
BIOGRAPHY—LIEUTENANT HERBERT WESLEY MCBRIDE, MM

Sergeant K. Grant, CD

The border between the United States and Canada has for centuries now seen the ebb and flow of people in times of strife. United Empire Loyalists, the Underground Railroad, soldiers and deserters all crossed the border at one time or another as they ran toward, or away from, their political beliefs.

In the spring of 1915 a strapping young man from Indiana named Herbert Wesley McBride made his way north to Ottawa in a bid to get into the “great show.” Although his career path was a bumpy one, McBride would demonstrate his ability as a soldier by earning the Military Medal for gallantry and secure his legacy in the world of marksmanship by writing two books, *The Emma Gees*, and *A Rifleman Went to War*, that have had a profound influence on army marksmanship programs around the world right up to the present day.

Herbert Wesley McBride was born on October 15, 1873 in Waterloo, Indiana, to a family with a strong military and outdoor background. His grandfather served in the Mexican War and his father in the Union Cavalry. Following the Civil War, McBride’s father went on to become a lawyer and a judge on the State Supreme Court, and rose to the rank of Colonel in the Indiana State Guard. Herbert followed in his father’s footsteps and at the age of fifteen joined the State Guard, but problems with tuberculosis forced him to move to the Colorado–New Mexico region on the advice of doctors. It was while in the west that he brushed shoulders with many frontiersmen who had settled the region and gained valuable advice about practical shooting and survival.

Upon his return to Indiana he rejoined the State Guard and was eventually promoted to Sergeant. Later he joined one of the State Artillery Batteries that was equipped with the Gatling gun and it is here that he received his indoctrination into the use of the weapon. Later, like his father and grandfather before him, he too would become a lawyer.

In 1898 the Klondike Gold Rush fired the imagination of thousands and McBride, now 25, armed with his knowledge of the bush headed north to the gold fields. But two years is a long time for anyone to spend under arduous conditions and in 1900 he’d had enough. Ever the opportunist, though, “on my way out I had the opportunity to help gather up a bunch of recruits for the Strathcona Horse, just then being mobilized for service in South Africa. I had hoped to go with them, but at the time, the regulations were such that none but British subjects were eligible. That was in 1900 and I came back to Indianapolis and again hitched up with my old outfit—Company D, 2nd Infantry.” By 1907 he had risen to the rank of Captain.

The company commander was a man to his liking and reinforced McBride’s belief that shooting was the most important skill that a soldier could learn. “Every man in his company had to qualify as at least a marksman during the first year or get out. In the second year, if he could not make sharpshooter, he also took the gate, and after three years, if he did not rate expert, he



Herbert W. McBaine
Captain, 21st Battalion, CEF



The Military Medal

was no longer eligible for re-enlistment.” McBride was serious enough about his shooting that he went on to compete each year from 1900 to 1911 at the National Matches as a member of the State team.

In 1911 however he was off again, this time to British Columbia where he ostensibly worked in railway construction, but the real reason was “to get out somewhere so that I could shoot a rifle without having to spend a couple of months and all my money building a backstop.” Working on the railroad suited McBride perfectly and he took every opportunity to hunt and fish the virgin territory being slowly opened up by the expanding track. But in March of 1914 word reached him of an impending war with Mexico and McBride saw his chance to finally get into action. He immediately returned home where he rejoined the State Guard and was assigned to Company H, 2nd Infantry at his former rank of Captain.

While waiting for a war that wasn't to be, news arrived of the outbreak of war in Europe. The desire to get involved was strong in McBride and as he puts it “there was a war on and I did not intend to miss it.” As a commissioned officer in the State Guard, McBride gambled that the Canadian Army would accept his services, so he resigned his commission and again headed north. His gamble paid off and he was granted a commission in the 43rd Regiment (Duke of Cornwall's Own Rifles) in Ottawa.

But getting overseas wasn't quite so straight forward. At the time there was a ruling in place that officers selected for service in the Canadian Expeditionary Force must come from the Active Militia. Though he was not a Canadian citizen, McBride was recommended for a commission as Lieutenant in the 43rd based on his past service. Now a member of the Active Militia, he was quickly appointed to the 38th Battalion C.E.F. with the rank of Captain and the recommendation that “in view of the previous experience that Captain McBride has had in musketry, his services be utilized in connection with the instruction of musketry in the 38th Battalion C.E.F.”

By mid-February McBride had been transferred from the 38th to the 21st Battalion in Kingston in the role of Musketry Instructor. But with his dream of going to war within reach, the first storm clouds of what would be a recurring issue of alcohol abuse began to appear as documented in this private letter in March 1915 from Lt.-Colonel William St. Pierre Hughes to his older brother Sam:

“Will you please have Capt. McBride recalled to Ottawa. He is drinking very heavily and I do not care to take him in hand. He will, I am sure, do better in Ottawa...”

