

HALIFAX, EXTRAORDINARY HEROISM, AND HOCKEY

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Joseph Ernest Barss is one of the most important people in the history of Michigan athletics, and by extension, college hockey. But you wouldn't have guessed that from his background—and certainly not from his family's.

Like 60,000 other British colonists, Barss's great-great-grandfather, Joseph Barss Sr., left New England for Nova Scotia before the American Revolutionary War. His son, Joseph Barss Jr., served as a privateer in the War of 1812, when he captured, sank, or burned more than sixty American ships, making him the most wanted man on the East Coast.

His great-grandson, Joseph Ernest Barss, was born in India in 1892, the son of Baptist missionaries. He grew up in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, just a few miles from Windsor, Nova Scotia, the birthplace of hockey. He attended the hometown Acadia University, which his grandfather helped found, where he starred in football, hockey, baseball, and boxing.

"He was sort of a stocky fella, big thighs, who carried himself very straight," recalled his son, Dr. Joseph Andrew Barss, in a 1999 interview. "A tough guy. His ankles were so strong, he didn't have to lace up his skates."

After graduating cum laude in 1912 at age nineteen, Barss moved to Montreal, where he rose to become a district manager for Imperial Oil, earning \$1,500 a year—big money for a twenty-two-year-old at the time. Barss seemed to have a steady supply of friends and romantic interests.

Life was good for Barss in just about every way we typically measure for a young man: career, finances, and fun. He did not want for ambition, talent, or charisma.

But Barss's letters give the unmistakable sense that his current lifestyle, appealing as it was, did not leave him fulfilled. He came from a line of people who had something else in spades: a profound sense of purpose. His

ancestors attacked enemy ships on the high seas, built fortunes in business, started universities, and went on missionary trips to India. And that essential piece was something the good life Ernest Barss was living in Montreal did not provide.

That changed one Saturday in 1915, during the second year of the Great War, when one of his rowing club friends read out loud that the Germans had gassed a famed Canadian unit, the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI), killing 461 of the 1,068 men in the unit, including friends of theirs from Montreal. The four men were "filled with indignation," Barss wrote, and decided to enlist right then and there.

In his early letters back to his parents, Barss was bursting with enthusiasm for the cause, and the role he was training to play: machine gunner. The reason the PPCLI was in such need of reinforcements, he explained, was because "there are only 53 left out of 1,500. So we have some reputation to keep up. Of course, as you have probably noted, I am full of this thing. So are the other fellows."

Barss's bravery and equanimity would soon be tested when the prospect of being killed in the trenches shifted from a far-off hypothetical to a cold reality he would face every day. But no one could claim his new life lacked purpose.

As the killing continued all around him, however, with no progress for either side, his letters revealed growing doubt, fear, and disillusionment. A little more than a year after he volunteered, after seeing countless comrades go down and surviving a few close calls himself, Barss wrote to his parents on May 31, 1916, from Belgium, just a mile from the worst fighting the world had ever seen. He told them his unit was going "into the line" that night for eight days, which he hoped would be their last trip.

"I think we are all heartily sick of the whole show," he wrote. But, he added, after this they needn't worry about what's next, because "it can't be any worse."

But it was. On June 2, 1916, a German shell landed near Barss and sent him flying, knocking him unconscious for hours, and seriously injuring his back and left leg. He spent six months in a body cast in England, then transferred to Halifax in early 1917, where the doctors reported Barss had suffered complete paralysis "of left foot and up the leg to three inches above the ankle joint."

Almost a year after Barss had been evacuated from the battlefields, he still could not extend or flex his left foot or toes, and could walk only with "a marked foot drop," hardly the stuff of a hockey hero. A question on the form asked the attending physician, "To what extent will injury prevent his

earning a full livelihood in the general labor market?" The doctor answered, "30%." On another form, under "Probable Duration of Incapacity," a doctor wrote, "Indefinite."

