Just A Few Lines

A Memoir of

William Thomas Miles

from The Great War

1916-1919

Narrative Compiled by

Thomas N. Miles and William J. Miles
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Preface

This narrative memoir is based on the collection of letters and documents that Tom and Bill Miles have had for over 30 years. There are 48 letters. Except for a letter written by Will’s Aunt Emily to Will’s father, one written to Will by his cousin Maud and one addressed to an unnamed aunt, all the letters were written by Will to his mother. Her letters to him and letters from a younger brother, John, apparently did not survive the war. Mary Tweedie Miles, Will’s mother, kept his letters and at some point gave them to Will’s wife, Jean Hay Miles. After Jean’s death in 1978, Tom and Bill divided up the letters and other documents. Along with the letters were telegrams, field postcards, a pay book, a discharge certificate, a letter of attestation, shot records, and a will. During the summer of 2008, all the separated materials were brought back together. Tom typed all 48 letters, which Bill took back to Colorado. In 2012, Bill finished the following narrative account.

Tom and Bill Miles Summer of 2010.
In Flanders Fields

By: Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae, MD
(1872-1918) Canadian Army

In Flanders Fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.
William Thomas Miles (1899-1969), son of Arthur and Mary Tweedie Miles, was born in Scarborough Junction, on the eastern edge of Toronto, Ontario, Canada September 19, 1899. At age 10, Will, as he was known in his youth, moved with his large family to Belleville, Ontario. Will was the second born and oldest son of what was to eventually become a family of eight boys and three girls. At 16, lying about his age, he signed a letter of attestation that would change his life.

World War I, known then as the Great War, had been raging for a year and a half by February of 1916. This conflict triggered changes that reverberated for the rest of the 20th century. British self-governing dominions such as Canada, New Zealand and Australia would come into their own as a result of this catastrophic war. While Canada governed its internal affairs under a British form of parliamentary democracy, foreign policy came from Whitehall (Center of British Government in London). When Britain declared war on Germany on August 4, 1914, Canada and the rest of the British Empire automatically joined the conflict.
By October 1914, Canadian troops began arriving in Plymouth, England. In February of 1915, Canadian troops joined the Western Front in Belgium and France. Baptized by fire in the Second Battle of Ypres in April of 1915, Canadian troops were also among the first to experience gas warfare. Prior to 1915, the French had used forms of tear gas but Germany introduced lethal, chemical warfare. First using chlorine and later mustard gas, the Germans skirted Hague Conventions, which outlawed these weapons. This new form of warfare “evoked peculiar horror, and made conditions for the front line soldiers even more difficult.” Will would endure this difficulty in 1918.

World War I had been raging for over a year by 1916. In February, claiming he was 17, Will swore his willingness to serve in the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force:

for the term of one year or during the war now existing between Great Britain and Germany should that war last longer than one year, and for six months after the termination of that war provided His Majesty should so long require my services.

2 Ibid., 152.
as “the only time you are warm is when you get into bed.” Thereafter, an aversion to cold may have begun with these winters spent in France. As an adult, Will slept with flannel sheets and blankets even during summer months.

By February of 1917, he finally received mail and a box from home. Characteristic of his life-long, wry, humor, Will told his mother that “the box that I got tonight is eat up now and you can send another as soon as you like.” Throughout the war he would receive numerous packages from five of his mother’s sisters: Agnes Tweedie (1877-1954), Martha Tweedie (1883-1952), Margaret Tweedie Craven (1872-1958), Janet Tweedie Carter (1881-1962), and Helen Tweedie Wilson (1870-1956). His home church in Belleville, St. Andrew’s Presbyterian, would also shore up his morale with comforts from the home front.

At this time, it appeared as if he had not seen combat. The February 22 letter said he had “not been up to the line yet.” This is somewhat confusing as the Regimental History for this period documented that his battalion, the 4th C.M.R., was on the lines of the Vimy Front by November 30. The Regimental History does label this a “quiet” period. It mentioned only “seven men wounded were the total casualties, a fact indicative of the quietness of this sector.” Marching and training for the coming battle at Vimy consumed most of the soldiers’ time. Perhaps another enemy, lice, was a greater concern as Will’s March 11 letter poignantly described:

There is one thing that bothers a fellow over here and that is the lice you get lots of them and they stick right with you. We get a bath and a change of clothes every once in a while but you soon get lousy again.

April of 1917 found Will in the trenches where he remained until his gassing in August of 1918. Horrors seeped from his letters. Harry Rowe, a fellow in the battalion “got part of his nose knocked off and a shrapnel wound in the side.” He was able to write this April 2 letter because they had been rotated out of the line and “billeted in huts.” Food and hunger issues beleaguered him as he told his mother he did get hot meals when out of the

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10 Letter 6, February 2, 1917.
13 Ibid., 45
14 Ibid., 47.
15 Letter 9, March 11, 1917.
16 Letter 11, April 2, 1917.
17 Ibid.

