

Brothers in the Great War New Memories from the Front

A few months before his death some years ago I asked my brother to tell me stories of our family, as he would know things that I, as much the youngest, could not. This is when I first learned of the existence of my father's diary from the first world war. After my brother's death, as papers were sorted and documents unearthed, the diary was discovered, along with some correspondence, and in addition, another diary and letters, those of my father's brother, who died during the battle of St. Eloi in April, 1916.

In transcribing this material I found myself immersed in the lives of these two men at the front, getting to know something of an uncle I had never met, and gaining an enriched sense of my father, who died when I was very young. There was an immediacy, a vivid, obviously personal, connection to their experience like nothing else I have read or heard about this horrific conflict. Reading the work of Tim Cook, in particular the first volume of his in depth study of Canadians in the Great War, *At the Sharp End*, set this account into the wider context.

My uncle, Ralph Egerton Norris Jones, born June, 1877, was formally accepted as Lieutenant in the 27th City of Winnipeg Battalion, 6th Brigade, 2nd Division, BEF (British Expeditionary Forces) in October, 1914. After a training period in Kent, England, he embarked for the front in September, 1915. He was killed near Ypres, on April 6, 1916. My father, Thomas Roy Jones, born August 20, 1879, reached Flanders in January, 1916. He was in the 6th Howitzer Brigade, C.F.A., (Canadian Field Artillery) 2nd Divisional Artillery, promoted from lieutenant by the end of the war, to Major. Like his brother, Roy also enlisted in Winnipeg, although they were born in St. Mary's, Ontario and grew up in Toronto, which is where Roy died in January, 1945. The men were close, the two youngest of six brothers, and Roy was grateful to be able to spend some time with Ralph in the weeks before his death. In fact, Roy writes on March 15th, "... I am backing up Ralph's outfit now, ... as our battery is right behind his part of the line." During the period covered both men were in a small area of the front in Flanders, near the town of Kemmel, not far from Ypres and close to the French border.

One can only speculate as to why these two men, in banking careers, enlisted. They were unmarried, physically fit, and like so many at that time, may have responded to a sense of duty, of loyalty to the British Empire. Perhaps also they were ready for adventure, though being well into their thirties they were certainly not naïve teenagers. We do get a revealing comment from Roy in a letter home when he recalls one of their last moments together a few weeks before Ralph's death. He writes, "Once while we were chatting he said, 'Well Roy, for you and me, this is Canada.' In other words the only place we could possibly be." By this time they had been at the front for some months, enduring all manner of hazard under the grimmest of conditions. Yet conviction of the rightness of what they were doing remained a constant for them.

This is not to say that they were always accepting of their situation. Ralph experienced frustration at times, on one occasion during a dispute with his Major. He writes in his diary, "The first good opportunity offering a transfer for me to another branch of the

service (he sought a way, futilely, to move to the artillery) will find me hot and ready. At 38 a man is too old for a subaltern's meagre privileges." But he immediately goes on to admit, "I am probably somewhat difficult to handle at times."

In a letter to a brother in Toronto Roy writes, "Our Major is becoming a bore, he eats, sleeps and walks gunnery and hates to see us even passably comfortable. All of us are fed up with him."

Both men show appreciation of their surroundings, briefly enjoying the natural world till interrupted by the other grim reality. In mid-March, Roy writes in a letter, "I wish you could see how very springlike everything is now and the variety of birds is extraordinary... some of their notes... quite wonderful and so sweet and musical. Sometimes I have been listening to them when it's interrupted by the sudden arrival of a screeching shell somewhere in our vicinity." In his diary on April 2: "I think the winter is over. The slopes of Mt. Kemmel are covered with wild flowers and the birds are really wonderful. Aeroplanes very active."

Ralph is enthusiastic about the scenery during a route march with his men: "...we reached a point where we halted and had one of the most interesting views a man could wish to have We saw Ypres, as far as St. Julien, and the great stretch of low country north, east and south of these two interesting places.... The day was clear and my only regret was the lack of map and glasses. The smashed tower at Ypres was quite easily seen as the day was wonderfully bright with a last touch of frost in the air."

