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"At Rest:" The Life and Death of Private Edward Martin Roberts

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"At Rest:"

The Life and Death of Private Edward Martin Roberts

The Battle of Vimy Ridge, beginning on April 9, 1917, looms large not only in Canadian history, but in the nation's popular memory as well. As many historians, including Tim Cook,



Figure 1: CWGC Headstone of Private Edward Martin Roberts, MPC, London, Ontario

have argued, Vimy is more than a battle.¹ For many Canadians, “Vimy” evokes a uniquely Canadian victory that culminated in the “birth” of the nation. A mythic event in Canadian history, the costs of this victory are memorialized by the Canadian National Vimy Memorial, a monument that has become part of the pantheon of Canadian symbols. What neither the date nor the word “Vimy” typically evoke is London, Ontario. In London's Mount Pleasant Cemetery, however, the date April 9, 1917, is engraved on the

Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) headstone of Private Edward Martin Roberts, an infantryman who fought in the First World War. The date is part of Edward's personal inscription, which reads in its entirety: “At rest. Wounded April 9th, 1917.”² These two deceptively simple sentences allude to some of the major events of Edward's Great War. Not only was Edward present at the momentous Battle of Vimy Ridge, but it was also here that he was wounded. Though this wound is the subject of much of his personnel record, it was not the only medical difficulty Edward faced during his service; he was hospitalized for two additional ailments.³ Additionally, despite dying on February 11, 1920, almost a year and a half after the end of the First World War, Edward was still awarded a war grave, a seeming paradox. Delving

¹ Tim Cook, *Vimy: The Battle and the Legend* (Toronto: Allen Lane Canada, 2017), 4.

² Due to their policy of “equality in commemoration,” one of the only aspects of a CWGC headstone that could be individualized by a soldier's family was the “personal inscription” (“To Commemorate and Remember – Our Story,” Commonwealth War Graves Commission, <https://www.cwgc.org/who-we-are/our-story/>).

³ Library and Archives Canada, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 8330 – 30, Personnel Record of Edward Martin Roberts, <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.redirect?app=pffww&id=610236&lang=eng>, 81.

into Private Edward Martin Roberts's story, then, proves to be a fruitful endeavor as his life and service align with broader historical and historiographical issues.

Edward's life before the Great War simultaneously followed and defied contemporary demographic trends; while some of his prewar experiences would have been similar to those of his fellow soldiers, others would have been somewhat unique. Born on November 27, 1890, Edward Martin Roberts was the sixth child of Thomas and Eliza Roberts of London.⁴ Edward probably grew up in a bustling household; in 1901, when he was eleven years old, the Roberts family had twelve members (Thomas, Eliza, and their ten children).⁵ Although large families are a historical stereotype, Statistics Canada has calculated the average number of people per household in 1901 to be five.⁶ Edward's family, then, was well above the average size. The Roberts were slightly more conventional in their occupations. At the turn of the twentieth century, the majority of the male population in Ontario was employed as farmers and farm labourers.⁷ Edward's father and older brothers, however, were part of the second largest category of workers: wage-earning manual labourers.⁸ The two eldest sons of the Roberts family seem to have taken up their father's trade; they were all listed as machinists on the 1901 census.⁹ The only other employed member of Edward's family was his third oldest brother, Fred, who

⁴ LAC, Personnel Record, 1; Dominion of Canada, Census of 1901, accessed through Ancestry.ca. https://www.ancestry.ca/discoveryuicontent/view/7256826:8826?tid=&pid=&queryId=6fe4679feefddd3833ef297233a5ed6&_phsrc=rwz5&_phstart=successSource; "Private Edward Martin Roberts," Commonwealth War Graves Commission, <https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/find-war-dead/casualty-details/2756177/edward-martin-roberts/>.

⁵ Dominion of Canada, 1901.

⁶ Statistics Canada, "The Shift to Smaller Households over the Past Century," <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2015008-eng.htm>. For more about the demographics of Canada in 1901, see Peter Baskerville and Eric W. Sager, *Household Counts: Canadian Households and Families in 1901* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

⁷ Peter Gossage and Danielle Gauvreau, "Canadian Fertility in 1901: A Bird's-Eye View," in *Household Counts: Canadian Households and Families in 1901*, ed. Peter Baskerville and Eric W. Sager (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 69.

