

Book review

The cost of war

**Medicine and Duty: The World War I
Memoir of Captain Harold W. McGill,
Medical Officer, 31st Battalion CEF**

Harold W. McGill MD

Editor, Marjorie Barron Norris

University of Calgary Press; 2007

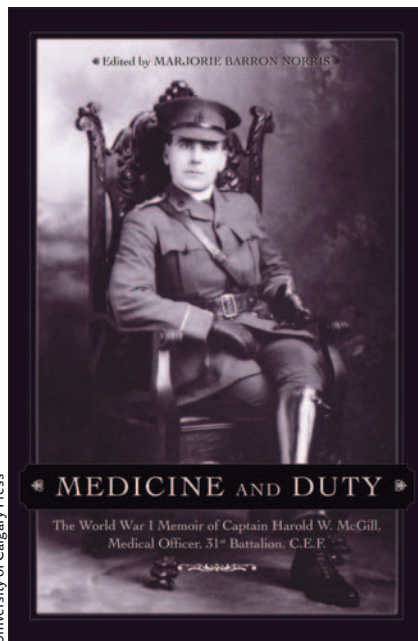
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In World War I, Captain Harold McGill was the family doctor for a battalion of 1000 Canadian soldiers that was shipped off to the killing fields of the Western Front in 1915.

Given the current gnashing of teeth over Canada's mission in Afghanistan, McGill's memoir of his years as medical officer for the 31st (Calgary) Battalion is especially poignant as a reminder of the cost of war — and of the soldiers who pay the bill.

It was physicians such as McGill who totaled this bill in their walk-in clinics from hell that were found in lice-ridden dugouts across the Western Front. There, McGill and his colleagues dealt with everything from shell shock that roiled soldiers' minds to poison gas that destroyed their lungs.

Take McGill's own unit as an example. When the 31st Battalion entered the trenches in 1915, it numbered about 1000 men. Over the ensuing years, more troops joined the battalion to replace those who had been killed or wounded, and by the time the war ended 3 years later, the 31st Battalion had suffered 941 deaths and 2312 of its soldiers had been wounded. During one day of the Battle of Courcellette, Sept. 26, 1917, McGill's battalion had 60 men killed in action — just 18 less than the Canadian army has suffered during 5 years of combat in Afghanistan. The 31st Battalion's final toll that day was probably much higher, because another 113 men went



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missing in action and many of them would later have “no known grave” attached to their names.

It is the pathos engendered by McGill's memoir, *Medicine and Duty*, that gives the book its power. The way the dead were dealt with then — sometimes soldiers' remains were scooped into empty sandbags and buried in a shell holes — provides a stark contrast to the elaborate ramp ceremonies held for the deceased in Afghanistan.

The death of McGill's batman, Private Ben Jones, provides one example. “One of the first casualties we had to attend to was poor Ben Jones,” he wrote. “He had been outside the dugout watching the attack when a piece of shell casing tore away a side of his skull. We placed his body over the side of the trench and had no time to give further thought to it until the following day ... [when] we dug a grave in the bottom of a shell hole. We conducted the burial with quiet dignity al-

though without loss of time, for the enemy was planting shells within 100 yards of us.”

McGill was one of roughly 1400 Canadian physicians who served with the Canadian army in World War I. He finished writing *Medicine and Duty* in the 1930s, but the Depression intervened and he could not find a publisher. Decades later, historian Marjorie Barron Norris discovered the manuscript at Calgary's Glenbow Museum and resurrected the project. The book was finally published last year by the University of Calgary Press.

This book is not for the timid; on almost every page soldiers die in manners too horrible to contemplate. However, it is an intriguing and well-edited account that is made more valuable by the superb footnotes that provide the setting and historical background for the actions McGill describes.

Everyone involved in this project has done military medicine a great service by ensuring that the sacrifices of doctors like McGill and the soldiers they served are not forgotten.

If you do read the book, be sure to at least thumb through the appendix listing the names of 31st Battalion soldiers killed between 1915 and 1918. The list covers 22 pages, in 8-point type.

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Military Medical Museum website:

Aficionados of military medical history may be interested to know that the Canadian Forces Health Services' museum in Vancouver, British Columbia, now has its own website: www.vancouver-mmm.ca. The museum's curator, Lt. Col. Adrian French, advises that museum is open by appointment only. He can be contacted via the website.