

The Importance of Sports in World War One

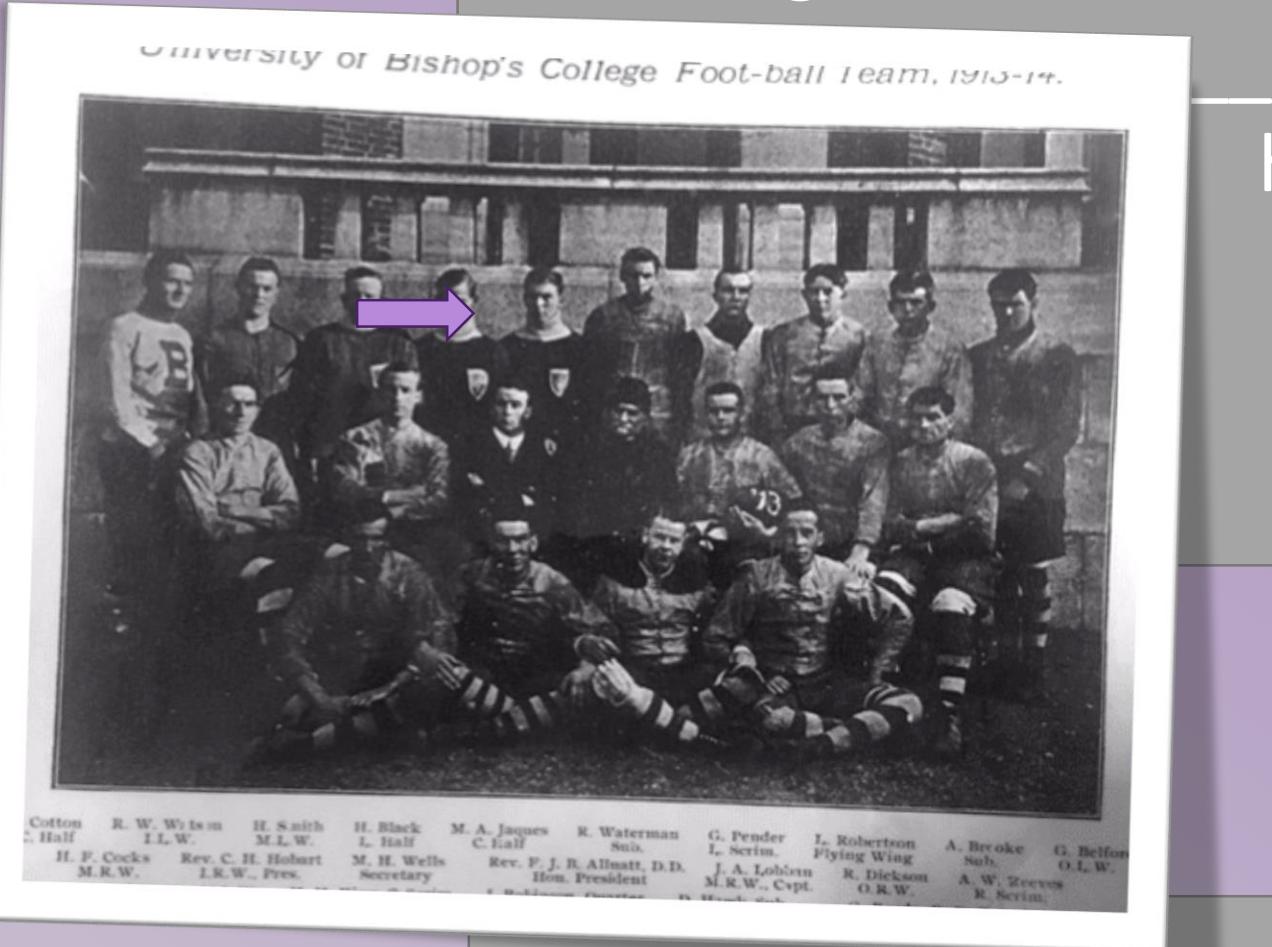
The Christmas Truce and the life of H.F. Cocks