⁸ Dominion of Canada, 1901; Gossage and Gauvreau, "Canadian Fertility in 1901," 69.

⁹ Dominion of Canada, 1901.

apparently worked as a “helper.”¹⁰ The Roberts’s size and occupations are just two examples of how Edward’s childhood both followed and defied contemporary trends, a pattern that continued into young adulthood.

While Edward’s young adulthood reflected some contemporary trends, he also diverged from the average Canadian soldier. At the time of his enlistment, Edward was described as



Figure 2: Artistic Depiction of Private Edward Martin Roberts

having a dark complexion, grey eyes, and brown hair.¹¹ He also had a tattoo on each of his forearms; an anchor adorned his right forearm while the other was graced with a woman’s face.¹² Although a photograph of Edward remains elusive, “The 21st Battalion CEF” website provides an artistic depiction of Edward, apparently supplied by a family member (see fig. 2).¹³ At five foot, three (and a half) inches, Edward was much shorter

than the average Canadian soldier in the First World War (who stood at five foot, seven inches).¹⁴ Enlisting at twenty-four years old, Edward would have mostly been among men close to his age as 70 percent of the CEF were twenty-one to thirty years old at enlistment.¹⁵ Although Edward was part of the largest age demographic of Canadian soldiers, he was also part of the minority that were married with children when they enlisted.¹⁶ Edward Roberts married Kathleen Gatecliffe on October 4, 1911.¹⁷ Settling on Broughdale Avenue in

¹⁰ Dominion of Canada, 1901

¹¹ LAC, Personnel Record, 2.

¹² LAC, Personnel Record, 2.

¹³ Al Llyod, “The 21st Battalion CEF: Edward Martin Roberts,” http://21stbattalion.ca/tributeos/roberts_em.html; “That image was supplied to me by a family member, Ed Roberts” – Al Llyod, email correspondence.

¹⁴ LAC, Personnel Record, 2; Tim Cook, *The Secret History of Soldiers: How Canadians Survived the Great War* (Toronto, Ontario Canada: Allen Lane, 2018), 13. The specificity of this height may reflect the stringent medical exams that initially required recruits’ height for the infantry to be over five foot three (Cook, *At the Sharp End*, 24).

¹⁵ LAC, Personnel Record, 2; Cook, *The Secret History of Soldiers*, 13.

¹⁶ Cynthia Comacchio, “‘Scars upon My Heart:’ Arnold and Clarence Westcott, Brothers and Soldiers,” in *Portraits of Battle: Courage, Grief, and Strength in Canada’s Great War*, ed. Peter Farrugia and Evan J. Habkirk (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2021), 226.

¹⁷ County of Middlesex, “Marriages,” 1911, <https://www.ancestry.ca/discoveryui->

Broughdale, Ontario, Edward and Kathleen went on to have four children: three daughters before Edward went overseas (Evalyn, Marjorie, and Francis) and a son who was born after Edward's death (who was also named Edward).¹⁸ To support his family, Edward worked as a painter for "Carrage."¹⁹ It was this life that Edward left behind when he enlisted to serve as part of the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force.

Before getting into Edward's experiences during the Great War, a brief aside about the surviving documents regarding his early life is useful. There are two ostensible discrepancies in the documents concerning Edward's early life that underscore the importance of triangulating historical sources. Within his service files, there is a discrepancy regarding Edward's birthplace. On his attestation papers, Edward reported that he was born in London, Ontario.²⁰ Later in his files, however, his birthplace is recorded as London, Middlesex, England.²¹ Since this discrepant birthplace was written on a medical document, it is possible that the person filling out the form simply misheard or misunderstood Edward, mistaking London, Ontario, for London, England. The 1901 Census of Canada confirms that Edward was, in fact, born in London, Ontario.²² The other discrepancy concerns Edward's religious beliefs. On his attestation papers, Edward

content/view/3490869:7921?tid=&pid=&queryId=3804742baeea72d4f60e2c429d716a18&_phsrc=rwz13&_phstart=successSource; County of Middlesex, "The Marriage Act," 1911, https://www.ancestry.ca/discoveryui-content/view/3510188:7921?tid=&pid=&queryId=3804742baeea72d4f60e2c429d716a18&_phsrc=rwz14&_phstart=successSource.

