

10 Quick Facts on... The First World War

1. The First World War began on August 4, 1914, with the Triple Entente (United Kingdom, France and Russia) and other nations (e.g., Canada and Australia) against the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy). However, Italy refused to join in the war effort and instead, in May 1915, it aligned with Britain and France and declared war against Germany and Austria-Hungary.
2. Canadians saw their first major action at Ypres on April 22, 1915. Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae was inspired to write "In Flanders Fields" to honour a friend who died during this battle.
3. The Battle of the Somme began early on the morning of July 1, 1916. The 1st Newfoundland Regiment suffered especially heavy losses on that day. Of the approximately 800 Newfoundlanders who went into battle, only 68 were at roll call the following morning.
4. The Battle of Vimy Ridge began on the morning of April 9, 1917, and ended four days later. It was the first time all four divisions of the Canadian Corps fought together as one formation. The Canadian victory at Vimy Ridge is considered to be a key point in shaping Canada as a nation.
5. Canadians took part in the Battle of Passchendaele from October to November 1917. In a muddy corner of Belgium, Canadians overcame almost unimaginable hardships to capture this strategic village.
6. More than 2,800 Canadian Nursing Sisters served with the Canadian Army Medical Corps.
7. Approximately 4,000 Aboriginal Canadians enlisted during the war. This represented nearly one-third of all Aboriginal-Canadian men eligible to serve.
8. Approximately 70 Canadians were awarded the Victoria Cross for "most conspicuous bravery in the presence of the enemy" during the First World War.
9. More than 650,000 men and women from Canada and Newfoundland served during the First World War. More than 66,000 gave their lives and over 172,000 were wounded.
10. The fighting ended on November 11, 1918, with the signing of the Armistice. The war officially ended with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919.

Photos and info. courtesy of Veterans Affairs Canada, www.veterans.gc.ca



Photos courtesy of Canadian War Museum, www.warmuseum.ca

Man's Best Friend



Bonfire and Dr. John McCrae

Bonfire was given as a gift to Dr. John McCrae. There were no jeeps to carry doctors and nurses to the wounded in the First World War. There were no helicopters to drop a doctor into a war zone. Bonfire would get the doctor where he had to be.

During the First World War millions of horses carried men into battle, delivered messages, and pulled equipment through fields, thick with sloppy mud and snow. Horses were hungry and tired, just like the soldiers they served, but they kept working.

Dr. McCrae sometimes rode on Bonfire when he just wanted time to himself. Away they would ride into the fields, or on a cold night, into the snow.

John McCrae wrote many letters to his family in Canada during the war. He often mentioned Bonneau, the abandoned dog he adopted overseas, and Bonfire. Here's a piece of one letter:

"I have a very deep affection for Bonfire, for we have been through so much together, and some of it bad enough. All the hard spots to which one's memory turns the old fellow has shared though he says so little about it."

Dr. McCrae especially liked to write to his sister's children. Sometimes he pretended the letter was written by Bonfire and drew a horseshoe at the bottom of the letter—Bonfire's "signature." The letter below is to his young nephew, Jack Kilgour.

"October 1st, 1916

Did you ever eat blackberries? My master and I pick them every day on the hedges. I like twenty at a time. My leg is better but I have a lump on my tummy. I went to see my doctor today and he says it is nothing at all. I have another horse staying in my stable now; he is black and about half my size. He does not keep me awake at night. Yours truly, Bonfire"

When Dr. John McCrae became ill and died in 1918 (the same year the war ended), Bonfire took part in his owner's funeral procession and spent his final years in retirement. Dr. John McCrae, was the Canadian who wrote the famous poem "In Flanders Fields" in 1915.

Photos and info. courtesy of Veterans Affairs Canada, www.veterans.gc.ca

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