

The

War Records

of

John Aldworth West

(Grampa)



Preface:

Tracing Grampa's war-time activities has long been an interest of several of the cousins over many years, stemming from many anecdotes from family members and from Grampa himself. The process of putting together a credible time-line begins with assembling those stories and continues through two more stages: acquiring his war records and researching troop-movement records. I have recently received Grampa's complete war records from Ottawa (115 pages) and thus have been able to fill in many of the gaps of my previous knowledge of these years. Although a reported 60 percent of British Army war records were lost, ironically, in a London air-raid fire during the second war, a copy of Grampa's Boer War discharge papers was filed with his Canadian records prior to that, thereby broadening our knowledge of his South African war participation. The First War records contain: Attestation (sign-up) papers; many medical reports and "separation payment" ledgers (salary paid entirely to Gramma Emma in Edmonton). The actual movements of his units are less detailed and I needed to search other online regimental reports and war diaries to fill in gaps between the medical reports. Generally, the documents are readable but on occasion illegible.



1. The Boer War



In addition to his birth-certificate, we also have the membership record which shows that his birthdate was the same, backwards or forwards. He served for one year and 48 days in South Africa (Mafeking etc.) and was discharged on July 3, 1901. As all soldiers in this conflict, he received the South Africa War Medal, but he also received a gold watch for bravery, which was presented to him



personally by Edward the VII for heroism. The report tells us that as a scout he was wounded with a bullet in his ankle while returning to his regiment to report a Boer position, thereby en-



abling another British victory. There are several references in his First War medical reports to diseases which he contracted while in South Africa: Enteric (Typhoid) Fever, which when untreated can cause inflammation of heart muscles and which may lead to heart problems in the long term (documented in several first war medical reports), and rheumatism, also cited in Grampa's Oct. 1915 discharge.

2. The First War - part 1

On May 6, 1915 following his completed home-staying in Earlie, AB and subsequent return to Edmonton, Grampa signed up with the 49th Battalion (Loyal Eddies) with the regimental number of 43177. Fairly soon thereafter, they left by train for Montreal. En route at a stop in Lestock, Saskatchewan, a young woman presented them with a coyote pup which became their mascot until they departed for France. The pet was named "Lestock" and when the battalion went to France, Lestock was given to a zoo in London. On June 14, 1915, the unit sailed from Montreal on the SS Metagama to Liverpool and then to Folkestone on the southeast coast of England. They trained at St. Martin's Field until they shipped out to France in October of 1915. During this 4 month training period, in August, Grampa forfeited 3 days pay (for absence). This was undoubtedly a visit to his mother and father in nearby Heathfield (see map). On October 8, Grampa was struck off strength (removed from the regiment) due to a medical discharge (rheumatism in both knees). Never having served in France, Grampa was shipped back to Canada on the SS Scandinavian on Oct. 26 and discharged at Quebec City on Nov. 6. Given the nature of the war in France at the time, it's entirely possible that his South African infirmities saved his life.



The First War - part 2

On April 27, 1916, Grampa signed up with the 218th battalion railway troops, with the regimental number 279533. Much is written of this colourful unit (see separate article) and their activities during the 10 months of their training in Canada. From April 1916 until February 1917, they were stationed at the Sarcee Camp in southeast Calgary. Uncle Ken's birth in September of 1917 shows that leaves were granted, especially around Christmas of 1916. They were finally called up on February 9th, (although men from the battalion rioted along 101st street in Edmonton the night before, after discovering they would be departing for overseas the next day. On Feb. 17, they sailed from Halifax to Liverpool on the SS Southland, with a brief sojourn again at Purfleet, east of London (although there is some evidence that they were in Witley Camp south of London.) Here is the chronology from their war diaries with entries (in italics) from other sources:



Grampa's unit built and maintained the critical rail lines to the front. It is amazing that Folkestone and Heathfield are less than 100 miles from the Battlegrounds in France and Belgium.

