

THE POPPY – ALWAYS IN MY HEART

Every year in November when Remembrance Day rolls around, I recall all of the men and women who have died during their service for Canada and her allies. I think about my grandfather as well, who served in WWI and spent a year in a London, England hospital recovering from his wounds.

After my grandfather passed on, at age 94, my family inherited many of his pictures, papers and letters. After studying them over the years, I decided to do more research regarding his service time in WWI. I searched through many books on the First World War and always hoped to find his picture or a paragraph about his heroics, even just a mention of his name, somewhere. I never did, at least, not yet. I've read about his Army Unit and the role they played in certain battles, but nothing on him personally.

I'm sure there were many men and women who, just like him, deserve a small mention. Chris Parres almost died in September of 1918 in the mud of France, but through the grace of God, returned to Canada to lead a productive full life.

I decided to write my own tribute to a man I barely knew, but whose blood flows through my veins. Here then is part of the story of Christopher Richard Parres, a man who was severely wounded in France at the battle of Canal du Nord near the town of Cambrai (north of Paris) on September 29, 1918, by a vicious shrapnel blast that left him bleeding in a ditch and near to death.

Chris Parres was born November 17th, 1877, at a small place called Salterville, several miles east of Carman, Manitoba. He grew up on the farm, the son of a Danish immigrant, Jes Matthiesen and his Metis wife, Henrietta Salter. His mother died when Chris was only 6 years old and he and his sister Kate were basically raised by their father. As a young man, he purchased his own land, farmed and "broke" horses. He also worked as a guide and camp cook. He had a large supportive family of Salter and Matthiesen relatives.

In 1904, he married Eliza Alberta Madill, the daughter of a staunch Presbyterian minister. They had 3 children, one girl and 2 boys. 1911 found them living near Richard, Saskatchewan on a farm and running 3 General stores in Hafford, Speers and Richard, Saskatchewan. Chris' father, Jes, lived at the farm as well.

Although I never heard about the War from my grandfather personally, it was evident from many of his letters that he had strong feelings about Canada's involvement. The Government had to invoke Conscription as a way to get more soldiers. Although 39 at the time, and the father of 3 small children, Chris volunteered. It was ironic in that Chris' father had left Denmark at age 18 as the Danes were constantly fighting the Prussians (now the Germans) over

a strip of land called Schleswig-Holstein on the south of Denmark. At 18 in Denmark, you went into the Army.

Chris joined in Winnipeg on September 19, 1917. He was assigned to the Winnipeg 78th Grenadiers Battalion, who were part of the 4th Canadian Division, 12th Infantry Brigade. Then it was off to England and into battle in France.

It was common knowledge in our family that my grandfather (my Dad's father) had fought in WWI and had been severely wounded. It was visually evident that half of his one hand was missing and he walked with a bit of a limp. One night in Kelowna, B. C., in the late 1950's my Dad (Lew) asked his dad to take off his shirt to show me the scars from the wounds he had suffered. These tremendous marks left an indelible impression on my teenage brain. The most amazing thing was that one larger metal piece of the second shrapnel blast (many metal fragments) had hit my grandfather in the chest. He had a practice of carrying his service issue stainless steel shaving mirror in the breast pocket of his tunic. The metal projectile hit the mirror and deflected off through his rib cage. This probably saved his life as it would have punctured his lungs and/or his heart. This was the most serious of his many wounds and required 128 stitches to close up the hole. Nancy Anne (daughter from his 2nd marriage) would not be here if not for that mirror!

Chris fought in many battles, several of which he recorded in letters to his family over the years. Unfortunately, he came back a much different man both physically and mentally. Although he had difficulty finding work due to his "perceived" disabilities, his wife, through her political connections in Saskatoon, got Chris a job in a Liquor Store. This was extremely ironic as Chris had sworn an oath to his 28 year old dying mother, to never drink or smoke, and he never did.

Finally, he went prospecting which involved intense physical labour, and found the gold mine property at Snow Lake. Here is one of his letters to his family on November 1, 1963, written in Kelowna, B. C.

"The last few days have been uppermost in my memory. It was 45 years ago the 29th of September that I got wounded. From the 25th until about 5 o'clock on the 29th were furious days and at times I was rooted in with just George Long and myself. On the 29th we had attacked over quite an open stretch. We could see the German flag flying up ahead of us. We had a few light skirmishes up to a tremendous big offensive series of trenches – eye to eye. We were to follow 2 – 18 pounder shells – the order was, every man for himself. We HAD to get that flag!

I and a kid from west of Portage la Prairie (his name was McKinnon) – I guess I thought I had my finger on the Lewis gun's trigger (it could spit bullets at over 600 per minute). I told my

crew before we went over – I said to them, “see here – we are to get to that flag – do not stop to look around, rush straight ahead – just follow me and if I go down – grab the gun and keep on going”.

