</sup> Scottish Light Dragoons* of Waterloo. This cavalry unit has several Suttonites amongst its ranks and a Squadron is based in Sweetsburg (Cowansville), conveniently just 6 miles from Draper's home. Still single at age 38 years old, Draper is a handsome solidly built man for his era (5'-9" and about 180 lbs.) that is both devoted to his farming and militia life.

In August 1914, Europe explodes into a war that most perceive as an inevitable result to the rising military tensions between powerful nations. Draper's reputation as an elite sharpshooter brings him to the Valcartier Training Camp in November 1914 as a Shooting-Instructor assigned to



Major Draper and Officers of the *13<sup>th</sup> Scottish Light Dragoons*, a local militia unit. Lieutenant-Colonel Baker is 5th from left – bottom row. Young Lieutenant Norman M. MacDonald top-right (photo BCHS)

the newly formed 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division. Although Draper will be considered an authority in small arms weaponry throughout the war, will his ambitions be met by simply staying in Canada and training recruits?

A first unit of volunteers is raised in the Eastern Townships in May of 1915 - The *5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Mounted Rifles (5<sup>th</sup> CMR)*. Dennis C. Draper is among these volunteers and is given the rank of Major. His Commander is the 37 years old Honorable Harold Baker from Sweetsburg. Baker is a lawyer, militiaman as well as representative of Brome County in the Canadian Parliament. What would drive Draper to volunteer for military service at age 40? Single-minded patriotism? Social pressure or perhaps the fact that he is single? From the few written records that he leaves, emerges the image of a sensitive, patriotic man with the greatest sense of duty.

Major Draper and the 600 men of the *5<sup>th</sup> CMR* follow a rudimentary preparation program for a few weeks in Sherbrooke. (A certain



Major Draper, his Squadron of the 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Mounted Rifles and his horse, *Black Cherry*, Sherbrooke, summer 1915 (photo BCHS)

percentage of them have basic military training from local militia) before leaving for England on July 18<sup>th</sup> aboard the *Hesperian*, arriving 9 days later.

During the voyage, Draper's favorite horse "Black Cherry" proves to be an excitable horse that only Draper can control.

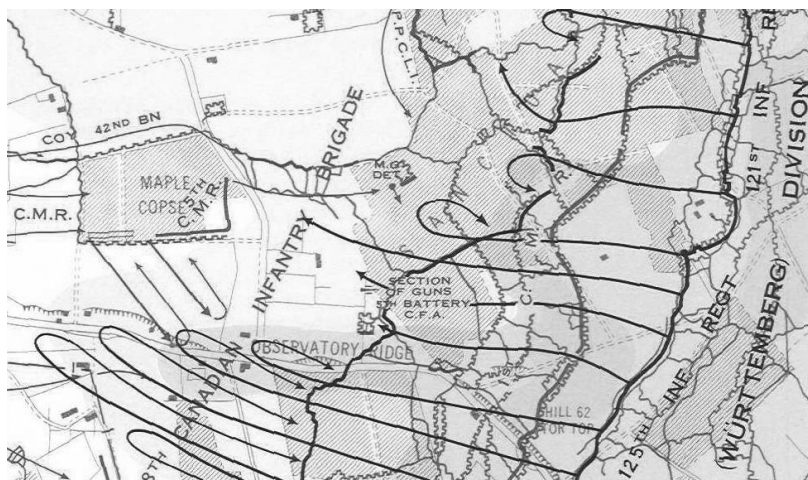
The deterioration to trench warfare of the whole Western Front in 1915 diminishes the need for cavalry units. *The 5<sup>th</sup> CMR* troopers graciously relinquish their "mounts", and agree to serve in the Infantry.

*The 5<sup>th</sup> CMR* becomes part of the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade. The 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade consisted of 4 battalions (*1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Mounted Rifles* respectively, each battalion now 1200 men strong). The 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade was part of the newly formed 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division, which included three Infantry Brigades plus all its services (artillery, engineers, general services, Headquarters, etc.) bringing its total strength to 15,000 men.

Draper arrives in France, the country of his ancestors on October 24<sup>th</sup> 1915. With his men, he quickly adjusts to this war of attrition, facing an enemy that is often only a few hundred feet away on the other side of the infamous *No Man's Land*. In Belgium, French and British troops are desperately holding on to an area called the *Ypres Salient* (named after the old city). The Ypres Salient is the last sector of Belgium still under their control. The Canadians are given the task of defending a stretch of small hills overlooking the *Flanders fields*, East of Ypres.

A massive attack is expected from the Germans at any time on this vital sector and on May 19, 1916, during one of many skirmishes, Draper loses a young Lieutenant when a shell lands on the Battalion HQ. Killed is Norman M. MacDonald, an electrical engineer in civilian life, born and raised in Sutton, son of the local doctor <sup>1</sup>.

