



THAIN WENDELL MacDOWELL

A man, not of words, but of actions.

THAIN was born in the parsonage at Lachute in 1890. But Lachute was no place for a minister's son, so "Mac" journeyed to Brockville, graduating from the Collegiate in '08. His academic course has been as consistently illustrious as his athletic career. Besides captaining the Jennings Cup Champions of 1912, holder of "Athletic Stick," rink manager, Athletic Union president, he is also a member of the Senior Intercollegiate rugby and hockey teams. Osgoode is his goal.

Biography of Lieutenant-Colonel Thain Wendell MacDowell, V.C., D.S.O. 1890-1960

By Charles Dumbrille

Born in Lachute, Quebec, on September 16, 1890, Lieutenant Colonel Thain Wendell MacDowell is an outstanding example of courage and presence of mind in the Canadian Military. During World War I's strategic Battle of Vimy Ridge in Northern France, Thain MacDowell was not only to immortalize his family's name and put the small village of Maitland in which he resided on the map, but he was also to help, along with thousands of other Canadians, show that Canada was more than just a part of an old empire of Britain. Instead, it was a mature country with a fine fighting force that was able to defeat one of the world's toughest armies.

Lieutenant Colonel Thain MacDowell was born in the home of his great grandmother in Lachute. His father, a rather overly enthusiastic Methodist minister, moved his family to Lyn from Carp, Ontario the following year but died in 1894. Thain's mother fortunately remarried and moved Thain with his three brothers Cyler, Newell and Merrill and one sister, Eula to the village of Maitland in 1900. Thain's new stepfather was the local cheesemaker and to this day is credited for being an exemplary father to his ready-made family. Although the boys had the reputation of being rather fearless, there was little in Thain's childhood that forecast his distinguished military career. Educated at the local high school, Brockville Collegiate Institute, Thain then moved on to the University of Toronto where he was a famous athlete and graduated in 1915 with a Bachelor of Arts degree.

In the meantime, World War I had broken out and Thain quickly volunteered his services. He was appointed as a Provisional Lieutenant with the 41st Regiment (Brockville Rifles) on November 9, 1914 and on January 9, 1915 enlisted for overseas service as a Lieutenant with the 38th Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force. After intensive training in London, Bermuda and then England, he arrived in France on August 3, 1916. MacDowell was quickly sent off to the front where in the Battle of the Somme he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his gallantry. Here, as Captain of "B" Company, he led his battalion against the German trenches in an attack south of Ancre against Desire Trench and Desire Support Trench on November 18, 1916. Bravely, MacDowell advanced to within throwing distance of the enemy and bombed out three German machine-gun nests which had been holding up the advance. He then was able to capture, after brutal hand-to-hand combat, three Officers and 50 of the enemy and clear the way for his battalion to advance to the final objective.

After being wounded and returning to England briefly, MacDowell rejoined his battalion in the trenches in the area of Vimy Ridge in northern France in January, 1917. An escarpment rising at its highest point to 475 feet in two spurs running west and southwest, Vimy Ridge dominated the flatlands around it and was regarded as the backbone of the whole German position in France. Five German regiments from Bavarian and Prussian divisions had held the

ridge for two years and turned it into an "inland Gibraltar" with gun emplacements and dugouts and an efficient communications system. The French and the British, at the expense of thousands of casualties, had tried to dislodge the Germans in several attacks but to no avail.

MacDowell waited for over four months along with other members of the 97,000- man Canadian Corps under the overall command of Lieutenant-General Sir Julian Byng for the offensive to begin. Frequent raids were sent off into enemy territory and Canadian shells bombarded the ridge. As the Canadians waited, constant training and the studying of maps and a model reproduction of the ridge pleased MacDowell. He was known as a methodical planner and had already picked out the German dugout he was going to use as his company's headquarters.

During the evening of April 8, the Canadians began to move to assembly areas, taking up positions within yards of some of the German outposts. Every watch of every Canadian soldier had been synchronized and promptly at 5:30 a.m. in the chilly early morning of Easter Monday, April 9, 1917, all hell must have broken loose as Canadians pounded Vimy Ridge with 983 heavy guns, howitzers and mortars. The barrage lasted three minutes and then wave after wave of Canadians methodically advanced across No Man's Land and up the ridge through indescribable mud, shell holes and trenches.