As we went over the top, I and my man spotted a shell hole. We zig zagged till we jumped in. I looked back – two of my new men were standing gazing over the field. I yelled at them to drop down quick. I was too late! They both were shot by snipers. We had advanced quite a distance when McKinnon said to me “Parres, our supply man is lying down back there but I don’t think he is wounded”.

I shouted for him to come up. I could see off to our right the rest of our men – or what was left of our company. I signalled to the officers to keep down as we were going to attack the headquarters. Anyhow, we two made it to a big pile of heavy timbers all piled up on benches – 2 feet off the ground. When we reached the pile there was a great shout sent up for us. I signalled again to keep down – we were going to attack the headquarters. As soon as I saw that they understood, we started to crawl. We came out about 75 yards away. I said to the kid – “how do you feel? Get some pans handy and speed up your gun”.

We opened up with a blast and kept it up till we had run about 3 pans. The Germans were on the run – our men were rushing in, we took the flag. A shell burst over our heads. One shrapnel bullet hit me in the left calf of my leg. I dressed it and soon the men came up. One officer came to me. He said, “Parres, I have been here since the start but you pulled off one of the finest tricks that I have ever seen. You will get something for this days work”. Then he saw my bandage. He asked “are you wounded?” “Just a shrapnel bullet – it won’t stop me.....”

The Rest of the Story

In the September 30th issue I wrote about my grandfather and how the blood red poppy, the symbol of Remembrance for all those who have fallen, reminds me of him every year in November. This is the “rest of the story” and personifies the courage and determination of so many World War vets who were wounded and disabled. That didn’t stop them from leading productive lives.

Shortly after Chris had been wounded in the calf of his leg, and had dressed his wounds, the Germans sent a huge shell hurtling towards the Canadians gathered near the captured headquarters. The Germans weren’t giving up. Chris wrote...and I paraphrase.. “the shell exploded only 35 yards from us. The concussion blew me off my feet and down into a muddy hollow. Fragments from this shell strafed my body and the metal projectiles ripped and tore through my skin and bones. I was knocked unconscious for some time. When I came to, I ached all over, it was nearly dark and I could barely breathe. The stench of death was everywhere, floating through the coolness of the French evening like the aroma in a fresh

graveyard, only much sharper and more pungent. There were the corpses of my comrades scattered around the battle field.

I was barely alive and weak from the loss of so much blood. My left side had been ripped open and part of my right hand had been torn off, but I was still alive and luckier than some of our unit who were even closer to the explosion and died instantly. I slowly crawled back up the hill where I had been standing when the explosion occurred. I left a trail of blood in the French muck and the pain was excruciating. I knew I would soon die if help didn't come quickly. It was growing dark and the cries of other wounded men drifted across the battlefield which had been the center of Hell, but was now suddenly eerily quiet. I thought of my family back in Canada and I visualised their faces, praying I would see them again.

I learned later that one chunk of the exploding shell had hit the edge of my stainless steel mirror (Army issue) and instead of piercing my heart/lungs, had deflected off through my rib cage. One third of my right hand was gone with bone fragments and ligaments sticking out like a tangle of white toothpicks.

Suddenly the crack of a rifle split the silence and a bullet splattered French mud on my face from a foot away. I managed to lift my gaze and I could see the flash from the sniper's rifle muzzle as a second bullet hit even closer. He was in a wooded area a short distance away but probably having trouble seeing me through his scope in the gathering darkness and fog.

As I would either die from my wounds or the next bullet from the sniper, I put my left thumb on my nose and wagged my fingers in a last futile act of defiance. Suddenly a rifle fired again and then I heard voices yelling out in English. I couldn't believe I was still alive. I tried to call back but my voice was numb. Eventually someone found me and I was loaded on to the back of a truck with a number of other wounded sorry souls. My rescuers told me how they had located the sniper after his second shot and killed him. Such is war."

Epilogue: Chris Parres spent a year in a London, England hospital recovering from his wounds. During his recuperation period, an Australian soldier befriended him and took him to the museum weekly. He showed Chris mineral specimens (sort of a course in prospecting). When Chris returned to Canada he was a very changed person. Very few employers would hire him because of his perceived disabilities. Chris tried mink farming and then went prospecting with the Bonter brothers. They worked a showing at Snow Lake (near the Diamond Willow area) but when assay results were disappointing, the Bonters pulled out. Chris stayed behind and found the showing that turned into the Snow Lake Gold Mine. It was late October, 1924. This mine was eventually the reason for the town of Snow Lake.

My family has the stainless steel mirror with the large gash on one side. You can take the mirror and try to flex it with your hands but it doesn't budge one iota. It is very rigid. It must have been a tremendous force that made the gash. Miracles do happen.

