

# **Reluctant Warriors**

## Canadian Conscripts and the Great War

*Patrick M. Dennis*



**UBC**Press · Vancouver · Toronto

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*Series editor: Andrew Burtch, Canadian War Museum*

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**Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Dennis, Patrick M., author

Reluctant warriors : Canadian conscripts and the Great War / Patrick M. Dennis.

(Studies in Canadian military history)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-7748-3597-8 (hardcover). – ISBN 978-0-7748-3599-2 (PDF)

ISBN 978-0-7748-3600-5 (EPUB). – ISBN 978-0-7748-3601-2 (Kindle)

1. Draft – Canada – History – 20th century. 2. Draftees – Canada – History – 20th century. 3. World War, 1914–1918 – Casualties – Canada. 4. Canada. Canadian Army – Recruiting, enlistment, etc. – World War, 1914–1918. 5. Canada – Armed Forces – Recruiting, enlistment, etc. – World War, 1914–1918. 6. Canada. Canadian Army – History. 7. Canada – Armed Forces – History – 20th century. 8. World War, 1914–1918 Canada. 9. Canada – History, Military – 20th century. 10. Soldiers – Canada – History – 20th century. I. Title. II. Series: Studies in Canadian military history

D547.C2D36 2017

940.4'1271

C2017-903777-3

C2017-903778-1

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**Canada**

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Publication of this book has been financially supported by the Canadian War Museum.

Printed and bound in Canada by Friesens

Set in Helvetica Condensed and Minion by Artextographica Design Co. Ltd.

Copy editor: Matthew Kudelka

Proofreader: Alison Strobel

Indexer: Judy Dunlop

Cover designer: George Kirkpatrick

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

[www.ubcpress.ca](http://www.ubcpress.ca)

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## **Foreword**

*By J.L. Granatstein*

MANY YEARS AGO WHEN I was teaching courses on the history of Post-Confederation Canada to third-year students at York University, I would devote four or five lectures to the Great War of 1914–18. One of my sessions invariably focused on conscription and how Sir Robert Borden, the Prime Minister, parlayed the Military Service Act, the Wartime Elections Act, and the Military Voters Act into helping him form a Union Government of Conservatives and pro-conscription Liberals. Once the Union took shape, Sir Wilfrid Laurier and the anti-conscriptionist Liberals were doomed, however loudly francophones, farmers, and labour protested against compulsory service; the results of the general election of December 17, 1917, confirmed Borden's victory.

The first call-ups under the Military Service Act came in January, 1918, and before long, unhappy recruits were in training. In May the first soldiers reached the front in France and Flanders, and soon there were casualties. But there were some 620,000 men in all enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, there were 425,000 volunteers serving overseas and more in Canada, and 345,000 men and nurses served in France and Flanders, and of those 236,618 officers and other ranks served in the 50 infantry battalions in the Canadian Corps. Yet, as the charts in Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson's official history of the army in the 1914–18 War demonstrate, of the hundred thousand men conscripted in Canada, only 24,132 served in the field with the Corps before the Armistice on November 11, 1918. Only 24,132 soldiers, I told my students, and for that paltry number, French and English Canada, rural and urban Canada, labour and capital, were divided in 1917–18 as they had never been before.

I am now forced to admit that I was flatly wrong to argue as I did. In the first place, 24,132 reinforcements numbered more men than were found in any one of the four divisions of the Canadian Corps. That was a substantial number, almost one quarter of the strength of the Corps' ranks. Then too, the war had been expected by the Allied generals and politicians to continue well into 1919; if that had occurred, the full hundred thousand conscripts – and perhaps more, if necessary – would have reached the front. And those conscripts were essential if the Canadian Corps' forty-eight infantry battalions were to keep their ranks at full strength. Understrength battalions suffered more casualties

in trying to take their objectives. Full strength units, their firepower and manoeuvrability maximized, simply did better on the battlefield.

