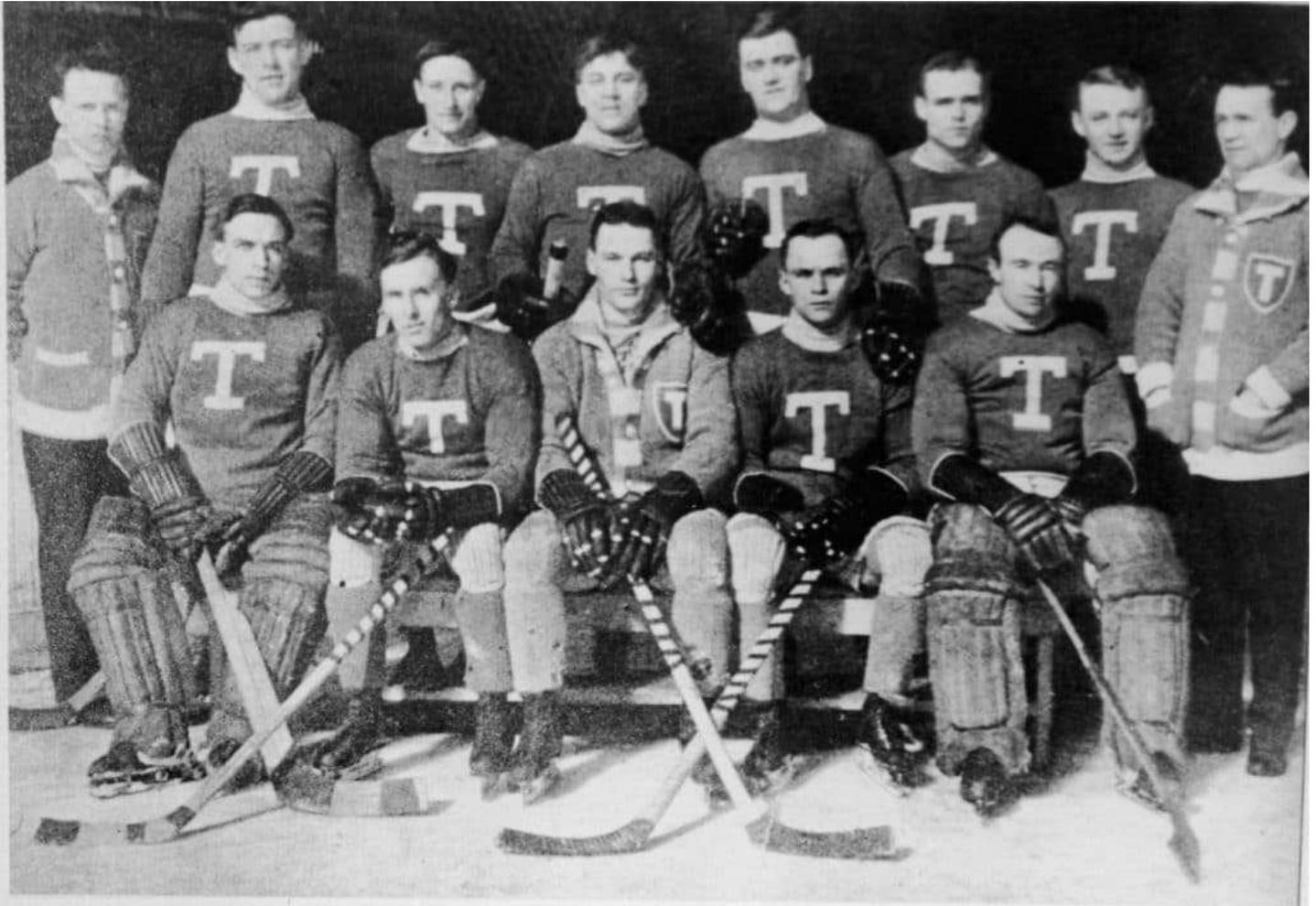


A hero from Toronto's first Stanley Cup win and the First World War story you have never heard



TORONTO
Stanley Cup Champions – 1914

Standing—left to right: R. CARROLL (Trainer) C. CORBEAU (Defence) F. R. McGIFFEN (Forward)
J. C. MARSHALL (Manager) G. McNAMARA (Defence) J. WALKER (Forward) C. W. WILSON (Forward)
F. CARROLL (Trainer)
Sitting: C. WILSON (Goal) F. C. FOYSTON (Forward) A. M. DAVIDSON (Defence) H. CAMERON (Defence)
H. HOLMES (Goal)

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By: Matthew Walther

Of the 35 Canadian soldiers who died on the Western Front on June 16, 1915, seven were from the 2nd Battalion: One was a farmer from Edmonton, another was a civil servant from Smiths Falls, Ont., and another was a hard-punching, high-scoring winger who led Toronto to its very first Stanley Cup title.