On June 2<sup>nd</sup> 1916, after several weeks of planning, the Germans open the most violent bombardment seen so far during the war on the *Mount Sorrel* area, followed by the explosion of 4 underground mines. In 4 hours, the first defensive line occupied by the *1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> CMR* is basically blown out. Draper and the *5<sup>th</sup> CMR* are in the second defensive line at *Maple Copse*, about 500 meters behind. In early afternoon, while the *5<sup>th</sup> CMR* are recovering from the previous bombing, *Wurtemberg Regiments* charge the Canadian positions from behind a smoke screen. After quickly overrunning the badly churned first defensive line and taking *Observatory Ridge*, all that is really standing in their way to Ypres are the *PPCLI* <sup>2</sup> and the *5<sup>th</sup> CMR*. When German units come into sight, our Townships and Maritime troopers of the *5<sup>th</sup> CMR* are awaiting for them with hopeless determination, ready to fight for every single inch of ground. With their artillery support, the Germans will try to force their way further on several occasions into the *5<sup>th</sup> CMR* lines, but with no success...



Units' movements during the early part of the *Battle of Mount Sorrel*, June 1916. 5<sup>th</sup> CMR defensive position center-left (Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War- NAC)

What is Draper's reaction during this unprecedented assault? This was no summer training with the *Scottish Light Dragoons* of Waterloo in the pastoral fields of Brome County! Twice, Major Draper guides his troopers on a vital strong-point that overlooks a lightly held terrain to repulse charging troops, between their sector and the *PPCLI*. Together, they hold off the enemy, thanks to their very effective gunfire: the shooting-instructor had done a good job... In the evening, Lieutenant-Colonel Baker is mortally injured<sup>3</sup>. Draper, ignoring a wound to the face, transports his friend to the back, but in vain. He then spontaneously takes over command in the general confusion and succeeds with the men, in maintaining the defensive line. The fighting continues with few intermissions for another day...

Without a single heavy machine-gun available at *Maple Copse*, the fact that the 5<sup>th</sup> CMR fended-off the enemy demonstrated an uncommon know-how for citizen soldiers. For his courage and



leadership during that day, Draper receives the Distinguish Service Order Medal (DSO), the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest British military decoration. He is also promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel to command the Battalion. The outcome of such courage for the 5<sup>th</sup> CMR: 59 killed <sup>4</sup>, 272 wounded and 5 missing-in-action out of 650 men on-duty.

Canadian troops move to Albert where they will be drawn into the bloodiest battle in human history: *the Battle of the Somme*, in the North-East of France. The 5<sup>th</sup> CMR commanded by Draper, is part of the massive attack of September 15<sup>th</sup>, along with fellow Canadians, New-Zealanders, Scots and other British troops. The battle on the Flers-Courcelette axis remains famous for the introduction of tanks. Men of the 5<sup>th</sup> CMR are part of the first attacking wave at 06:15AM, preceded by a new type of bombardment: the *rolling barrage*. Draper and his men quickly take their objective, a 1000-foot section of *Sugar Trench*,



The infamous *Mouquet Farm*, a few hundred meters away from *Sugar Trench*. Taken in part by the 5<sup>th</sup> CMR on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1916 (photo J.V. – 2003)

after short but violent close-quarter combats against the German *89<sup>th</sup> Guards Reserve Brigade*.

Combats continue for his troops on October 1<sup>st</sup>. *5<sup>th</sup> CMR* men succeed in occupying a section of *Regina Trench* for several hours in contrast to the remaining of the Canadian Corps. The two attacks cost 129 killed <sup>5</sup> and 374 wounded in his battalion, an excruciating sacrifice, but a lot less than most other Canadian Battalions. Fighting ends in mid-November as winter settles in.

Draper finds himself for the winter months at the foot of the German fortress of Vimy Ridge. The 1916-17 winter is especially cold in Europe, even for Canadians! Consequently, he is admitted to the Hospital on February 2<sup>nd</sup> for treatment of bronchitis. Luckily, he recovers promptly.

During the famous battle of Vimy Ridge in early April 1917, Draper and the *5<sup>th</sup> CMR* act as supporting troops during that unprecedented Canadian victory, mopping-up small groups of belligerents left by the advancing troops as well as supplying night patrols later, to test the enemy lines <sup>6</sup>. Draper receives the high honor of being *Mentioned-in-Dispatch* by the Field-Marshal of British Armies, Sir Douglas Haig, for his relentless devotion to duty during those days. The reputation of Canadians as *shock troops* is now established. At 42 years old, the citizen of Sutton Junction could not even imagine the bitter fighting that lay ahead of him and his men. ●

*To be continued...*