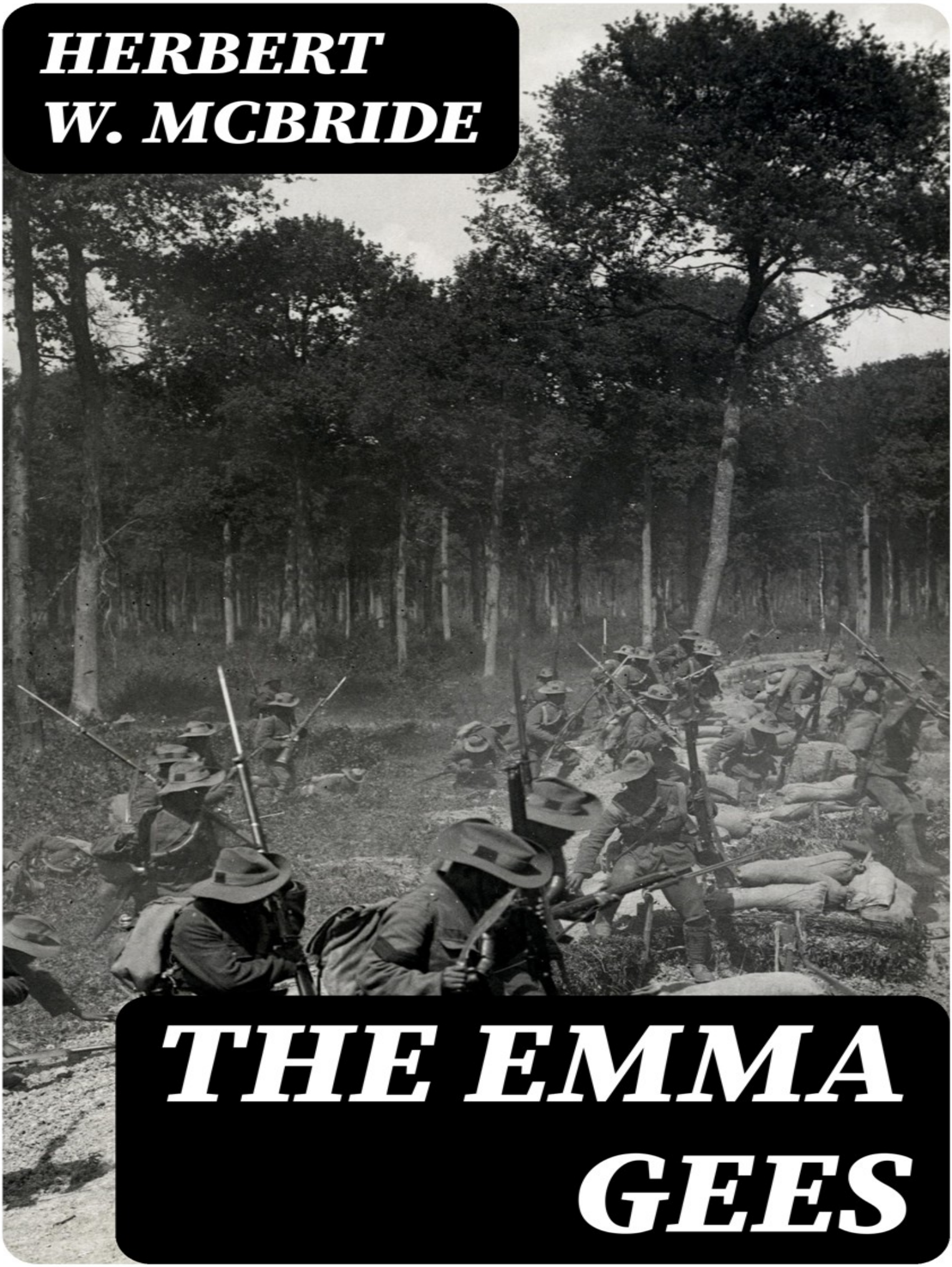
HERBERT W. MCBRIDE



THE EMMA GEES

Herbert W. McBride

The Emma Gees

EAN 8596547342380

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION
NEW NAMES FOR OLD LETTERS
CHAPTER I
CHAPTER II
CHAPTER III
CHAPTER IV
CHAPTER V
CHAPTER VI
CHAPTER VII
CHAPTER VIII
CHAPTER IX
CHAPTER X
CHAPTER XI
CHAPTER XII
CHAPTER XIII
CHAPTER XIV
CHAPTER XV
CHAPTER XVI
CHAPTER XVII

INTRODUCTION

Table of Contents

When the final history of this war is written, it is doubtful if any other name will so appeal to the Canadian as Ypres and the Ypres Salient; every foot of which is hallowed ground to French, Belgians, British and Colonials alike; not a yard of which has not been consecrated to the cause of human liberty and baptized in the blood of democracy.