MacDowell and his battalion were part of the force that were responsible for the capture of the highest part of the ridge, called Hill 145. The going was hard. In the confusion the battalion by-passed three large craters swarming with Germans. MacDowell reached the first enemy trench just before dawn about fifty yards to the right of the area that he had aimed for. Most of his men though had gone even further to the right and MacDowell was left with only two runners. He could see the dugout in the shell-torn trench that he wanted for his headquarters but he could not take the time to collect his men. The first thing he had to do was silence two German machine guns which he did with well-aimed hand grenades. Reaching the dugout, he found it appeared to stretch a long way underground. MacDowell shouted for any Germans to come up and surrender. With no response, MacDowell climbed down fifty-two steps and rounded the corner to come face-to-face with seventy-seven Prussian guards. "With the vision of the enemy obscured by a turn in a passage in their dug-out, he was able to convince them that he commanded a vastly superior force." Thus, MacDowell looked back up the steps and shouted to an imaginary force. The Germans raised their hands in surrender. Now MacDowell had to get his prisoners to the top of the dugout. He knew if he took all seventy-nine up at once that they would easily overpower him and his two runners waiting above. Once again he made an on-the-spot decision to send the Germans up in groups of a dozen. The first Prussians to reach the top realized they had been tricked. When one grabbed a discarded rifle, he was fired at by one of the runners thus ending any further attempts by the Germans to retake their position.

In one of four reports MacDowell issued that day, he speaks of eventually getting help from 15 men but their rifles were clogged with mud and they were of little help. The London Gazette on June 8, 1917 completes the account by saying: "Although wounded in the hand, he continued for five days to hold the position gained, in spite of heavy shell fire, until eventually relieved by his battalion." When MacDowell had a chance to further explore the German dugout he found wires leading to five tons of high explosives ready to be fired.¹⁸ Not only did MacDowell's heroism probably save many lives but he succeeded in capturing a very strong enemy machine-gun post and greatly aided not only his own battalion's objectives but the capture of Vimy Ridge.

For his heroism, MacDowell was given the Victoria Cross. Suffering from trench fever and shell-shock, MacDowell returned to Canada on sick leave. Hospitalized in Brockville, his sister, a nurse and this writer's grandmother, recalls having at one point to hold him down as he relived the terror of his experiences at Vimy Ridge. However, his military career was not over. He returned to England on March 1, 1918 serving at the Headquarters of the Overseas Military Forces of Canada.¹⁹ Then as a civilian from 1923 to 1928, he was private secretary to the Minister of National Defence and later became director of several mining companies. He died alone in Nassau, The Bahamas, on March 28, 1960, where as his Nassau physician wrote his sister, "he was an active man and wanted to do important business" so



Lieutenant-Colonel Thain Wendell MacDowell, V.C., D.S.O. receiving the Victoria Cross from H.R.H. King George V at Buckingham Palace.

denied his "upset stomach" was really a coronary attack - a hero to the end.

MacDowell's characteristics and actions in World War I helped to reveal a new trend in not only the Canadian military but Canadian history. Many Canadians had entered the war ill-prepared and real amateurs. MacDowell, on the other hand, was known to delight in battle detail and is described as bringing to soldiering "a dedication of purpose and an implacable determination to master the crafts of battle." MacDowell's courage even before Vimy Ridge was described by one of his peers as "remarkable." Although very retiring, he was referred to as a "tiger" when a job had to be done. As one editorial so kindly puts it:

"He (MacDowell) was perhaps a characteristic example of the citizen soldiers who won such high acclaim when they took the field against the mightiest professional cadres of all time...It has often been said that the Canadian emerged for the first time, both as an individual and as a type, on the battlefields of 1914-1918. There the sum total of his environment factors - isolation, climate and the rest - and his racial heritages combined to produce a fighting man par excellence - obdurate of purpose, canny, fierce and flexible of mind in encounter, inured to mischance, contemptuous of all but absolute victory. Of this We Colonel MacDowell might well be regarded as archetype."

Obviously, with the new kind of citizen soldiers like MacDowell, Canada's military could no longer be called amateur. MacDowell and other soldiers like him though helped to lay the groundwork for something even bigger which was the making of a nation out of Canada. Before World War I, Canada had had little more than a railway and a Parliament to tie it together. It took a battle like Vimy Ridge which brought Canadians from all walks of life together to perform an heroic task against the mightiest force in the world to give the sense of community and commonality that was needed to turn Canada into a nation. In fact, before the war ended, this Canadian prowess and courage had not only brought Canada recognition from the Imperial War Cabinet but it had given her a place at the peace conference in Versailles. A nation is said to be "a body of people who have done great things together in the past and who expect to do great things together in the future. If this is true, Vimy Ridge and the actions of soldiers like MacDowell certainly brought nationhood to Canada and changed Canada's history forever.

First Dispatch

10:30 a.m. 9/4/17.

O.C, 38th Battalion C. E, F.

Have been along the line. The dug out we occupy is at the corner of Cyrus and Baby, It has three entrances well distant from each other and will hold easily 250 men at the very least. A tunnel leads down towards out lines, which I did not explore. It has a winch and cable for hoisting. There are only 15 men with me of whom two are stretcher bearers. The rifles are one mass of mud, I have two Lewis Guns and only four pans. Both guns are out of action on account of the mud. We have a very few bombs as we had to bomb several dug outs.

