

A uniquely Canadian military moment: Sam Hughes and the No. 7 General Hospital, 1915–1916

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SUMMARY

Universities across Canada actively supported the call to arms in 1914, and Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, was no different. Though a myriad of units composed of Queen's faculty and students were created, the university perceived the military hospital raised by the school's medical faculty to be among its most vital contributions to the First World War. This commentary describes the engagement of the No. 7 General Hospital with the Minister of Militia, Sam Hughes, which has become an almost unknown footnote to its illustrious story. This commentary has an Appendix, available at canjsurg.ca.

Universities across Canada actively supported the call to arms in 1914, and Queen's University in Kingston, Ont., was no different. Though a myriad of units composed of Queen's faculty and students were created, the university perceived the military hospital raised by the school's medical faculty to be among its most vital contributions to the First World War.¹ Originally formed in 1915 as No. 5 (Queen's University) Stationary Hospital, it was sent to Cairo, Egypt, and used in support of the British Army in the Middle East from August 1915 to January 1916, when it became No. 7 (Queen's University) General Hospital. It remained in Cairo until April 1916, and then moved to Étampes, France. No. 7 General Hospital stayed at that location with other Canadian hospital units until May 1919, when it returned to Canada and was demobilized (Appendix 1, available at canjsurg.ca).² This hard-working and well-travelled medical unit treated more than 39 900 patients.

Throughout its existence, its engagement with the Minister of Militia, Sam Hughes, from December 1915 to August 1916 has become an almost unknown footnote to its story.

Sam Hughes was a controversial Canadian figure — larger than life and, depending on the sentiments of those who described him, a fiercely proud nationalist or eccentric and dangerous crackpot. The reality is likely somewhere in between. However, there is no doubt about his personal involvement with the members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF). This engagement with the CEF was rooted in a philosophy shaped by his years in the prewar Militia, which endowed him with a belief in the primacy of the citizen soldier and their individual ownership of the conflict in which they had volunteered to fight. In a conflict that could not be owned by individual citizens, this viewpoint, along with Hughes' abrasive personality and inability to manage in a systemic way the force that he had raised,



Fig. 1. No. 7 General Hospital: Surgery in France (date unknown). Queen's University Archives, Dr. F.X. O'Connor III Photographic Collection 1069, Box 2 of 3, File 35 III "Pictures and Photographs — Military Hospital Medical and Surgical, "Surgery," n.d. Reproduced with permission.

were at odds with the needs of the Canadian government. Hughes' increasingly erratic behaviour and performance prompted his dismissal by Prime Minister Robert Borden in November 1916.³ All of that would be in the future and, like any good tale, this story needs to start at the beginning.

With the outbreak of war in 1914, students at Ontario's universities rushed to enlist in the military. Institutions like Queen's facilitated this by expanding or implementing Canadian Officers' Training Corps (COTC) contingents and supporting the formation of various units from within the university.⁴ As part of this enthusiasm, Dr. Frederick Etherington, a prominent member of the Queen's medical faculty, was commissioned as a Major in the Canadian Army Medical Corps and in November 1914 offered to raise a Stationary or General Hospital among the faculty, students and graduates of the university. Recruitment started almost immediately. In March 1915, the direction was given to mobilize No. 5 Stationary Hospital, and along with its newly promoted Officer Commanding, Lieutenant-Colonel Etherington, it proceeded overseas. The link and identification with Queen's University continued unabated until the end of the war. For example, the Hospital's increase in establishment in January 1916 as No. 7 General Hospital was quickly filled with Canadian volunteers.⁵

Not all members of the hospital in Cairo were enthused with their wartime role. Some became bored by the predictability of routine in a hospital removed from the fighting and wished for a transfer to more active units. Frederick (Don) MacKenzie, a Queen's graduate and future parliamentarian, as well as some nonmedical Queen's students and graduates who had been members of the COTC, approached Etherington in late Autumn 1914 about obtaining commissions to be at the Front. Etherington was not supportive; he asked the group to reconsider. He appealed to them as Queen's men who were part of a Queen's unit to remain and enable the Queen's spirit to prevail. One could argue that, like Hughes, Etherington wanted to have his hospital and his university personally "own" this portion of the war while simultaneously serving the medical needs of the soldiers in the most efficient way.

