

= Edwin Alderson =

Lieutenant General Sir Edwin Alfred Hervey Alderson KCB (8 April 1859 ? 14 December 1927) was a senior British Army officer who served in several campaigns of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries . During the First World War he was placed in command of the Canadian Expeditionary Force during the first half of the war but made enemies amongst the Canadian political and military elite and suffered disastrous casualties during operations in 1915 / 16 which forced his sidelining and eventual retirement from service .

Despite the opposition he faced , Alderson transformed the ill @-@ trained and poorly prepared Canadian recruits into tough , veteran soldiers and laid the foundations for later victories at Vimy Ridge and in other operations . An accomplished sportsman , Alderson wrote several books and was a keen proponent of hunting and yachting , pastimes he believed to be at risk from developments in motor sports .

= = Early life = =

Born in 1859 in Capel St Mary , a village in Suffolk , Edwin Alderson was the son of Lieutenant @-@ Colonel Edward Mott Alderson and his wife Catherine Harriett Swainson . He attended Ipswich School from 1873 to 1876 . At 17 Edwin gained a commission in the Norfolk Artillery Militia and at 19 transferred to the 1st Foot (later Royal Scots Regiment) on 4 December 1878 . He transferred again ten days later , replacing a promoted officer , to his father 's regiment , the 97th Foot (soon to become the Queen 's Own Royal West Kent Regiment) . Joining the regiment in Halifax , Nova Scotia , Alderson was soon transferred to Gibraltar and later South Africa , where he was detached to the Mounted Infantry Depot at Laing 's Nek .

= = = Mounted Infantry = = =

The Mounted Infantry Depot was a post where young officers could be stationed , forming a ready reserve of young , educated officers available as volunteers for staff or command positions in African colonial campaigns . It was whilst attached to this post that Alderson saw service in the First Boer War in 1881 in the Transvaal . The following year , Alderson served in the 1882 Anglo @-@ Egyptian War , fighting at the battles of Kassassin and Tel @-@ el @-@ Kebir . Two years later , Alderson was attached to the Mounted Camel Regiment during the failed expedition to relieve Khartoum and rescue General Gordon . During this campaign , Alderson was presented with the Bronze Medal of the Royal Humane Society after diving into the Nile to rescue a drowning soldier . For his service in these campaigns , Alderson was promoted to Captain and was stationed at Aldershot with the European Mounted Infantry Depot . The same year he married the daughter of the vicar of Syresham , Northamptonshire , a Miss Alice Mary Sergeant .

The next ten years of Alderson 's career were spent on staff duties and with his old regiment in England and Ireland . He also undertook training at the Staff College , Camberley and in 1896 was sent to Mashonaland as a commander of a regiment of local troops during the Second Matabele War . Following the campaign 's successful conclusion , Alderson returned to Aldershot and wrote his first book , " With the Mounted Infantry and the Mashonaland Field Force , 1896 " , an account of the war and a thesis on the tactical uses of mounted infantry . A second book on military tactics followed in 1898 called The Counter @-@ attack . His third book , " Pink and scarlet " was published in 1900 and was another tactical treatise concerning the relationship between fox @-@ hunting and the cavalry and the connection that these gentlemanly and military concerns had in training young officers and developing new innovations in cavalry tactics . In 1908 , he released a compilation of notes made on campaign entitled Lessons from 100 notes made in peace and war .

= = = Second Boer War = = =

In 1900 , shortly after the outbreak of the Second Boer War , Alderson returned to South Africa to

command the Mounted Infantry against the Boer forces . His experience with mounted infantry made him ideal for this role as in the Boer guerillas , the British were fighting against masters of mounted infantry tactics and suffered heavy losses from their hit and run campaigns . Alderson was instrumental in forming British counter @-@ tactics and used his brigade to great effect against the Boers , his elite troops being two regiments of Canadian soldiers . The force was under the overall command of experienced British soldier Edward Hutton , previously GOC Canadian Militia , who became a lifelong friend . Among Canadians he was popular , being preferred to the tactless Hutton by the commander of the 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles , and in 1901 the then Governor General of Canada , Lord Minto , unsuccessfully petitioned the British government to have Alderson brought to Canada as GOC Militia .

By 1901 , Alderson 's innovations had resulted in several successful operations , participating in the battles of Paardeberg and Driefontein as well as the relief of Kimberley and the capture of Bloemfontein and Pretoria . The result of Alderson 's contribution of these campaigns was to be rewarded with confirmation as a brigadier general , appointment as a Companion of the Order of the Bath and to receive the ceremonial post of Aide @-@ de @-@ Camp to Queen Victoria , who died the same year . He was mentioned in despatches several times (including 31 March 1900) , and received the Queen 's South Africa Medal .

