

GRANDDAUGHTER ON THE SOMME

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This is the story of a man who I am very proud to say was my grandfather. Last summer for a month I had the opportunity and privilege to walk in his footsteps in the Battle of the Somme.

My interest began as a young child of four or five years of age when my grandfather would say to me in his Cockney accent, "Swee'ar', fetch me legs for me" and I would dutifully bring him what he called "his legs": steel rods screwed into the heels of his shoes for support with a leather cuff at the top which would rest just below the back of his knees. When he lifted up his pant legs to put on these leg supports it revealed gaping holes in the calves of his legs. One hole was so large I could see from one side of his calf right through to the other. At that young and inquisitive age I knew somehow I wasn't to ask any questions but that image has stayed with me all these years. After my journey in his footsteps last summer, I now feel I know his story.

My grandfather, Ainger Roger Berry, was a very interesting man. Born March 15, 1879 in London, within the sound of Bow Bells, he was the oldest of seven children. As a Boy Seaman in the Royal Navy in the early 1890s, he certainly had his fair share of adventure travelling the world by sea. But after being "bought out" early for the remainder of his indentured service to the Royal Navy, he decided to venture to Canada arriving in Montreal on the ship, the "Bavarian" in August 1904. Roger, who listed his profession as "Carpenter" on the Ship's List, headed for Manitoba where he found work in Minnedosa. By 1906 however, he was living in Seattle and working in his profession. The main purpose of this journey had been to find a permanent home for the entire family including his aged parents. After a return trip back to England with positive news, my grandfather left Liverpool in May 1910 on the "Virginian", again bound for Canada with the final destination being Victoria, British Columbia. Just two years later in 1912, he and his brothers had built a home large enough for the entire family of nine at 2525 Scott Street close to the corner of what is now Bay and Shelbourne Street.

By late 1914 he had met my grandmother and the following year on June 7, 1915 they were married. A mere ten days later on June 17th, as affirmed on his Attestation Paper, my grandfather enlisted in Vernon as a Private in the 1st Canadian Pioneers Battalion, "A" Company. By now he was 36 years old, which at that time, was considered middle age. It is

evident that my grandmother went to Vernon with him as just two photographs exist – one of them showing a newly married couple with my grandfather in uniform.

After five months of training at Camp Vernon, Roger embarked on November 18, 1915 from Montreal and arrived in Plymouth 11 days later. Before leaving Vernon, however, he removed his cap badge and gave it to my grandmother who wore it on a ribbon around her neck.

In England, after further training at Dibgate Camp, then on Saint Martin's Plain near Folkstone in Kent, my grandfather left for France July 5, 1916. Before leaving England he was promoted to the rank of Acting Lance Corporal.

By the time Roger had been at the front about three months, a very revealing letter appeared in an article in The Victoria Daily Colonist, dated November 23, 1916. He had written this letter to his parents, James and Jessie Berry, and it was probably the last one he wrote while he was in the trenches.

"Well, here we are, still on top, and so far quite safe," he writes. "I never had a bigger punch before. The Germans are leaving the country and have just received notice from us to keep on moving, while we continue to feed them their iron rations nightly. The enemy sends back some, of course, but up to the present gets very few of our boys. We took a few German prisoners the other day and they look pretty downhearted. We have the pleasure of living in their deep and well-made dugouts just now; in fact, I am enjoying the heat of a German's stove. I expect he could do with it himself, but I am afraid he would have a hard time in the attempt to get it back.

I am pleased to say victory is ours all along the line, and the boys are just getting their own back. The enemy doesn't like our new tanks at all, and in general he is fed up with the war. So are we for that matter, but he has simply got to take his medicine, and he certainly will get it."

Roger was the eldest of four brothers, all of whom served their country in various branches of the service. In January 1916, the youngest, Dick, lost an eye and was wounded in the groin. Six months later, on June 3, 1916 Charlie was killed at Ypres. In consoling his mother, Roger continued his letter with compassion using eloquent metaphorical prose.

"I am pleased to hear that brother Dick has arrived home. I found out how brother Charlie died, and I would ask you not to mourn, for death is the inevitable end of us all. Death faces us here at every turn of the road, and yet the boys here meet it sternly and unafraid – bravely. The men here put me in mind of beautiful music. When they leap the trench and charge in the face of death what can one be but proud of such men as

these, and then in the clash of battle one can almost imagine hearing the faint, and then gradually louder, strains of music. So I would ask you not to mourn, for would you have had us different; would you have had us stay at home? Many mothers have lost their sons and will lose them until the end”.

Writing these prophetic words to his mother, it was obvious my grandfather had already prepared himself to accept his own fate.

