

# 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 8th battalion at their formation in March of 1917 and received an honorable discharge in April, 1918.

We don't 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 activities of his battalion can be perused in the 1917 diaries of his battalion. They are handwritten and very time consuming, but are research yet to be done. They can be found at:

[http://data4.collectionscanada.ca/netacgi/nph-brs?s1=+Canadian+Railway&s13=&s12=&l=20&s9=RG9&s7=9-52&Sect1=IMAGE&Sect2=THESOFF&Sect4=AND&Sect5=WARDPEN&Sect6=HITOFF&d=FINDD&p=1&u=http://www.collectionscanada.ca/archivianet/02015202\\_e.html&r=11&f=G](http://data4.collectionscanada.ca/netacgi/nph-brs?s1=+Canadian+Railway&s13=&s12=&l=20&s9=RG9&s7=9-52&Sect1=IMAGE&Sect2=THESOFF&Sect4=AND&Sect5=WARDPEN&Sect6=HITOFF&d=FINDD&p=1&u=http://www.collectionscanada.ca/archivianet/02015202_e.html&r=11&f=G)

The following article excerpts present a historical view of the mission of the railway troops. ([http://www.exporail.org/can\\_rail/Canadian%20Rail\\_no437\\_1993.pdf](http://www.exporail.org/can_rail/Canadian%20Rail_no437_1993.pdf))

*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 specially-constructed light railways now seemed to be a feasible answer. The idea caught on. As early as September 17, 1914 the French government had accepted, with some reservations, British assistance in railway construction, so the company of the Royal Engineers were no longer idle. It would not be long before the Canadians were involved as well.*

*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. On February 2 the Dominion government replied that it would arrange for the recruiting, in Canada, of a force of about 500 men for "railway repair and reconstruction work in Europe during the continuance of the war.*

*In April, 1917 began the battle of Arras (?), and it is here that the Canadian Railway Troops, and, in fact, the Canadians in general, scored one of their greatest triumphs, an event which is still looked on as an important turning point in Canadian history. On Easter Monday, April 9, 1917, against seemingly impossible odds, the Canadians, under Sir Julian Byng, later to be Baron Byng of Vimy and Governor General of Canada, attacked and captured Vimy Ridge, then the strongest German fortress on the Western Front. After all the frustrations and horrendous losses of the Somme campaign, the capture, in a matter of hours, of this strategic position seemed nothing less than a miracle. For several weeks prior to the opening of the attack 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.*



### 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Canadian Railway Troops

#### Background Information

Organized at Purfleet in March 1917 under the command of Lieutenant Cornwall.

Personnel from the 211th and 218th Battalions formed the nucleus.

Arrived in France 20 April 1917.

### 218th Battalion roll - (became 8th Battalion)

Private	West, John	5th Horse	West, Mrs. Emma	Abingdon, Berks, Eng.	Expelled	Edmonton	April 17, 1918
Private	Wheeler, Frederick	Nil	Wheeler, Mrs. Kathleen	6740, 95th St., Edmonton, Alta.	Expelled	Edmonton	June 12, 1918
Private	Whetton, Benjamin	Nil	Whetton, Thomas A.	The Hall Farm, Wharfedale-Treat. Derby, Eng.	Expelled	Edmonton	July 29, 1918
Private	White, David McFarlane	Nil	White, Robert	Newburg, W. Va., U.S.A.	U.S.A.	Edmonton	Feb. 20, 1918
Private	White, William Peter	Nil	White, Mrs. Catherine	Port Saskatchewan, Alta.	U.S.A.	Edmonton	Jan. 20, 1918
Private	Whitesell, John James	Nil	Whitesell, D. A.	Bentley, Alta.	U.S.A.	Edmonton	April 4, 1918
Private	Wiese, Alexander Ernest	Nil	Wiese, Mrs. Julia	Stilet, Alta.	U.S.A.	Edmonton	Apr. 16, 1918