= = = Peacetime 1902 ? 1914 = = =

In 1903 he was given command of the British 2nd Infantry Brigade at Aldershot and in 1906 was again promoted to major general . Two years later Alderson was posted to the Indian 6th Infantry Division based in Poona , Southern India . In 1912 he returned to England in semi @-@ retirement on half @-@ pay , becoming a hunt master in Shropshire and developing an enthusiasm for yachting .

= = First World War = =

At the outbreak of the First World War in the summer of 1914 , Alderson was placed in charge of the 1st Mounted Division and all troops in the counties of Norfolk and Suffolk but was soon requested for command of the newly formed First Canadian Contingent due to his experience in South Africa commanding Canadian troops . Personally selected by Sir Sam Hughes , Canadian Minister of Militia , Alderson met the first shipments of Canadian troops in October and almost immediately came into conflict with their minister . Hughes had preceded his men and insisted that the Canadian contingent was not only fully trained and battle ready but also equipped with the best weaponry available . Alderson however saw his charges differently , commenting on the poor quality of the politically appointed officers , the low degree of training and the operational problems of the Ross rifle , a weapon personally approved by Hughes .

Training his new charges on Salisbury Plain , Alderson made some headway in toughening his troops encamped in the wet , autumn weather and dismissing the officers appointed by Hughes who had proved ineffectual . When Hughes ' representative in England , Colonel John Wallace Carson , secured preferential accommodation for the Canadian soldiers at the expense of a British brigade , Alderson refused the barracks and in doing so , made both Carson and Hughes into determined enemies . Carson wrote to the Canadian Prime Minister Robert Laird Borden that Alderson " does not treat our men with a firm iron hand covered with the velvet glove which their special temperaments require " .

Dispatched to France in February 1915 , the Canadian Division was briefly initiated to trench warfare on the periphery of the Battle of Neuve Chapelle before being attached to the British 2nd Army under Sir Horace Smith @-@ Dorrien in the Belgian town of Ypres . It was in front of Ypres on 22 April that the Canadians bore the brunt of the most furious German attack of the year . In the afternoon at 5 @. @ 00 pm the Germans began heavy shelling of the French trenches and the Canadians and the French Algerian troops stationed next to them saw a fog traveling across no @-@ mans land , covering the advance of German forces . The fog was chlorine gas , the first

occasion in which this substance had been used in warfare . The Algerians broke and fled , suffering over 6 @, @ 000 casualties in a matter of minutes and the Canadians were consequently forced to defend twice the length of their front line in the face of a new and deadly weapon . Although the Canadian Division held on for more than two days , much ground was lost and the Division had themselves suffered over 50 % casualties , nearly 6 @, @ 000 men .

For Alderson the battle had been a failure : although his troops had held , he had found himself out of touch with the front line and unable to get accurate information about the situation . At one stage he had been commanding 33 battalions across several miles of front line with no central co @-@ ordination and great confusion between his distant headquarters and the trenches . In addition to his personal failings however , the Ross rifles had proven almost useless in battle and some of Alderson 's officer corps had performed poorly . In particular Brigadier @-@ General Richard Turner , commander of the 3rd Brigade , and Turner 's brigade @-@ major , Colonel Garnet Hughes , the son of Sam Hughes , caused much havoc when on the second day of the battle , they unilaterally withdrew the 3rd Brigade from the front line , opening up a 4 @, @ 000 @-@ yard gap through which the Germans threatened the entire Ypres Salient . Colonel John Carson however , who reported personally to Hughes , downplayed the difficulties and blamed the heavy casualties on Alderson 's leadership , indicating that the Division had only been saved from annihilation by the actions of Turner and Hughes .

= = = Ross rifle controversy = = =

Alderson 's situation worsened at the Battle of Festubert in May 1915 , when the Canadian Division failed to make any headway and suffered nearly 2 @, @ 500 casualties . Another operation a month later , the Second Battle of Givenchy , cost 366 casualties for no appreciable gain . Again , Alderson was not solely at fault in these actions and he remained popular with British Army Headquarters , Prime Minister Borden and with his men , resulting in promotion to command the entire Canadian Expeditionary Force when a second Division arrived late in 1915 . Despite this popularity , Sam Hughes continued to hold a grudge against Alderson and opposed him in political circles , taking offense at Alderson 's refusal to accept promotions made by Hughes or Carson of untried Canadian officers and instead promoting veteran British officers in their place . The main area of argument between the two men however was again over the Ross rifle .

