

Sketchbook-diary preserves memories of The Great War

By SUSAN de STEIN

He recalls the events, the people, the tragedies and the emotions with a clarity that belies the 60 years that have passed between then and now.

"Yes, I kept a diary against army regulations, but it served a purpose, giving me all the details necessary to put my personal story in picture form", the author writes in the preface.

Containing some 150 pencil sketches complete with explanatory notes, A Canadian Soldier's Diary is Russell Rabjohn's chronicle, his personal history of World War I. Compiled from original notes and sketches, the soft cover book was published for the first time last month by CDM Business Services Ltd. of Burlington.

The original diary was completed 50 years ago.

Rabjohn's memories are all there, tucked in the pages of five small leather-bound diaries, written in the tight, neat handwriting of an 18 year-old. There are more memories on the pages of a large hard-cover sketchbook, memories of his three years as a Canadian soldier fighting in The Great War.

The detailed drawings were sketched on his return to Canada — a project that occupied his time for 10 years. Although he had five or six-sketchbooks on the go during combat, most of those sketches were given to officers and fellow soldiers.

He worked from his written notes and from memory.

The scenes, he says, were not easily forgotten. "The sketches reflect perfectly the way it was. I recall everything very vividly . . . it's as clear as can be."

He sketched the war as he saw it — from cold dark trenches, dank basements and muddy, casualty-strewn fields in war ravaged France and Belgium. It's a warm and honest document about war.

Now approaching his 80th birthday, the Mississauga resident remembers the war today as clearly as he did 50 years ago when he first compiled his story.

A Sapper (Private) with the 123rd Battalion, 7th Engineers (Royal Grenadiers), the young Rabjohn jotted his observations on people, places, battles in his diaries from the day he enlisted.

"But when I attempted to write my diaries into a book, I couldn't do it. I have no writing abilities . . . but I could make drawings and footnotes."

The title of his book is important, too. "This is a Canadian book about Canadian soldiers," he says with pride.

History teachers, writers and researchers have, for the most part, ignored the role of Canadians in World War I. "There's so very little mention of Canadians in history. When you read books on the war thoroughly, you realize that we were in the action right from Vimy Ridge."

He remembers himself as an 18-year-old embarking on the ocean-going voyage to the war. "At 18, I had no fear of war. I was only afraid of going over on the boat", he laughs now. "Once I had a foot on England, I knew I'd be alright as far as soldiering went." Like others, there was no fear of fighting for one's country.

The issue was clear cut. Britain was sinking to her knees. Canadians fought in the war with no questions asked.

"You felt you were walking into a little danger. But it didn't worry you. We were with the same gang. And I took action with my brother. We were in the same company."

An ever present feeling during those three years in action was loneliness. "If you could only come home . . . we were homesick."

He recalls his first experiences digging trenches near the front line. "I was given the job of digging a trench six feet long, six feet deep, four feet wide. The first time I was working with a pick, I hit something soft . . . it was a German corpse. The fumes were incredible. I dug the trench in a different direction."

He remembers what he calls "the most terrible spot" in the world — a muddy, swamp-like field near Ypres. "It was just a sea of mud . . . and so badly unprotected. The Germans would send in 40 to 50 Gothas . . . our planes feared them. They'd fly in so low you could see the pilot reach over and toss the bomb out. You would stand there and watch them coming . . . like a cloud."

He worked behind the front line. "We had nothing to do with bayoneting or shooting" or hand-to-hand fighting. In the 60 years since he fought, war, of course, has changed.

"There have been so many combats . . . everyone has proved a failure. No one has come out ahead."

"Today someone will ask 'what can I do for the glory of my country' . . . there's no part for them to do." There was a large part to be played then.

His story is better told by his sketches.

The writing, while factual and unemotional, is poignant and real, often humorous despite situations

and surroundings. The sketches make the book.

Under one sketch: "We leave Maroc and move on to Camblain Chatalain. This is quite a mining country. We were paid last night so everyone makes for the Estaminet. Poker, crown and anchor are the sport for the day, 'till your money runs out."

picture on back →

A DIARY



R·H·RABJOHN

*A story of my
experience :
in France, and
Belgium, during
the World War*

1914   1918



Beneath another: "June 4. Walking up the street I picked up a youngster who had just blown his fingers off with a detonator. After being examined by the doctor, he found eight more in his pocket, enough to blow three or four of us up".

Beneath another sketch: "As Germans were so often used to carry our wounded this became a rather amusing incident. I heard this wounded chap calling for water, so I handed him my water bottle, much to the surprise of the Germans, as they tried to make me understand he was one of their soldiers."

Beneath a drawing of two young French children: "It was good to see little kids again."

And on Nov. 11: "As we walked through Mons, ten Canadian soldiers lay dead. By mid morning every one of them was covered with flowers, while hundreds of civilians passed by with tears in their eyes."

Also on Nov. 11: What a celebration! Thousands of civilians trying their best to do something for you. Food, wine, beer, arm in arm marching fur-

ther into Mons. Still wondering can it really be true."