¹⁸ Dominion of Canada, Census of 1921, accessed through Ancestry.ca.

https://www.ancestry.ca/discoveryui-content/view/1097542:8991?tid=&pid=&queryId=71570c603e5aaf182421477f4dd16279&_phsrc=rwz12&_phstart=successSource.

Kathleen's first name was actually Mary; she is referred to as Kathleen on her marriage papers but in Edward's service file and on subsequent censuses, she is recorded as "Mary K. Roberts."

¹⁹ Dominion of Canada, Census of 1911, accessed through Ancestry.ca.

https://www.ancestry.ca/discoveryui-content/view/5355108:8947?tid=&pid=&queryId=bfaa93ba201a6408a77e53253d6d9392&_phsrc=rwz8&_phstart=successSource;

This could be a misspelling of "carriage." If so, it might be possible that Edward worked for John Campbell's Carriage Factory as a painter.

²⁰ LAC, Personnel Record, 1.

²¹ LAC, Personnel Record, 135.

²² Dominion of Canada, 1901.

identified his religion as Wesleyan.²³ Later in his files, on a patient diet chart, Edward's religion is recorded as Methodist.²⁴ This, perhaps, is not surprising as the Wesleyan Church is part of the Methodist denomination.²⁵ On the 1901 census, however, the Roberts family indicated that they were Baptist.²⁶ What might explain this seeming religious discrepancy is Edward's wife, who was herself a Methodist.²⁷ Another way to interpret Edward's denominational affiliation is to view churches as places of social connections. As Jonathan Vance has argued, the community a church provided was often more important than denominational or doctrinal differences.²⁸ Despite this ostensible religious discrepancy, it is interesting that Edward identified a religious denomination on his attestation papers but does not have a cross on his headstone. The CWGC's default religious emblem was a cross; a family had to submit a request in order to receive a headstone without a religious symbol.²⁹ This means that Edward's family requested for his headstone to be created without the cross. The CWGC explains on their website while "many headstones have no religious symbol by request," the reasoning behind each decision was "never recorded" and therefore can "only be speculated upon."³⁰ Perhaps after all he had seen during his service in the Great War, Edward abandoned his faith. These two discrepancies illustrate how the life and service of Edward connect not only to larger historical issues, but historiographical ones as well.

²³ LAC, Personnel Record, 2.

²⁴ LAC, Personnel Record, 61.

²⁵ "Methodist Churches," *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://www-oxfordreference-com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/display/10.1093/acref/9780199659623.001.0001/acref-9780199659623-e-3802>.

²⁶ Dominion of Canada, 1901.

²⁷ County of Middlesex, "Marriages," 1911.

²⁸ Jonathan F. Vance, "'When Told to Advance, They Advanced: War Culture and the CEF,'" in *Portraits of Battle: Courage, Grief, and Strength in Canada's Great War*, edited by Peter Farrugia and Evan J. Habkirk (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2021), 52.

²⁹ "To Commemorate and Remember – Our Story." Commonwealth War Graves Commission. <https://www.cwgc.org/who-we-are/our-story/>.

³⁰ "To Commemorate and Remember – Our Story." Commonwealth War Graves Commission. <https://www.cwgc.org/who-we-are/our-story/>.