Here the tattered remnants of that glorious "contemptible little army," in October, 1914, checked the first great onrush of the vandal hordes and saved the channel ports, the loss of which would have been far more serious than the capture of Paris and might, conceivably, have proved the decisive factor in bringing about a Prussian victory in the war.

Here the first Canadian troops to fight on the soil of Europe, the Princess Pat's, received their trial by fire and came through it with untarnished name, and here, also, the First Canadian Contingent withstood the terrible ordeal of poison gas in April, 1915, and, outnumbered four to one, with flank exposed and without any artillery support worthy of mention, hurled back, time after time, the flower of the Prussian army, and, in the words of the Commanding General of all the British troops: "saved the situation."

Here, too, as was fitting, we received our baptism of fire (Second Canadian Division), as did also the third when it came over.

For more than a year this salient was the home of the Canadian soldier and Langemarck, St. Julien, Hill 60, St. Eloi,

Hooge, and a host of other names in this sector, have been emblazoned, in letters of fire, on his escutcheon.

Baffled in his attempts to capture the city of Ypres, the Hun began systematically to destroy it, turning his heaviest guns on the two most prominent structures: The Halles (Cloth Hall), and St. Martin's Cathedral, two of the grandest architectural monuments in Europe. Now there was no military significance in this; it was simply an exhibition of unbridled rage and savagery. With Rheims Cathedral, and hundreds of lesser churches and châteaux, these ruins will be perpetual monuments to the wanton ruthlessness of German kultur.

When we first went there the towers of both these structures were still standing and formed landmarks that could be seen for miles. Gradually, under the continued bombardment, they melted away until, when I last passed through the martyred city, nothing but small bits of shattered wall could be seen, rising but a few feet above the surrounding piles of broken stones.

Glorious Ypres! Probably never again will you become the city of more than two hundred thousand, whose "Red-coated Burghers" won the day at Courtrai, against the trained army of the Count d'Artois; possibly never again achieve the commercial prominence enjoyed but four short years since; but your name will be forever remembered in the hearts of men from all the far ends of the earth where liberty and justice prevail.

H. W. McB.

NEW NAMES FOR OLD LETTERS

Table of Contents

When reading messages sent by any "visual" method of signaling, such as flags, heliograph or lamp, it is necessary for the receiver to keep his eyes steadily fixed upon the sender, probably using binoculars or telescope, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, for him to write down each letter as it comes, and as this is absolutely required in military work, where nearly everything is in code or cipher, the services of a second man are needed to write down the letters as the first calls them off.

As many letters of the alphabet have sounds more or less similar, such as "S" and "F," "M" and "N" and "D" and "T," many mistakes have occurred. Therefore, the ingenuity of the signaler was called upon to invent names for certain of the letters most commonly confused. Below is a list of the ones which are now officially recognized:

A	pronounced	ack
B	"	beer
D	"	don
M	"	emma
P	"	pip
S	"	esses
T	"	tock
V	"	vick
Z	"	zed

The last is, of course, the usual pronunciation of this letter in England and Canada, but, as it may be unfamiliar to some readers, I have included it.

After a short time all soldiers get the habit of using these designations in ordinary conversation. For instance, one will say: "I am going over to 'esses-pip seven,'" meaning "Supporting Point No. 7," or, in stating the time for any event, "ack-emma" is A.M. and "pip-emma" P.M.

As the first ten letters of the alphabet are also used to represent numerals in certain methods of signaling, some peculiar combinations occur, as, for instance: "N-ack-beer" meaning trench "N-12," or "O-don" for "O-4."

"Ack-pip-emma" is the Assistant Provost Marshal, whom everybody hates, while just "pip-emma" is the Paymaster, who is always welcome.

Thus, the Machine Gunner is an "Emma Gee" throughout the army.