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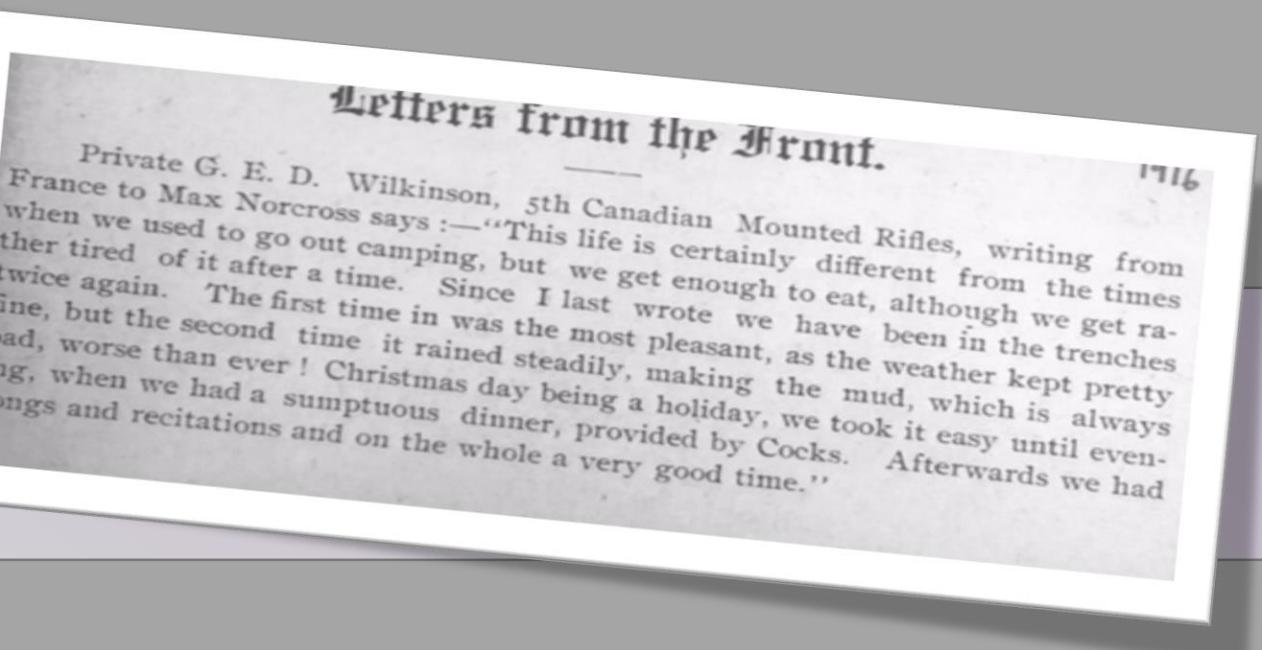
Introduction

Sports have always brought communities together and connected individuals. In the First World War, sports played a unique role in the soldiers' lives. The sense of comradeship on the pitch is the same sense of brotherhood that becomes essential to survival at the frontline. Sports enabled young soldiers to connect to their youth; reminding them of home and who they were before the war. They relied on sports as a way to build morale and escape the formality of their regimented lives. Sports were crucial to their mental well-being for many men, including H.F. Cocks, as they helped them get through the hardships of war.



