

Veterans Day brings thoughts of past, future

Michael Armstrong

Point of view

For the past few years, when I think of Veterans Day, I think of my grandfather, Pvt. Roy Armstrong, 15th Battalion, 48th Highlanders, First Contingent, Canadian Expeditionary Force, World War I.

I had not always had this association with Veterans Day. For, until I dug into Grandpa's military history, I had not realized how involved he had been with the Great War, and how his service spanned the entire war, from Canada's first battle to his repatriation from a German prisoner of war camp.

I don't know much about Grandpa. Truth to tell, he was a bit of a scoundrel. He and my grandmother, Lillian Harvey, met before the war, corresponded during his imprisonment, and married after the war ended. Grandpa was born March 29, 1894, in Minesing, Ontario, the only child of a Scottish-Irish immigrant and his teen-age bride. My great-grandfather died in a logging accident when Grandpa was an infant, and Grandpa's uncles and aunts raised him in Toronto.

My grandparents eventually wound up in Miami, where my father, Allan Armstrong, and Uncle Warren were born. When the boys were in their teens, Grandpa abandoned his family and disappeared into the jobless hordes of the Great Depression.

Understandably, my grandmother spoke bitterly of Grandpa, if she spoke of him at all. I grew up thinking of him as dead, except that around 1963, when I was 7, Grandpa reappeared.

My family lived in Tampa at the time, and Grandpa had settled in Zephyr Hills, with a new wife and more children, some about my age. Grandpa had a heart attack and decided to look up my father. It turned out to be an awkward reunion and an association that did not last.

But it raised some questions about my grandfather: Who was he? What was his involvement in the Great War?

Years later, researching my family's history, I found a Web listing of all Canadian Expeditionary Force soldiers, and among it, cross-referenced with his service number, Grandpa's name. I wrote off to the Canada archives for his war records, and a few months later, received back a huge packet of photocopies. Comparing his service record with that of the CEF, I discovered how brutal his service turned out to be.

Grandpa enlisted in the CEF on Sept. 18, 1914, at the age of 20, and was assigned to the 15th Battalion and Toronto's 48th Highlanders. On Feb. 15, 1915, the 15th Battalion went to France, eventually winding up March 3 at the front near Ypres. Grandpa might have seen some action there, but his real battle started April 22.

The Canadians held part of the line northwest of Ypres, among the British, French and French Colonials. On April 22, the Germans attacked with chlorine gas, "a mysterious greenish cloud," as Desmond Morris describes it in "Silent Battle" -- not as nasty as the mustard gas used later in the war, but fatal if a soldier couldn't escape out of the trenches and breathed in too much.

The first attack opened a 4-mile gap in the line, one that the Allies sought to close with attacks on April 23.

At 4 a.m. on April 24, Grandpa's combat career ended. The Germans again fired gas, a wind pushing it up toward the 15th Battalion and the 48th Highlanders at the top of the Gravenstafel Ridge. The battalion dissolved.

Morris says that four officers and 216 other soldiers died, and 10 officers and 247 soldiers surrendered. My grandfather was among those 247.



• Roy Armstrong •

Grandpa's service records show him reported a prisoner of war on April 25, 1915. He was officially reported to be a POW Feb. 2, 1917, at Gottingen in Germany, and was transferred to Cassel on Feb. 19, 1917. He was repatriated to England Jan. 9, 1919, and sailed back to Canada Feb. 12 on the Lapland, returning home on March 3. He was officially discharged April 19, 1919, shortly after his 25th birthday.

Of Grandpa's four years in a POW camp, I know little. He's said to have learned to speak French and German. The mystery of a German document among his papers suggests he might have been allowed passage outside of the camps. "Silent Battle" describes the Canadian's ordeal as something similar to that of a Soviet Gulag prisoner: meager rations, forced labor and periodic beatings. The Gottingen prisoners worked in the salt mines, although if Grandpa was lucky, he might have been allowed to work on a local farm.

His return home most probably was chaotic, and it's probable after war's end he had to make his way back to Allied lines on his own. I do not doubt he endured great hardship during his captivity. That he became a POW and did not die in his first and only battle or, worse yet, survive to die in a further battle, in retrospect was a blessing.

So when I think of Veterans Day, I think back on a young man about my age when I was in college. I had the blessing of peace and freedom at age 20, in 1976. I never came to know the hardship of war; the last born of my family, I was too young for Vietnam, too old for the Gulf War.

On this Veterans Day in 2002, we think again of war, and how Americans could once more have to go into battle. Veterans Day should be a day to consider war and its necessity as well as futility. Above all, though, it should be a day to honor the veterans, the men and women who by choice or compulsion found themselves in combat and in the military.

This week the American Legion Auxiliary sells poppies. I'll buy a poppy, the memoriam that came about from the Great War, and think of my grandfather and his service, sacrifice and pain.

Long-time Homer resident Michael Armstrong is an editorial assistant at the Homer News.

Grandpa's letters give glimpse of WWI

BY MICHAEL ARMSTRONG
STAFF WRITER

For those who have served in America's wars, Nov. 11 honors their service. For World War I armies, the armistice on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, 1918, meant their war ended. For my grandfather, Pvt. Roy Armstrong of the 48th Highlanders, 15th Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force, the armistice meant liberation. After more than three years imprisoned in German prisoner of war camps, Grandpa was coming home.