And there was one final point. When on August 8, 1918, the Canadians, Australians, and British struck the German lines at Amiens and punched a huge hole in them, the war for the Allies shifted from trench warfare to open warfare. The Canadian Corps were the “shock troops of the British Empire,” and they would be used as such for the next Hundred Days, or so the campaign that ended the war was labelled. After Amiens, the Canadians moved north to Arras, cracked the Drocourt-Quéant Line, crossed the Canal du Nord, liberated Cambrai and Valenciennes, and pursued the retreating enemy to Mons in Belgium. These battles were the most important ever fought by Canadian troops, and they might truly be said to have won the war. But they were costly, with forty-five thousand killed, wounded, and taken prisoner in the period from Amiens to the Armistice, some 20 percent of all Canadian casualties in the Great War. Without those 24,132 conscripts, without the conscripts still en route overseas, the Canadian Corps might have ceased operations for want of men.

I should have understood these facts and explained them to my students. What I did not know was who the conscripts were, why they had not volunteered for military service, and what they did – how they performed – in action in the critical battles of 1918. No one had looked at the conscripts en masse, a great gap in our historical knowledge.

Now that gap has been filled in this very fine book by Patrick Dennis, a retired Canadian Air Force colonel. Dennis answers these questions completely, and he does so in part by focusing on members of his family who, he discovered, had been called up under the Military Service Act and served at the front. His grandfather was conscripted as was his first cousin and two more distant relatives. Three of Dennis’ family had been killed in action and his grandfather suffered serious wounds. Of course, this was “a very small sample,” Dennis writes, but it “was not entirely consistent with ... Canadian historiography” that dismissed the conscripts as inconsequential (as I had) and, because they were “reluctant warriors,” of little value in action.

With his fine research and careful analysis, Patrick Dennis has corrected the story that I and others told for so long. Some conscripts may have been shirkers – so were some volunteers – but most did their duty in a succession of great and terrible battles that broke the German Army. Many sacrificed their lives for their comrades and their country, and Dennis’ important book definitively sets the record straight.

—J.L. GRANATSTEIN is the author of several books on the Great War including *Broken Promises*, a history of conscription, *Canada’s Army*, and *The Greatest Victory*. He is Distinguished Research Professor of History Emeritus at York University.

# **Introduction: Slackers, Shirkers, and Malingeringers**

*There are three types of men:  
Those who hear the call and obey,  
Those who delay, and – the others.  
To which do you belong?*

– ILANA R. BET-EL, *CONSCRIPTS:  
LOST LEGIONS OF THE GREAT WAR*

## **The Men Who Weren't There**

PRIVATE GEORGE LAWRENCE PRICE of the 28th North West Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), was shot and killed by a German sniper in the Belgian hamlet of Ville-sur-Haine only minutes before the Armistice went into effect at 11:00 a.m. on 11 November 1918; he thus became the last Canadian to fall in battle during the Great War. Less well known is that Price, originally from Falmouth, Nova Scotia, was a conscript, having been drafted into the Canadian army on 4 December 1917, while working as a farm labourer in Saskatchewan. Price had completed his basic training with the 15th Reserve Battalion at Bramshott, England, before being dispatched to France on 2 May 1918. Then, after nearly three weeks' additional training and indoctrination, he had begun his combat service on 24 May. Four days later he was sent into the front line, where his time in the trenches at Mercatel and Neuville-Vitasse was relatively brief. Nonetheless, he subsequently fought in the epic summer battles at Amiens and Arras before being wounded and hospitalized as a gas casualty on 9 September.<sup>1</sup> Afterwards, his recovery and convalescence were understandably slow. But by 15 October he was back with his unit in the Canadian Corps' famous pursuit of the German army to Mons and, in his case, for a fateful rendezvous with an enemy sniper.

At first glance, and given that more than 50,000 Canadian soldiers had been killed in combat in France and Belgium up to this point in the war, Price's story appears noteworthy only insofar as he was the last Canadian to die in combat. However, beyond this poignant and tragic footnote to history lies a larger and much more compelling narrative, one that speaks to us not only from Private Price's simple grave in the St Symphorien Military Cemetery just a few kilometres east of Mons, Belgium, but from the voices of thousands of other



*Figure 1.1* Private George Lawrence Price, last soldier in the CEF to be killed in action, 11 November 1918. *Source:* Courtesy of George Barkhouse and Parks Canada.

conscripts, now forever silenced, who also served honourably at the front and whose stories remain largely untold.