Letters sent and received, as is probably true of all those at war, are of vital importance to these two men, and constitute a huge amount of the material left behind. An amusing sequence about socks runs through Roy's correspondence. First there is gratitude for five pair, "...nice and long in leg, that's what's needed as they shrink when washed." Months later he writes, "By the way it might be as well to cut down shipments of socks... as I have plenty." Then, "By the way no socks are needed...at present." A week later it's, "I have loads of socks now." Finally a note of desperation arises: "Love to all. Implore them to cease sending socks."

Frequent reference is made to mud, rain, cold and lack of sleep. Near misses are on almost every page. On one occasion Roy writes, "At 9:30 a.m. hear large shell coming. I duck for cover... behind some sand bags The shell land[ed] easily within 15 feet of me and splinters and rock rained about me, one of which fell within 6 inches of my head with a horrible zing. Those who saw it thought I was a goner. The shell hole was 6 feet deep and 12 feet across." Ralph describes moments of horror while out on a wiring party one night. First he falls on the body of a British soldier, then a little later finds he has placed a hand "on a much decayed human face... and the head wobbled." He walks back to the trench, washes his hands and puts on gloves, and resumes supervision of his men.

Collapsed trenches and parapets are an ongoing problem, though Ralph comments wryly after making his way safely along a communication trench with shrapnel flying overhead, "A short man has an advantage without a doubt." For the moment, at least.

Early on, while still training in England, Ralph expresses two concerns, first about the safety of the Ross rifle, “which had burst just in front of the receiver... The man of 28th Battn was firing recruits’ class at Hythe ranges; his hand was not injured as much as the hand of his coach nearby.” He includes a detailed diagram, and states, “It would appear there was a flaw in the steel of the barrel underneath.” Ralph is unaware of the politics behind this Canadian made weapon, staunchly backed by Munitions Minister Sam Hughes despite clear evidence of its serious flaws. Officers who complained about the rifle risked demotion. The other worry, about a shortage of equipment, prompts Ralph to write to his brother, Harry Jones. His diary notes, “Sent Harry a message that 27th Battalion need 20 machine guns, and requested he send cable to...Winnipeg to approach best and well known clubs and Masons as to what they will do towards securing guns.” Canada’s level of preparedness for combat was clearly lacking in some areas.

Ralph becomes aware of shell shock when he meets a Corporal in the battalion of a friend, and asks him for news of this friend. The Corporal replies, as Ralph writes, “ ‘I cannot remember Lovett. My memory is gone as there is something wrong with my head.’ ” Ralph wonders how many similar cases there will be before the war is over. On another occasion he tells a story of heavy bombardment in the trenches, where the only casualty was the officers’ cook. “His kitchen was hit by a whizz-bang and on running out it appears an H.E. (high explosive) fell nearby and blew him back into the kitchen again. Unhurt but lost his nerve completely and seemed almost crazy when being escorted out.”

During a rest period, staying at a farmhouse, Ralph has time for reflection as he observes one of the officers in rolled down boots and a leather jacket sitting at an old table, his face lit by the glow of a huge fireplace. An ancient musket stands in a corner. The scene conjures for Ralph a medieval setting, and he comments, “Even our thoughts are medieval - the killing of Germans.”

News of Ralph’s death goes astray. Roy only learns of the loss of his brother after a week’s delay, from a friend. Ralph had been leading a small detachment of his men to lend support to another battalion under heavy fire when he was hit and killed instantly. In the end his men are ordered back, unable to reach their destination. The area where Ralph’s body lies is under constant heavy bombardment, and although his men retrieve his personal effects, it is never possible to bring him in for a proper burial, which greatly distresses Roy. He mourns the loss of his “best pal” in his diary and letters. He carries on his war till the end, comes home, resumes his career, marries and raises a family.

What do we learn from these new memories? That the human spirit has the capacity to survive, even triumph over horror, suffering and loss. And in keeping with the theme of this conference, we learn that we need to ask our families what documents they might have - in the attic, in the basement or in the garage. It was luck, chance really, that I came upon these precious personal testimonies before they vanished forever.