THE EMMA GEES

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

Headed for the Kaiser

The following somewhat disjointed narrative, written at the solicitation of numerous friends, follows the general course of my experience as a member of the Machine Gun Section of the Twenty-first Canadian Infantry Battalion. Compiled from letters written from the front, supplemented by notes and maps and an occasional short dissertation covering some phase of present-day warfare and its weapons and methods, it is offered in the hope that, despite its utter lack of literary merit, it may prove of interest to those who are about to engage in the "great adventure" or who have relatives and friends "over there." The only virtue claimed for the story is that it is all literally true: every place, name and date being authentic. The maps shown are exact reproductions of front-line trench maps made from airplane photographs. They have never before been published in this country.

I am sorry I can not truthfully say that the early reports of German atrocities, or the news of Belgium's wanton invasion impelled me to fly to Canada to enlist and offer my life in the cause of humanity.

No, it was simply that I wanted to find out what a "regular war" was like. It looked as though there was going to be a good scrap on and I didn't want to miss it. I had been a conscientious student of the "war-game" for a good

many years and was anxious to get some real first-hand information. I got what I was looking for, all right.

The preliminaries can be briefly summarized. The battalion mobilized at Kingston, Ontario, October 19th, 1914, and spent the winter training at that place. The training was of the general character established by long custom but included more target practise and more and longer route marches than usual. The two things we really learned were how to march and how to shoot, both of which accomplishments stood us in good stead at a later date.

Leaving Kingston May 5th, 1915, we sailed from Montreal the following morning on the *Metagama*, a splendid ship of about twelve thousand tons. We had as company on board, several hospital units, including about one hundred and fifty Nursing Sisters, all togged up in their natty blue uniforms and wearing the two stars of First "Leftenant," which rank they hold. And, believe me, they deserve it, too. Of course they were immediately nicknamed the "Bluebirds." Many's the man in that crowd who has since had cause to bless those same bluebirds in the hospitals of France and England.

We ran into ice at the mouth of the St. Lawrence and for two days were constantly in sight of bergs. It was a beautiful spectacle but I'm afraid we did not properly appreciate it. We remembered the *Titanic*.

Then we got word by wireless that the *Lusitania* had been torpedoed. I think an effort was made to suppress this news but it soon ran throughout the ship. Personally, I did not believe it. I had had plenty of experience of "soldier stories," which start from nowhere and amount to nothing, and

besides, I could not believe that any nation that laid any claims to civilization would permit or commit such an outrage. I began to believe it however when, next day, we received orders to go down in the hold and get out all our guns and mount them on deck. We had six guns; two more than the usual allotment for a battalion; two having been presented to our Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel (now Brigadier-General) W. St. Pierre Hughes, by old associates in Canada, just a few days before our departure.

Two of the guns were mounted on the forward deck, two on the flying bridge and two on the aft bridge. I'm not sure, to this day, just what we expected to do against a submarine with those machine guns, but at any rate they seemed to give an additional feeling of security to the others on board and of course we machine gunners put up an awful bluff to persuade them that we could sink any U-boat without the least difficulty. Of one thing we were sure. Being a troop ship we could expect no mercy from an enemy and we were at least prepared to make it hot for any of them who came fooling around within range provided they came to the surface. I was with the forward guns and, as we had several days of pretty rough weather, it was a wet job. Our wireless was continually cracking and sputtering so I suppose the skipper was getting his sailing orders from the Admiralty as we changed direction several times a day. We had no convoying war-ships and sighted but few boats, mostly Norwegian sailing vessels, until, one night about nine o'clock, several dark slim shadows came slipping up out of the blackness and established themselves in front, on both flanks and behind us. We gunners had been warned

by the captain to look out for something of the kind, but I can assure any one who has not been through the experience that the sigh of relief which went up from those gun crews was sincere and deep. We were running without lights, of course, and none but the crew was allowed on deck. The destroyers (for such they were), were also perfectly dark and we could barely discern their outlines as they glided silently along, accommodating their pace to ours.

Just before sunrise we dropped anchor inside Plymouth breakwater. This was a surprise, as we had expected to land at Liverpool or Bristol. But you may depend on it, no one made any complaint; any port in England looked good to us. A few hours later we moved into the harbor and tied up at Devonport Dock where we lay all day, unloading cargo. Right next to us was a big transport just about to sail for the Dardanelles. The Dublin Fusiliers were aboard her and they gave us a cheer as we came in. Poor devils, they had a rough time of it down there; but I guess by this time they think the same about us; so we'll call it square.