The utility of having an elder brother who was the Minister of Militia and Defence was effectively demonstrated when a day later McBride was immediately recalled to duty with the 38th Battalion. He reported to Ottawa, but was disheartened to learn that the 38th was slated for deployment to Bermuda for garrison duty. Accounts of the events of the week following this news are somewhat fuzzy and more than one version exists. In *A Rifleman*, McBride puts a gallant spin on the events and in his own words “I went out and tried to drink all the whiskey in Ottawa and made such an ass of myself that the higher-ups were glad to get rid of me.” The official report, however, is far more colourful, as recorded by his O.C.:

“At noon on Wednesday the 17th instant, Captain H.W. McBride dressed in uniform and wearing a Stetson hat became intoxicated. Later in the afternoon he procured a horse and for the better part of an hour, gave an exhibition of his qualities in horsemanship on the main street of Ottawa [now Sparks Street], and at one time was performing for about two hundred people in front of the Russell Hotel...”

During the week it appears there was at least one face-to-face with his O.C., copious amounts of drinking, a written request by the 38th for him to resign his commission and, at McBride's request, a private audience with Sam Hughes during which McBride essentially fell on his sword and admitted he acted badly and understood why he was being asked to resign his commission. To his credit, McBride could have return to the United States and that would have been the end of it, but instead he requested permission “to serve in the ranks in another battalion going to the front at an early date.” His request was granted and on April 3rd, 1915 Herbert McBride arrived in Kingston and enlisted in the 21st Battalion as a private and it was off to England.

In June of 1915, while the 21st was training in England, McBride transferred to the machine gun section, and it appears that drinking again became a problem. His record shows that in July and September he was reduced to half pay for drinking incidents while attached to the Headquarters Sub-staff of the 2nd Division. For a time—and likely as punishment for his indiscretions—he remained attached to the H.Q. staff while the 21st went to the continent; not until October would he leave for France to rejoin the unit.

While he was at the front there were no more drinking incidents and in February 1916 he was promoted to Sergeant. McBride was finally in a position to indulge himself in the combat he had always yearned for and it was this period that his books were based on. That McBride was a capable soldier has never been in doubt, as witnessed by his commander Lt.-Col. (later Brig. Gen) W.S. Hughes: "McBride was outstanding as a fighting man, fearless, untiring, [and had] a genius for invention... with an army of such men it would be an easy matter to win against any troops." The hunting skills learned during his years in the bush served him well and he developed a knack for sneaking out into no man's land at night to monitor and harass the enemy. As he puts it "the technique is quite simple. Just wait until the enemy is quiet, slip over, bomb 'em a little, hop into their trench, grab off a few prisoners and any machine guns you happen to see and beat it back home," and for the entire time he was in the trenches "he was constantly seeking authority to damage the enemy." His abilities were quickly recognized and on June 5th 1916, he was awarded the Military Medal for his actions in the face of the enemy. In part, his citation reads as follows:

"For exceptional courage and devotion to duty in connection with scouting and patrol work. In December of 1915 he twice visited the enemy parapet and upon one occasion brought back a small flag, which had been affixed with wires to a can of explosive. He has on several occasions gathered valuable information from enemy conversations overheard."

Later that month, on 21 June, McBride was again granted his commission as an officer, at which time he was returned to England to await official commissioning and posting to a new unit. It is quite probable that McBride's time on the front had a profound psychological impact on him. At 43 he was no longer a young man, and it is likely that the death of William Bouchard, a young French Canadian from Aylmer, Quebec he had taken under his wing, had a profound impact on him. In his first book, the Emma Gees, he writes "but I knew right down in my heart that my nerves were weakening. Thinking over some of the things we had done, I believe I could never do them again." Years after the war he would again reflect upon his time in the trenches and in his second book, *A Rifleman Went to War*, he writes, "I found I was weakening, not that I allowed anyone else to see it, but right down in my heart I felt that the game was over, so far as I was concerned." The prospect of returning to the horrors of the front was likely more than he could take and the drinking incidents started again when he returned to France with the 18th Battalion.

Perhaps having fulfilled his desire to get into the fighting and having witnessed the real face of combat, he felt he had seen enough to last him a lifetime. On August 2nd, 1916 Captain McBride was transferred to the 18th Battalion and trouble soon followed. Just after his arrival at battalion he was told to report to the front, instead, he went on an A.W.O.L. drinking binge only to resurface days later in an intoxicated state. The result was a Court Martial facing three charges. Here his legal training stood him in good stead and for five torturous days he tied the lesser trained legal officers in procedural and jurisdictional knots that ultimately won him an acquittal. Elated with his legal victory McBride went on a celebratory binge and two days later was again brought before a Court Martial on charges of drunkenness. This time his ability to manipulate the proceedings failed him and the court sentenced him to a severe reprimand.