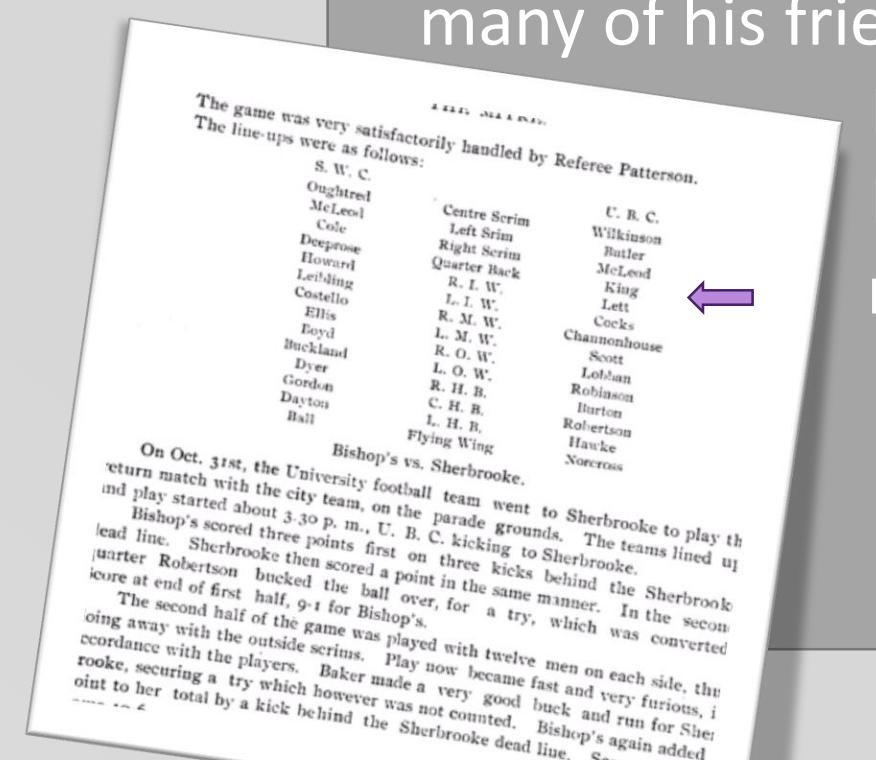
The Christmas Truce

When war broke out in 1914, it was the belief of many that it would all be over before Christmas. But as December came, and the war continued, the men had to settle for spending Christmas in the trenches. As the Germans sang their carols, they noticed verses being sung back to them in English from the Allied trenches. This led to one of many "truces" along the front line. On Christmas day, soldiers from both trenches met in no-man's land for singing, exchanging goods and food, burial of their dead, and even a football match. As the men did not speak the same languages, football allowed them to connect in a shared humanity and escape from the realities of war. This football match boosted morale but not all were happy with the truce. Officers in higher ranks recognized the game as a dangerous fraternization and banned such events in the future.



H.F. Cocks at Bishop's University

H.F. Cocks was a student at Bishop's University when war was declared in 1914. An extremely accomplished student with an utter adoration for Bishop's, Cocks had his toe in everything at the university. He was studying Divinity and participated in many clubs, including the Dramatics Club, Church Warden Club, and the Guild of the Venerable Bede. Cocks was also extremely involved in the sports scene at Bishops. He was Captain of the tennis club, cricket club, canoe club and was secretary treasurer of the football club. Cocks signed up in the summer of 1914 with many of his friends from the football club for the 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles, attached to 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade, 3rd Canadian Division. He was made sergeant and posted adjutant to a regiment in Havre, France in 1914, where he spent all of the war.



H. F. Cocks at War

We do not know for sure if H. F. Cocks continued playing sports and used them as an outlet during the war, as many men did, but we do know that the bonds formed on the Bishop's sports teams before the war were a lifeline for him. He joined the same battalion as many of his teammates, and it was probably a comfort for him to be around people who knew him and knew how to look out for him. We can see, through the pieces published in the *Mitre*, that he was in contact with boys back at Bishop's, and that his whole life at the university loomed large in his imagination. We do not hear of the harsher times, the times when the boys were taking fire together, but we know that in their downtime, they were taking care of each other mentally and physically, making Christmas dinner and talking about their lives after the war. Even when H. F. Cocks had been at war for two years, he was still gossiping with Bishop's boys about changes to the university, concerned that it would not be the same place when he got back to it. It likely kept him sane to think that he and his teammates, currently living through the cruelties of war, would return soon to that world of clubs and sports and tobogganing down the stairs of Divinity House.