In this context Price's story is most remarkable, especially when one considers that the prevailing wisdom of Canadian historiography on the subject of conscripts in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, both generally and specifically, frequently suggests that these so-called slackers arrived too late and in insufficient numbers to make any significant contribution to the Canadian Corps during the final campaign of the war – the Hundred Days.<sup>2</sup> In fact historian Kathryn Bindon once wrote that “in the end, the numbers were less than significant.” More recently David Bercuson has made a passing reference to “the few thousand conscripts who had reached the front” by the end of the war, while Andrew Theobald has flatly declared that “few conscripts played a role in the final fighting.”<sup>3</sup> Still others might well argue that this is a quite valid analysis, since one will search largely in vain for evidence to the contrary among most histories that have been written about the Canadian Corps. But one doubts very much that Private Price’s mother, Mrs. Annie Price, or indeed his beloved sister Florence, would have embraced this view, particularly when so many other facts seem to contradict such harsh judgments.<sup>4</sup> To use Price’s case as an example, he served in the trenches at the front from the late spring of 1918 onwards; indeed, apart from the Canadian action at Cambrai when he was still recovering

from a poison gas wound, he fought in all of his unit's major engagements throughout the Hundred Days, thus qualifying him as a veteran soldier in every sense of the word. If Price's story is not unique, and if his journey to war was repeated by a significant number of his fellow conscripts, then many of the myths that are typically attached to the role of Canadian conscripts during this period of the war must be called into question.

What, then, would constitute a *significant* number? In his official history of the CEF, Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson estimated that 24,132 conscripts had "served in the field" with Canadian units in France by the time hostilities ceased.<sup>5</sup> While some may understandably dispute this precise number, especially for reasons Nicholson himself identified, it is still a reasonable "approximation," the significance of which will be borne out by this study. Others, including J.L. Granatstein and J. Mackay Hitsman, suggested at one time that this figure of roughly 24,000 hardly constituted a significant percentage of the total 619,636 Canadians who were enlisted in the CEF, and therefore that the Military Service Act (MSA) "can be considered only a partial military success."<sup>6</sup> At first glance then it would appear that such skepticism was perhaps warranted. But Tim Cook notes that when we look at these statistics a bit more closely, we find that of "the roughly 425,000 Canadians serving overseas," about "345,000" all ranks actually served in France.<sup>7</sup> Of this latter number, one is further struck by the fact that of all troops dispatched overseas, just "236,618 passed through the 50 Canadian battalions which served in France and Belgium."<sup>8</sup>

In assessing the relative importance of 24,000 conscripts at war, one is next drawn to the Canadian Corps in France, itself numbering approximately 100,000-plus soldiers in the field at that time, and thence to a primary focus of this study – the four Canadian infantry divisions and their complement of forty-eight infantry battalions, numbering in the early summer of 1918 about 50,000 men. In this regard, as will be shown, most conscripts were sent to the infantry, where they were needed most. Moreover, since the infantry sustained the highest number of casualties in the CEF and equally had the highest demand for reinforcements, the actual results of this symbiotic relationship – that is, between conscripts as reinforcements and infantry requirements at the sharp end of the spear – clearly warrant a closer analysis.<sup>9</sup>

*Reluctant Warriors*, however, is neither an extended study of conscription per se (since the politics of conscription have long been the subject of scholarly analysis), nor a detailed examination of the much larger issue of reinforcements in the CEF (which has recently been accomplished), although it will be necessary to explore key elements of both.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the link between conscripts as infantry reinforcements and the origins and implementation of the MSA must be examined, especially in order to better understand the core issue

of military necessity.<sup>11</sup> In this respect, conscripts did provide the crucial manpower necessary for Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie (Canadian Corps Commander) to execute an aggressive and continuous series of offensives, which led to successive triumphs in the Hundred Days and ultimately to what historian J.L. Granatstein has described as Canada's "greatest victory."<sup>12</sup> Currie came to utterly depend on his conscripts in this history-making advance; indeed, it is quite evident that this timely infusion of manpower provided an additional fighting margin, one that led him to take a number of tactical risks, many of which paid off brilliantly. Others, as will be shown, had costly and near disastrous results, the consequences of which were mitigated only by the ready availability of replacements. Hence the impact of conscripts on Currie's battlefield decision-making is also an important element of this story.