Barss's shell shock hadn't abated either, including "insomnia, nervousness . . . some tremor of his hands." Today doctors would likely conclude Barss suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. After being released, he returned to his parents' home in Wolfville to continue his self-directed rehabilitation program, which entailed walking all over town with a cane, trying to sell Victory Loans and prove the doctors wrong.

He was also trying to figure out what to do with his life. He knew he didn't want to run the family grocery store, work for a corporation in Montreal, or return to the trenches. But he didn't know what he wanted to do—or what he still *could* do.

On the morning of Thursday, December 6, 1917, a French munitions ship called *Mont-Blanc* was very eager to get inside the safety of Halifax Harbor as soon as the underwater metal gates, designed to keep German U-boats out, were opened—and with good reason. Five days earlier the longshoremen in Brooklyn, New York, had finished loading her down with an unprecedented quantity of high explosives, including TNT: a staggering six million pounds, or thirteen times the weight of the Statue of Liberty, which would be used to fill shells to drop on the Germans.

While *Mont-Blanc* was anxious to get inside Halifax Harbor, the Norwegian ship *Imo* was just as eager to get out and go in the opposite direction to New York. There it would load relief supplies intended to alleviate the desperate situation of the civilians in German-occupied Belgium. At Halifax Harbor's narrowest stretch, *Imo's* impatient captain, who had no idea what *Mont-Blanc* was carrying, passed several ships on the left, against nautical convention. This set up a game of chicken with *Mont-Blanc*, which bailed first, pivoting to the left at the last second—just as *Imo's* captain lost his nerve and veered the same direction.

At 8:46 a.m., *Imo* struck *Mont-Blanc's* bow, knocking over barrels of airplane fuel. Fire swept across the decks, sending *Mont-Blanc's* crew scurrying to the lifeboats, while Halifax longshoremen, office workers, and schoolchildren watched the ghost ship slip perfectly into Pier 6 at the base of the city.

At 9:04:35 a.m., *Mont-Blanc* erupted, leveling 2.5 square miles of Halifax, rendering twenty-five thousand people homeless, wounding nine thousand, and killing two thousand more—all in one-fifteenth of a second, less time than it takes to blink. It was the largest manmade detonation prior

to the A-bomb. In 1942, J. Robert Oppenheimer set up a conference at California-Berkeley to study Halifax, accurately concluding that the atomic bomb would be only five times more powerful.

About an hour after the explosion, which blew out windows fifty miles away, Barss received a call from a mentor, Dr. Elliott, who had gotten word by telegram that a crisis had occurred in Halifax. "Of course, we thought it greatly exaggerated," Barss wrote to his uncle, Andrew Townson, "but when about half an hour later an urgent call came for doctors and nurses we began to think there must be something in it."

There was something to it.

Dr. Elliott was essentially recruiting Barss to return to a war zone—not to fight this time, but to help. Despite Barss's infirmity and shell-shock symptoms, all of which could be aggravated by this demanding mission, once again he didn't hesitate to answer the call.

If Barss's outlook had changed dramatically during his first trip to the trenches, slowly turning his optimistic bravado into fatalistic defeatism, this second call would transform his life once again.

When he got off the train, he wrote, "No reports could exaggerate the terrible damage and loss of life. We couldn't get within three miles of the city, for the whole space in between was a blazing mass of ruins. I saw some terrible scenes of desolation and ruin at the front, but never, even in that old hard-hammered city of Ypres, did I ever see anything so absolutely complete. In that entire area of over three-square miles in the immediate vicinity of the explosion there was not one stick or stone standing on another. Every house and building had just crumpled up and the whole was a raging mass of flames.

"Practically the whole waterfront was wrecked. All the large new steel and concrete piers just completed recently were wrecked beyond repair. People were killed everywhere, all over the city, and there was hardly a whole ceiling or pane of glass in the city or within a radius of five miles."

Although Barss had no medical training beyond the basic first aid all soldiers received, the city was grateful for anyone who could still walk, see, and lend a hand, so he was permitted to perform tasks normally reserved for medical professionals.