After consideration, MacKenzie and the others thought the war a much greater thing than the needs of a single unit. This desire to join the larger war was not uncommon during the early years of the conflict. It was typical of the realization that the war was changing dangerously and quickly. As a result, these soldiers thought their particular contribution would be better made elsewhere and in combat. After discussing the matter the group, consisting of T.W. Third (B.A.), M.B. MacLachlan (B.A.), F.D. MacKenzie (B.A.), F.J. Young, A.B.C. Throop, J.M. MacIlquham, R.J. MacKenzie, W.E. Grassie, W.F. Charon, and J.H. Odell, decided to take action and sent a telegram offering their services as commissioned officers in the Canadian Army to the Minister of the Militia, General Sir Sam Hughes. In what was to commence a uniquely

Canadian dialogue, Hughes replied to this small band of soldiers that they should start training in Cairo.⁶

The background events that likely contributed to Hughes' willingness to become directly involved with this exchange was probably underpinned by his personality and beliefs regarding the primacy of citizen-soldiers, along with his thoughts concerning their individual ownership of the conflict. On top of this, there was an ongoing need for recruits, which by October 1915 was exacerbated by an authorized increase of the CEF from 150 000 to 250 000.⁷ It is likely, in that context, that Hughes saw a Canadian Hospital supporting the British campaign in the Middle East as not relevant to Canadian purposes. Accordingly, Hughes believed that qualified volunteers like MacKenzie and the others should be brought into the Canadian fold forthwith. This idea seems to be supported by Hughes' later actions in 1916, which raised the ire of the military medical community by advocating for a proposed scheme to have Canadian military casualties receive medical treatment solely by Canadians. In practical terms, this idea did not acknowledge that casualties occurred in waves and ebbs conforming to operations, not in a predictable flow. All military medical resources, regardless of nationality, needed to be brought to bear when necessary. Andrew MacPhail, historian of the Canadian Medical Services in the First World War, observed that this segregation would have been divisive, separating the CEF from the British Expeditionary Force. MacPhail highlighted that "the medical service was selected by the Minister as the ground of his struggle for control of the army."⁸ Consequently, in the matter of the MacKenzie telegram one could opine that Hughes was likely acting from a personal perspective that was justified by his vision of national self-interest.

In any case, MacKenzie later wrote in his recollection of events that they decided to verify the possibility of following Hughes' direction and conducting their training in Egypt. Accordingly, MacKenzie soon took the telegram and travelled to the Imperial School of Instruction 15 or 20 miles east of Cairo. There he met with the adjutant of the school, Captain Cook, who was, according to MacKenzie, quite excited about their case. Moreover, when Cook found out that MacKenzie did not know Hughes, he, according to MacKenzie, remarked that "such a thing as a general answering a cable from an unknown soldier could not happen in imperial circles." In turn, Cook not only said that they could take their training at the school, but also referred MacKenzie to Captain Gibson, the aide-de-camp of the General Officer Commanding the Mediterranean forces. Gibson was welcoming and took the telegram to the General Officer Commanding, General Maxwell, who also assured that they could take their training and return to the Canadian Forces. As MacKenzie was departing, Gibson told him that if Etherington continued to block their application "they should not hesitate to go over his head, as a man should not be stopped from

promotion.” Following that, on 08 January 1915, they sent a cable to Hughes explaining that training was possible in Egypt, and on 11 January they received a reply: “Have pleasure in giving authority for training in Cairo. Sam Hughes.”⁶

With this telegram MacKenzie visited the school again, this time along with Third and Throop. Although Cook was hospitalized at the time, they met with the “colonel in charge,” who greeted them warmly and introduced them to a number of other senior officers. In the course of the conversation one of these officers asked MacKenzie if he could have the telegrams, as it would make an exceptional dinner story: “No one would believe such a story. Just imagine what would happen to me should I cable Kitchener? Why I’d be shot in the morning.” However, MacKenzie declined to give away the telegrams, as he would need them until they received the consent of their commander, Etherington.⁶

At the same time the Commanding Officer, Etherington, was a firm believer in the need for his hospital to maintain its integrity as a Queen’s unit. Mackenzie recorded in his account of the period that Etherington refused to provide his consent for them to leave the unit and start training. Despite 2 further telegrams from MacKenzie to Hughes on 18 January and on 25 January 1915, Etherington did not alter his decision. One can guess that with the expansion of the hospital from a Stationary to General Hospital,

the loss of 10 able-bodied and intelligent Queen’s men before the arrival of the much-needed reinforcements from Kingston would be detrimental to unit efficacy. Indeed, although the necessary personnel were quickly raised by Queen’s University, they did not depart Kingston until the end of January. Etherington’s prudence in this matter seemed to be justified; in March, Queen’s University reported to the Adjutant General in Ottawa that the promised reinforcement draft was broken up and only a portion were sent to Cairo. After inquiries were made to the Director of Medical Services of the Canadian Contingent in England, it was decided to keep those who had arrived in England employed temporarily until they could join No. 7 General Hospital once it was redeployed from the Middle East.^{5,6,8}

