

530 Dominion Street,
Winnipeg, Man.

July 14, 1938.

Major George W. Northwood, M.C.,
London and Western Trust Building,
City.

Dear Major Northwood:

Major J. K. Bell, O.C., Winnipeg Rifles, telephoned me asking that I write you setting out my Overseas contacts with the late W. A. Aldritt, D.C.M., who died of heart disease several years ago. I understand that this letter is designed to supply evidence in fighting the case for his widow and family for pension on, it may be, compassionate grounds.

I had intimate contact with Aldritt before the war and during our service in Canada and Overseas. It is just possible that he joined us at Valcartier, but I think it was on Salisbury Plains. I know the circumstances which brought him to us. The late Major General S. P. Lipsett, D.S.O., had a "mob" (I use the word advisedly) of us raw militiamen to whip into shape for service in France. We knew little of military discipline, and cared less. Later, when under fire, we came to appreciate its value. I don't know whether he sent for Aldritt through Col. O'Grady or whether Aldritt dropped as manna from heaven into his lap.

Anyway Lipsett welcomed Aldritt personally and saw at once the value of his training as a Y.M.C.A. physical director. He had Aldritt give the entire battalion, particularly its non-commissioned officers, instruction in physical "jerks" and Aldritt's work in this department was priceless. Later, Lipsett (one of the few O.C.'s in the first division to accomplish this) had a trained staff of physical directors -- thanks to Aldritt. He had used Aldritt's skill to advantage and later sent him to the machine guns under the late Lieut. Col. (then Captain) T. H. Raddle, a former Imperial Marines' Officer. Raddle appreciated Aldritt and leaned on him a lot in consequence.

It was while Aldritt served in the machine guns that I was best able to evaluate his service. When he came our machine gun unit non-commissioned officers didn't know much about their job and, for the most part, seemed to care less. Aldritt came with enthusiasm for his job. He learned machine-gun work in brief order and was soon senior machine gun sergeant.

Major George W. Northwood, M.C.

July 14, 1938.

He was in the reserve during the Easter attack on Hill 60, in the Ypres salient, the first 8th Battalion N.C.O. to smell battle smoke. He had two machine guns and crews along and, while not actually engaged, proved steady and a fine example during that nerve-wracking period of waiting.

However, I didn't appreciate Aldritt until the fateful 2nd Battle of Ypres. We went into the line on April 20, 1915 -- a Tuesday. On April 22, Thursday evening, the Germans released their first poison gas against our lines -- or at least against the French Algerians to our left. What happened then is history. But I now recite something which, perhaps, has never been written before. Capt. Raddle, machine gun officer, had been wounded and I had taken him out on the Wednesday evening. Aldritt was now O.C. of all four machine guns -- the ranking N.C.O. with his officer knocked out.

Reserves were rushed up to fill the gap made by the retirement of the Algerians. The Toronto Scottish, a 3rd brigade unit, was anchored on our left between us and the gap. Our 8th Battalion left heel was placed in the low ground at the foot of the Gravenstafel Ridge which we occupied. Aldritt took the position of danger with the machine guns at the foot of the ridge. He would do that.

On the Saturday morning the Germans tried to clear all the low ground by sending over more gas. Our 3rd Brigade unit broke back and there was a gap. Aldritt placed his machine guns on the new front, which was our exposed flank and denied that ground to the Germans for nearly 40 hours while our people behind prepared new ground. I would not be surprised if the 2nd Battle of Ypres was saved right there -- the tilting of the scale of battle in our favor, as it were. Before that, while the yellow gas was floating over No Man's Land, Aldritt's machine guns were blazing into the gas. He had anticipated that the Germans were advancing behind it -- as they were.

There were other men on the front that morning -- of course there were. But not one of them was doing more useful work than Aldritt. And, during the engagement he got plenty of the German chlorine gas, make no mistake about that. He had the constitution of a horse and didn't know when he was licked. The medical examiners have no record of Aldritt's exposure that day. But I believe it hastened his end and was responsible for his family's loss of their breadwinner. The damned fool never went to hospital in Germany but his health suffered. I went to hospital but there is no medical record from there even of my wounds, gas and treatment. I hadn't what it takes to the same extent as Aldritt.

Major George W. Northwood, M.C.

July 14th, 1938.

On the Sunday night after we had evacuated our advanced position, Aldritt and his machine guns were back on the ridge, covering that retirement. When it came time for him to retire he was cut off and taken prisoner. That was about 8 p.m. on Sunday, April 25, 1915. I was with my machine gun down at the left foot of our line when I was hit by a machine gun bullet, I think. I was knocked out and a short time later Aldritt and Ben Ranns came along under German escort, and picked me up, carrying me to a dressing station behind the German lines. They saved my life.

On the way back Aldritt said he didn't understand how he escaped the gas. He had been in the thick of it and men had dropped dead all round him or had lingered for a few hours or days before going off. But he escaped -- apparently unharmed, so he thought. I do not now believe that he escaped unharmed. I believe that the gas that day did irreparable damage to his heart, which played out prematurely and left his family with no just means of support.

Aldritt placed me on a bunk in that German dressing station and was taken away for interrogation. They didn't get much out of him and his example was splendid for the other prisoners. A good volunteer soldier was Bill Aldritt.

I heard of him occasionally in Germany. He escaped twice, I think. Once he escaped from the Munster Camp and actually succeeded in crossing into Holland, as he thought. But it turned out later, at a Dutch-German inquiry, that he was still in occupied Belgium. The Germans had run their border barbed wire and charged wire barriers a hundred yards or so inside the Belgian frontier. When a German guard ordered Aldritt to stop after he had crossed this wire barrier into Holland, as he thought, he kept on. The guard shot and wounded him in the hand. Dutch and German guards rushed up and Aldritt was found to be about 10 yards inside the German occupied area. He was taken back a prisoner but, I am told, he escaped again. He was sent to the salt mines and to other labor camps where they sent recalcitrant prisoners. But he was always a liability to them, a stickler for his rights and for those of his Canadian and British comrades.

It is idle to imagine that Aldritt's experiences in action, his gassing, his high nervous excitement while escaping and being fired at, didn't affect his health, particularly his heart. My own heart is bad and I hadn't the responsibility nor the initiative he displayed.

I have written thus, in detail, to you, Major Northwood, because I feel that the Pension Commissioners have a very difficult task in these difficult times when unfair

Major George W. Northwood, M.C.

July 14, 1938.

claims, may, on occasion, make it clear that their duty is to protect the public purse from illegal claims. I have every sympathy with their problem. But I feel sure that they will see, also, the other side of the story; this man (now dead) with the constitution of a horse, confident that his health was perfect after his war service. He made no claims for pension. He was confident that that great body which he kept so fit, would care for the wife and the family he was soon to acquire. He took on these obligations and I am sure you, and the Board of Pension Commissioners, will hold the scales even as between the public purse and that family. They deserve a better fate than to be left to the tender mercies of the world.

If there is any further information you may require, or any further assistance I can give, please call on me at any time. Aldritt is beyond our help but his family's need lives on.

Sincerely yours,



C. V. Combe

No. 238-8th Battalion, C.E.F.