Allan (Scotty) Davidson was considered one of the best players of his era, scoring 23 goals in 20 games in that championship season with the Toronto Hockey Club and clinching the Cup in March 1914.

When war broke out, five months later, Davidson cast his playing career aside to enlist. He trained at Valcartier, in Quebec, shipping out across the Atlantic Ocean for a difficult winter in England before finally landing in France in February 1915.

Davidson survived the Second Battle of Ypres, where the Canadians helped hold the Allied line against a German chlorine gas attack. But two months later, he was dead, killed in action at Givenchy, near the not-yet-famous Vimy Ridge.

“He crawled up to within a few feet of their trenches and hurled bomb after bomb in the midst of the Huns,” George Taylor Richardson, a friend and former teammate, wrote to their old hockey coach in a letter the *Calgary Daily Herald* published on Dec. 9, 1915.

“Two of his companions retreated, but Davidson refused to do so until he had gotten rid of his bombs. Finally he was discovered, surrounded and ordered to surrender. Scotty refused and crashed his last hand grenade against the body of a German officer, blowing him to pieces. We found Scotty’s body the next morning, riddled with bullets and jabbed with bayonets.”

The letter was later published in other papers, and the details have been repeated and embellished for a century. Former Prime Minister Stephen Harper made reference to Davidson in his book, “A Great Game,” writing the young star had been killed “reputedly after refusing to retreat during a battle.”

But as Canadians prepare to mark the 100th anniversary of the end of the First World War, reflecting on countless stories of heroism and sacrifice, they should know there is a problem with the story of Davidson’s death: It’s not true.

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If you haven’t heard of Scotty Davidson, you’re not alone. Pieces of his legacy still exist in old newspapers, a faded personnel file and a name chiseled in limestone on the Vimy Memorial. More is preserved in fragmented family lore, and also at the Hockey Hall of Fame, where he was inducted posthumously, alongside the likes of Newsy Lalonde and Joe Malone, two other early stars whose accomplishments still echo through the game.

But very little has been written about his too-short life, which ended three months after his 24th birthday, just as he should have been entering the prime of his playing career.

Davidson already held a measure of regional notoriety before he landed in Toronto, having led his hometown Kingston Frontenacs to a pair of Ontario Hockey Association titles. He also played for Portsmouth, a team based near his family home by the penitentiary, in the Kingston Senior League, where, according to the *Globe and Mail*, “it was considered an uneventful night, indeed, when several riots did not occur.”

“He was a brawler and used his elbows a lot,” said Al Stevenson, Davidson’s grandnephew. “And a pretty heavy drinker, too. He played to win.”

The young forward, with his square jaw and handsome flourish of light-brown hair, was skilled — he finished fourth in NHA scoring in his final season — but he was also at home when the game turned rough.

“Davidson stepped into the National League and immediately proceeded to make the experienced campaigners look foolish,” Mike Rodden wrote in the *Globe*. “His wrists were made of ‘iron,’ he was a brilliant stick-handler, he could skate with the best of them, he could check, and he could score. He was the ideal player, and, in my estimation, he was all alone.”

He was not above criticism, though. Late in that 1913–14 season — and despite the fact Davidson was scoring almost two points a game — Harper wrote there were “widely circulated rumours about breaks from training and sobriety by Scotty and his young Blue Shirt teammates.”

Still, Toronto beat Montreal and their legendary goaltender Georges Vezina in a two-game NHA tie-breaker series to win the Cup, with Davidson scoring the winning goal.

Next up were the Pacific Coast champion Victoria Aristocrats in the best-of-five Stanley Cup challenge series. Davidson scored once in a 5-2 win to open the series, but according to the *Toronto Sunday World*, he was used sparingly and “had another off-night.”

The reason soon became apparent. Before Game 2, the *Globe* reported Davidson was sick with the flu and had, in fact, defied his doctor’s orders to take the ice in the previous match. His temperature soared to 104 degrees, and forced him to sit out the second game, which Toronto won (although he did sneak into the Arena to watch). Davidson was healthy enough to return to the ice for Game 3, where he took three major penalties and left with the Stanley Cup, following a 2-1 win.