His military records are not clear as to where he was sent first but after a mention on his medical records of having conjunctivitis October 22th, the next hand written entry is very brief with just one word – “Buried – November 6th 1916”. With some research, I discovered that he had been assigned to the 4th Division whose objective was to take Regina Trench. This was very close to the village of Courcellette, therefore corroborating the statement in his records, “Was buried by shell while running a transit on duty near Courcellette on the Somme.” How long he was buried under a massive pile of debris and mud before being discovered unconscious, I do not know. But having seen enough live film footage of the massive force of exploding shells combined with the suffocating mud, especially in November, I should imagine my grandfather must have been there a considerable length of time. Further details state, “Does not remember anything until he was put on train at Albert and given a hypodermic injection , was sent to Camiers ” (misspelled in his records as “Commieres”). That hospital train took him and hundreds of other badly wounded soldiers to the Casualty Clearing Station at Camiers, south of Boulogne. The abbreviated form, “CCS” was used in his medical records and dated, November 11, 1916. Searing hot metal shrapnel from the exploding shell must have embedded itself in his legs while he was running from one trench to another. Their removal most certainly would have created the gaping holes that I remember seeing as a child. On November 14th, records show he was taken aboard the Hospital Ship, “Stad Antwerpen”, bound for England. Just one day later, November 15th, on his Medical Case Sheet stamped Western General Hospital (Manchester), a Medical Officer, Dr. Rust, wrote his two word diagnosis in very large letters, “Shell Shock” and underneath it the word, --“buried”. These two words were repeated throughout all his medical records.

After being admitted to five different hospitals and convalescent homes in various parts of England over a period of five months, his condition had not improved. At his last hospital, the Canadian Military Hospital in Hastings, a Captain Walton made these observations, “A well built, well-nourished man. Is extremely nervous, cannot keep quiet for a moment. Fine and coarse tremors, difficulty in speaking. Poor memory, suffers from headaches, sleeps badly, no appetite. Heart rate rapid.” One hundred years ago, this was a new disease that was occurring on a massive scale. Thousands of men were suffering the same symptoms but with no known cure.

Finally, after being reviewed by three Medical Boards from January to March 1917, my grandfather was declared unfit for duty and was invalided to Canada for further medical treatment. On April 11, 1917 he was taken aboard the Hospital Ship, "Letitia", at Liverpool and arrived ten days later. Special trains outfitted as hospitals transported the wounded men from Halifax westward. Arriving in Toronto April 24, 1917, he was admitted to Spadina Military Hospital where he was placed in various Units for three weeks. In May, he was moved to Vancouver where he graduated from being a temporary Outpatient to an Outpatient at the Vancouver General Hospital. By June, he had finally arrived back to Victoria as an Outpatient at Esquimalt Military Hospital.

A mere two years had passed since my grandfather had enlisted at Vernon, June 17, 1915 but a lifetime of uncertainty lay before him. Due to the severe effects of Shell Shock, he was never again able to work or hold down a job to support his family.

Being articulate and eloquent, however, he felt it was his duty to advocate for the lowly soldier. An article appeared in The Daily Colonist dated December 6, 1917 soon after he had been discharged from the Army. Titled, "Three Returned Men Support Liberals", it stated that my grandfather, "Mr. A.R. Berry, and two other returning soldiers took the platform at the Princess Theatre in Victoria to speak out against the Borden Administration and Officers of the Canadian Army, Mr. Berry declaring that wounded men on the trans-Atlantic passage were put down in the hold while the upper decks were reserved for a few "autocratic officers". He was obviously referring to his own experience as a wounded soldier on his journey home by Hospital Ship just eight months earlier. Later, in the early 1920s, he rode the rails to Ottawa along with thousands of other veterans to plead their case in the House of Commons for a war pension not only for themselves but for war widows as well. He was a man who was not afraid to speak up in order to improve the lives of others.

For the rest of his life, my grandfather not only suffered from the lingering and debilitating effects of Shell Shock, which no one could understand or cure, but he also suffered the cruel criticisms and false accusations of being a malingerer.

Very recently, while reviewing all these documents, I discovered a significant fact that I had missed in all my previous research. When my grandfather was officially discharged from the Army, November 30, 1917, he was to receive the remainder of his War Service Gratuity amounting to \$339.90. It was to be paid in three separate cheques over three months – a fair amount of money in 1917. For a man with such an uncertain future who had suffered greatly, this would have been a financial boost. When I saw the handwritten instructions on his Pay Sheet with these words, "Send 3rd cheque to Soldiers' Aid Committee, Toronto, Ontario" and knowing his extremely generous nature, I was not astounded. His very hard earned and

deserving cheque would have been sent to the Soldiers' Aid Committee to benefit the lives of other men returning from the horrors of war.

My grandfather died November 2, 1968 just four months short of his 90th birthday and just four days short of that significant date, November 6, 1916 when he was buried alive on the Somme.

Last summer I stood waist deep in a lush green wheat field in the area that was once Regina Trench near the village of Courcelette. I paused to reflect on my grandfather – on all that he would have witnessed and experienced and, on the man he was: newly married, nearly forty yet willing to volunteer and sacrifice it all.

I honour him for his courage, determination and loyalty with immense pride and admiration. His renowned generosity has inspired others and this is the legacy he leaves for all of us.