April 1 - several battalions assembled at Purfleet, training (instruction in anti-gas), parades

April 16 - companies move to Southampton

April 17 - 19 - embark on SS Archimedis and SS Hunslett

April 20 - land at Le Havre - proceed to Docks Rest Camp

After disembarking from the ships that carried them across the Atlantic, engineers (sappers, like Grampa), eager for rest after being at sea for two weeks were instead put to work. They unloaded ships, dug ditches, did construction, and performed other tasks around the camp, at the docks, or in the city. To add insult to injury, it was often raining, turning the field where they camped into a muddy swamp.

April 22-24 - Troops are transferred by train to Ouderdam, Belgium.

April 26 - Master parade (muster - 38 officers & 945 regular troops)

April 27 - Troops moved to DeSoule (Seule) via Bailleul (see map)

April 28 - May 5 work started on railway east toward Ploegsteert.

May 6 - Terrific bombardment - no casualties - warning of gas attack, raining.

May 18 - Germans attack by aeroplane on balloon (??)

May 31 - Strength 37 officers / 943 regulars

June 1 - 8 - Much shelling - many wounded.

June 9 - This battalion is now building railways over old battle areas.

Ground in awful condition owing to heavy shellfire. Good weather

June 22 - 25 - Stormy weather, bad roads

June 26 - first mention of gas poisoning

July 1- 31 - Entries are all regarding routine activities,

Cdn election and promotions. Troop transfers - stowaways

(!)

August 3 - first mention of shell shock - sporadic entries regarding gas injuries. Strength over 1000.

WAR DIARY		OF	
INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY.		SERIAL NUMBER FOUR.	
(Erase heading not required.)			
22	259036 A/Sgt. Bennatyns, B. M., granted leave to London from 22-11-17 to 6-12-17		
23	2497809 Sapper Kasicomk, M. (3 Co) H.E. shell wound in throat (serious) 21-11-17. Adm. to Hospital. 112198 Sapper Bell, F. J. (1 Co) granted leave to Ireland from 23-11-17 to 7-12-17. Lieut. K. F. Corbitt, granted leave to England from 24-11-17 to 8-12-17 The following other ranks have been S.O.S. this Battalion for the reasons set opposite their respective names:- 279533 Sapper West, J. 1 Co. Invalided sick and posted to Canadian Hvy. Troop. Depot. 22-10-17 1042998 " Burgess, T.H. " " wounded " " " 28-10-17 292370 " Kergan, J.O.J. 2 Co. " injured " " " 1-11-17		

August -October-no more mention of troop movements, only individual promotions, wounded, transfers etc. (Grampa mentioned Oct. 21)

The war diary entries from July onward take on a very different focus. From April through June, there is much written about troop movement, weather, attacks (gas and shell) etc. From July onward the entries are mostly about individual movement, some casualty listings and a lot about promotions. It would seem that they were sometimes not accurate. For example, from several medical documents, we know that Grampa was gassed on August 23rd, but he is not listed as "invalided" in the war diary until Oct. 21.

When in France, Grampa served as a "Sapper" (builder - engineer) building much needed temporary railroads to bring supplies to the front. (Grampa usually listed his previous profession as "engineer" or "machinist". Those of us who have seen the complicated mechanical structure of Venn Mill can't argue this point). Although Sappers were not as directly targeted as infantrymen, they were regularly put in harm's way, as the railroads needed to go all the way to the front. The upside of this posting is that they would not have to spend so many countless hours sitting around in the trenches. Nevertheless,

Grampa was gassed on August 23. It is not clear whether it was chlorine or mustard gas and since the British were also using gas, it is also possible that it was not from the Germans. (Google “First War gas friendly fire”), Grampa was treated on the following dates & for these symptoms: (see footnotes below)

August 23, 1917 -Gassed & posted to Cdn. Railway Troops depot
A soldier who was injured in the field would be treated firstly at a Regimental Aid Post in the trenches by the Battalion Medical Officer and his orderlies and stretcher bearers, then moved to an.....

September 6, 1917 - Field Ambulance #25 - trench fever*

Sept. 10, 1917 - Field Ambulance #24 - Myalgia**

Advance Dressing Station close to the front line manned by members of The Field Ambulance, RAMC. If further treatment was needed he would be moved to a

October 8, 1917 - Casualty clearing station - debility***

Casualty Clearing Station, a tented camp behind the lines and if required moved to one of the.....