"The wounds were terrible," he wrote. "There was every kind I ever saw at the front, but a great majority had head wounds. Hundreds of people lost their eyes. In one of the operating rooms where they took only eye cases, the surgeon took out one hundred eyes the first day, and then handed the patients over to the next man to operate.

“The stench of blood was almost overpowering. Several of the trained nurses keeled over at the sights. As for me, I had seen so much of that kind of thing that it didn’t bother me at all. I was assigned a trained nurse and a V.A.D. [Voluntary Aid Department nurse] to help me, and my how we worked; I dressed every kind of wound, set several fractures, and did a number of [surgeries] as well.”

When Barss was relieved at four the next morning, Friday, December 7, he had completed a nonstop fourteen-hour shift. He got a few hours of sleep somewhere, then came back at 8:30 Friday morning for more—and did it all again Saturday. If he ever wondered whether medicine might be his calling, it would be hard to concoct a more intense introductory course to find out.

That Saturday afternoon the beleaguered town received relief from an unexpected source: Boston, which had fought against “British North America” in 1776 and 1812, and whose government’s Speaker of the House advocated the annexation of Canada from the floor of the U.S. Congress in 1911—and received hearty cheers for it, just six years before the explosion.

Yet it was Boston, not Montreal or Toronto, which sent two trains and two ships loaded with one hundred doctors, three hundred nurses, and a million dollars’ worth of supplies (about \$20 million today)—all without being asked. Some of those medical professionals relieved the exhausted Barss after three very long days in the operating room with almost no sleep. The Americans’ unexpected act of chivalry was enough to transform 141 years of animosity and aggression into a century of peace. Boston’s overwhelming generosity even converted the great-grandson of Canada’s greatest privateer.

“You know we have always been a trifle contemptuous of the U.S. on account of their prolonged delay in entering the war,” Barss wrote his uncle. “But never again! They can have anything I’ve got. And I don’t think I feel any differently from anyone down here either.”

The explosion and its aftermath did something else, too: it changed Barss’s outlook. On the long train ride home it came to him: having taken part in both fighting and healing, Barss wanted to spend the rest of his life practicing the latter. When he told his uncle Andrew Townson of his new-found desire, he gave Ernest \$100 to enroll at the University of Michigan in 1919, back when that was enough to get started. How Ernest Barss picked Michigan, however, remains a mystery.

“Darned if I know why he went to the University of Michigan,” his son, Dr. Joseph Andrew Barss, told me, “but it’s always been a first-class school.”

In Ann Arbor, Barss started becoming a new man, with a new mission, and a new name: Joe, because that's what his professors read off roll call. He found time to sing in the First Congregational Church under the leadership of Lloyd C. Douglas, who would go on to write *The Robe*, which sold two million copies and became a movie starring Richard Burton.

In the fall of 1920, he went on a blind double date that "neither of us wanted to go on," recalled Helen Kolb, a Michigan undergraduate from Battle Creek. "But we had a wonderful time. I never thought anything serious would come of this date, as Joe had so far to go to become a doctor."

When Barss and a classmate, Bob Breakey, picked up their dates the next day to go to a football game, Barss brought Helen two big mums and a box of Whitman's chocolates. The man seemed to have a plan, and "worked very hard to be invited to my home for Christmas," she recalled. Shortly after the holidays, Barss asked Helen to marry him, then did something even more surprising: he became a naturalized American citizen. If anything demonstrated the distance the two nations had traveled since the Halifax explosion, it was the simple, small decision of Joseph Ernest Barss, descendent of a notorious Canadian privateer, to become an American, something he could not have conceived when he joined the British forces in 1915, grumbling about the Americans sitting out the war.

The couple wed in 1922 and had a son, Joseph Andrew, in 1923, and a daughter, Elizabeth, in 1927.