By the end of March, Davidson was back in Kingston, where he worked as a machinist with the Kingston Foundry Company.

“I do remember a story about them having — I don’t know if this makes sense — but they had the Stanley Cup sitting on their mantelpiece,” his grandnephew said. “It seems kind of funny that somebody would actually have it in their possession at their house.”

A brief item in the *Daily Standard* reported Davidson would “remain in the city for the rest of the summer and will in all probability sign up with the Torontos again next fall.”

The spinning wheel of history had other plans.



Allan 'Scotty' Davidson. (Photo: Bruce Bennett Studios/Getty Images)

Britain declared war on Germany on Aug. 4, following the latter's invasion of Belgium. The news was met with excitement in Kingston, where a throng gathered around the Daily Standard office to read the latest news bulletins. According to the paper, "a perfect pandemonium of patriotism broke loose" as the crowd cheered and sang "Rule Britannia" and "The Maple Leaf Forever."

Canada, as a British dominion, was now also at war.

A week later, Davidson — who served in the pre-war militia with Kingston's 14th Princess of Wales' Own Regiment (PWOR) — reported for duty and volunteered to serve overseas. While the men of the 14th waited for mobilization orders, they performed guard duty at Fort Henry and other important sites around the city.

Orders finally arrived on Aug. 21, that 80 men selected from the PWOR would leave the following afternoon for the new army training camp at Valcartier, north of Quebec City.

"Fear God, honor your King, and boys, you cannot fail in your duty," Colonel T.D.R. Hemming, PWOR commanding officer, told his men, per the Daily Standard, as they prepared to depart after a morning of tearful goodbyes. The officers were gifted Colt revolvers, while the men each received a gold English sovereign worth \$5 (about \$110 today) and a pocket knife.

The group of soldiers marched to the train station accompanied by the PWOR band. Locals lined the streets: Some cheering, some trying to steal one last glimpse of a son, brother or husband. A few men slipped their new coins to family members on the station platform just before the train pulled away. Davidson had another gift with him, a Great Dane puppy, which, the Daily Standard noted, was, "the original war dog of Europe."

After a month of paperwork and training and more paperwork at Valcartier, the PWOR men, now part of the 2nd Battalion, boarded the S.S. Cassandra at Quebec City. A 12-year-old, single-funneled steamship constructed in Greenock, Scotland, the Cassandra would be their home for the next month as they joined a convoy of 31 other troop ships for the crossing to England.

On board, Davidson put his fists to good use in a boxing tournament and, though he won the semifinal match, he injured his hand and could not fight in the championship bout.

As they steamed down the St. Lawrence past Rimouski on Sept. 27, Private Alfred Baggs recorded in his diary that soldiers on the Cassandra's deck could see the northern lights dancing overhead. For many, it would be one of their last memories of Canada.

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Toronto badly missed its captain. According to the Ottawa Evening Journal, Davidson's absence turned "the Torontos from a championship team to a second rate sextette."

The Blueshirts won just eight of their 20 games that season, finishing fourth in the NHA.

Meanwhile, the First Contingent arrived in England, but faced a long winter of training before making the final leg of the journey to France. Life on the cold, wet and muddy Salisbury Plain, while ostensibly good preparation for the Western Front, was hard on morale.

"Some of the boys have bad colds, and many more will get them, if we do not soon move into the huts," wrote Daniel Douglass, a 2nd Battalion man from Oshawa, in a letter published in Bowmanville's Canadian Statesman. "We came if necessary, to die for our country, but not of colds — we could have done that at home with very little trouble."

Davidson, with his athlete's physique, was chosen as a scout during the training in England, although he would later be selected as a bomb thrower, advancing as close as possible to enemy trenches to hurl grenades inside.

Describing his role in a letter to friends that was published in the Toronto Daily Star, Davidson listed all the equipment he had to carry, including a special bomb harness, plus the heavy English boots, and lamented, "A fat chance to get out of any German's way have I!"

The Canadians finally made it to France in February 1915 and then Belgium, where, on April 22, they were in the lines in the Ypres Salient when the Germans unleashed a chlorine gas attack. While many around them fled, the Canadians held their ground, suffering more than 6,000 casualties. The 2nd Battalion alone had 541 men killed or wounded, although Davidson was not among them.

The men needed time behind the lines to relax and decompress from the incredible strain of battle; their units needed reinforcements if they were to fight again. While the men rested, replacements were found among the units training in England and quickly brought across the Channel to fortify the ranks.