The 78th I have no trace of but there are two German Machine Guns just in front of us. They are firing constantly. Snipers are also busy. We cannot locate them as yet. The 72nd are on the left and seem to be spread out fairly well. The ground is practically impassible. His aeroplanes came over and saw a few of my men at dugout entrance and now we are getting his heavies from our right and his left. I have no N.C.O.'s whatever and unless I get a few more men with serviceable rifles, I hate to admit it, but we may be driven out. Three of the men are wounded as it is so I might as well tell you the facts of the case.

The runner has just come in with your message. We are in Baby Trench slightly to the right of Cyrus. I was wrong in my other message as to my location as I had just arrived and I will try to get in touch with Major Howland, but don't like to leave here as mentioned above have not an officer or N.C.O. There are a lot of wounded out in front of here as I can see by the rifles sticking up.

His heavy battery from the right is working very well at present.

"T. W. MacDowell"
Captain.
O. C. "B" Company 38th Battalion.

Second Dispatch

2:45 p.m. 9/4/17.

O, C. 38th Battalion, C.E.F.

While exploring this dug out Kelty and I discovered a large store of what we believe to be explosives in a room. There is also an old sap leading away down underground in the direction of No. 5 Crater. This was explored down to a car, got no further as it may be wired.

Would you get in touch with Brigade as quickly as possible and ask that either a party of 176th or 182nd Tunneling Company come up and explore these. We have cut all wires for fear of possible listening posts. The dug out has three entrances so will accommodate easily 250 or 300 men with the sap to spare. It is 75 feet underground and very comfortable. The cigars are very choice and my supply of Perrier water is very large. If I might I would suggest that you take it up with the Brigade that this place be occupied in strength as there is a great field of fire to the north and west as well as to the east. This you see makes it a very strong supporting post to our left flank, and I would strongly recommend that it be occupied by Brigade Machine Guns. I cannot locate them as I have no N.C.O.'s to leave in charge here to look for them myself. It is quite alright for anyone to come up here. They are firing at us all the time with their heavy guns from the south east but I have no casualties to report since coming in except being half scared to death myself by a big brute. I cannot impress you too much the strength of this position and value of it as a strong supporting point to the left flank by which they will undoubtedly make their counter attack.

Observation is good hereon the whole far side of Lens and other villages. Battery positions can be seen. We have taken two machine guns that I know of and a third and possibly a fourth will be taken tonight. This post was a machine gun post and held by a Machine Gun Coy. I believe they were Prussian Guards. All big strong men who came in last night. They had plenty of rations but we had a great time taking them prisoners. It is a great story. My two runners Kobus and Hay did invaluable work in getting them out of the dug out as we had to conceal the fact that we were only three in number, I don't think they all got back though.

Please have these Engineers sent up at once to examine wire further as this is a great dug out and should not be destroyed. I believe the sap, runs into No. 7 Crater and might help in being an underground C T. There are a large number of wounded in front of here as I can see by the rifles stuck in the ground. I can't think of anything further. Tell Ken to come up to tea tomorrow if it is quiet. Sorry to hear of C. O. and Hill and the others.

"T. W. MacDowell"
Captain.
O, C, "B" Company 38th Battalion.

Third Dispatch

4:45 p.m. 9/4/17.

O. G. 38th Battalion C. E. F.

This chap is a runner of mine and has done very fine work. He was wounded shortly after starting yet came on and has been all over our front for me.

Did I ask that a Liason Officer or Artillery Officer be sent up with wire if possible this afternoon as we can see the Bosche Batteries firing and some useful work might be done tonight. Perhaps they are up here now on some other part, but thought I would mention it. The two chaps who started out with me have not been seen since.

Also the matter about the sap running toward No. 7 Crater. This might be turned into good use as a C T possibly.

We have now 28 men besides myself here as follows:

A Company	2
B ..."	15
C ..."	1
D ..."	8
78th Battln.	2 (Wright and Roebottom)

This is all I can report. His heavies are still pounding us but as yet have not hit any of the three entrances, but shakes the place.

"T. W. MacDowell"
Captain.
O.C. "B" Company 38th Battalion.

Citations

Major Thain Wendell MacDowell

Deed of Action for Award of Victoria Cross to Major Thain Wendell MacDowell, V.C., D.S.O.

"For most conspicuous bravery and indomitable resolution in face of heavy machine gun and shell fire. By his initiative and courage, this officer, with the assistance of two runners, was enabled, in the face of great difficulties, to capture two machine guns, besides two officers and seventy-five men. Although wounded in the hand, he continued for five days, to hold the position gained, in spite of heavy shell fire, until eventually relieved by his Battalion. By his bravery and prompt action he undoubtedly succeeded in rounding up a very strong enemy machine, post"

- (London Gazette,S-6-17)