Even while Barss was busy starting a family and finishing his medical education in peaceful Ann Arbor, he was still occasionally haunted by the Great War. Like most veterans who'd seen combat, Barss was a stoic man who rarely talked of the epic battles in which he had fought. But early in their marriage, Helen was startled to discover that this otherwise self-possessed person would get choked up whenever he heard bagpipes, as it was bagpipers who led his unit into the trenches and it was bagpipers who led them back out, with the soldiers carrying the writhing victims of shells, gas, and bayonets behind them. Helen also noticed whenever he heard a whistle or a loud bang he would drop to the ground, a survival instinct he had learned in the awful days when enemy shells were dropping all around him.

Through the steady support of his family, his friends, and his own strong spirit, Barss was gradually able to let his memories of war recede, and the simple pleasures of civilian life take their place.

Barss knew he would lose his hard-earned progress re-learning to walk if he quit pushing himself, so he made it a point to go down to Michigan's

rudimentary rink, a building with only three sides, and cajole himself to get around the rink until tears streamed down his face.

According to the box scores of Michigan's "informal team," Barss officiated many of the club's hockey games in 1922. Perhaps it was his desire to return to a normal lifestyle and have some fun again that motivated him to find time in his already overburdened schedule for such a trivial pursuit. It's easy to imagine the lightheartedness Barss must have felt as he became reacquainted with the happiness a hockey game could bring. And having gotten a taste, he wanted more.

To get more, however, Michigan needed a varsity hockey program—something the club players had asked for and been denied three times over the previous decade. When the Great War broke out, Michigan sponsored only five varsity teams: baseball, football, track, tennis, and basketball.

To change that, Barss paid a visit to Michigan's legendary football coach and athletic director, Fielding Yost, to ask if he could start a varsity hockey team. Yost, a native of West Virginia, didn't know much about hockey, but he knew a good coach when he saw one. Yost agreed, on one condition: Barss had to become the program's first coach.

Barss agreed, which meant he had to "rush home from classes, eat dinner, have a taxi waiting, go to the rink and coach, return by a little after nine and study for the next day's classes until midnight," Helen recalled. Because the rink lacked artificial ice, or a fourth wall, they were at the mercy of the weather. "The tin roof [on the rink] caused him some trouble because we had to live by the weather report and temperature."

Barss attached a thermometer outside their bedroom window, which Helen Barss checked every morning. If it was too warm to skate on the Coliseum's outdoor rink, she simply rolled over and let her young husband steal a golden hour of sleep until he had to go to class. But if it was cold enough for the team to practice, Helen would stir her bone-tired husband out of bed to get him to the rink on time. After everything he'd seen in France and Halifax, however, Barss was not likely to complain about a little fatigue.

Before he stepped down in 1927 he had built the Michigan hockey team into one of the most popular attractions on campus, with a 26–21–4 record (.553) and two league titles. The program was strong enough to inspire Yost to buy the rink, enclose it, and install all-important artificial ice. These crucial elements helped Michigan hockey survive both the Great Depression and World War II—one of only two programs west of the Alleghenies to do so. Michigan has since won an NCAA record nine national titles.

Dr. Barss became chief of surgery at the Hines Veterans Hospital in Chicago before setting up a private practice in Oak Park, Illinois, Ernest Hemingway's hometown.

"He sure gave me a good upbringing, in terms of character and honesty," Barss's son said. "He was absolutely true-blue. He was very aware of what was right and what was wrong. My dad was a helluva guy."

In 1966, at age seventy-four, Dr. Barss took his wife, Helen, his son, and his grandson Joe back to Nova Scotia. In Wolfville, he showed them where he had learned to skate, where he had gone to college, and where he sold victory bonds. In Halifax, he showed them where he had recuperated, where *Mont-Blanc* had blown up, and where he'd helped victims at Camp Hill Hospital start their own recoveries.

But he didn't tell them how he had left Acadia University a confident young man with no sense of purpose, returned from the Great War a broken man searching for one, and went to Halifax for three long days, where he found his life's mission—and pursued it at the University of Michigan.