By early 1916 it had become clear to all serving on the front lines that the Ross was useless in the filthy conditions of the trenches and its incompatibility with the British Lee ? Enfield rifle meant that the Canadian troops were continually running out of ammunition . Hughes however had invested great political capital in the weapon and refused to countenance a switch to the British @-@ made alternative . This issue reached a head when Alderson , newly knighted as a Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath , circulated a document listing ten deficiencies with the rifle and claiming 85 % of Canadian soldiers no longer wished to use it . Hughes was furious at Alderson 's defiance and sent letters to 281 senior military figures backing the Ross and attacking Alderson 's character . Alderson responded by ordering all subordinate commanders to prepare reports on the efficiency of the Ross rifle . Carson sent a copy of this order back to Hughes , along with a note from Turner that " action is being delayed too long as regards Alderson " .

Turner had his own reasons for wanting Alderson gone , following the Battle of St @-@ Eloi in April 1916 . After British troops had taken a large crater near the ruins of the Belgian town of St Eloi , a brigade of Turner 's division was ordered to hold the gain against German counter @-@ attacks . Due to dreadful management of the Canadian forces by Turner and Brigadier @-@ General Huntly Ketchen , German soldiers overran the crater , causing 1 @, @ 400 Canadian casualties and retaking the land around the crater , negating the gains made at heavy cost just a few days before . Sir Herbert Plumer , the commander of British 2nd Army who had overall responsibility for the front , demanded Ketchen 's immediate dismissal and when Turner claimed that if Ketchen was dismissed he would resign , Alderson sought his dismissal as well . Both officers were supporters of Sam Hughes , who made it clear in no uncertain terms to Commander in Chief Sir Douglas Haig that if Turner went then Haig could no longer rely on Canadian support .

Haig 's solution to this diplomatic crisis was a compromise . Alderson was transferred to the nominal post of Inspector @-@ General of Canadian Forces and the highly effective Sir Julian Byng replaced him in command of the Canadian Expeditionary Force , supported by Sir Arthur Currie , who had succeeded Alderson in command of the 1st Canadian Division . In exchange , Haig finally got rid of the Ross rifle , all Canadian troops being reissued Lee ? Enfields in preparation for the upcoming Battle of the Somme . Alderson was not made aware of the purely nominal nature of his position until later , when he requested a staff car and was informed that he was no longer entitled to one . In September 1916 , Alderson became Inspector of Infantry in the British Army , a position he retained until 1920 , when he retired from active service at the age of 61 .

= = Retirement = =

Alderson enjoyed an active retirement , becoming Colonel Commandant of the Royal West Kent Regiment and pursuing hunting and yachting with fervour , being an active member of the South Shropshire Hunt and Royal Norfolk and Suffolk Yacht Club . He was also very concerned that the growing popularity of motor sports would result in the demise of these traditional pastimes and expended much energy promoting them . After living the last few years of his life on a houseboat moored in Oulton Broad , he died in December 1927 of a sudden heart attack at Lowestoft and was buried at Chesterton , Oxfordshire , survived by his wife . She later arranged for his private papers to be given to the nation and they are currently stored at British Library and the National Archives of Zimbabwe .

= = Reputation = =

Alderson retained strong feelings about his treatment at the hands of Hughes and his allies , commenting to a friend that " Canadian politics have been too strong for all of us " . Nonetheless , he was well liked by the men he commanded and was remembered in The Times on his death as " An Englishman of a fine type " and that " the affection which he inspired in all who knew him was great " . The Dictionary of Canadian Biography recalls him as " A decent , honourable , unimaginative man , [who] had been more faithful to the interests of Canadian soldiers than their own minister " .

Another biographer , Tabitha Marshall , wrote (2014) that the conflict between Hughes and Alderson " likely affected not only his career but also his place in Canadian history . While his successors as Canadian Corps Commander , Byng and Currie , are well remembered , Alderson is relatively unknown to Canadians . "

Alan Clark 's work " The Donkeys " (1961) , detailing alleged British command incompetence in 1915 , contains a photograph of Alderson decorating a Canadian soldier , captioned " Donkey Decorates Lion " , alleging he was decorating the unnamed soldier for bravery at the Second Battle of Ypres . In fact , the photograph had been taken the following year , on 9 March 1916 , " near Locre " (Loker) , Belgium .

= = Namesake = =

The name Mount Alderson was given in 1915 to one of the peaks in the Waterton Lakes National Park in Alberta , Canada .

= = Works = =

With the Mounted Infantry and the Mashonaland Field Force , 1896 , 1898

The Counter @-@ attack , 1898

Pink and Scarlet or Hunting as a School for Soldiering William Heinemann , 1900

Lessons from 100 notes made in peace and war , 1908