Edward's Great War was defined by battalion transfers, irregularities, and

hospitalizations. Having previously served with the 7th

Regiment for five years, on August 18, 1915, Edward

enlisted in London, Ontario as part of the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force (see fig. 3).³¹ As Sir Sam

Hughes, the Canadian Minister of Militia and Defence,

wanted Canadian soldiers fully trained before they headed

to England, it was often many months after a soldier's

enlistment before they were deemed "ready" for service.³²

This was not the case for Edward. Originally assigned to

the 34th Battalion, he arrived in England on the *S.S. California* on November 1, 1915, only two and a half months after his enlistment.³³ After arriving in England, Canadian troops, who were

considered to be "raw recruits," were subjected to more training.³⁴ Since they had already been

trained back home, Canadian soldiers were often bored during this liminal training period.³⁵ To

pass the time, some Canadian soldiers took up cycling.³⁶ Edward must have been one of these

men as three weeks into his training, on November 22, he was admitted to the Cedars Hospital in

Wells due to a bicycle accident.³⁷ Being diagnosed with a concussion and receiving three stitches

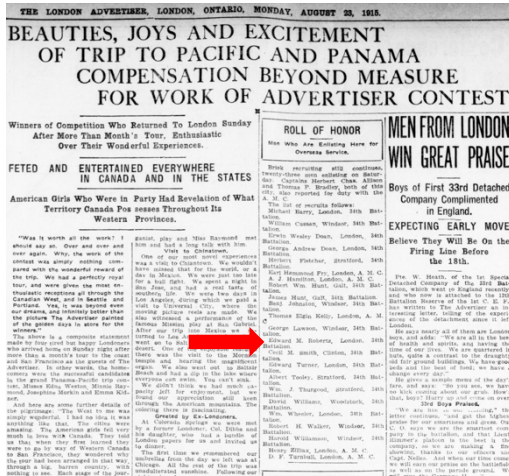


Figure 3: Honouring Edward in The London Advertiser after his enlistment (emphasis added)

³¹ LAC, Personnel Record, 1. Though I have found little regarding Edward's involvement with the 7th Regiment, this previous militia experience is interesting as it reflects militia men's enthusiasm to participate in the war effort (even if it was a result of intense social pressure). As Tim Cook notes, these militia men had been "practising at war for years, even if it had been in short summer camps, [...] and it took incredible willpower to resist [...] the real thing" (*At the Sharp End*, 27).

³² Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1993), 82.

³³ LAC, Personnel Record, 81.

³⁴ Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 90.

³⁵ Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 90.

³⁶ Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 90.

³⁷ LAC, Personnel Record, 81.

for the wound over his eyebrow, Edward was kept in bed for a few days before being released from the hospital on December 10, 1915.³⁸ He was then granted sick leave until December 14, 1915.³⁹ The next notable incident in Edward's service files occurred on January 6, 1916, when he went absent without leave. Missing from 12:01 p.m. to 11:45 p.m., he was awarded six days of barrack confinement and forfeited one day of pay.⁴⁰ Shortly after this punishment, on February 3, 1916, Edward was transferred to the 12th Reserve Battalion in Shorncliffe.⁴¹

Just over a month after being transferred, Edward was hospitalized again. Admitted to a Barrack Hospital in Shorncliffe, this time he was treated for a "defective left grand toe," which eventually had its nail removed.⁴² This toe plagued Edward until June, when he was admitted to the Brigade Hospital for "poisoned feet."⁴³ Also known as trench foot, "poisoned feet" was the result of living in a perpetually cold and damp environment.⁴⁴ Many of the trenches had poor drainage meaning that rainwater had a tendency to pool where the soldiers lived and fought.⁴⁵ Combined with the cold, these wet, muddy conditions caused soldiers to develop a painful type of frostbite that cracked skin, creating lesions that often oozed blood and pus.⁴⁶ As most of the Western Front was originally farmers' fields, the soil was rich in fecal matter.⁴⁷ While good for crops, this soil was a medical nightmare because it exponentially increased the risk and severity of infection.⁴⁸ The cracked skin caused by trench foot, therefore, was problematic as this

³⁸ LAC, Personnel Record, 61.

³⁹ LAC, Personnel Record, 81.

⁴⁰ LAC, Personnel Record, 81.

⁴¹ LAC, Personnel Record, 81.

⁴² LAC, Personnel Record, 81, 13, 25.

⁴³ LAC, Personnel Record, 82.