Oct. 9 - Gen Hospital Etaples, France

base hospitals usually by train, the seriously wounded were taken.....

Oct. 21, 1917 - Horton County of London War Hospital - Epsom
back to Britain by Hospital Ship and onto the relevant hospital for further treatment.

Jan. 10, 1918 - Clarence House, Rockhampton (Near Bristol)

March 14, 1918 - Bushy Park, Richmond

(The King's Canadian Red Cross Convalescent Hospital)

Apr 16, 1918 - Canadian Red Cross Special Hospital, Buxton

May 13, 1918 Embarked from Liverpool for Canada

** a highly contagious rickettsial disease transmitted by lice, infecting soldiers in the trenches in World War I.*

***severe headaches*

**** a catch-all designation for unknown caused symptoms: shell shock; (post traumatic stress) or chronic fatigue syndrome.*

As Sappers, Grampa and his fellow soldiers would not have been involved directly in any of the large battles of the time, although through construction of critical supply lines, the 8th battalion was clearly involved with combat successes in Messines, the 3rd battle of Ypres and Passendale.

Grampa spent a long 10 months in hospitals in England. Although we have no family stories or correspondence to support it, Grampa's return to Britain in October presented wonderful opportunities for him to be visited by his mother, father and sisters, particularly during the three months he was at the Horton County Hospital in Epsom (50 miles from Heathfield).

I haven't made any attempt to “analyze” the pay ledgers, but I did notice that the final one gave an address in Grand Prairie. There was another reference which gave Grand Prairie as the place to which Grampa (and family) intended to settle after his discharge. Although there is no family verbal confirmation of this that I'm aware of, we do know that Heber had settled in “the Peace River area” and perhaps they intended to settle near them initially, until (as family history has it) Grampa was advised by his Calgary doctor to go to a coastal climate because of his medical conditions.

Grampa's troopships



SS Metagama - Montreal - Liverpool June 4, 1915



SS Scandinavian - Liverpool - Quebec City - Oct. 26, 1915



SS Southland - Halifax - Liverpool - February 16, 1917



SS Hunslett - Southampton - LeHavre - April 20 - 1917



RMS Mauritania - Liverpool - Halifax - May 13, 1918

Medical reports contained references to:

- (from South Africa): Enteric (Typhoid) Fever, Rheumatism in both knees

- (First War - part 1): Rheumatism in both knees - (stated reason for medical discharge, although difficult farm labour in Alberta could also be a contributor)

- (First War - part 2): Trench Fever; Dyspnoea; Fainting; Weakness; Washed out appearance (Grampa's stories of his appearance on his return in 1918 reflect all of these observations); Loss of 40 pounds weight; Neurasthenia (an ill-defined medical condition characterized by lassitude, fatigue, headache, and irritability, associated chiefly with emotional disturbance); Hand tremor; Heart palpitations; D.A.H. (bleeding in the lungs- from the gas poisoning); Vertigo, Fatigue - due to disease or injury prior to active service (i.e. South Africa). Active service has aggravated it; Arterio Sclerosis, Right Apex. - infection prior to enlistment (South Africa). The seriousness and wide-spread nature of Grampa's ailments at the end of the war are emphasized by a doctor's description of him in June, 1918:

"He is a well nourished man but looks pale and flabby. Is nervous and easily excited. He tires easily and cannot do a day's work; Extended hands show a very slight tremor. Tongue is tremulous and eyelids flicker when closed. Knee jerks are diminished but station is good and ocular symptoms of tabbies are absent. Heart - sounds are normal, no enlargement present, but rate is rapid, pulse sitting 96/108/96. Rate various. He is very short of breath on 1 minute PT on going up one flight of stairs. Becomes dizzy if he stoops over."

This is not the quiet, thoughtful, calm, loving man that we grew up with. But the bottom line is that we did grow up with him and were blessed with his presence until the ripe old age of 93.

and that is the miracle.....

Grampa returns from war - 1918.