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When Your Number’s Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War by Desmond Morton

“Living and sleeping close to the ground meant that men were seldom clean and frequently infected with lice. Not until 1918 were effective methods of disinfection were introduced, largely because Canadian doctors proved lice carried the infection of Trench Fever.”
Dear Mother,

Just a few lines to let you know I am well hoping everybody is the same at home. You will be surprised to hear that I am going to France. The first draft goes out of this battalion tomorrow and I and [sic] going with it. Bill Hogan that lived over on Baldwin St is going to [sic]. Harvey Anderson was booked to go to but he got turned down. There is another draft going to follow us in a week or so and I don’t think it will be long before the whole Battalion is broken up and go over. I seen some more of the fellows over here that I knew in Belleville and I seen Dick Ashley from the G.T.R. shop. He has been over to the front and wounded but he has to go back soon now as he is better again. We don’t get any more to eat now than we did when we landed here. The other night for supper here we got a little jam and four little arrowroot biscuits with a little tea but I guess we will get a little more when we get to France. Spike Gorman got a letter from Frank Elvins a couple of days ago and he is out of the hospital again. He says he is going to get married but I don’t know whether he means it or not. I heard some of the fellows say they seen Clarence Ramsey when we were up to London on pass. Well I guess this is all for this time. I will write as soon as I get in France and give you my address. I think we are going in with the 4th CMR. I guess any letters that you have sent will get me where you addressed them to.

from

Your Son
W. T. Miles

(Why the 4th C.M.R.? Because the 4th with 1200 men had entered into the Area called “The Somme” in Sept. of 1916 and left it on Oct. 14, 1916 with over 1,000 men killed, wounded or missing. What was left of the 4th marched to Vimy and on November 29, 1916 father joined the battalion on the front at Vimy Ridge.)
Dear Mother,

Just a few lines to let you know I am well and getting along right. Hoping everyone at home is the same. I have not received any letters from home yet nor any letters. I guess the were lost as else they have been sent to the wrong address. I got a letter from Meg [Wolfwell] the other night and was still in England, but he said he would likely come to France after New Year. He is probably at present time it isn't very warm here. I can tell you. It snowed over here a few days ago and turned pretty cold everything froze up. We are billeted in a barn just now and the only time you are warm is when you get into bed. Then you have to get used in the
morning. My address is 1½ to 2½ S. Miles # 68 66 42, 4th E. M. P. Grave.
There was a bunch of Belleville fellows passed through the same
place we were in a couple of days ago but I didn’t get a chance to see
any of them as we were doing
some shooting on a range. We got
paid here again to day we get three
dollars all the same you get a
month here is six dollars. Well I
guess this is all for this time hoping
to hear from you soon.

Your Son,
Will.
Dear Mother,

Just a few lines to let you know I am well and getting along alright hoping everyone at home is the same. I have not received any letters from home yet nor any boxes. I guess they were lost or else they have been sent to the wrong battalion from Bramshott. I got a letter from Percy Follwell the other night. He was still in England but he said he was likely to come to France after New Years. I suppose it is pretty cold in Canada at the present time. It isn’t very warm here I can tell you. It snowed over here a few days ago and turned pretty cold. Everything is froze up. We are billeted in a barn just now and the only time you are warm is when you get into bed. Then you hate to get out in the morning. My address is Pte. W.T. Miles #636642, 4th C.M.R. France. There was a bunch of Belleville fellows passed through the same place we were in a couple of days ago. But I didn’t get a chance to see any of them as we were doing some shooting on a range. We got paid here again today. We got three dollars. All the money you get a month is six dollars. Well I guess this is all for this time hoping to hear from you soon. from

Your Son,
Will
Dear Mother,

I received your letter dated Jan. 5th a couple of nights ago and I received the box tonight. I was certainly glad to hear from you this is only the second letter I have had from you. I did not get the box you sent for Christmas nor the money you sent. I hope the money soon gets here if it ever can. I did not get the box Aunt Agnes sent either. I got a parcel from the Lafees of the church with a pound of family a pencil and a bar of chocolate in it. The box that I got tonight is eat up now and you can send another one over just like. My address is Pte. 7755 Mils #636642 4th Pl r France. I got another letter from Greg full and trying to get a continuation on.
Dear Mother,

I received your letter dated Jan. 5 a couple of nights ago and I received the box tonight. I was certainly glad to here [sic] from you this is only the second letter I have had from you. I did not get the box you sent for Christmas nor the money you sent I hope the money soon gets here if it ever comes. I did not get the box Aunt Agnes sent either. I got a parcel from the Ladies of the church with a pad of paper a pencil and a box of chocolates in it. The box that I got tonight is eat up now and you send another as soon as you like. My address is Pte. W.T. Miles #636642, 4th C.M.R. France. I got another letter from Percy Follwell he is going to get a commission in...

(The rest of letter #6 is missing.)
Dear Mother, —

Just a few lines to let you know I am well, hoping this finds you the same. I received your letter dated Jan. 81st a couple of nights ago and the box the night before. The box was all smashed up and everything was all stuck together.
cigarettes were all mixed up with the cakes the only thing that was any good was the pudding in the can so when you send another parcel try and put it in a tin box.

My address is Pte. W.T. Miles # 636642 D Co. 4th E.M.P. France

Well we have not been up the line yet but I guess we will go in with the battalion next time. You asked how we live in France and were we
sleep. We sleep in barns and old houses but it isn't too bad as we generally have two blankets a piece and a couple of us sleep together. We don't get all we want to eat but we do pretty good. I haven't seen anything of Mr. Hodge yet. Well I guess this is all for this time hoping to hear from you again soon.

From your loving son

Well
Dear Mother,

Just a few lines to let you know I am well hoping this finds you the same. I received your letter dated Jan. 31st a couple of nights ago and the box the night before. The box was all smashed up and everything was all stuck together. The cigarettes were all mixed up with the cakes the only thing that was any good was the pudding in the can so when you send another parcel try and put it in a tin box. My address is Pte. W.T. Miles #636642 D Co. 4th C.M.R. France. Well we have not been up the line yet but I guess we will go in with the battalion next time. You asked how we live in France and were [sic] we slept. We sleep in barns and old houses but it isn’t too bad as we generally have two blankets a piece and a couple of us sleep together. We don’t get all we want to eat but we do pretty good. I haven’t seen anything of Mr. Hodge yet. Well I guess this is all for this time hoping to hear from you again soon.

from
Your Loving Son
Will

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