An Exciting Discovery

Exactly 100 years from the start of the First World War (1914 -2014), the remains of 5 soldiers from the Winnipeg Grenadiers, have now been positively identified through modern DNA techniques. Further testing on 3 more of the 8 remains discovered in 2006 and 2007, in a small village in France is ongoing. It is believed they are also members of the same 78th Battalion.

Men from all over Manitoba, as well as volunteers from Ontario and Saskatchewan, such as my Grandfather, C. R. "Chris" Parres, were assigned to the 78th Battalion, Winnipeg Grenadiers and shipped overseas to fight in WWI.

The actual site of the burying place of these 8 men was discovered when a 14 year old boy, Fabien Demeusere, was digging up soil for a garden. This occurred in the village of Hallu, France, when the boy first uncovered human bones in 2006. Fabien is a WWI history buff. His family home in Hallu, is built upon a former Battlefield.

The Department of National Defence (DND) announced on September 29th, 2014, that Lt. Clifford Neelands, Lance Sgt. John Lindell, and Privates Lachlan McKinnon and William Simms have all been positively identified. On November 5th, 2014, the DND further announced the identification of the remains of Sidney Halliday. A locket given him by his fiancé was the conclusive proof. Halliday was from Minto, Mb., near Elgin, Mb., south of Brandon. The Government of Canada is continuing to work with the War Graves Commission and in consultation with the soldier's relatives towards a proposed ceremony for internment, to give the 5 a final resting place. The ceremony is intended to take place in May 2015 at Caix Cemetery, in France.

The DND and CAF (Canadian Armed Forces), used historical research, physical anthropology, genealogical research, genetic testing and isotope analysis to determine the identities.

The remains of soldiers from all sides in WWI are often found at farming and construction sites. Some bodies were buried in very shallow graves. Some are found where they fell. Sometimes weapons, parts of uniforms (especially metal buttons) provide the first clue towards identification. Total positive I. D. of the remains of unknown service personnel often require historical, biological and anthropological analysis by a special team of experts known as the Directorate of History and Heritage, Casualty Investigation.

The 8 soldiers died during the Battle of Amiens, August 8 – 17th, 1918, approximately 80 kms north of Paris, France. Canadian forces had taken the German occupied area around the villages of Marcourt and Chilly, and driven the enemy out of Hallu, which was a mile further east (1.6 kms). They attempted to hold at Hallu, but intense counter attacks had taken a heavy toll on the Canadians. Apparently this is where the 8 Winnipeg Grenadiers were killed along with soldiers from several other Canadian Units. Intense hand to hand combat resulted in nearly 100 fatalities and/or missing in action. In the entire Amiens Battle, the total of all Canadian soldiers (all units) killed the first day (August 8th) was 1036.

General Currie decided to have his forces withdraw to the west in an area near Marcourt and Chilly, to give time to re-organize an attack on a broader front.

My Grandfather fought alongside these men and was fortunate to survive the Battle of Amiens. As Chris Parres was born and raised near Carman, Manitoba, southwest of Winnipeg, before moving to Saskatchewan, he knew many of these men and their families. Chris was 40 years old at the time of his service overseas and many of his fellow soldiers were much younger. They referred to him as “Pops”!

In a group photo taken June 12th, 1918, in Brighton, England, before embarking for France, the 15 men in the picture were described as the “Best of the Bunch”. This may have been the title used by the photographer, Mr. E. Hilton. My Grandfather captioned his copy as “Chums of the A. S. Co.”.

Chris’ luck ran out however, in the next major battle at Canal du Nord/Cambrai (September 28th to October 9th, 1918) 60 kms N. E. of Amiens. He was severely wounded and almost died from a shrapnel blast when an enemy shell exploded close to where his Unit was positioned. The Grenadiers had just captured a German Headquarters with fire from their Lewis machine guns and were regrouping at the time of the bombardment. Chris Parres spent over a year recuperating in a London, England hospital, before returning home to his wife and 3 children. His family found him to be a very different man physically and mentally, from the person who enlisted in September of 1917.

Of the nearly 68,000 Canadian fatalities during the First World War, more than 19,000 have no known grave. This fortunate recent discovery of 8 soldiers from the Winnipeg Grenadiers is the largest single find of unknown Canadian soldiers since the launching of the Casualty Identification Program.

The researchers analyzed the skeletons to create a profile. This physical profile, in conjunction with dentition, height and age can help narrow down the I. D. of the human remains. Biological testing such as matching up DNA profiles with descendants is also

frequently used. Using the maternal line (mitochondrial DNA) is often helpful. Mitochondrial DNA is used on remains that have been in the ground more than 90 years.

Another tool researchers are able to use is called “geo-habitation”. The oxygen isotope ratios, from drinking water, are found in the dentition and jaw bone. They can then develop a pattern of habitation that tells where the person has lived.

Modern forensic techniques are incredible, wouldn't you agree?

Please take time to REMEMBER on November 11th EVERY year!