Poem by Grampa's sister Ruth Naomi West

End of the Great War 1914 - 1918

I close my eyes on all around,
And allow my thoughts to roam,
Far from old England's hills and dales,
Over the seas to another home.

Swiftly they fly over mountains and lakes,
By rivers and valleys and forests forlorn;
Lingering awhile in the prairie wilds,
Then on through the golden, waving corn.

They wander on till their goal is reached,
Which is Alberta Province in Canada West.
Up to the capital, Edmonton,
At a cosy house they settle and rest.

Restful it is to gaze awhile
On that family group—each expectant face
Betrays the joy of a throbbing heart,
Dad is coming, his own armchair to grace.

“He's here!” Imagination's vain -
My thoughts are drowned in loving
words and kisses.
Oh, the satisfaction in his eyes.
Daddy's realized at last his wishes!

One arm clasped round his faithful wife,
The other, methinks round
Lally (Elsie?) and Jack;
Edna and Ted (Fred?) each claim a knee,
While Harold and Phil climb up on his back.

Baby Ken hangs round his mother's neck,
He's rather shy. Dad's been gone so long:
He left when Kenneth was six months old,
Before he could prattle his baby song.

At home again! Can it be true?
The space between them gone,
and no more fighting.
None can conceive the joy they feel.
A happy family re-uniting.

Methinks I see the supper through,
The children gone obediently to bed,
Mother and Dad sit talking long,
Telling each other how they've been led.

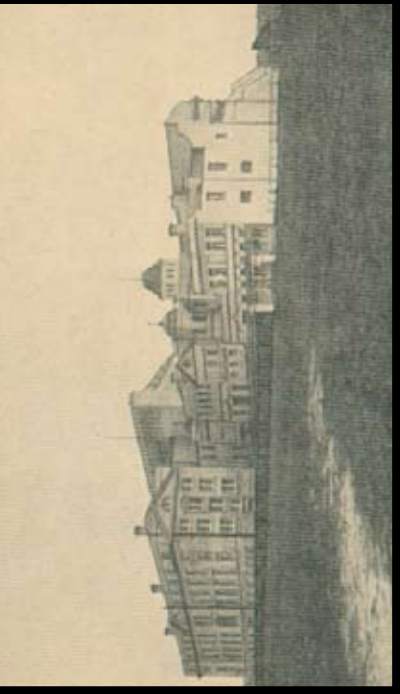
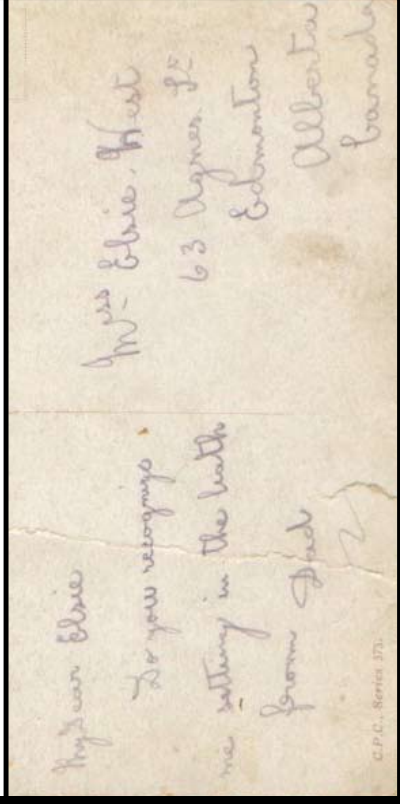
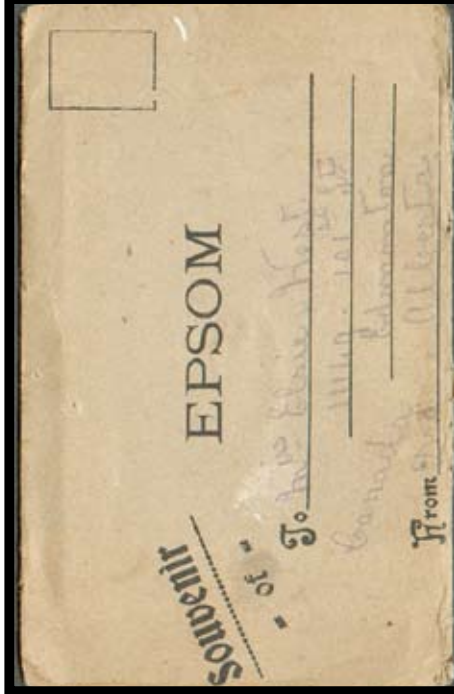
How many sighs, how many tears,
Long months of separation cost them both.
‘Tis sacred now, I will not pry.
Am loath.

