

THE SUICIDE BATTALION AND CANADA'S ROLE IN WORLD WAR ONE

Objectives:

Foundational:

- Know that the actions and policies of other nations influence the well-being of the Canadian people and nation.
- Know that the conduct of Canadian foreign policy has generated, and continues to generate debate within the Canadian community.

Knowledge:

- Know that by the end of the First World War, 600 000 Canadians had served in an army of four divisions. More than 60 000 Canadian military personnel were killed in the War.

A. Background

The 46th Battalion was formed in Moose Jaw in Feb., 1915, and would end up playing a role in every major battle in which the Canadians took part from August 1916 until the Armistice. With a 91.5% casualty rate (3,484 wounded and 1,433 killed, including Victoria Cross winner and Saskatchewan hero Hugh Cairns), the 46th became known as the Suicide Battalion. James L. McWilliams and R. James Steel used this term as the title for their book describing the 46th Battalion's history and war experiences. (Recordings of dozens of interviews conducted by McWilliams and Steel with many Suicide Battalion veterans are housed at the Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan, Regina.)

- Source: Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan: Encyclopedia entry included in this learning package, courtesy of University of Regina Press.

Learning Activity:

Using the Attestation Papers (available online from Library and Archives Canada using the links below) from the following Suicide Battalion soldiers as evidence, what inferences can we make about who these men were prior to signing up for the war? (**Using Primary Sources**)

[Ernie "Jinx" Jenner](#)

[Jim Butterworth](#)

[E.D. McDonald](#)

B. Introduce the Inquiry Question

WWI is commonly accepted as a turning point in history for both Canada and the world, yet we don't often get the chance to hear about the experiences of the war from the men that were there in the trenches. Using the audio interviews from three 46th Battalion soldiers, have the students examine the following question:

What can we learn about Canada's role in WWI through the experiences of the Suicide Battalion soldiers?

C. Background Research

Divide the class into 5 groups and assign one of the audio recordings to each group. Have the students conduct some preliminary research about the focus of their recording (Trench Warfare, Raiding Parties, The Somme, Passchendaele, Amiens) by answer the 5 W's. *Note: This is not meant to be an extensive research activity, but an opportunity for students to develop some background knowledge before they listen to the interviews.*

D. Primary Source Analysis

Have the students listen to their assigned audio recording while making inferences about the soldier's experiences in war based on what they have heard. Have the students use the Suicide Battalion Inference Chart as a place to record trace Evidence (What Happened?) from the recording and Inferences (Why is this important? What can we learn from this?) that they have made. The students may need to stop the recording at certain points to discuss/reflect upon what is being said, or they may wish to listen to it more than once. **(Historical Perspectives, Using Primary Sources)**

The audio recordings are available on the Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan website at [www.saskarchives.com/Suicide Battalion](http://www.saskarchives.com/Suicide_Battalion).

Trench Warfare – Jim Butterworth (5:50 minutes)

Raiding Parties – Jim Butterworth (9:50 minutes)

Regina Trench & The Somme – Jim Butterworth (9:09 minutes)

Passchendaele – Ernie 'Jinx' Jenner (8:02 minutes)

Amiens – E.D. (Eric Douglas) McDonald (9:48 minutes)

Alternative: Have the students listen to all of the recordings to give them a more comprehensive understanding of the war.

E. Determining Big Ideas

Have the students analyze the inferences they have made looking for 3-5 possible Big Ideas about the war and their soldier's experiences. What WWI knowledge can be created/affirmed by the soldier's accounts of the war? (*Historical Significance*)

F. Sharing Insights

Have each of the groups describe/summarize their interview to the class and share the inferences and Big Ideas that they have created. As a class, compile the list of Big Ideas that they have generated to provide a visible representation of what they have learned from the activity.

G. Assessment

As a reflection on what they have learned and the connections they have made, have the students refer back to the original Inquiry Question - *What can we learn about Canada's role in WWI through the experiences of the Suicide Battalion soldiers?* This can be done in as a formative assessment (Group discussion, Quickwrite, etc) or as a summative assessment (essay, project, artwork, etc).

Appendix A

List of Primary Sources for Use with Suicide Battalion Lesson

Attestation Papers from Library and Archives Canada (online):

Ernie 'Jinx' Jenner:

<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/first-world-war-1914-1918-cef/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=479712>

Jim Butterworth:

<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/first-world-war-1914-1918-cef/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=80041>

E.D. (Eric Douglas) McDonald:

<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/first-world-war-1914-1918-cef/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=145910>

Audio Recording Excerpts from Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan, The 46th Canadian Infantry Battalion (South Saskatchewan) "The Suicide Battalion" Oral History Project by James L. McWilliams and R. James Steel, 1975-1977.