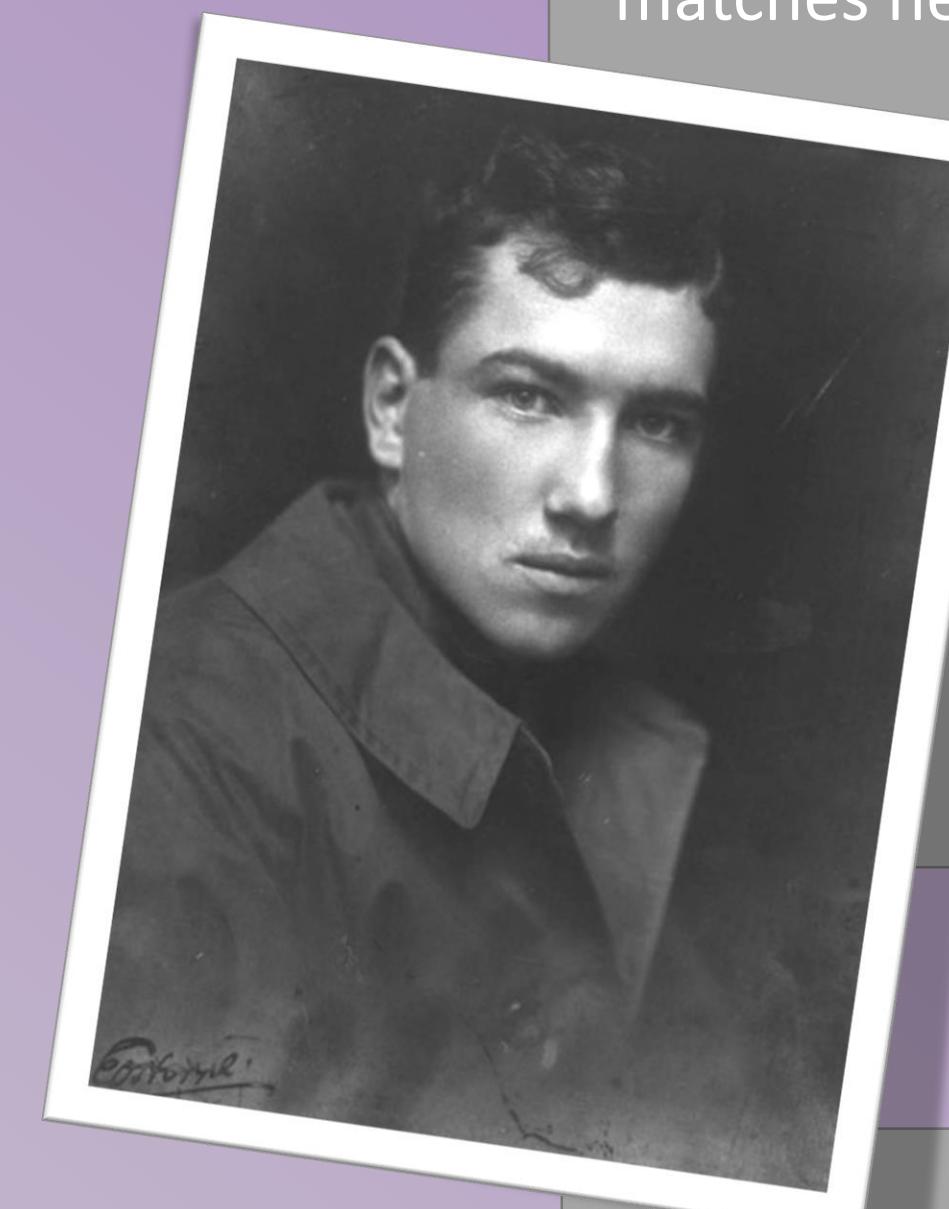
In a recent letter from Lieut. H. F. Cocks we find the expression of a sentiment which we believe to be general amongst our men overseas; it was occasioned by a rumour that the Divinity House was about to become a ladies' hostel. He says: "What is this I have heard, that the 'shed' is about to be given up to the Co-eds? Now stick to your guns, that must never be. The 'shed' is too precious. Why there will be no inducement to return if we cannot go back to the 'shed,' occupy our old rooms and toboggan down the stairs again." Don't worry, Harry, the enemy is checked for the present, and the defenders of the "shed" are holding fire well.



From Literature...

Robert Graves was a British poet/writer and war veteran who fought in France from 1915-1917. One of his most famous pieces is a short story depicting the Christmas truce of 1914. The story was based on true events and illustrates beautifully the sentiments felt by the men on that Christmas day, despite it not being entirely factual. When he depicts the football matches he writes:

"We provided the football, and set up stretchers as goalpost; and the Reverend Jolly, our Padre, acted as ref. They beat us 3-2 but the Padre had showed a bit too much Christian charity – their outside left shot the deciding goal, but he was miles offside and admitted it soon as the whistle went. And we spectators were spread nearly two deep along the touch-lines with loaded rifles slung on our shoulders." (314)



Conclusion

It is evident through looking at H.F. Cocks' experience in the war that his bond with his teammates and fellow soldiers were essential to his mental health and likely his physical survival during the war. Sport was important to the soldiers as a diversion but also as a way to remind themselves of their common humanity. Games such as the one played during the Christmas Truce bonded the men together and reminded them of the lives they led and would (hopefully) someday continue to lead outside of the war. Sports meant more to the soldiers in the war than we could imagine, because of what they represented to the men and the bonds they provided them with.

References:

- Robert Graves excerpt: *The Penguin Book of First World War Stories*. Penguin; London 2007. PP 309-326
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Excerpts and photos for H.F. Cocks: *The Mitre*, 1914, 1916, 1918