⁴⁴ Bill Rawling, *Death their Enemy: Canadian Medical Practitioners and War* (Québec: AGMV Marquis, 2001), 86.

⁴⁵ Tim Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers: Medical Care and the Struggle for Survival in the Great War* (Canada: Allen Lane, 2022), 72. Augmenting this drainage problem was the fact that the war overlapped with some of France's abnormally wet winters (Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers*, 72).

⁴⁶ Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers*, 72-73.

⁴⁷ Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers*, 136.

⁴⁸ Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers*, 136.

contaminated soil sometimes got into the wounds; the more serious cases had the potential to become gangrenous.⁴⁹ Though the Canadians missed the first winter in the trenches, two divisions of Canadian soldiers, of which Edward was a part, suffered through the 1915-1916 winter.⁵⁰ After observing the horrible consequences of trench foot, high command charged the Canadian Medical Corps with preventing this ghastly ailment.⁵¹ The most important preventative measure to combat trench foot was whale oil.⁵² Enforced by officers and medical personnel alike, whale oil was slathered on soldiers' feet in an attempt to keep them dry; such precautions greatly reduced incidences of trench foot by 1916.⁵³ Although trench foot could be quite serious, it seems like Edward was able to escape relatively unscathed. One month after being discharged from the hospital, on August 20, 1916, Edward was transferred to the 75th Battalion, with whom he served until October 7, 1916.⁵⁴ He was then transferred to the 21st Battalion of the Canadian Infantry, the unit that he would serve with in the Battle of Vimy Ridge.

Having arrived in the October of 1916, Edward probably participated in various trench raids and specialized training with the 21st Battalion in the months preceding Vimy Ridge.⁵⁵ One notable trench raid occurred in Calonne on January 17, 1917, where the battalion captured numerous prisoners, caused tremendous damage to the enemy line, and inflicted heavy casualties

⁴⁹ Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers*, 73.

⁵⁰ Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers*, 72.

⁵¹ Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers*, 73. Medical personnel were also concerned with the outbreak of contagious disease, which had historically ruined armies (Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers*, 3). The fact that contagious diseases were largely avoided is a testament to advances in preventative medical care (Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers*, 3; Harrison, *The Medical War*, online resource).

⁵² Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers*, 73.

⁵³ Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers*, 73.

⁵⁴ LAC, Personnel Record, 82.

⁵⁵ Library and Archives Canada, RG9-III-D-3, Volume number: 4930, War Diary of the 21st Battalion, May 15, 1915-January 1, 1917, <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.redirect?app=fonandcol&id=1883236&lang=eng>.

upon the enemy.⁵⁶ Then, after spending a few days in specialized training, Edward, with the 21st Battalion, moved into position for the Battle of Vimy Ridge at 4:00 a.m. on April 9, 1917.⁵⁷ The 21st Battalion, fighting as part of the 2nd Division, was supposedly given some of the heaviest of the fighting, with 2nd Division's designated sector containing the formidable obstacles of les Tilleuls, Thélus, Farbus, wooded areas, and Hill 135 (see fig. 4).⁵⁸ Though all of the battalion's

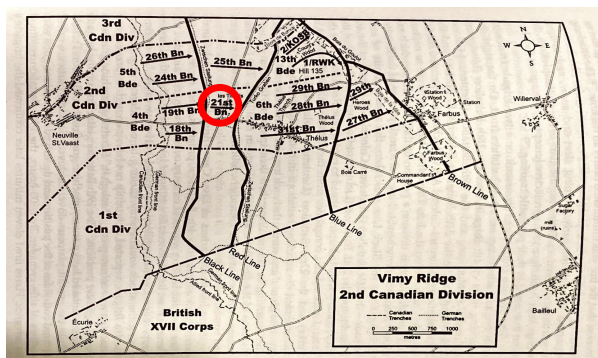


Figure 4: The 21st Battalion at Vimy Ridge (emphasis added)

objectives were captured, Edward sustained a “gunshot wound” from a shell to his left forearm.⁵⁹ According to their war diary, the 21st Battalion suffered four casualties in the lead up to “Zero” hour (5:30 a.m.).⁶⁰ While it is possible that Edward was one of those wounded, it is more likely that he

was part of the 215 casualties that the battalion suffered during the battle on April 9.⁶¹ Battalions in the CEF typically had a strength of about 1000 men.⁶² Assuming that the 21st Battalion was at full strength before the battle, the number of casualties the battalion suffered at Vimy would represent almost 25 percent of their total fighting force. Heavy casualties were not unique to the 21st Battalion, however, as April 9, 1917, was the single bloodiest day in Canadian military