Soon, the 1st Division moved south, back into France, and suffered a further 2,605 casualties in a futile assault at Festubert, though the 2nd Battalion was not heavily implicated. Their next test was to come nearby at Givenchy where, after a period of rest at Essars, they headed back into the trenches on June 11.

The battalion's first couple days back in the lines were uneventful. Although the 2nd was not leading the upcoming attack, that did not mean they were free from danger. No one anywhere near the front line was — ever.

As the men waited for the battle, they attended to the usual routine, including trench maintenance, weapons cleaning, eating and, if they had a few moments to spare, perhaps writing a letter home. Over tins of bully beef, they would have discussed the same things soldiers on campaign have talked about since the dawn of civilization: home, women, complaints about food and the latest war rumours.

The 1st Battalion attacked the German lines alongside a larger British force on the evening of June 15 after the detonation of a large mine that killed both Germans and Canadians. Bombers from the 2nd Battalion and two platoons from the 3rd supported the attack from the new mine crater, according to the Official History of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

“Fighting was fast and furious this time in, under continuous shell fire,” wrote Howard Curtis of the 2nd, a painter from Peterborough, Ont., in a letter to his sister. “Perhaps I was lucky to get out of it when I was wounded ... It's a game of chance living in this land of war — whole in body one minute and the next in a thousand pieces.”

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On June 19, a letter from Davidson arrived at the family home in Portsmouth, per the Daily Standard. It mentioned that he had been part of the attack at Festubert, attached to the 10th Battalion, but gave few other details. He was being modest, as the same article outlined another letter sent by a fellow Kingstonian saying Davidson was recommended for the Distinguished Conduct Medal (second in precedence only to the Victoria Cross) for holding an entire trench against a German attack with two other soldiers.

But the relatively slow pace of communications in 1915 could lead to confusion and misunderstandings. On June 21, a brief notice was published in the Toronto Telegram saying that Davidson was dead. When word arrived in Kingston, the Daily Standard wired the Telegram asking for details. The reply stated that the paper had received a cable saying Davidson had been killed, but without his initials or battalion: “Possibly not he.”

Of course, Davidson's parents were in denial. There was no official confirmation — though even the official casualty lists were sometimes wrong — and they had just received a letter from their son and heard he was to be decorated for gallantry on the battlefield.

Now, all of a sudden, he was dead?

And then, on June 23, more hope. The Daily Standard published a letter from Private Charles Tenney saying, “I am bunking with Alan Davidson, the famous hockey player. He has done great work as a bomb thrower and is recommended for the D.C.M. or V.C. He certainly should get either. He and two more bombers were all that reached the German trench and blew them out of it and held it until the battalion came up and occupied it. He is one of the best soldiers in the contingent.”

His parents were helpless, at the mercy of the military bureaucracy and the fog of war. There was no one to call, no one to ask about their son. The only thing to do was pray that the next knock at their door was not a messenger of death.

On June 25, the dreaded confirmation came. Richardson cabled his family’s firm in Kingston: “Regret to advise that Allan Davidson and Thos. Connolly both killed in action...”

His uncle broke the news to Davidson’s mother.

Davidson’s personnel file makes it very clear what happened to him. A handwritten note from Aug. 11, 1915 states he “was killed instantly by a shell falling in the trench. He was practically blown to pieces.”

So that letter from Richardson — the one so often repeated where Davidson died after refusing to surrender — that was just written to console a grieving family with one last inspiring story about a lost son, right?

No.

On July 10, the Daily Standard published a letter Richardson had written to Davidson’s mother just a week after her son’s death and long before the erroneous one to James Sutherland: “Allan was instantly killed by a shell which killed three of his companions at the same time. He was buried just in the rear of our trench, which was about fifty yards distant from the German line, and a cross bearing his name and Regiment was erected over his grave.”

Several other letters from soldiers who knew the true story were also published in papers from Ottawa to Kingston to Edmonton. Which leaves us with two questions: Why did Richardson write the second letter, with a story he knew wasn’t true? And why was the inaccurate story of Davidson’s death repeated so often when the truth had already been published?

The second question is easier to answer: The heroic story was repeated because it was the better story. A Hollywood ending for a real-life action hero. But Davidson’s heroism came from how he lived — giving up a comfortable life to serve his country — not from how he died.

As for Richardson’s motivation in writing the second letter, we can only speculate. He was killed seven months later in Belgium, so he never had a chance to come back to Canada and clear up the record.

