

William Arsenault
by Granddaughter Leona
Russell nee Arsenault
Russell WWI Veteran
Empress of Briain and
Tunisian
July of 1916 and October of 1928



The Story of Pte. William Arsenault, Margaree, Nova Scotia (1890 - 1974)

William Arsenault was my grandfather but, because I was raised by my grandparents, I called him Dad. As a child, it was difficult to communicate with him because he was deaf and a hearing aid was of no use to him due to his head injuries in the war.

Although it was more than five decades ago, I vividly remember him sitting by the wood stove in the kitchen, staring out across the room through his thick coke bottle glasses. He never ventured too far from home because he was unsteady on his feet. He never talked about his experience in World War I, but he would often talk to himself or shake his head, as if to stave off a bad dream. As the years passed, and after he had several heart attacks and strokes, Mom was unable to take care of him on her own, so he spent the last two years of his life in Camp Hill Veterans Memorial Hospital where he passed away in 1974 at the age of 84.

Except for being told he had suffered a head injury in the war, I never knew what actually happened to him overseas. But, three years ago, I had a dream about Dad dressed in his khaki green service uniform, much like the picture that hung in our country home where I grew up. I knew immediately that I must research his war records in order to tell his story. I was so fortunate to receive information from many kind folks - the Canadian Archives, overseas' hospitals and especially the 26th Battalion CEF Forum Study Group via the internet - I am so grateful to everyone for their help in piecing together the story of Private William Arsenault.

It all began on November 8, 1915 when 106th Battalion C.E.F., Nova Scotia Rifles was born, with headquarters in Truro. They started recruiting men from various rifle clubs, but many others joined. Soon the call reached the rough shores of Cape Breton. Men reported for training and surrendered their own dreams, ambitions, hopes and fears

in order to heed the cries for help from over the sea proclaimed by King and Country.

One of these men was my grandfather. It wasn't until I received his war records that I learned he had worked as a fireman in Margaree, prior to serving overseas in the Great War. At age 25, on December 11, 1915, in Sydney, Cape Breton, he enlisted and took his Oath, "to be faithful and bear true Allegiance to His Majesty King George the Fifth "so help me God".

On December 22nd, he was declared medically fit to join the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force and, from Halifax on July 15, 1916, he embarked on the S.S. Empress of Britain, arriving in Liverpool, England on July 25th.

On September 28th, he was transferred from the 106th Battalion Nova Scotia Rifles to the 26th Battalion of New Brunswick. (The 106th never fought as a unit but rather was broken up for reinforcements to other Battalions serving in France and Belgium). Thus, he arrived for duty in France as part of the 2nd Division, 26th Battalion.

The First World War had started in Europe when Germany invaded Belgium to get into France in early August 1914. Britain rushed troops into Belgium through French ports and encountered the German Army at Casteau where the first shots were fired and the first casualties occurred on both sides. The First Battle of Ypres (in Belgium) began in October 1914 as British forces defended Ypres and vicinity from the German lines. There were huge losses of life but no significant changes. The Second Battle of Ypres followed during April and May of 1915, but the Germans drove the British back into the town of Ypres and a stalemate continued.

In July 1917, Britain was determined to break through the front and capture the German submarine bases on the coast of Belgium. This third Battle of Ypres was better known as the Battle of Passchendaele. The heaviest rains in 30 years produced thick mud that clogged up rifles and immobilized tanks. It was so deep that men and horses drowned in it. Because little advance had been made, in October 1917, there was one more drive, but the main objectives were still in German hands and the British were near exhaustion. The Canadian troops were ordered to relieve the other forces and prepare for the capture of the Passchendaele and the German-occupied ridge of Ypres.

In a series of attacks from late October to early November 1917, the Canadians seized Passchendaele but at a terrible cost of many lives. The Battle of Passchendaele was probably the worst of the western struggles.