He has painted a picture of a war few know much about. His sketches tell the human side.

Russell Rabjohn has been drawing since he was a small child.

Although he quit school at the age of 13, a school principal pointed him on the road toward a career as a commercial artist.

"I had no idea until the schoolmaster told me that I could do something with artwork. I liked my lessons in art at school and I seemed to have more success at it than others. But I had no idea in the world I could make a job at it."

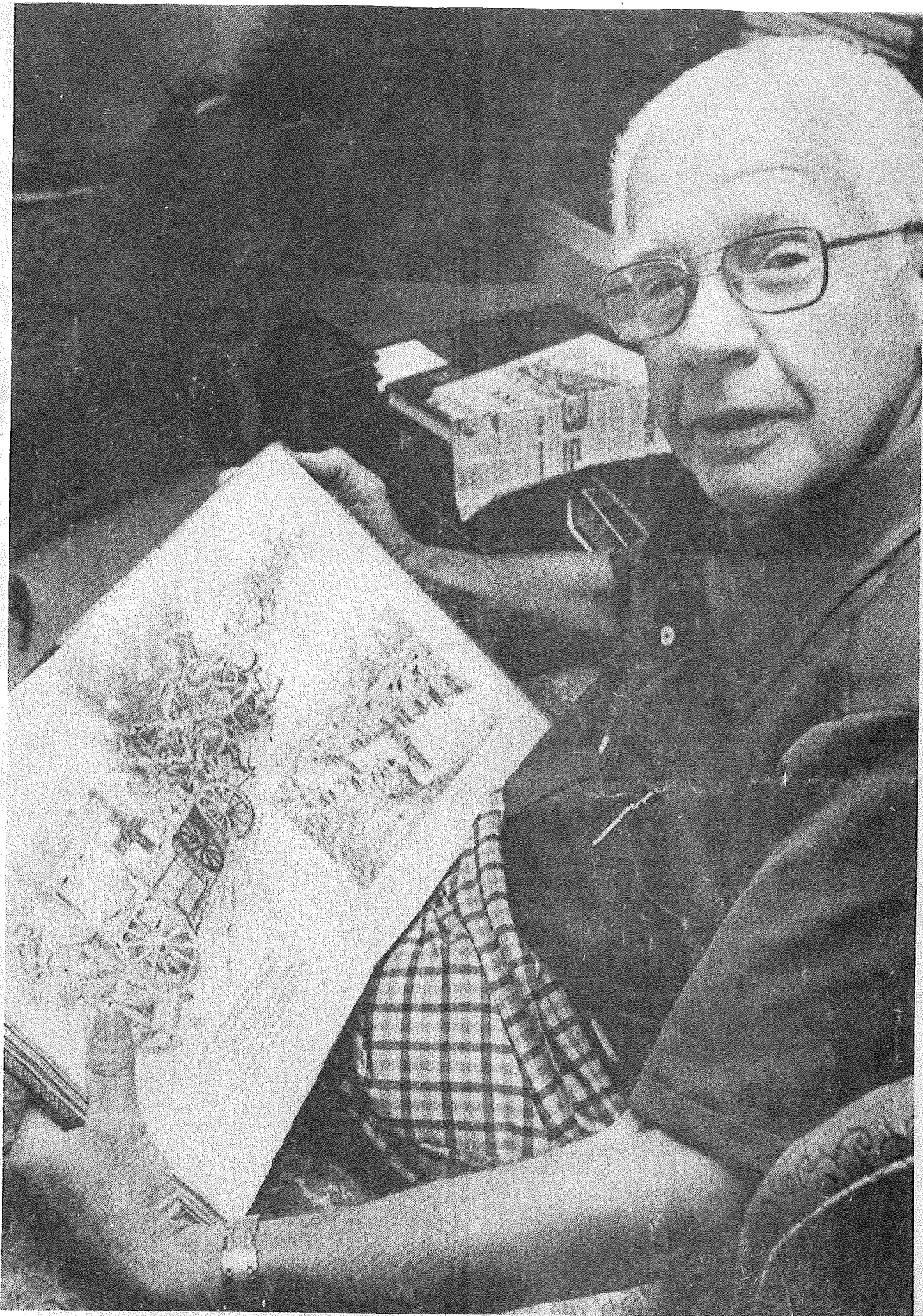
With the principal's help, he became an apprentice at J.L. Jones Engraving Co. in Toronto, where he worked for over four years. He returned there after the war.

In 1934, he established Rabjohn Illustrators Ltd., which operated under his name for 30 years.

Although he gave up the business 15 years ago, he continued working on a free-lance basis until moving to Mississauga six years ago. He continued working for one particular client until an illness in May forced him into full retirement.

A Canadian Soldier's Diary is more than a book or a set of illustrations. And while the diary represents only three years of his life, it is very much a reflection and a tribute to the man.

picture on back →



Mississauga Russell Rabjohn holds the original sketchbook-diary that forms the basis of his recently published *Canadian Soldier's Diary*. The soft cover book is available at the Fat Pig Boutique in the Applewood Plaza.

(Staff photo by Fred Lock)