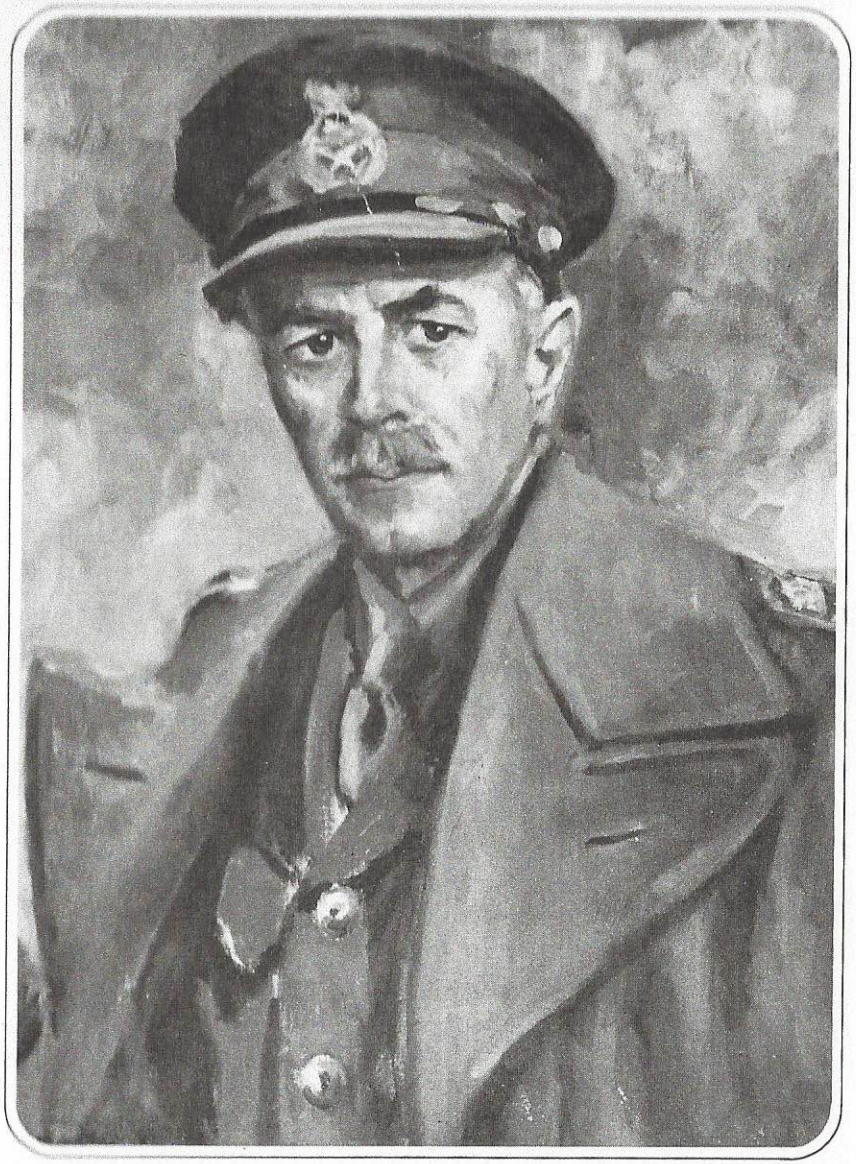

From a painting by Mrs. K.S. Brydone-Jack
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McNAUGHTON

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Chapter 1

Off to War

Late on 4 August, 1914, Great Britain declared war on Germany; automatically with Britain's entry—but not reluctantly—Canada too was at war. Scenes of wild excitement took place in Montreal. Convinced that Britain's cause was just, usually staid Montrealers thronged the streets to sing, shout and cheer in an orgy of enthusiasm. Though the skies grew darker and the street lamps steadily brightened in the deepening twilight the shouts and laughter from the surging crowds continued far into the summer night.

On 6 August the British government gratefully accepted Canada's offer of an expeditionary force and that day McNaughton's battery, as he had confidently expected, was placed on active service. On the 7th, the British Army Council having considered a division from Canada to be a suitably sized contingent, the misguided Minister of Militia (Colonel Sam Hughes) set about mobilizing the force, which he did by scrapping the existing mobilization plan for the infantry and raising new battalions. The artillery, however, mobilized under the Director of Artillery – Lieutenant-Colonel "Dinkie" Morrison—methodically and without hysteria.

