

End of the Originals

It started at 0400, on the 8th of May 1915. Through the pre-dawn gloom came the whistling of shells. They seemed to rip the sky apart before crashing down with fury and a terrific flash of light. Chemical gas canisters and high explosive shells thundered down onto the waterlogged trench lines below. Half collapsed revetments and dugouts shuddered and shook with every impact, the sole protection offered to the soldiers of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry sheltered within. For hours the barrage hammered the position, straining nerves to their absolute breaking point and wreaking havoc across the lines of the PPCLI.



By 0900 an eerie, bewitching silence descended. Amidst the hazy morning light, thick with the smells and smog of protracted barrage, the men emerged from cover and gazed out onto no man's land to see the German ground assault already underway. Over a division's worth of bayonets glittered as they stormed towards the Regiment's lines. Most of the Patricia's machine gun positions had been devastated by the morning's barrage, but somehow they managed to get a few of the weapons up and running. Soon, the chattering of the Vickers' dispelled the moment of silence along Frezenberg Ridge.

Major Gault ordered every able bodied soldier into the frontline trenches, including support troops and Headquarters staff. The training and discipline of the Patricia's effectively halted the German attack. By noon, the Germans had launched their third attack of the day, and both allied flanking units began to pull back. The Patricia's were now taking fire from three sides. Despite the overwhelming odds and mounting casualties the soldiers of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry were, as became a motto of the regiment, able to "*hold up the whole damn line*".



Canadians at Ypres, William Barnes Wollen, 1915

By the end of the day, the seven hundred man strong regiment would be severely reduced to barely company strength commanded by a fresh Lieutenant in what would become known as the 'End of the Originals'.

Who were the originals? They were the first to respond to Hamilton Gault's call to arms, and the first Canadian unit to

enter the trenches in January 1915. These men were the first soldiers to be able to call themselves a Patricia. They were the last gasp of the British adventurer, almost entirely composed of veterans from across the empire including Canadians, British, Scottish, and South Africans. When the regiment was stood up by Hamilton Gault, the choice for many of them was obvious. The result was not some green militia, but instead a hardened fighting force. This was the cream of the crop of colonial soldiering the world over, and would be the first colonial force to triumph over a European one, on European soil.

At Frezenberg, the fighting descended into a hellish maelstrom of bayonet thrusts, staccato rifle fire and hand to hand combat for fifteen straight hours. Every hand that could carry a rifle did so, and the regiment in its entirety was thrown into the valiant defense. By midnight, the 3rd Kings Royal Rifle Corps found their way forward to the position, and were greeted by the resolute soldiers of the PPCLI. Battered, but still holding the line. One hundred and fifty men and four officers were all that remained, a testament to the unshakable bond formed between them. They had not trained with the rest of the Canadians in the force, who they saw as a colonial militia, yet none of the originals would claim anything but loyal patriotism to Canada. Lieutenant Niven, who survived the ordeal and commanded the Patricia's that day, said that Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry were quite simply, "A Battalion Apart."

Lieutenant S. R. Glover

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