Key military events at both the strategic and operational level also merit consideration, at least insofar as they helped give birth to the Canadian Corps and were instrumental in creating the severe troop shortages that eventually provided the impetus for conscription itself. In this context, to gain a better appreciation of how ordinary citizen-soldiers came to find themselves at war without their consent, it will also be necessary to consider the essential political, military, and social factors that put them there.

### **Myth and the Canadian Conscript**

This is not the first study to challenge the received wisdom on this controversial subject. In 1956 the Canadian historian A.M. Willms wrote that "most historians seem to have accepted the thesis that conscription was a failure, that it did not produce worthwhile results. But this is not true." Willms argued that conscription was "militarily necessary" and that the MSA was largely successful in satisfying the specific manpower goals identified by Prime Minister Robert Borden in June 1917.<sup>13</sup> Other scholars, however, have questioned whether the MSA was a success, although mainly within the framework of the deep and fundamental political, social, and cultural divides that conscription either created or deepened. In most of these analyses, the issue of military necessity has not been the principal focus and the actual contributions of conscripts in the field have been addressed inaccurately or not at all. This analytical weakness, coupled with the unproven theory that conscripts arrived at the front too little and too late, has fostered several historical myths, all of which collectively have reduced the combat role of Canadian conscripts to a passing footnote. For example, in responding to the rhetorical question "Was their journey necessary?", historian Desmond Morton once observed that "the MSA men filled the ranks only when the worst fighting was over." Indeed, a decade later he wrote: "Most of the so-called MSA men never actually experienced battle."<sup>14</sup>

In a similar vein, there are anecdotes that disparage the performance of conscripts in the field, including the remarkable charge by General Currie that conscripts were key suspects in fomenting one of the more infamous postwar riots that took place in England.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, as we will see, the fact that volunteers frequently praised conscripts does not appear to have diminished the impact that the myth of their poor performance has had on Canadian military historiography. Actually, the portrayal of the conscript as a disloyal soldier – or worse, a mutineer and rioter who deliberately defamed the hard-earned reputation of the Canadian Corps – has a very dubious foundation. Similarly, some scholars have asserted that those draftees who did make it to the front were insufficiently trained.<sup>16</sup> The evidence presented here, however, strongly suggests otherwise – that conscripts in general appear to have performed remarkably well during the most intensive and sustained fighting of the entire war.

The most common calumny visited upon non-volunteers is that many Canadians, civilians and soldiers alike, viewed these men as “slackers,” or as shirkers and malingerers.<sup>17</sup> Although such negative stereotypes have made for popular and convenient labelling, they could have been equally applied to those thousands of “volunteers” who had similarly delayed joining up for a year or two or three. Yet it was the non-volunteers and later the conscripts who were the real targets of the public’s opprobrium. Considered by many pro-conscriptionists to be unpatriotic and anti-democratic, by the end of the war some draftees were even suspected of having Bolshevik sympathies.<sup>18</sup> These slanderous allegations would collectively give birth to the myth of the conscript as anti-hero. And in an era when social norms permitted widespread and often unsettling displays of intolerance and public incivility, a whole generation of young men would be subjected to intense psychological pressures and often to physical abuse. Such coercive recruiting methods would manifest themselves in Toronto, where, for example, as historian Ian Miller has noted, recruiting sergeants conducted door-to-door “canvassing,” newspaper editorials “attempted to shame local men into joining up,” citizens were openly encouraged to report their neighbours in a “GIVE US HIS NAME” campaign, and in one documented case an eligible recruit was accosted in the street.<sup>19</sup>

Integral to this defamatory campaign was the myth of the “majority.” As Colonel A.F. Duguid pointed out in the preface to his incomplete *Official History*, Canada in 1914 was very much “a young country, as yet imperfectly knit by bonds of mutual danger, of joint interest or of common origin.” In other words, a great many Canadians did not see this “European War” as any affair of Canada’s, and certainly they did not perceive any direct threat to Canada from the Central Powers. Not surprisingly then, by mid-1916, as casualty lists grew ever longer, support for the war had begun to erode across all segments

of Canadian society. So when Duguid remarked on the contribution made “by that third of the adult male population which served in the armed forces,” he inadvertently underscored a most salient point in this discussion.<sup>20</sup> Conscripted men were in fact part of that larger *majority* of draft-age Canadian men who had freely chosen not to step forward to offer their services until, in some cases, their country legally demanded that they do so. Yet the myth of the “volunteer” as the majority endures.