In the meantime, neither Hughes nor MacKenzie let the matter disappear. At about the same time as inquiries were being made about the Queen’s reinforcement draft, the Adjutant-General’s office in Ottawa contacted the Canadian General Staff in London to have Hughes’ wishes carried out. A series of letters and telegrams ensued from various departments in London to the Middle East, and eventually an answer was received in April that the unit had departed Cairo and was en route to France, where they arrived in early May. At that point, a telegraph was sent from Major-General J.W. Carson, the Canadian



Fig. 2. No. 7 General Hospital: Funeral service in France (date unknown). Queen’s University Archives, Dr. F.X. O’Connor III Photographic Collection 1069, Box 2 of 3, File 33 III “Pictures and Photographs — Military Hospital Europe, “Funeral Service,” n.d. Reproduced with permission.

representative of the Department of Militia and Defence on the Canadian General Staff in London, to let Hughes' office know that No. 7 General Hospital had arrived in France. At that time Carson suggested that although the requests of the 10 students to transfer to the artillery could be enacted, there were more than sufficient numbers of junior officers and there was no need to complete this request, but it would be done if Hughes wished. The reply from Ottawa was "In reply, I have to inform you that the Honourable Minister has instructed that the directions, as previously given, to be carried out if possible."⁸

Meanwhile, MacKenzie continued his inquiries as to the status of his request for commissioning after his arrival in France in late May. His first letter laid out his background and explained that this had already been approved by Hughes, but diplomatically wrote "could not be satisfactorily arranged at the time." The reply informed MacKenzie that no applicants for commissioning in the artillery were being accepted at that time owing to a surplus of artillery officers. In June, MacKenzie replied asking for consideration for a position as a prospective infantry officer.⁹ By this time the Canadian military bureaucracy were processing Hughes' directive to send the No. 7 (Queen's University) "10" to artillery training in England. The rest is best described in a letter from Don MacKenzie's brother Bert, a member of the group, to his sister, Rose, dated 23 July:

You may be wondering what we are doing back in Old 'Blighty.' Well, before Xmas we (10 of us) wrote or rather cabled Col. Hughes for commissions and as time wore on and nothing came of it we thought that it had all petered out, but last Tuesday morning a letter came to our O.C. telling him to strike us off his strength and have us report to Shorncliffe for the purpose of trying out for vacancies to be filled here. So we came across and here we are. We shall make a try for artillery commissions and in 3 months or better will go back to France with a couple of stars up at least.¹⁰

Sadly, this tale did not have a happy ending for all the participants. Bert MacKenzie was seriously wounded before war's end, resulting in an amputation of the left leg, and James MacIlquham was killed in action in 1917.¹¹

After the departure of these Queen's men, Etherington followed up in September 1916, requesting those specially recruited for the expansion to No. 7 General Hospital be sent to France to bring them up to full strength.¹² This seems to have occurred. The history of the hospital, published in 1917, indicated that the flow of reinforcements from Queen's University had continued uninterrupted and in many ways provided it with its unique character, representing the traditions of service and sacrifice espoused by that institution.¹³ After the war, Etherington returned to Queen's to continue a distinguished teaching career.

This unique Canadian military moment is not only an interesting story, but also indicates a myriad of tensions

that emerge in wartime. Personalities like Etherington, Hughes and MacKenzie reflect our national culture and serve not only as examples of the past, but also guideposts to our future. Interestingly, one can discern that all believed that they should take ownership of "their" part of the war, which created opposing perspectives. The friction between them was evidence of the larger collisions between the culture of the professional soldier and that of the citizen-soldier and the occasional disagreement between military medicine and service bureaucracy. It also speaks to the uniqueness of the Canadian military ethos, with its singular blend of individualism, perseverance, patriotism and willingness to serve. Finally, it also underscores the importance of past Canadian military experience and the lessons that this knowledge highlights for the present and future.

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