⁵⁶ LAC, War Diary of the 21st Battalion, vol. 4930, 418. For more on this “Million-Dollar Scrap,” see Cook, *Shock Troops*, 57-61.

⁵⁷ Library and Archives Canada, RG9-III-D-3, Volume number: 4931, War Diary of the 21st Battalion, February 2, 1917-March 31, 1918, <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.redirect?app=fonandcol&id=1883237&lang=eng>, 34-35.

⁵⁸ David Campbell, “The 2nd Canadian Division: A ‘Most Spectacular Battle,’” in *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, ed. Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci, and Mike Bechthold (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), 171.

⁵⁹ LAC, War Diary of the 21st Battalion, vol. 4931, 37; LAC, Personnel Record, 82, 140. In the words of Tim Cook, Vimy was a “shell-driven battle” (*Lifesavers and Body Snatchers*, 228), so it is not very surprising that Edward was wounded by one of the many shells whizzing through the air. For more about the artillery used at Vimy Ridge, see William F. Stewart, “From Bombs, Bullets, and Bayonets: The Transformation of Canadian Infantry Firepower at Vimy Ridge.”

⁶⁰ LAC, War Diary of the 21st Battalion, vol. 4931, 36.

⁶¹ LAC, War Diary of the 21st Battalion, vol. 4931, 38.

⁶² Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1914-1916* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2007), 40.

history.⁶³ Vimy Ridge was captured but for many Canadians, including Edward, the war was over. Edward was one of the "lucky" ones, however, as his wound provided an escape from the horror of the Western Front. Though the 21st Battalion would continue to fight throughout the rest of the war, Edward was on his way back to "Blighty."⁶⁴

Just as the soldiers trained extensively for the Battle of Vimy Ridge, the medical services were also prepared for the mass casualties that the battle would produce. For example, at Vimy, casualty evacuation was fairly efficient and effective despite the vast numbers of wounded because of the innovative hand-pushed trucks and horse-pulled trams that ran on narrow-gauge rails.⁶⁵ That being said, to avoid overloading these systems and the diligent stretcher bearers, the wounded who could walk often had to make their own way to the rear.⁶⁶ It is unclear what method of evacuation Edward would have used. Regardless, he eventually made it to the No. 3 Canadian General Hospital in Boulogne, renowned for being one of the best medical units in France.⁶⁷ Edward was subsequently transferred to a variety of hospitals; one of his longest stays was at the Manor War Hospital in Epsom, with Edward being admitted from August 31, 1917, to February 8, 1918. Interestingly, on the first anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, from April 9-12, 1918, Edward once again was absent without leave.⁶⁸ This strange coincidence is only noted on a separation allowance document where he was docked pay for four days.⁶⁹ As far as I can tell, Edward was still hospitalized in Buxton at this time.⁷⁰ Perhaps he took to the streets of

⁶³ Cook, *Vimy*, 113.

⁶⁴ This is the soldiers' slang word for England. It was also used to refer to a wound that was bad enough to be evacuated to England and given some respite from the trenches, but not so bad as to be life threatening (Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers*, 133).

⁶⁵ Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers*, 234.

⁶⁶ Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers*, 231.

⁶⁷ LAC, Personnel Record, 82; Andrew Beckett and Edward J. Harvey, "No. 3 Canadian General Hospital (McGill) in the Great War: Service and Sacrifice," *Canadian Journal of Surgery* 61, no. 1 (2018): 8.

⁶⁸ LAC, Personnel Record, 99.

⁶⁹ LAC, Personnel Record, 99.

