

Perth Inside Out:

by Terry O'Hearn

World War I soldier George Stokes remembered



Perth's George James Stokes was but one of many young Canadians whose lives ended on the Somme battlefields in France during World War I. Stokes was recorded as born on September 18, 1895, in the Town of Perth, to George and Minna (Jemima) Stokes.

The greatest battle in Canadian history was yet to come at Vimy Ridge, when the 21-year-old Stokes fell to enemy fire on Nov. 18, 1916, near Albert, France. We can only hope he felt the loving arms of his mother as his body was engulfed by the rancid mixture of flesh, blood, earth, and war material. Stokes was a Private with the 38th Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF).

The 38th Battalion was mobilized in Ottawa and recruited in Ottawa, Brockville, Perth, Prescott, and Alexandria, with an initial complement of five officers and 251 other ranks. They had grown to a strength of 35 officers and 1001 other ranks by the time they disembarked in England in June, 1916. The battalion arrived in France on Aug. 13, 1916, becoming part of the 4th Canadian Division, 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade.

The Battalion's Nominal Roll of Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers and Men, issued in 1915, has the following entry: Stokes, George James; Private; number 410199; NOK Stokes, Mrs. Minna; Perth, Ont.; Taken on strength April 10, 1915."

An official Battalion War Diary entry for Nov. 18 reads: "Batt. in front line. Attack commenced at 6:10 a.m. 8th Batt. on right, East Surrey on left flank - All Battalions obtained their objective. Large list of casualties. Snow early in the morning, later turning to rain - Albert & vicinity of Transport Lines untroubled by enemy shelling or aeroplanes - Desire Trench occu-

piated."

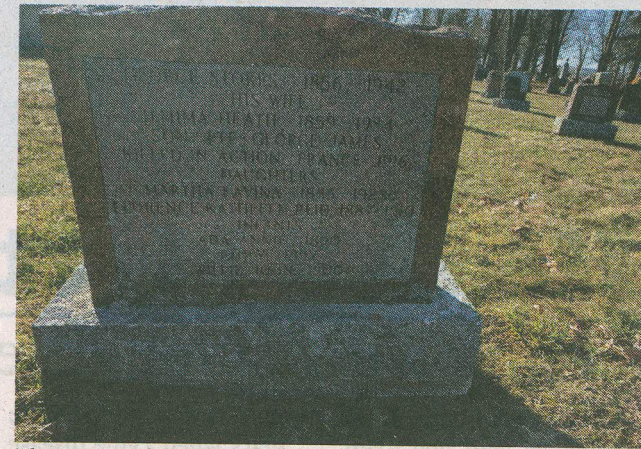
Using the stilted military language of the times, the war diary entries of Nov. 22 and 23 go on to describe the recovery and funeral services for three commissioned officers of the Battalion. Nothing is mentioned of the recovery of remains, or services held, for "other ranks", as enlisted men were known.

A Perth newspaper of Dec. 8, 1916 reports the following under the headline "Killed In Action": "The sad news was received by telegram from the Record Office on Friday last by Mr. and Mrs. Geo. Stokes of town, of the death of their son, George, in France. The telegram gave no particulars, but simply said he had been killed in action in France on the 18th of November. ... "Pte. Stokes, who has made the supreme sacrifice ... "was born in Perth, where he lived until joining the 38th Batt. His parents, two brothers and five sisters mourn his loss, and are awaiting further particulars of his death. His father is a veteran soldier, having spent thirteen years with the British army, and has seven nephews

at present at the front."

There are many other instances of missing men (assumed to have been killed in action) during World War I, and it is not for lack of trying to find the remains. A good example is Norman Christie, who is recognized as Canada's number one expert on the battlefields and cemeteries of both World Wars. Christie is the former Commonwealth War Graves Commission's chief records officer, and has written nearly 20 books on Canada's military history and hosted several documentaries about Canada's wartime history. He has arguably done more than any other Canadian to locate the remains of men missing in action from the two World Wars.

Some further history of the 38th Battalion relates that it returned to England on May 6, 1919, arrived in Canada on June 13, 1919, and was demobilized in Ottawa on June 15, 1919. It was disbanded by General Order on Sept. 15, 1920. The 38th, was known by the nickname "The Royal Ottawas", and the unit is perpetuated by The Camer-



The George Stokes family plot at Elmwood Cemetery, Perth, where the name of son George James Stokes is inscribed. He was killed in action in France on Nov. 18, 1916, but his remains were never located. Photo credit: Terry O'Hearn

on Highlanders of Ottawa to this day.

From reading newspaper coverage of Perth Council meetings of those years, it can be found that the elder George Stokes was employed seasonally by the Town of Perth to water down the dusty streets for a time after his son's death. However, the Perth Courier of Jan. 11, 1918, reported that: "George Stokes has sold his house and lot, opposite the brick yard, to M. Karakowsky and with his wife and family removed to Ottawa on Wednesday."

The name G.J. Stokes is inscribed on the ramparts of the Vimy Memorial at Pas de Calais, France, with the names of over 11,000 Canadian soldiers who were posted as "missing, presumed dead", and his name is also

etched into the gravestone at the family plot in Elmwood Cemetery here in Perth.

Stokes' enlistment documents in 1915 recorded these simple facts: "Trade as machinist apprentice; single; no current or previous military service; Church of England; height: 5 feet 4.5 inches; girth: 34 inches fully expanded; fair complexion; blue eyes; fair hair." And so, a machinist trade never fully accomplished; no chance for a loving wife and children; the remains of that small body with the blue eyes and fair hair forever entombed in the detritus of the Somme battlefields. Rest In Peace brother.

If you have any comments or suggestions, please email me at: terry@pdgmedia.ca