◆Photo provided
Pvt Roy Armstrong stands on the front porch of his home in Toronto after returning from World War I ◆

Recently, my cousin, Pam Poe, sent me copies of letters Grandpa sent to our grandmother, then Lillian Harvey, a young woman living in Toronto, Canada. From Grandpa's first letters about training in Salisbury Plains, England, to a letter sent shortly before the war ended, his letters show a POW trying to stay sane — and a man wooing the friend who would later become his wife.

In September 1914 at age 20, Grandpa enlisted in the 48th Highlanders, and shipped off to England with the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

His first letters described the winter of 1914-15.

West Camp, South Down, Salisbury Plains, England: "Gee, this is some place. It's all plains as far as I can see and it's darned cold, too."

A few weeks before the 48th Highlanders shipped out in February 1915, Grandpa wrote again. "I can't say much as I have a rotten cold ... Well, kid, we are going to France in two or three weeks and I hope you will write to me there won't you because it's good to get letters from old Canada."

In April 1915, Grandpa fought in the Second Battle of Ypres, in Belgium. On April 24 a German chlorine gas attack rolled up toward the 15th Battalion at the top of Gravenstafel Ridge. The attack decimated the 15th, killing 220 soldiers. Of the survivors, the Germans captured 257 soldiers — including Grandpa.

Lillian didn't get a letter from Grandpa for a year, on March 15, 1916, after Grandpa got Lillian's address from her sister Flo.

Prisoner of War Camp, Gottingen, near Hanover, Germany: "Hello, Lil. I guess you think I have forgotten you ... I lost your address in the mix up I got into, ha ha. Hoping to hear from you when you have time to write and also from Flo."

In February 1917, the Germans transferred Grandpa to a POW camp near Cassel. Under the rules of war then, enlisted men could be made to work in non-military jobs. On July 1, 1917, Grandpa wrote.

Camp of prisoners of war, Cassel, Germany: "I am working on a farm here. We must work you know. ... We all have great hopes of being home soon. Nearly time, eh, over two years now so you see there's nothing bright about staying here. ... Well, old friend I guess I am tiring you of this rubbish so will have to ring off so excuse my scribbling as I was never any use with a writing stick."

Over the next few months, their correspondence picked up. Grandpa wrote about learning German and French in his spare time.

Cassel, Germany, Aug. 5, 1917: "My dear Lil, I have received your most welcome letter and photo this morning. ... You have changed a lot. So you had a cold 24th (May 24, Victoria Day) this year. Well, cold or not, I hope to be home for the next one. This lot is getting on our nerves here. We are all 'fed up' as the saying is. I guess the prisoners in all lands are about the same. There is also another saying we have here that is 'stick it Gerry,' so I guess we will have to ha, ha. ...

Working is not so bad it keeps us from thinking too much. German is easy to learn. ... I suppose things have changed a lot in Canada in three years. Just think it's that long since I have seen Canada, ha, ha. Oh well, hope to see it soon again this can't last forever."

As time dragged on, Grandpa's handwriting changed, and became messier and crooked — and his spirit darker.

Cassel, Aug. 17, 1917: "Dear Lilly, Just a line to (say) I am well but damned lonesome today. But I cheered right up when I received your kind letter. ... As a prisoner here it's a tiresome job ha, ha, rather hard on the nerves when over two years here."

In another letter Grandpa described trying to patch a pair of well-worn pants.

Cassell, March 3, 1918: "I cannot patch those trousers any more they are wore out and as to skirts I have discarded those years ago ... my kilt was too badly torn in the battle so I had to discard it and wear pants after I came to Germany."

German regulations limited him to two letters a month home. One letter went to his Muir relatives and the other to Lillian.

May 19, 1918: "Everything in regards scenery is beautiful here in this month of May, but I would rather see it at home in old Canada, and I am always wondering when I will get back home again. I hope it will not be long now, don't you?"

As the war went on, Grandpa wrote of hope that he might get exchanged with German POWs.

June 23, 1918: "Say, kid, my hand is just too shaky to write my nerves are bad these days so you must excuse the scribble. ... We boys here have some hopes of being exchanged but don't really know if it is true or not time will tell of course."

The last letter Lillian received spoke again of coming home, and how prisoners incarcerated more than 15 months would be exchanged first.

Aug. 4, 1918: "As I am over three years I expect to be with that lot but I don't know when it will be. I expect it will be the same as all military matters plenty of red tape but I expect to smell the salt air in a short time. So it might not be long before I am back again in good old Toronto. Then I am afraid you will have to put me on a chain as it is possible that I will kick up a devil of a row if I once break loose. ... I remain as ever your sincere friend, Roy Armstrong."

Grandpa had to wait until Jan. 9, 1919 for freedom. He returned home on March 3, shortly before his 25th birthday. A photo shows him standing on the front porch of the Muir home on Montrose Street before a British flag and a "Welcome Home" sign.

After the war, Roy Armstrong and Lillian Harvey married. Eventually, they moved to Miami, Fla., where my father and uncle, Allan and Warren Armstrong, were born. Grandpa left his family during the Great Depression. As a young boy, I grew up not knowing much about my paternal grandfather. In 1963, when I was 7, our family reconnected with Grandpa.

He never spoke of his war — until now.

Michael Armstrong can be reached at michael.armstrong@homernews.com.