⁷⁰ LAC, Personnel Record, 140.

Buxton to commemorate the anniversary of Vimy. Here, it would be invaluable to have some glimpse into the inner workings of Edward's mind but, instead, we are left to our theories. Edward's wound can be connected to the role and development of the medical services at Vimy. Though it is a perspective not often studied, the medical services at Vimy were essential in supporting victory "at the sharp end," providing preventative and life-saving care before, during, and after the battle.⁷¹ The medical services, however, were not yet perfected; they still experienced a slight learning curve at Vimy. What Vimy Ridge demonstrated, as Heather Moran concludes in "The Canadian Army Medical Corps at Vimy Ridge," was the "systematic willingness to grow, adapt, and improve the medical service based on battle experience and medical advancement."⁷²

Edward's wound can be connected to the development of the medical services in the

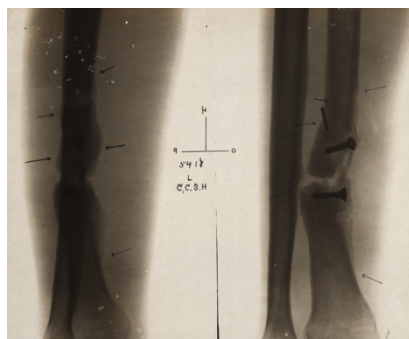


Figure 5: X-ray of Edward's Left Forearm

broader context of the First World War as well. Included in his personnel record is an X-ray of his left forearm (see fig. 5). Taken February 14, 1918, this X-ray shows two screws, the result of an operation at the Manor War Hospital, and remaining shrapnel in the wound.⁷³ Eventually, Edward would undergo another operation to remove these screws and some

dead bone.⁷⁴ Although X-rays were discovered in the late nineteenth century, the First World War marked the first widespread use of this relatively new technology.⁷⁵ X-rays were particularly useful in cases like Edward's where there was still shrapnel in the wound. Being able

⁷¹ Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers*, 237.

⁷² Heather Moran, "The Canadian Army Medical Corps at Vimy Ridge," in *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, ed. Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci, and Mike Bechthold (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), 146.

⁷³ LAC, Personnel Record, 140.

⁷⁴ LAC, Personnel Record, 140.

⁷⁵ Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers*, 147.

to see inside the body enabled medical personnel to ensure that all debris was extracted from the wound, a crucial step in preventing deadly infections.⁷⁶ The X-ray, along with other developments in medical technology and treatment, enhanced the medical corps' lifesaving work. If a wounded soldier was able to be cared for by a medical practitioner, they had a 90 percent chance of surviving their injury.⁷⁷ Unfortunately, Edward was part of the 10 percent who would not survive his hospital experience.

After his numerous transfers to various hospitals overseas, Edward was eventually sent

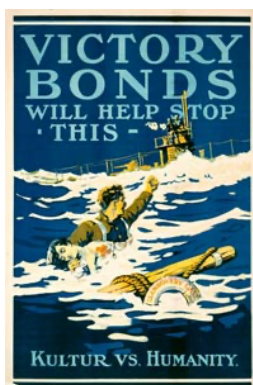


Figure 6: A Canadian Victory Bonds Poster that Condemns the Sinking of the *Llandoverly Castle*

back to Canada. Travelling on the *HMHS Llandoverly Castle* in the June of 1918, Edward was a passenger on the ship's second last voyage.⁷⁸ Edward landed in Halifax on June 17, 1918.⁷⁹ Just ten days later, during the *Llandoverly Castle*'s return journey, it was sunk by a German U-boat off the coast of Ireland, sparking much outrage among Canadians (see fig. 6 for a propaganda poster published in the aftermath of the sinking).⁸⁰ After another bout of hospital transfers, in February 1919, Edward was finally admitted to the Toronto Dominion Orthopaedic Hospital, the place where

he would spend his final year.⁸¹ During his stay, Edward eventually contracted "all varieties of moist rales scattered universally over [his] chest anteriorly," signaling the pneumonia complicating influenza that would be the cause of his death.⁸² A Board of Officers assembled to investigate the "circumstances surrounding the death" of Edward and confirmed the hospital's

⁷⁶ Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers*, 147.