Like many another battery commander, McNaughton was due for disappointment, though for him it was not so keen as for some. His unit, at least, was one of the fifteen militia batteries selected to supply the men, guns and horses of the nine batteries required by the three field brigades* that would form the major artillery component of the expeditionary force. But since the 3rd Battery was a four-gun unit another section of two guns was to be added

*Each made up of a headquarters, three batteries of six eighteen-pounder guns and an ammunition column.

to meet the organization of six eighteen-pounder guns required for war. This came from the 22nd Battery, Sherbrooke, and in consequence of the amalgamation the 3rd (Montreal) Battery lost its old designation. McNaughton's new battery—he had hoped it would remain the 3rd—became the 4th Battery of the 2nd Brigade.

The amalgamation took place at Camp Valcartier, near Quebec, during the last week in August. Meanwhile McNaughton's unit mobilized in men, horses and equipment. The days in Montreal were fully occupied: collecting horses for the battery, purchasing uniforms from local manufacturers and making up shortages of equipment from militia stores. Then, on 29 August, the unit moved by rail with horses, guns, limbers and ammunition to Valcartier.

The young battery commander was not easy in his mind to be leaving Montreal. His future wife remained there and, since the outbreak of war, there had been nothing but distress. They had wanted to get married immediately—after all, they had been engaged for more than a year—but her mother, who had returned to Montreal with her daughters from Murray Bay on the night war was declared, had set her face against it. (Mabel's parents had been separated for many years.) Andrew might be killed, her mother said, or mutilated, and it would be better to wait until he got back. Everyone said the war would not last long; until Christmas, maybe, and surely her daughter could be patient until then? But the daughter, who had been of age since March, did not let the matter rest. Torn between her love for Andrew and her desire not to alienate her mother, as long as McNaughton remained in Montreal Mabel tried hard to obtain her consent. But all her attempts at persuasion had been unsuccessful by the time the artillery rumbled off to the station on its way to Valcartier and the distant war. McNaughton had been ready to marry her with or without parental consent. For some time now he had carried in his pocket a dispensation from the church for his marriage to a Catholic bride and a marriage settlement had been drawn up. In a letter to his future wife at the end of July, telling her that his battery had been offered to Colonel Hughes for "service out of Canada in defence of the Empire," he had added, "I have the draft copies of the marriage settlement as I write."[1] But Mabel still wavered

the way he said, "You know, Mabel, I'm sorry for you, having to walk with Andy for the rest of your life!" ("You see," she explained, years later, "he didn't walk—he *ran*.")[9] She had the fondest memories of her father-in-law's unfailing support at this time. In fact, he made her an allowance, as he had done to each of his sons to supplement their army pay, and he continued to do so until his death. On 4 November, after a week in New York, Andrew McNaughton's young wife left in the *Lusitania* (because word had gone about that the ship would face the threat of mines, there were only eight women aboard), arriving in Liverpool on the 10th. Her husband, who had taken leave, was there to meet her, but he was soon recalled. They travelled south by train, taking a car from Amesbury to Tilshead, the nearest village to West Down North.

On the way to Tilshead, in the depths of the plain, the car broke down but the couple managed to get a lift to the village. There they stopped at the local pub and asked about accommodation. It was well into the night and the landlord, who was very drunk, said, "I have room for another horse." But McNaughton would take no nonsense. Rooms were found in the carpenter's cottage in Tilshead and McNaughton returned to camp. His wife remained in Tilshead until after Christmas when the 4th Battery moved into billets in Market Lavington. There Mrs. McNaughton found accommodation with the local butcher; her bedroom overlooked his slaughter-yard.

