

1916-2016 FINDING BILL!

A CENTENNIAL REMEMBRANCE DAY STORY

By Robert James Williamson

This centennial story of remembrance is my personal adventure of searching for answers to a family mystery. It is an incredible tale of discovery. The two photographs shown here are central to my story. They show my grandmother, Mary Webster, holding a picture of her son, William Henry Webster of Manchester, England, while her teenage daughter Marjory looks on. Bill had recently been killed in action in 1916. Almost a decade later, Marjory would marry Samuel Williamson and in time give birth to me in 1937. In the meantime, the family had emigrated to Canada and settled in Hamilton. My grandmother died at Hamilton Mountain's Macassa Lodge in 1960, and my mother in Grace Villa nursing home on Upper Gage Avenue in 1993. I inherited the photographs and thus began my saga for "Finding Bill".



Unfortunately a lot of British military records were lost in the bombing of London during WW2. Because I had so little information to base my search upon, I had all but given up any hope of **Finding Bill**. Then, at the Hamilton International Tattoo in 2008, destiny played a miraculous role in my research.

As a retired Naval Commander and Governor of the Canadian Corps of Commissionaires, my wife and I were assigned box seats in the VIP section at the Copp's Coliseum show. One of the international bands featured that year was the Lancashire Fusiliers from Manchester. Fortuitously, the band's administrator, Major (Rtd.) William Sheil and his wife were seated beside us.

Serendipity now came into full play. My wife who is from Manchester began to reminisce and I mentioned my search for Uncle Bill. Major Sheil thought that there was a strong likelihood that Bill might have been a member of the Lancashire Fusiliers and would search the Fusiliers' memorial archives when he returned home.

Within a month Major Sheil sent the following report. L/Cpl William Henry Webster, 2nd Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers, was killed at the opening Battle of the Somme on July 1, 1916 during an attack on an enemy strong point at Beaumont Hamel in Flanders, northern France. He is "remembered" at the Surcrerie Military Cemetery in nearby Colincamps.

General reading produced the rest of the story. The battle lasted four months from July 1 to November 19, 1916 in an attempt to recapture territory occupied by Germany in 1914. The first day of the battle is infamous in British history for having the most casualties in one day - 60,000. It is also memorable for using British coal miners to dig tunnels under No Man's Land, to explode powerful mines under German strong points. The elimination of German defensive redoubts in this way allowed the Lancashire Fusiliers to capture the first line of German trenches with a minimum of casualties. By 11:00 a.m. however, their advance stalled and the enemy counter attacked under a heavy barrage.

Because the memorial states that Bill Webster is "remembered" (not buried) in the military cemetery, we can conclude that he was blown up in the barrage or buried under tons of earth displaced by the heavy artillery shells. By the end of the day he would have been included in the 48 men reported missing. The Fusiliers had gained 2,000 yards of real estate and suffered a 60% casualty rate.

In searching for Bill, I discovered that there was a Canadian contingent at the Battle of the Somme. In fact the Newfoundland Regiment so acquitted itself in the fighting that King George bestowed the "Royal" title to the regiment.

In September 1916, the British used tanks in their Somme offensive, advancing 15 miles. Not realizing this new weapon's effectiveness, they failed to take full advantage of their success. Overall the Somme was a great disappointment considering the price paid in human life.

***Mountain Memories**, written by **Robert Williamson** for the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society, appears each month in *The Mountain News*..*