⁷⁷ Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers*, 7.

⁷⁸ LAC, Personnel Record, 21, 82.

⁷⁹ LAC, Personnel Record, 21.

⁸⁰ *Canadian War Museum*. "HMHS *Llandoverly Castle*."

https://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/navy/objects_photos_search-e.aspx@section=4-A&id=67&page=2.html.

⁸¹ LAC, Personnel Record, 21, 131.

⁸² LAC, Personnel Record, 121, 131.



Figure 7: Cover of the Dominion Orthopaedic Hospital's Illustrated Souvenir

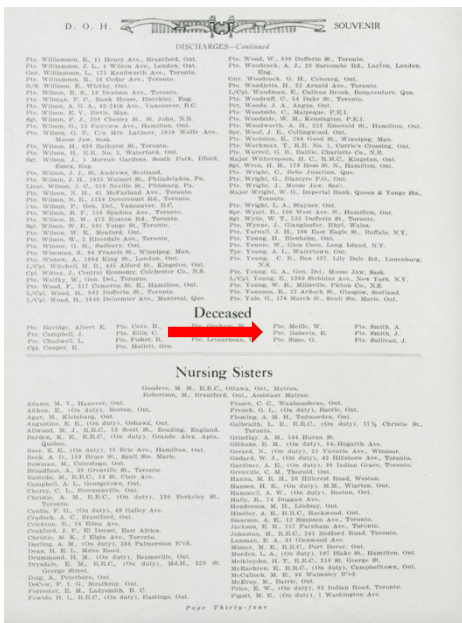


Figure 8: Page with Edward's name (emphasis added)

verdict on his cause of death.⁸³ In 1920, shortly after Edward's death, the Dominion Orthopaedic Hospital released an illustrated souvenir book. Under the small category honouring the "deceased," Private Edward Roberts's name can be found (see fig. 7 and 8). Edward was finally "at rest."

There is still the matter of Edward's CWGC headstone to consider, however. Buried in Mount Pleasant Cemetery in his hometown of London, Ontario, Edward has two headstones: one is civilian and the other is from the CWGC.

Although Edward technically died after the war ended, the CWGC (or Imperial War Graves Commission as it was then known) aligned their interpretation of the war's end date with the King's declaration of the termination of the war, August 31, 1921.⁸⁴ This meant that Edward was eligible for a war grave, even though his death date was after the Armistice and his family had already buried him. Dying within the dates of the war did not guarantee that a person would receive a war grave; the CWGC typically required that the person's death be a result of their war service. However, this policy extends

beyond just battles, including such events as accidents, disease contracted during service, and disease aggravated by

⁸³ LAC, Personnel Record, 131.

⁸⁴ "The Last Casualties of the First World War." Commonwealth War Graves Commission. <https://www.cwgc.org/our-work/blog/the-last-casualties-of-the-first-world-war/#:~:text=As%20the%20Imperial%20War%20Graves,the%20remit%20of%20the%20Commission.>

active service.⁸⁵ Based on these policies, then, it makes sense why Edward was awarded a CWGC headstone as he contracted his disease while hospitalized for a wound from his service.

Although Edward's life connects to many broader historical and historiographical trends, such as contemporary demographics, source uncertainty, Vimy Ridge, and medical developments during the First World War, he is not just an abstract historical object for study. He was a living, breathing human, the subject of his own story. Biographies, like this one, remind us that history happened to people. Hopefully, as scholars continue to "go over the ground" of the First World War again, more stories like Edward's can be brought out of historical obscurity. Doing so will not only enliven academia, but also encourage the public to engage with the past in a critical and productive manner. Now, at the conclusion of my paper, I just hope that Edward can remain "at rest" with my interpretation of his life and service.

⁸⁵ "Commemorations Policy." Commonwealth War Graves Commission. https://www.cwgc.org/media/0awj5vti/policy-eligibility-criteria-for-commemoration_march21.pdf, 5.

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