

“Far From Home”

A Study of The Great War Canadians Commemorated in the United Kingdom.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission files list 3885 World War One Canadian men and women buried or commemorated at eight hundred and thirty-six different locations across the United Kingdom. However, this does not include Canadians who fought within a British Regiment or Unit. Often, only a single soldier was buried in a churchyard or cemetery, some of which are in remote locations or are now disused. Although the distinctive CWGC headstone can be seen throughout the United Kingdom, many Canadians were buried in private graves, often in a family plot with an unique memorial, but no longer tended by family members.

A high proportion of these private graves have not been maintained for years. They are often neglected and overgrown with vegetation, with memorial stones broken or fallen over. One prime example is that of the only Great War Canadian buried at St Margarets Municipal Cemetery, Rochester, Kent. Ninety years on, the grave was only discovered by us after cutting away dense undergrowth to find that a fully grown tree had taken root in its centre.



Sapper Ernest Stigant – Serial No: 505026 from Winnipeg, died from wounds he received at Vimy Ridge and was laid to rest in a family grave in January 1918. His father William died in 1888 aged 59 whilst his mother Mary Ann Elizabeth Stigant died two years before her youngest son. Ernest was actually born in nearby Chatham, which would explain why he is buried in this Cemetery. We can only assume that now no family members remain to care for his grave.



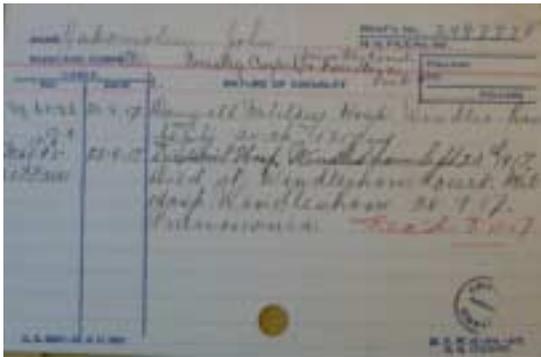
As the centennial of the outbreak of WW1 approaches, it is vital that *all* existing Canadian graves across Great Britain are recorded for posterity. We are fully aware of the Maple Leaf Legacy Project and other similar sites, that seek to photograph every war grave across the world.

When Canada swiftly followed Great Britain and declared war on Germany in August 1914, it had no regular army. She relied on a three thousand strong militia force which trained for just sixteen days per annum. The call to arms by General Sam Hughes, saw thirty-three thousand volunteers flocking to recruitment centres within a matter of days. By the end of the War, almost one million volunteers and conscripts had served in the Canadian Forces. Of these around sixty-thousand died during or after The Great War. The fallen servicemen and women were drawn from extraordinarily diverse ethnic and religious origins. However, the five years of conflict unified them as ‘Canadians’.

Our project is dedicated to locating the 3885 memorials in the UK contained on the CWGC list. The work has been divided into Counties, or groups of Counties, depending on the number of memorials in each. In addition to personally visiting each grave, the pictures include our distinct signature of a Canadian flag and British Legion memorial cross as well as recording the personal inscriptions or tributes engraved on the headstones. To date, we have already photographed in excess of two thousand graves and memorials. Furthermore, a personal profile for each person is compiled, that requires a great deal of research on both sides of the Atlantic. These profiles include the cause and place of death, along with the UK civil death certificate number. A large number of the Canadians died in circumstances not directly related to the battlefield when illness, accident and suicide claimed them. However, much of the information is often inaccurate or missing, so at times it is a daunting task to try to do justice to every soldier equally.

During our research, we uncovered a very rare phenomenon which involves Private James George Burns – serial no: 264336 - who died on 17th December 1916. He was buried in Bear Road Cemetery, Brighton, Sussex three days later. When we were unable to find his Death Certificate reference in the civil registers for the region, we wrote to the Cemetery Registrar and were amazed to find that this man was buried without a Death Certificate being issued. Some death registration problems are solved by determining whether the Christian and surnames were transposed. Several of the soldiers included in this study were found to have their names miss-spelled when their deaths were registered. For example, Private Alfred Frederick Puterbaugh – serial no: 53378 - was recorded as Albert Pieterbough in the local register and then transcribed as Peeterbaugh nationally. Bearing in mind the huge variety of Canadian and local dialects spoken by the troops, it is not surprising that some names were recorded incorrectly into the registers. Also for many reasons, the place of a death and burial were not always in close proximity to each other, compounding the traceability problem.