Many of the missing and unknown had been blown to bits or had drowned in the mud that was the battlefield, and every man who fought on the way to Passchendaele agreed that those battles in Flanders were the most awful, the most bloody, and the most hellish. The heavy rains made one great bog in which every shell crater was a deep pool, filled with slimy water and dead bodies. Trenches filled with water and the soldiers had to stand for hours in water to their knees. They slept in the mud, crawled in the mud, fought in the mud, and drowned in the mud. There was no sign of life; there were no trees, only a few dead stumps. There were no birds, no blades of grass, not even rats. Nature was dead - death was everywhere. The men heard nothing but drumfire, the groaning of wounded comrades, the screaming of fallen horses, the beating of their own hearts. The dead were put to use as steppingstones before slipping out of sight into the mud. For those who survived, they had no escape and nothing left but horrific memories.

Pte. Arsenault's 2nd Canadian Division arrived to the front lines in early November and on November 6, 1917 they were ready to charge the Germans' position at Passchendaele village. At that time, there was no rain falling, a bright full moon shone down, there was a brisk wind and it was cold. The Major General's 2nd Division deployed the 31st Alberta Battalion, the 28th Northwest Battalion the 27th Winnipeg Battalion and Pte Arsenault's 26th New Brunswick Battalion. The advance started and the men of these battalions were falling fast; it was estimated they had lost at least one-third of their men, but each battalion continued to advance, slowly and painfully. Most of the casualties were from shell fire, and more than one in three soldiers in the 26th Battalion were wounded, killed or missing. But Passchendaele, followed by the other three battalions.

It was in this Battle of Passchendaele in early November 1917 that my grandfather received a high explosive wound of skull and right side of the cerebellum, after being in the trenches for one day and one night. He was knocked unconscious and remained that way for a long time after being hit. His wound was excised, the shrapnel was removed, and the area was packed and dressed at the Casualty Clearing Station. On November 11th he was transported and admitted to the No. 9 Lakeside USA General Hospital in Rouen, a city in Northern France on the Seine River, about 70 Miles from Paris. During his stay there, he was in serious condition, with a fracture of the skull, and no memory of what had happened to him. His speech was affected; he had a foul discharge from the nose, suffered headaches and dizziness, and was mentally despondent.

On November 25th, he was evacuated across to England to the Royal London Hospital in Whitechapel where he remained until the following

March. It was a long process and the wound slowly healed, but it was noted that a radiogram showed an irregular shadow probably representing a bone fragment driven into the cerebellum

Remarkably, his condition continued to improve so that he was able to be moved, on March 18th, 1918, to the 16th Canadian General Hospital in Orpington, near London. This large military hospital was built during the war and was funded by the Government of Ontario, Canada. By early 1919, more than 15,000 wounded soldiers had been treated there. There is even a 'Canadian Corner' in the All Saints churchyard where some of the dead soldiers were buried.

On July 27th, my grandfather was transferred yet again to the 5th Canadian General Hospital in Kirkdale, a district in Liverpool, England. He continued to show marked improvement but struggled with headaches, dizziness, and difficulty with vision and balance.

It was a long process, but finally on September 24th, 1918, he embarked for Canada on the steamship RMS Tunisian and arrived in Quebec on his birthday, October 7th. He most likely then traveled by rail to Halifax, Nova Scotia where he was transferred to the Casualty Company of Camphill Veterans Memorial Hospital.

During his stay in Halifax he received eye and dental care. His memory was still impaired and he was dull and slow of speech, with no idea as to what operations had been performed after he had been wounded. His medical report shows that he was - left with a scar in the skull about the size of a 25 cent piece. He was, in fact, left permanently disabled, medically unfit, and he was honourably discharged from the army on February 11th, 1919, at age 28. And so, after more than 25 months of raveling to various hospitals, he was finally sent home to Margaree to try to get back to a normal life.

I dedicate this story to the memory of my grandfather, as well as to the memory of all those brave men and women who endured such great hardship during war times. May they never be forgotten!

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