GRAMPA IN THE FIRST WAR - "CHAPTER" 3 8th Battalion Canadian Railway Troops 1916 - 1918

Grampa (Private John Aldworth West - Regimental #279533) signed up with the 218th battalion shortly their formation, on April 17, of 1916. The regiment trained in Alberta and did not leave for Europe until February of 1917. During their lengthy training period, near Calgary, they were involved in anti-German riots in that city in October and again in the following February, the reasons and details are not clear. On arrival, in England the 218th was subsequently absorbed by the 8th Battalion, Canadian Railway troops. Grandpa received an honorable discharge in April, 1918.

We don't yet know much about this phase of his war activity, except to look at the unique mission of the battalion which he served in. You may have noticed that on several occasions, Grampa listed his trade as "machinist". Although most of his later life was involved with carpentry and construction, Grampa's younger years, spent as a miller in England, must have provided much practical knowledge of engineering and physics. Much of the day to day activies of his battalion can be perused in the 1917 diaries of his battalion, available on line. The following online article excerpts present a historical view of the mission of the railway troops:

Early in the war, it slowly, very slowly, dawned on the British War Office that some more efficient means than hauling by horses over muddy, shell-damaged roads had to be devised to move the mountains of supplies needed at the front. The idea of speciallyconstructed light railways now seemed to be a feasible answer. The idea caught on. For twenty years before the war Canada had built more railways than any other part of the British Empire, so it was only natural that Britain would think of Canada when the

idea of railways in the war zone was considered. On January 21, 1915 the British Army



Council sent word that it would be glad to have a corps of Canadian railwaymen. For several weeks prior to the opening of the attack (at Passchendaele) the weather had been extremely bad, and the ground in the battle area was like a quagmire. Nevertheless, the Canadian Railway Troops had laid rails to within a short distance of the front line. Then, as soon as the infantry advanced on that memorable Easter Monday, the railway battalions constructed new lines on the heels of the fighting men. Supplies and ammunition were carried forward on standard and narrow-gauge lines, and the wounded were evacuated over them to the very doors of the field ambulance dressing stations and the casualty clearing hospitals. It was the first time in the war that such work had been accomplished. Within a week of the opening of the campaign, trains were running to the top of Vimy Ridge, and by the end of April light railways were running forward to the British ration dumps which were now some distance ahead across the level plain.

This was Grandpa's involvement, as a support "Sapper" or engineer. His role was more like a medic, than a combat soldier in that he worked independently of the fighting men, but a times, very much on the front line and in great danger. Such was the scene when he was gassed and according to the war diary of November 23, 1917 invalided back to England to the CRT Depot Hospital in Purfleet (near London). Note that he is classified as "sick", rather than "wounded" or "injured", suggesting that types of casual-ties were differentiated. Note also that many of the casualties listed on that date were "sick" also. We know that the Germans use mustard gas at the first battle of Passendale (Oct. 9-12), and Grandpa wasn't hospitalized in England until 10 days later. This is consistent with what we now know about the longer term effects of gas injuries. Although he lived into his nineties, Grandpa's ongoing physical problems with gas injuries have mentioned many times in our family lore.

Summ and t	naries are o the Staff M	ontained in	ries and Intelligence F. S. Regs., Part II. ctively. Title pages ript.		INT		ence s		ARY. SE	ert number fo	UR.	
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	19.		512565 Dvr. Spencer, W. (C.A.S.C) granted leave to England from 19-11-17 to 3-12-17 447860 A/Sgt. Burnham, A. (C.A.V.C) granted leave to England from 19-11-17 to 3-12-17									
	20.		20-11-17 t	. Davies, J.H. (0 30-11-17 . Ayloff, F.T.							to PARIS from	ipho
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	22		259036 A/S	gt. Bannatyne,	B. M., gr	anted lea	we to Lond	ion from	22-11-17 to	6-12-17 //	man /	
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218th Battalion roll - (became 8th Battalion)

Private	Horse, West, Mrs. Emma	Abiagdoa, Berks, Eng.	England Educonton April 17, 181
Private Wheeler, Frederick, Nil., Nil.,	Wintern Thomas A	The Hall Farm, Wharton-on-Trent, Derby, Eng.	England Serces Camp July 29, 191
Private	White, Robert.	Newburg, W., Va., U.S.A.	U.S.A
Private		Fort Saskatche wan, Alto.	CanadaErimonton
Private	Wiese, Mrs. Julia.	Millot, Alte	U.S.A