Each soldier has a personal story to tell. After completing basic training in Canada, some embarked for England but then sadly succumbed within days or weeks to one of the various fatal diseases that today are curable. The file for Private John Jakomolin – serial no: 2497978 – tells us he was a member of the Cree Nation and enlisted into the Canadian Forestry Corps as part of the “Indian Draft” in July 1917. He embarked from Halifax, Nova Scotia on 5th September 1917 and arrived at Liverpool on 15th September. Whilst his Unit was encamped at the Regimental base in Sunningdale, Surrey, he died of pneumonia just five days later, presumably after enduring a miserable Atlantic crossing.



Private John Jakomolin died at Windlesham Court Military Hospital and is buried at Englefield Green Surrey. Thirty-one other Great War Canadians, the majority from the Canadian Forestry Corps, keep him company.



Against all the odds, other Canadians overcame obstacles from their early lives to become successful military officers. Our research discovered that Edward William Frank Hopgood was orphaned at ten days old. His 18



The memorial of Lt Hopgood who was killed in an aeroplane accident on 14th October 1918 at Throwley, Kent

year old mother Minnie Hopgood a domestic servant, was living at The Union Workhouse when she died of puerperal septicaemia and acute peritonitis after giving birth to her son. However, he was fostered out and by the age of four was attending school as a pauper scholar. At age just 15, he emigrated to Canada listing his occupation as plumber and whitesmith. After volunteering into the Canadian Infantry four years later, he became a Lieutenant attached to the 188th Light Training Squadron of the Royal Air Force. Based at the small country hamlet of Throwley deep in the heart of the Kent countryside, this Unit trained pilots for night flying skills specifically for the defence of London.

As part of our study, each county volume contains a statistical analysis page detailing six sets of information. These include whether they were married or single, their regiment, country of birth, their religion, age at death and cause of death. Some of the figures are quite surprising and show

unexpected results. For instance, the instances of death through battlefield wounds was quite low compared to those for serious illness. As expected, the influenza pandemic that peaked in 1918 wreaked havoc amongst the troops. But even in the earlier years of war, meningitis, tuberculosis, pneumonia and measles claimed their fair share of casualties, with a dramatic number of deaths through accidents or suicide.

A shortage of land has already resulted in the removal of many older graves. It is highly probable that many more will eventually disappear altogether, in response to the demand across the United Kingdom to provide more land for open spaces or housing projects. From 1867, the town of Gillingham in Kent buried its war dead in the cemetery next to the church of St Mary Magdelene, Grange Road. In 1973, the site was largely cleared of memorials to provide a community green space for the local population. The War Grave memorials for five sailors and fourteen soldiers, but not the remains, were relocated to the Woodlands Road Cemetery. One of these was Canadian William Frederick Ridley, who served with the 4th Battalion Central Ontario Regiment and died of his wounds in November 1915.



Above: The former Grange Road Cemetery, Gillingham, Kent which is now an open green space for the community.

Right: The headstone for Private Ridley
Below: The memorial stone in the nearby Woodlands Road cemetery where the headstones were relocated.





Right: Private Ridley in uniform and the original wooden grave marker at Grange Road Cemetery, Gillingham, Kent.