It rained all day, but we finally got everything off the ship and on the trains and pulled out about dark. No one knew where we were going. The only training camp we had heard of in England was Salisbury Plain and what we had heard of that place did not make any of us anxious to see it. The First Canadian Division had been there and the reports they sent home were anything but encouraging. Our men were nearly all native-born Canadians and "Yankees," and they cracked many a joke about the little English "carriages," but they soon learned to respect the pulling power of the engines.

We made ourselves as comfortable as possible with eight in a compartment, each man with his full kit, and soon after daylight the train stopped and we were told to get out. The name of the station was Westerhanger but that did not tell us anything. The native Britishers we had in our crowd were mostly from "north of the Tweed" so what could they be expected to know about Kent. For Kent it was, sure enough, and after a march of some two or three miles we found ourselves "at home" in West Sandling Camp. And how proudly we marched up the long hill and past the Brigade Headquarters, our pipers skirling their heartiest and the drummers beating as never before. For we were on exhibition and we knew it. The roads were lined with soldiers and they cheered and cheered as we came marching in. We were tired, our loads were heavy and the mud was deep, but never a man in that column would have traded his place for the most luxurious comforts at home.

There came a time when we hated that hill and that camp as the devil hates holy water, but that Sunday morning, marching into a British camp, with British soldiers, eager to keep right on across the channel and clean up Kaiser Bill and feeling as though we were able to do it, single-handed--why, the meanest private in the Twenty-first Canadians considered himself just a little bit better than any one else on earth.

Thus we came to our home in England, where we worked and sweated and swore for four solid months before we were considered fit to take our place in the firing-line. All that time, from the top of Tolsford Hill, just at the edge of our camp, we could see France, "the promised land"; we

could hear the big guns nearly every night, and we, in our ignorance, could not understand why we were not allowed to go over and settle the whole business. We marched all over Southern England. I *know* I have slept under every hedge-row in Kent. We dug trenches one day and filled them up the next. We made bombs and learned to throw them. We mastered every kind of signaling from semaphore to wireless, and we nearly wore out the old Roman stone roads hiking all the way from Hythe to Canterbury. We carried those old Colt guns and heavy tripods far enough to have taken us to Bagdad and back.

But, oh, man! what a tough lot of soldiers it made of us. Without just that seasoning we would never have been able to make even the first two days' marches when we finally did go across. The weaklings fell by the wayside and were replaced until, when the "great day" came and we embarked for France, I verily believe that that battalion, and especially the "Emma Gees," was about the toughest lot of soldiers who ever went to war.

(Emma Gee is signaler's lingo for M. G., meaning machine gunner.)

It must not be inferred that our four months in England were all work and worry. Personally, I derived great pleasure from them. We were right in the midst of a lot of old and interesting places which figure largely in the early history of England. Within a mile of our camp was Saltwood Castle, built in 499 by the Romans and enlarged by the Normans. It was here that the conspirators met to plan the assassination of Thomas à Becket at Canterbury, only sixteen miles away, and which we had ample opportunities to visit. Hythe, one

of the ancient "Cinque Ports," was but a mile or so distant, with its old church dating from the time of Ethelbert, King of Kent. In its crypt are the bones of several hundred persons which have been there since the time of the Crusaders, and in the church, proper, are arms and armor of some of the old timers who went on those same Crusades. Among numerous tablets on the walls is one "To the memory of Captain Robert Furnis, Commanding H. M. S. Queen Charlotte: killed at the Battle of Lake Erie: 1813"--Perry's victory. About three miles away was "Monk's Horton, Horton Park and Horton Priory," the latter church dating from the twelfth century and remaining just about as it was when it was built. Then there was Lympne Castle, another Roman stronghold; Cæsar's Plain and Cæsar's Camp, where Julius is said to have spent some time on his memorable expedition to England; and, within easy reach by bicycle, Hastings and Battle Abbey where William the Norman defeated Harold and conquered England. The very roads over which we marched were, many of them, built by the Romans. Every little town and hamlet through which we passed has a history running back for hundreds of years. We took our noon rest one day in the yard of the famous "Chequers Inn," on the road to Canterbury. We camped one night in Hatch Park, where the deer scampered about in great droves. On Sundays we could charter one of the big "rubber-neck" autos and make the round trip to Margate, Ramsgate, Broadstairs, Deal and Dover.

Photo by Western Newspaper Union

French Hotchkiss Gun Firing at Aeroplane

But, just the same, when we were told, positively, that we were going to leave, there were no tears shed. We had gone over there to fight and nothing else would satisfy us.

CHAPTER II

Table of Contents

Straight to the Front