The appalling conditions on the plain had forced the battery move. The tents, for the most part, were of cotton and, in a crude attempt at camouflage, a mixture of linseed oil and pigment had been issued to the occupying units. This caused the cotton threads to tighten so that the weave opened; in consequence the tents leaked atrociously. The horse lines, churned up by hooves, were quagmires. There were no hard-standings,* so that the horses stood hock-deep in mud. McNaughton, noting their pitiful condition, ordered small trees to be cut down, which at least would keep the animals out of the morass. By so doing he contravened restrictions imposed by the British which forbade the cutting down of trees; it was hunting country and to destroy the cover for foxes was a heinous thing, and that almost ended his military career. For three days he remained under open arrest while his conduct was debated. Charlie Hanson, a friend from Montreal who at that time commanded a battery in one of the other brigades, told Mrs. McNaughton dolefully that her husband "might be sent home." She, still at the carpenter's cottage at Tilshead, hoped it might be true. But sense prevailed; after a warning, McNaughton went freely about his ways.

*Conditions in Flanders were better than on the plain. A year later a Canadian NCO recorded: "Last year we were in the richest country in the world which couldn't afford any better shelter for us than tents and not good ones at that. Here we can (at a little personal risk) take what we want from the ruined villages . . . and so make ourselves and our horses comfortable." See this writer's *To Seize the Victory*, p. 52.

The batteries trained as well as they could in the frightful weather. But not until the end of January, 1915, did they actually fire their guns, and then only fifty rounds per battery. Long before that, in November, training had been disrupted by a major organizational change just when the batteries were beginning to find cohesion. Still visualizing a war of movement, the British War Office had come to the conclusion that six guns would be too many for a battery commander to handle. Under conditions of static warfare, of course, the control of six guns was child's play. Nevertheless, a decree went out that "the three 6-gun batteries in each brigade should be reorganized into four 4-gun batteries"[10] and the Canadians complied. Each battery relinquished a section of two guns to make an extra battery in each brigade with two guns in brigade reserve. Now there were twelve batteries instead of nine and some existing batteries were renumbered. One of these was McNaughton's 4th, which became the 7th, much to his disgust. The guns, harness, vehicles and equipment all had to be numbered again but what he complained of most was the setback to the *esprit de corps* which he had fostered. It was on this new organization that he took the 7th Battery to France.

From Tilshead Mrs. McNaughton walked miles over the plain hoping, she said with touching simplicity, to meet her husband coming home. One night she heard hooves behind her, stopped and waited. It was a tough French-Canadian gunner who said, as he trotted alongside, "Lady, I've followed you for two weeks

The 7th Battery was directed to a large building outside the dock area where the men bedded down for the night; next morning they found that it was the pesthouse of St. Nazaire. They were to bed in stranger places than that before the war was over but the change came by degrees. Two days later the gunners were billeted for the most part in cottages east of Hazebrouck, fifteen miles behind the front which was now continuous from the Alps to the grey waters of the North Sea. Then, on 17 February, Burstall visited Headquarters III Corps of the British Second Army to discuss the Canadian gunners' share in a brief period of indoctrination which the newly arrived division was slated for. As a result Creelman's 2nd Brigade was attached to the British 4th Divison and McNaughton fired his first shots at the enemy from British gun positions in the sector Armentières-River Lys-Ploegsteert Wood.

The artillery and the infantry units all had a taste of manning the line under British supervision. They were quick learners and even before the period of indoctrination ended the 1st Division took over from the 7th British responsibility for a portion of the line. McNaughton sited his eighteen-pounder guns behind convenient hedgerows south of Fleurbaix village some two thousand yards behind the front. There were still hedgerows then in Flanders.

Each brigade had three batteries forward and one in reserve. The 7th Battery took its turn behind the others and it was then that McNaughton "got into a certain amount of trouble" with the Ross rifle. He had had some experience during training of this "very delicate, highly perfected and highly accurate target rifle" and he sympathized at first with Sam Hughes' wish to "bring effective fire at long ranges" against the enemy. But after what he saw later at Second Ypres, when the use of a rifle that was insufficiently robust "almost brought us to the verge of disaster," he had little faith in a minister who "just wouldn't take 'no' for an answer in the face of the experts and everybody else." And, he reflected, "We didn't get rid of it until long after the experience in the gas attack at Ypres, and it became a very vicious bone of contention."[1]

Christina McNaughton, Andrew McNaughton's mother