Maybe Richardson did not know that his letter to Davidson’s mother had been published. When he wrote to Sutherland, he may have been seeking to portray a noble death for their mutual friend, perhaps even hoping that Sutherland would disseminate that story. We must also consider the possibility that Richardson heard the no-surrender story well after Davidson’s death and believed it. It’s unlikely, given his status as an officer and the number of people who seemed aware of the real circumstances, but it is possible.

Either way, Davidson's parents knew the truth, even if it was lost over time.

"The 1st contingent had lost its best man when that shell burst and I lost the best 'pal' I ever had or could have," Davidson's bunkmate, Private Tenney, wrote in a letter published by the Daily Standard on July 8. "They may send more men in thousands from Canada, but I fear we'll never see Davidson's place taken by any of them. I know every man in the 2nd Battalion has the same belief."

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Canadian soldiers at the front during the First World War. (Photo: Universal History Archive/UIG via Getty Images)

Arthur Davidson was the baby of the family, just 20 months younger than his brother, Scotty. Suddenly, like so many Canadians left behind during those four awful years of war, he had to figure out how to grieve.

"I think when he lost his brother, I think they were quite close and I think it just affected him," said Stevenson, Arthur's grandson.

Seven months after Scotty was killed, Arthur returned to Kingston from Chatham, Ont. where he worked at the Merchants' Bank. Two-hundred and eight days after his brother was killed in action, Arthur signed his attestation paper to enlist in the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

He shipped to England in April 1917 and, after some additional training at Shorncliffe, was assigned to the Princess Pat's. On Aug. 25, he joined his unit in Lens, France, as the Battle of Hill 70 ended.

Along with the Somme, Passchendaele has become synonymous with the horrors of the First World War, and with good reason. Endless mud, tangled barbed wire, thousands upon thousands of dead for minimal gains... Passchendaele had it all.

In fact, Scotty and the 2nd Battalion had their first taste of battle in the Ypres Salient back in April 1915. Now, two and a half years later, Arthur and the PPCLI were fighting over almost exactly the same ground. A fresh crop of soldiers approaching the same gates of hell.

The Third Battle of Ypres had already been raging for nearly three months by the time the Patricia's arrived in the ruined Belgian city on October 24. Three months, with perhaps half a million dead and wounded on either side of no man's land. The Canadian Corps was called in to mount a final assault to take

Passchendaele village and the high ground around it.

Late on October 29, three days after the Canadians' first attack, the PPCLI began moving into forward positions for an assault early the next morning. "Several casualties in Assembly trenches," the battalion War Diary recounts matter-of-factly.

Arthur Davidson was one of those casualties.

He was shot through the left leg, but survived. Like Howard Curtis at Givenchy, perhaps he was even lucky to have been shot when he was, as nearly one of every six Patricia's who went over the top on Oct. 30 was killed. After stays at hospitals in France, Wales and England, Arthur returned home in 1919.

Back in Kingston, he tried to forget about the war that had taken his brother and left both his body and mind wounded. Perhaps he was also frustrated or angry that, after a year and a half of training, he had been shot before ever participating in a battle.

Either way, he was suffering from what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

One day Arthur went out in the backyard of the family home and started digging. He threw his army uniform into the hole and shoveled the dirt back over it, trying to bury some unwanted memories with it. He developed a stutter, yet had a successful career in Windsor, working his way up through the accounting department at Ford. He also golfed, curled and sailed, leading an active social life with his wife, Orma, who he married in 1921.

But what his grandchildren remember most about him is the silence. And the smoke.

"Honest to God, the guy hardly ever said a word," Stevenson said.

"I guess he had an awkwardness and a discomfort with the speech impediment, so he wasn't one to strike up a conversation," said Al's brother, Ian. "You always had to go to him."

When they were young, Al, Ian and their sister Christine often visited their grandparents' summer home on Lake St. Clair. The house would be full of smoke from Arthur's ever-present pipe and Export "A"s, and the kids would spend their days at the beach.

And while the children played, Arthur would sit quietly on a bench under a willow tree, smoking and staring out at the lake.

Surrounded by family, but alone with his thoughts, listening to the waves and the children's laughter. Maybe remembering his own childhood by the water in Kingston or the war or his brother, who never came back from it, but mostly just trying to forget.



Matthew Walthert is a freelance writer from Ottawa, Ont. He has a degree in history from Carleton University and his work has appeared in a range of publications, including the Globe and Mail, Vice Sports, Canadian Running, Bleacher Report and the Canadian Military History peer-reviewed journal.

(Photo: Bruce Bennett Studios/Getty Images)