### **Canadians Are Entitled to Know Their Own History**

With respect to Canadian conscripts, this thoughtful declaration by Desmond Morton seems to beg at least one pertinent question: Why has their story not been more fully told? This is a reasonable enquiry for which there appears to be no simple answer.<sup>21</sup> Tim Cook has pointed out that conscripts were enlisted men and that most unit histories were written by officers. An unsurprising result is the paucity of information in those histories about deeds performed by individuals in the ranks, be they conscripts or volunteers.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, there is an abundance of Great War literature about the Canadians and in particular about ordinary Canadian combat soldiers during the Hundred Days. Likewise, the subject of conscription in Canada has attracted deep and widespread analysis. However, only one book has ever been written specifically about the conscripts themselves: Ilana Bet-El’s account of the British experience, *Conscripts: Lost Legions of the Great War*. And even this important work does not focus explicitly on the conscripts’ overall contribution to the British war effort; instead, it goes to extraordinary lengths to describe how British conscripts were systematically purged from Britain’s memory of the Great War, thus helping create a central myth of the conflict – the virtual “non-existence of the conscripts.”<sup>23</sup> The lack of even one book in Canada that addresses the role conscripts played on the battlefield suggests that a similar phenomenon has also occurred here. With few exceptions, the Canadian historical narrative appears to have largely overlooked the contribution that conscripts made to the triumph of the Canadian Corps during the Hundred Days.<sup>24</sup>

One of the biggest challenges facing any attempt to sharpen the focus on the battlefield exploits of Canadian conscripts is the belief – at least in some people’s minds – that to do so would be to somehow diminish the great sacrifice of all those volunteers who came before them. At the time, for some Canadians, the mere possibility that the conscripts’ narrative might usurp in any way that of the volunteers was an emotionally charged issue (and for some Canadians it still is).<sup>25</sup> Thus for politicians, regimental historians, the Militia, the Overseas Ministry, and the Canadian Corps itself, it would have been politically risky to document the achievements of conscripts on the battlefield in a timely and

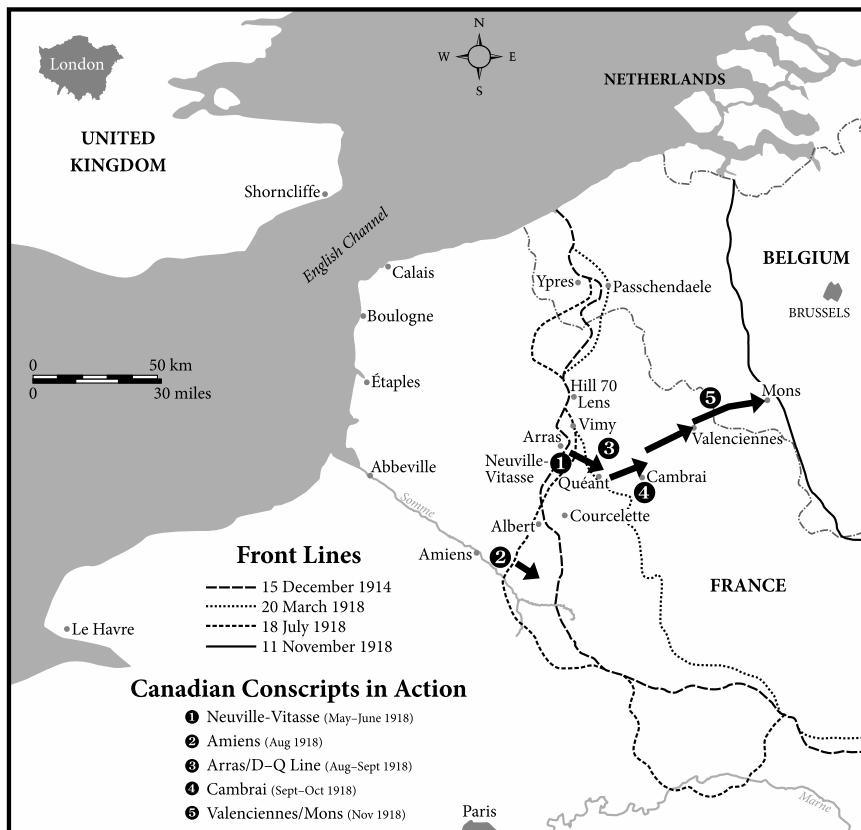
fulsome manner. But it seems that not doing so came with a far higher price – the false and politicized assumptions of succeeding generations that this extraordinary national effort did not deliver on its original promise to provide up to 100,000 soldiers for the CEF. Indeed, official records reveal that tens of thousands of conscripts faithfully served their country, and that many of them displayed on the battlefield levels of courage and tenacity the equal of their volunteer comrades.