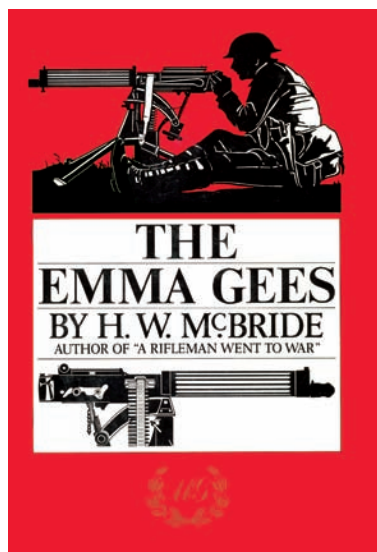
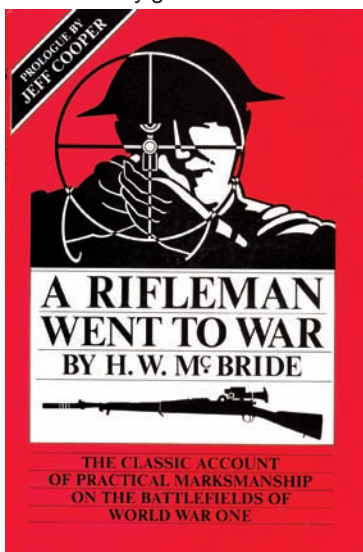
The final straw however came in October of 1916 when, after having been placed in command of a mule convoy bringing supplies up to the forward trenches, he abandoned his charge and was arrested having been found in a drunken state. Captain Herbert Wesley McBride was subsequently Court Martialed and in February 1917 was "Dismissed from His Majesty's Service."

Here again, McBride could have returned home and left the service for good, but his sense of duty got the better of him. Following his departure from the C.E.F., McBride returned to the United States and became a marksmanship and sniping instructor with the U.S. Army's 38th Division, serving out the war in Camp Perry. Nearly two years later, in October of 1918, he resigned

from the U.S army and spent his remaining years in the Oregon lumber industry. On March 17th 1933, Herbert Wes McBride, MM, passed away unexpectedly of heart failure at his home in Indianapolis. He was sixty years old.

While McBride's career was both colourful and tragic and full of notable subterfuge, it is in his writing that we find his lasting contribution to the military. The *Emma Gees*, first published in 1918, was McBride's first book and focuses on his service with the machinegun section during the war. Uniquely, it is the first book to be published about the application of the machine gun during war. Alternating between a poetic and direct style, his writing encapsulates the thinking of the period, but it is second book, published two years after his death, which has grown to the status of legend amongst the shooting fraternity.

A Rifleman Went to War covers everything from military training, life in the trenches, the anatomy of trench raids, hand-to-hand combat and the use of the pistol. His thoughts on "the pistol in war" played a key role the development of Jeff Cooper's "Modern Techniques of the pistol" and McBride's discussion of the "neatest and handiest military rifle I have ever seen" provided the basis for Cooper's concept of the "Scout Rifle." Cooper, who has been recognized as the father of what is commonly known as the "modern technique" of handgun shooting, and is considered by many to be one of the 20th century's foremost international experts on the use and history of small arms, himself points out in the introduction to a later reprint of *A Rifleman*, "as a young marine I read McBride carefully and enthusiastically, and I learned more about my business from his work than from any other single source. I hope it is not true that I got *all* my ideas about fighting from him... but I certainly got a lot of them."



It is interesting to note that despite the passage of time, the introduction of new weapons and weapon systems, and the seemingly endless list of tasks the modern infanteer must perform, the fundamental truths of the need for physical fitness and marksmanship training remain the same today as when McBride wrote about them; so much so that, McBride's writing on the matter were seminal in the development of U.S. military sniping doctrine in the Second World War, Korea, Vietnam and on to the present day. Indeed, the U.S. Marine Corps Sniper School has made *A Rifleman* mandatory reading for its would-be snipers. "His books are not just a history of World War One, but a fact filled thesis on the use of rifle, pistol and machinegun in combat. The chapters on sniping and machine gunnery are classics and by themselves make this book worth one's while to read. Yet this is only part of the book's value; McBride's insights about the practicalities of surviving and winning the infantry battle are true gems, and are well worth the attention of infantrymen at every level." Any serious student of marksmanship would do well to have both these books in their collection.