Trench Warfare – Jim Butterworth: Tape R-1075

Raiding Parties – Jim Butterworth: Tape R-1075

The Somme – Jim Butterworth: Tape R-1075

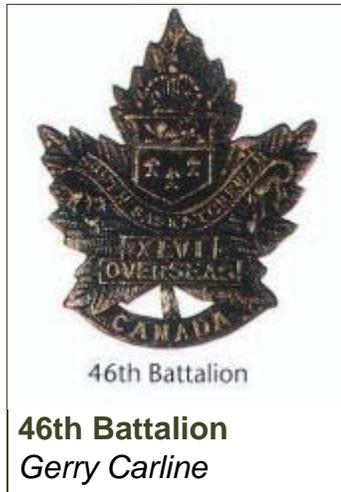
Passchendaele – Ernie 'Jinx' Jenner: Tape R-1059

Amiens – E.D. (Eric Douglas) McDonald: Tape R-1078

Suicide Battalion Lesson

Suicide Battalion Inference Chart	
Event:	Soldier:
Evidence (What Happened?):	Inferences (Why is it Important? What Can We Learn From This?):
Possible Big Ideas:	

46th Canadian Infantry Battalion, CEF



At the outbreak of World War I the Minister of Defence, Sir Sam Hughes, ordered the raising of units for overseas service. Scrapping the existing mobilization plan, he ordered the formation of numbered battalions: as a result the 46th Battalion, headquartered in Moose Jaw and commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Herbert Snell, came into being on February 1, 1915. The 46th traveled to Camp Sewell, Manitoba on May 28, 1915, for basic training before entraining for Halifax and overseas service. The battalion arrived in England on November 1, 1915, with a strength of 36 officers and 1,115 other ranks. Many of the original soldiers of the battalion were then transferred to other units, and new men took their place; the winter of 1915–16 was spent re-establishing the cohesion of the unit as the new men were moulded into the battalion.

The 46th embarked for France on August 10, 1916, becoming an integral part of the 10th Infantry Brigade, 4th Canadian Division, from August 11, 1916 until the Armistice. During its active service the battalion fought in every major victory attributed to the Canadian Corp, suffering 1,433 killed and 3,484 wounded (a 91.5% casualty rate) and earning the title of “Suicide Battalion.” Sergeant Hugh Cairns was awarded the Victoria Cross posthumously for his actions at Valenciennes on November 1, 1918; he was the last Canadian to win this distinction in World War I. Two former members of the 46th Battalion were also awarded the Victoria Cross posthumously: Private William Johnstone Milne while serving with the 16th Canadian Scottish; and Sergeant Arthur Knight, of Regina, while serving with the 10th Battalion. On March 24, 1919, in preparation for its return to Canada, the battalion was presented with Colours bearing the sixteen Battle Honours that it had earned in the twenty-seven months of combat. On April 26, 1919, the battalion began its homeward journey. It arrived in Moose Jaw on June 9, 1919, and after a brief reception paraded to the Armoury to be demobilized. The 46th Canadian Infantry Battalion is perpetuated by the Saskatchewan Dragoons of Moose Jaw.

Gerry Carline

Further Reading

McWilliams, J. and R.J. Steel. 1978. *The Suicide Battalion*. Edmonton: Hurtig.

World War I and Saskatchewan

From August 4, 1914, when Britain's declaration of war brought Canada into World War I, two attitudes prevailed in Saskatchewan: one was a determination to defend all things British, and the second was an appreciation for jobs and wages which peace had not provided. Many of the first volunteer soldiers answered blood ties to the Empire: for example, of 68 Swift Current recruits in the first days of the war, 63 were British-born. But as seasonal work dried up later that fall, more volunteers came from other ethnic groups. Many unemployed responded to the \$1.10 per diem provided to soldiers, as unemployment had risen since the end of western railroad expansion in 1912. Saskatchewan politicians, clerics and journalists asked the federal government to expand the armed forces *faster* to absorb all the unemployed. Soldiers received a warm send-off from a populace excited by the prospect of a short war. Scrambling to enlist, some Saskatchewan soldiers served in regiments mobilized in other provinces. The Princess Patricia Light Infantry (the Pats), one of the first Canadian units to reach France in December 1914, recruited veterans from across the country who had "no attachment to any militia"; as they were experienced, they were sent to the front with much less training. So many men from the West enlisted with the Pats that they were often considered a prairie battalion by other units. Similarly, a rumour that Manitoba units would reach the fighting sooner prompted many Saskatchewan lads to join there.