R.N.W.



War-time Postcards sent to Elsie from Grampa

from Folkestone - 1915



From Epsom Hospital - 1918

The Grampa that we knew.



Appendix I - The Colourful 218th Battalion

218th BATTALION (EDMONTON)

<https://sites.google.com/site/irishregimentsoftheempire/canadian-expeditionary-force-2>

The battalion was organized in January 1916 under Lt. Col. McKinery; the authority was published in General Order 69 of July 15th. The recruiting campaign started in Edmonton on February 25th. The battalion requested permission to adopt the subtitle Canadian Irish Guards. But this was not approved. Lt. Col. McKinery seems to have taken absolutely no notice of this, and continued to recruit an Irish battalion. This included newspaper adverts calling on Irishmen, parades through the streets of Edmonton with banners bearing Erin Go Bragh (Ireland for Ever). And presenting each new recruit with a green armband printed with the wording Irish Guards. Recruiting was not only open to Irishmen. And the campaign attracted a large number of Russians who had just finished a railway construction job. And required interpreters to translate the drill. This convinced some of the local population that the battalion was infiltrated by Germans and Austrians! The battalion entered training at Sarcee Camp near Calgary on June 7th, (men from the 218th and other battalions were involved in a riot at Calgary, when a large body of soldiers attacked a police barracks on October 11th). The battalion was converted to a railway construction battalion on January 21st 1917; this had the same establishment of an infantry battalion but with no machine gun section. And as a non combatant unit, would not be armed with rifles or bayonets. After training they returned to Edmonton, now under the command of Lt. Col. J. K. Cornwall. And departed Edmonton on February 9th, (men from the battalion rioted along 101st street the night before, after discovering they would be departing for overseas the next day). Four officers and staff remained behind to recruit another company, and bring the battalion up to strength. The battalion left for England in two drafts, the first on February 17th onboard the Southland from Halifax. Arriving at Liverpool on the 27th with a strength of 27 officers and 601 other ranks. And continued training at Witley. The second draft onboard the Austonia departing Halifax on March 4th. The 218th were absorbed by the Canadian Railway Troops Depot at Purfleet Essex on March 8th. And transferred to 8th Battalion Canadian Railway Troops on the 21st. They entrained at Purfleet for Southampton, and embarked onboard the Archimedes and the Hunslett on April 17th for France. Disembarking at Le Havre, and spent the war at railway construction work. The 218th were disbanded by General Order 60d of April 15th 1918. The 8th Battalion CRT were disbanded by General Order 196, of November 1st 1920.

FACES OF WAR

<http://ww1.canada.com/faces-of-war/peace-river-jim-and-two-gun-cohen-were-an-unlikely-duo>

The 218th won no prizes for good behaviour. While the men trained and waited to ship out, they caused riots in Calgary and Edmonton. Their battalion mascot, a black bear cub named Teddy, didn't endear them to local authorities either. Once they arrived in England in February 1917, the battalion was quarantined, due to outbreaks of mumps and measles. Cohen, who'd managed to slip to London for a night, was hospitalized longer, with gonorrhoea. Eventually, the Irish Guards were folded into the 8th Battalion of the Canadian Railway Troops. They were sent to Passchendaele to lay rails for lines that delivered supplies, weapons and ammunition to the front and carried wounded back to field hospitals. It was dangerous work, just behind the trenches. They often laboured at night to avoid being seen by the Germans. Still, there were deaths and casualties, as workers encountered mortars and aerial bombs.