(Pictures courtesy of Ted Ridley, Grandson, Ontario, Canada)

As a high percentage of 'our' Canadians were British born, we realise that our work will be of great interest on both sides of the Atlantic and internationally for relatives who may have genealogical links to these soldiers. For this reason, as each county is completed, we are offering our research on a series of DVD's that contain all the information we have gathered. These are available online at a modest cost that represents only a small contribution towards our project. As many counties will involve a great deal of travel and accommodation to far-flung and remote areas of the British Isles, some volumes will not be available for a few more years. Importantly, we are using the *original pre-1974 boundaries*. After that date, the counties in Britain were re-aligned, names were changed, they decreased in number but increased in size, but it is vital that locations may be easily identified as per the original CWGC file. However, our site contains an index of all the soldiers in the file and the county in which they are buried or commemorated. We are happy to provide help to anyone who contacts us if we are able.

As we visit each church, cemetery, town or village, part of our aim is to provide a 'snapshot' of the location. We feel that it is important for people to have some idea of the actual surroundings where their ancestor is buried. These extra pages include a picture of the church or cemetery, with a description of the city, town or village. Where space permits, additional photographs, historical points of interest about a particular place or soldier have been included. Particularly, we have tried to include as many local newspaper or inquest reports as possible especially when a soldier met his death in such tragic circumstances as accident, suicide or murder.



A local newspaper for the 10th March 1917 carried this story of Canadian Corporal Thomas Luther Algeo who is buried in Hastings, Sussex and had his throat cut by Private Edward Ripley wielding a razor. Both men were having a drink in The Royal Hotel, St Leonards, Hastings, when an argument between them occurred. This escalated into a fight which continued when the men left the hotel and Algeo was killed. Although an American citizen, Private Ripley had enlisted into the CEF and had experienced service at the Front, suffering shell shock and gassing. However, he was found guilty of murder and sentenced to five years penal servitude.

During our research to date, we have discovered many anomalies in the soldier military records. For instance, many dates of birth do not coincide with the age of a soldier at the time of attestation or death, with men either adding or

subtracting years in order to qualify for Attestation. For a variety of reasons, soldiers chose to enlist under a pseudonym. In some cases, this was simply by adopting an alternative or historical name found within the family. With others, it was to completely sever all ties with original families or wives and then re-marry bigamously. Thomas Charles Vey, a Corporal in the Canadian Military Police, was convicted in 1916 for bigamously marrying Elizabeth Hannah Ahrens at a church in Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey, whilst knowing that his legitimate wife was still alive back in Canada.



With the mistaken belief that “*it would be over by Christmas 1914*”, the need to become part of the “excitement” of war was compelling. Some were accepted into the Army only to be discharged within days, weeks or months because of a health problem. Many military personnel files contain two sets of Attestation Papers as men successfully re-enlisted at different recruiting stations across

Canada, especially when the numbers of volunteers began to drastically decline. This trend was particularly evident as the war continued beyond expectations and Conscription loomed in 1917. Throughout our work, we seek to disentangle the contradictions and give the correct information where it is able to be proved.

One important factor to be acknowledged is the non-Canadian status of Newfoundland during the period of World War One as it did not become Canada’s tenth Province until 1949. However for this study, we have included Newfoundland as part of Canada, in order to embrace the high number of Newfoundlanders in the CWGC file. Some important Newfoundland military records are not to be found at the Library & Archives in Ottawa, but we have tracked them down in Newfoundland so that these men can be given equal prominence with the rest. Although their files are fairly scant, this is especially relevant for the Newfoundland seamen.

During our researches in Canada, we have often heard the belief expressed that their national contribution in both World Wars is undervalued or worse, ignored. These same people are surprised to learn about the annual Canada Day services at Bramshott, Hampshire and Shorncliffe, Kent.

We have undertaken this epic work as a retirement project and on a non-profit basis. It is our personal tribute to all those from Canada who rallied to the call to arms at the outbreak of World War One but remained *Far From Home* after death. It is our intention to try to complete this project during the centennial anniversary years. Within a short article, it is impossible to give the fine detail about our work. Suffice to say that the huge sacrifice made by Canada in The Great War has never been forgotten by the people on this side of the Atlantic. By embarking on this study, we are endeavouring to compile a unique record that will help to preserve the commitment to King and Country begun so selflessly by the Canadians in August 1914.

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