

1917-2017 SEARCHING FOR BENJAMIN In the Carnage of Passchendaele

By Robert Williamson October 2017

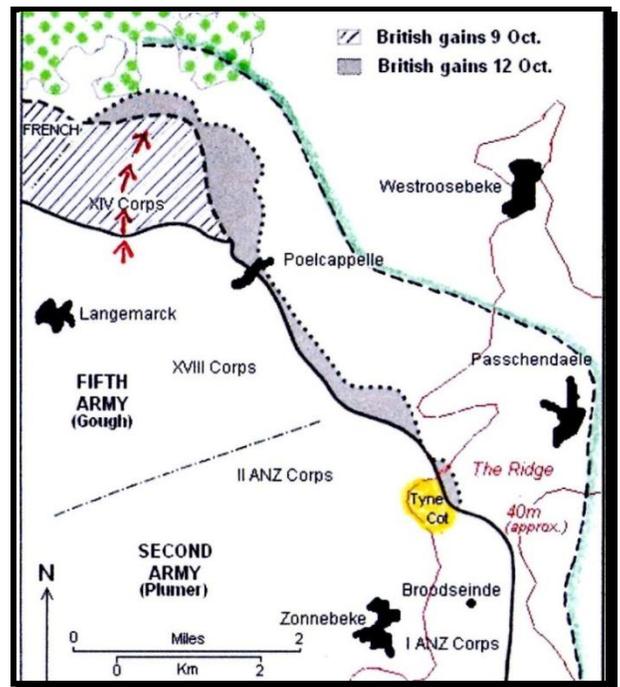
Contemplating the anniversary of Canada's involvement in the 1917 Battle of Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele, a century-old family photo aroused my Remembrance Day curiosity. With the aid of a "family tree" I concluded that the soldier standing in the middle of the picture was my uncle, James Edward Williamson age 22, posing with his 19-year-old sister Christiana and 17-year-old brother Benjamin circa 1915. As it came to pass, James Edward, would name his son, Ben, in remembrance of his younger brother Benjamin, killed at age 19 somewhere in Belgium.



Photo courtesy Kevin Williamson family collection.

Hence, the photograph initiated a search for Benjamin. My cousin Kevin, grandson of James Edward, discovered a 100 year-old letter from the War Office dated November 7, 1917. It said, "*Private Benjamin Williamson 352910 of the Manchester Regiment 2/9th Battalion was posted as missing in action on 9/10/1917.*" Internet research showed us that on October 9, 1917 the Manchester Regiment went on the attack in Belgium, north of the village of Langemarck in the Ypres Salient, an area well-known for the locale of John McCrae's iconic poem "In Flanders Fields".

The 3rd Battle of the Ypres Salient began on July 31, 1917 as a diversion to help the French. It ended in December when the Canadian army, after its great success at Vimy Ridge in April was brought up to capture Passchendaele on the high ground. The Battle was infamous for three things: heavy rains turned the battlefield into a quagmire, the Germans made use of mustard gas for the first time, and the salient had the third highest casualty rate in the war, 275,000. The month of October when Benjamin was killed, saw 110,000 casualties. His older brother, James Edward, suffered from mustard gas poisoning for the rest of his life.



YPRES SALIENT, BELGIUM, OCTOBER 9, 1917
Manchester Regiment Attack → → →, Cemetery, Canadian Advance Dec. 7 - - - - , Towns ■

In 1921 a follow-up letter to our grandmother stated that Benjamin's body was exhumed from a small cemetery and re-interred in the War Graves Cemetery at Tyne Cot, Belgium, (Plot XVI, Row F, Grave 22), located near Passchendaele.

Now as we view this very old photograph, there is a sense of solace on Remembrance Day, knowing that Benjamin has been found and lies "in Flanders Fields where poppies blow between the crosses row on row".



As a centennial project, family historians Kevin & Robert Williamson are at work searching for their uncle Benjamin killed at Passchendaele in 1917.