### **Canadian Conscripts and the Hundred Days**

A close analysis of the large number of conscripts who did flow to the Canadian Corps in the late spring, summer, and early fall of 1918, coupled with an in-depth examination of their role as critical reinforcements for the line infantry battalions, reveals a number of surprising and sometimes startling facts. Principal among these revelations are the numbers of conscripts killed and wounded in battle and, as will be seen, the important contributions of conscripts to Canadian success in the Hundred Days. Yet it was Sir Arthur Currie's own surprising postwar impression that "very few conscripted men reached France before September, 1918," and that furthermore, among the "five or six thousand" Canadians "killed or died of wounds" in the last two months of the war, only "a very small proportion must have been conscripted men."<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Currie's inaccurate recollection of these troops has been buttressed for decades by what appear to be other similarly ill-informed impressions. Hence the precise role that conscripts did play in the final Canadian offensives of the war remains at best a mystery and wholly obscure. At worst, the historiography is misleading.

*Reluctant Warriors* seeks to fill this gap and to correct these misconceptions. The focus is on the conscripts themselves, on the key events that shaped their long and troubled journey from Canada's farms, factories, forests, and sea coasts to all the major battlefields of the Canadian Corps in 1918, and finally on new evidence that has come to light that challenges the reader to confront enduring myths, both about these conscripts and about their senior commanders. In this key respect, the story of the Canadian conscripts is not just about the draftees themselves but to a certain extent about the men who determined their fate and who directly employed them in battle. Implicit in this latter analysis is one overarching fact: had the lifeblood of the Canadian Corps not been continuously infused with conscripts during the Hundred Days, "Canada's greatest victory" simply would not have been possible.<sup>27</sup>

This analysis seeks to better define the precise nature of the conscripts' battlefield contribution during the Hundred Days, building on statistical data derived in part from Edward Wigney's seminal work *The C.E.F. Roll of Honour*, from a



Map 1 Canadian conscripts at war, 18 April–11 November 1918. Map by Mike Bechthold.

comprehensive review of relevant war diaries and official histories, and from the nominal rolls of numerous regimental histories. Further evidence is drawn from more than 7,000 conscript attestation papers and hundreds of digitized personnel files, as well as wartime letters, private diaries, newspapers, and postwar personal accounts, and of course from a broad spectrum of secondary sources, including the corporate and private histories that are most germane to Canada's combat operations on the Western Front during 1918.<sup>28</sup> Finally, raw data have been drawn from official Circumstances of Death Reports, which include the casualty's name, rank, unit, and grave location. These chillingly brief accounts do not spare the brutal details of the violent deaths that many of these men suffered. To do otherwise would obscure their great sacrifice.

This is the story then of men from towns and villages across the nation and from all walks of life who lawfully exercised their rights as citizens in the face

of exhortations by the press, the churches, and a good part of the enraged Canadian citizenry (most of them beyond the age eligible for military service). Some of these men were genuinely opposed to compulsory military service; others simply waited their time to be called. But then, having stepped forward to discharge their civil responsibilities as loyal citizens, they embarked on the same perilous journey as had their volunteer comrades before them. Thousands of these men ultimately fell in battle for a cause in which many of them did not believe, but for a country they loved and, most importantly, in defence of cherished principles – Canada's *Reluctant Warriors*.