Canada's military leadership re-shuffled all the units going overseas into numbered battalions. The 95th Saskatchewan (later Regina) Rifles and the 105 Fusiliers (later Saskatoon) both fought with the 11th Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), and in turn sent many reinforcements to the 5th Battalion CEF. The North Saskatchewan Regiment (later Prince Albert) and the South Saskatchewan Regiment (later Weyburn) also received their marching orders in the fall of 1914. Moose Jaw's 27th Light Horse was called in early 1915. After the initial mobilization, recruiters were simply given blocks of numbers to assign. CEF battalions like the 65th and 96th battalions, mobilized in Saskatoon in 1916, were recruited there. Later the 28th, 46th, 68th, 152nd and 195th battalions all mobilized men from Saskatchewan, but province of origin was not considered important. Although records of the Saskatchewan units can be confusing or non-existent, their war experience proved remarkably uniform. Assembled at Valcartier Camp near Quebec City, they embarked for Britain and a few months' further training before joining other Canadian units fighting in the trenches in Flanders. Here their war abbreviates to a list of famous battles: Ypres (April–May 1915), Festubert (May 1916), Mount Sorel (June 1916), the Somme (July–November 1916), Vimy Ridge (April 1917), Hill 70 (August 1917), Passchendaele (November 1917), Amiens (August 1918), and Valenciennes (November 1918).

The battle for Ypres, the gateway to the French ports of Calais and Dunkirk, demonstrated the mettle of 1st Canadian Division when they were first to encounter chlorine gas and suffer casualties. But the headlong daylight rushes against machine-gun pillboxes, adopted by military leaders on both sides, meant that every battle had high casualty rates. The daily course of trench warfare also took a large toll. At the Somme in 1916 (600,000 Allied casualties), three Canadian divisions suffered 2,600 casualties *before* the main onslaught began.

Eventually the Somme, where 24,029 men from the four divisions of the Canadian Corps died for six miles of No Man's Land, changed the country's recruitment policy. Even before conscription was introduced in August 1917, the army command began breaking up units in training to rush the soldiers forward as replacements at the front. The 196th Western Universities Battalion was one of the casualties of this change. Led by Walter C. Murray, president of the University of Saskatchewan, they sought to recruit and train a special soldier "of the university type"—that is,

British. Almost all male students were required to train, and as one student of agriculture explained to his mother: “They make you feel like two cents at the University if you don’t enlist.” The University of Saskatchewan outfitted some 200 men, but these efforts ceased after mid-1916 when the Brigade became replacements for other regiments. Another special unit, the 107th Battalion, mobilized many Aboriginal soldiers from Saskatchewan. Some of these Aboriginal units, with reputations for valour, were disbanded for fear they might be wiped out all at once.

By 1916, all Canadian infantry entered battle together as the Canadian Corps; after their hard-won victory at Vimy Ridge, they had one of their own as commander: General Arthur Currie. At home, however, divisions had deepened. Camps for “enemy aliens” opened across the prairies in October 1914 and eventually interned over 8,000—mostly Ukrainians (known as Ruthenians for that area of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). Along with conscientious objectors, Mennonites and Doukhobors, they were disenfranchised by the Wartime Elections Act of 1917, which included alien immigrants naturalized after 1902. Saskatchewan voted for the revamped Unity Government of Robert Borden in December 1917 largely out of support for conscription. However, the Military Services Act (August 1917), administered by local committees, continued to exempt conscripts in Quebec, but drafted the farmers’ vital workers in Saskatchewan, where local committees were made up of, or influenced by, veterans. Farmers were further dismayed when agricultural exemptions were lifted in the spring of 1918 as German offensives produced even greater casualties.

Armistice on November 11, 1918, came as a surprise. A poor crop had signaled another hard year. Divisions over war and conscription, between English and French Canadians, between Empire and immigrant, would continue for years.

Scott Broad

Further Reading

Giesler, P. 1982. *Valour Remembered: Canada and the First World War*. Ottawa: Government of Canada Veterans Affairs; Martin, W.M. 1919. *What Saskatchewan Has Done in the Great War*. Regina: J.W. Reid Government Printer; Thompson, J.H. 1978. *The Harvests of War: The Prairie West, 1914–1918*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.