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Wellington Advertiser
20 April 2012
Valuing Our History

Colonel J.J. Craig failed to regain command of the 153rd

(Note: This is the conclusion of two-part account of the removal of Lt. Col. J.J. Craig of Fergus as commanding officer of the 153rd Wellington Battalion in the summer of 1916, and his efforts to regain that position.)

Last week's column described the removal of J.J. Craig as commander of the 153rd at the time the Battalion was called to active duty and training at London. Craig did not willingly accept his removal. Rather, he waged a campaign, largely through the press, against his military superiors and against several men in Guelph, whom Craig blamed for poor recruiting results in the Royal City.

Col. Craig was no fool. He had a distinguished academic career as a student at Queen's University, majoring in English and history, and later studied medicine, though he never practiced as a doctor. It is obvious that his contempt for wooden-headed civil servants and inept senior military officers was behind his determination to do things his own way.

But in times of war, a loose cannon such as he was could be dangerous on the battlefield. It was not his actions or abilities that resulted in his dismissal, but rather, his attitude and his inability to follow policy from above.

Nevertheless, much of the public sentiment across Wellington County remained with Craig. County council passed a motion in June to refuse all help and aid to the war effort until Craig was restored to his job, and urging member municipalities to do the same and to discourage enlistments.

After fighting the Department of Militia through the press for a couple of weeks, Col. Craig hopped on a train to Ottawa to confront top military officers, and if possible, Sam Hughes, the minister. He seems to have had success in pressing for a full investigation into his dismissal. For the first time, Craig had little to say after his return.

Meanwhile, the 153rd Battalion, still training at London, had suffered its first casualty. Lieutenant Harold Bright of Mount Forest had become ill and was later diagnosed with meningitis. He died on July 8 at the age of 20. Doctors examined the rest of the 153rd, and found several other cases that seemed suspicious. The outbreak delayed the transfer of the 153rd to Camp Borden for further training.

County council's resolution embarrassed the Department of Militia. As well, there were further complaints and queries from individual members of county council, some of whom were active and influential in federal political affairs. Eventually the Department of Militia realized that, for political reasons, an inquiry would be necessary.

The investigation into Craig's complaints was scheduled to begin in Guelph on July 25, under General Smith, the judge advocate general. The day before it was to commence, Col. Craig went to Guelph and began to speak, telling reporters from both the *Mercury* and the *Herald* that he expected little from the session because no witnesses had been subpoenaed.

The investigation, of course, produced no new information, but it allowed J.J. Craig another opportunity to vent his complaints to officials. To his disappointment, the press was excluded from the session.

The hearing was intended to put an end to the controversy, but instead it kept the affair alive. It was conducted behind closed doors, and there was no statement issued at its conclusion. Eventually, under pressure from members of Wellington County council, the Department of Militia issued a statement in late August that the complaints against Craig were "trivial." But there was no hint that he would be restored to his command.

The press, by the end of August, had lost interest in his case, which had plodded on for almost three months with no new information emerging. By then it was clear that the Department of Militia had no intention of restoring J.J. Craig to the head of the 153rd.

Instead, public attention began to shift to speculation on who would be Craig's successor.

At that time, as it had been since the mid 19th century, a high rank in the militia or army was a sign of civic stature and social prominence. Such appointments were eagerly sought by socially ambitious men, who, in turn, were expected to exhibit the exemplary conduct and uphold the best of British values and traditions.

The realities of war overturned the roll of the militia and the place of the senior officers in their communities. Other than the South African War and the Riel Rebellions, neither of which involved large numbers of volunteers, the militia in Ontario had been largely a social organization, with men such as Craig viewing themselves as the natural leaders.

Craig could not adapt to the new order of strict rules and lines of command, especially when he viewed those in charge as inept. There was no place for him in the new Canadian army.

By the end of July 1916 speculation had been that the appointment to head the 153rd would go to Major Kelly Evans, who was serving as the acting commander, and that the announcement would be made shortly. Back in Wellington County another man was the popular choice. Major W.M. Head, a native of Eramosa, was serving with the 34th Battalion; he responded to telegrams from home, stating he would be honoured to accept leadership of the 153rd should it be offered to him.

By mid August there were new developments with the 153rd. Col. Shannon, in command of the London Military District, announced that between 300 and 340 men would be transferred from the 135th to the 11th Waterloo Battalion prior to its movement to England, which was expected soon.

The remainder of the 135th would likely travel to England and Europe in small groups, but there were other rumours that the Battalion would return to Wellington for a short time to assist with recruitment activities, and that it would go to Europe when it was up to full strength.

As well, speculation over the naming of a new commanding officer continued through August. That uncertainty ended on Aug. 30, with the announcement that Lt. Col. R.T. Pritchard would be the permanent commanding officer of the 153rd. He was a popular 46-year-old bachelor farmer from Concession 1 of Nichol Township. Col. Pritchard had served as reeve of the township from 1905 to 1910, and had been active with the militia in the 30th Regiment since the 1890s. "Colonel Tom," as he was known familiarly, accompanied the 153rd overseas, leaving from Halifax in April 1917 aboard the Olympic, and returned with the men in 1919.

The appointment of Col. Pritchard put an end to the pot-stirring by J.J. Craig, whose dismissal had triggered one of the more interesting local episodes of World War I. The men of the 153rd were divided up and attached to other units on active service. They served with distinction in France and Belgium.

Col. J.J. Craig sat out the war at home, and continued his career as a public school inspector.

His son, Norman, enlisted and served in the army and then the Royal Air Force. He returned to Canada, and after medical school at Queen's University, came back to Fergus. He practiced medicine in his home town for almost 40 years, until his death in 1964. His military career was a fascinating one, but that is a story for another time.