

## Second Battle of Ypres Centenary and,

### John McCrae "In Flanders Fields" Centenary

This was a family event arranged by Mr. John Durham and the Durham and Klein families, to commemorate these centenaries and also to recognize his father Private Edwin Durham, who was gassed and wounded twice at this battle, by placing a wreath at the Cenotaph on Friday, April 25.



John was kind enough to invite Legion members to attend, and a small group did so, with Reverend Art Turnbull saying a prayer, having two minutes of silence and reading the Act of Remembrance.

Private Edwin Durham was rescued from the battlefield by a German officer who covered Edwin with a blanket and used a rolled up blanket to support his head until he could be removed. Edwin spent the rest of the war in a German prisoner-of-war camp and returned to Canada in 1918.

The essence of the event organized by John is explained no better than in his personal address to the gathering of family members and legion guests which was as follows:



#### *Introduction — John Durham*

*Good evening, welcome and thanks for coming out on a chilly Friday evening. I am John Crawford Durham and my father Edwin Durham, was in the Second Battle of Ypres. His story is amazing because it is the story of tens of thousands of young Canadian soldiers who volunteered trained, were exposed to war and then were thrown into the middle of it. They suffered inhuman hardships, had incredibly horrible experiences and made many sacrifices, often the ultimate sacrifice. On April 24 1915 my father was gassed, wounded twice, taken prisoner by German stretcher-bearers and spent the rest of the war in a prison camp. I am named after his best friend in the camp.*

*My father signed up in August 1914, shortly before his 20th birthday, went through initial training in Canada and then more war preparation in England. Canadian troops got some frontline experience with British troops at the end of*

*February where they proved themselves, and then were sent to Fleurbaix to hold a stretch of trenches during the battle of Neuve Chapelle. At the beginning of April 1915, the Canadians were ordered to relieve some French forces in the Ypres salient in Belgium. Private Edwin Durham was part of the Canadian 2nd Battalion that was rushed to fill abandoned French positions in the face of advancing German infantry. On Apr 24 the Germans mounted a concentrated attack to take the salient, beginning with the release of poison gas and a bombardment. Outnumbered, outgunned and outflanked the Canadians held fast and counterattacked to stall the German advance. The price was horrendous 6,000 Canadians were lost. In the 2nd Battalion, of 1,000 men, there were 544 casualties.*

*The 100th anniversary of that first major Canadian action in the Great War should be honoured by remembering all those Canadian men and their sacrifices. We should also remember Dr. John McCrae, later Lieutenant Colonel. He wrote "In Flanders Fields" near the end of the Second Battle of Ypres, while sifting on the back of an ambulance, 100 years ago on May 3. That poem is a staple of Remembrance Day ceremonies and may be the most well know literary piece among Canadians. So let us proceed.*

Next, a short history of the 2nd Battle of Ypres was given by Peter Slade, who laid large file cards on the ground with the names of the Canadian Battalions involved in the front line defending the village of St Julien, outside Ypres, along with the French and British troops who were involved. The positions of ridges and the direction of the chlorine gas attack on April 22 against the French Algerian troops were shown, which caused the Algerians to flee. Private Edwin Durham's 2nd Battalion was one that was rushed into the front line to help the 13th Battalion fill the gap caused by the withdrawal of the French Algerian soldiers on April 22, resulting in his exposure to chlorine gas.

The subsequent retrenchment of part of the allied front line and the second chlorine gas attack, which was directed against the Canadian 13th Battalion on April 24, were shown. The 2nd Battalion, with Edwin Durham, was also alongside the 13th Battalion experiencing the second gas attack also.

Under attack from a hitherto unknown weapon, and heavily outnumbered, the British pulled the front line (including the Canadian Battalions) back closer to Ypres. However, the Canadians did not yield under the battle conditions and Arthur Currie's 5th and 8th Battalions were left isolated but still holding Gravenstafel Ridge, a testimony to the fortitude of the Canadians, which was demonstrated with greater success in later battles of the War.

This battle was the first major battle of the First World War that the Canadian Expeditionary Force was involved in.

The 2nd Battle of Ypres cost the British Empire 59, 000 casualties, 6,000 of whom were Canadian, including 2,000 killed.

This was followed by the Prayer from Reverend Arthur Turnbull, a two minute period of silence and the Act of Remembrance.

John showed a large sheet that had "In Flanders Fields" written on it which was a school project some years ago by a young lady family member. This was



presented back to her and then was passed to his daughter Mrs. Jennifer Lee, who read the poem as a symbol of Remembrance to Lt.-Colonel John McCrae, who was present in his medical station (bunker) on the Yser Canal, attending to the soldiers wounded in the battle.

The poem was written by John McCrae after the battle on May 3rd, 1915 and appeared in "Punch" magazine in England in December of that year. The bunker which John McCrae used as his field station on the Yser Canal is restored and can be visited; its location is at the north end of Essex Farm Cemetery just north of Ypres.



The wreath was placed at the cenotaph by John Durham and his family, and family members also placed candles on the cenotaph:



In closing, John thanked everyone for coming to share in remembering the two centenaries and also his father Private Edwin Durham

Legion members present: Alan Hood, Robert Rohrer, Jim Happer, Peter Welford



"The Brooding Soldier" Memorial at the Canadian Cemetery, St. Julien, east of



Ypres, commemorating the 6,000 Canadian casualties, including 2,000 killed.