

Mud and Chocolates



C. H. UNWIN

Off To War : Letters from Cecil Harrow Unwin

From the Front to his Sisters in Victoria during World War 1

Enlisted in Victoria Nov 1915, Private #180685

88th Battalion C.E.F., Victoria Fusiliers

Silver War Medal C22773

C. H. Unwin moved from London England to Oak Bay in 1912 with his mother, Maria, sisters Mabel, Hilda, Dora, Edith, and cousin Winnifred. They built the first house in their area close to Monterey School just off Hampshire Rd.

When the Great War was declared in 1914, so many Vancouver Islanders volunteered, seven Battalions were formed resulting in many prominent and ordinary Victorians enlisting. Most experienced the same horrors of war that Cecil has described in over 30 letters and postcards mailed from the front to his Sisters in Oak Bay.

After enlisting at the age of 36 in Nov 1916, training started at Willows Fairgrounds. All exhibitions were cancelled for the years 1914 to 1919. In addition to the buildings, 100 tents with wooden floors were set up to accommodate both the 67th and 88th

Eleven-hundred of the 88th marched from Willows camp to Inner Harbour in May 1916, embarking on the SS Princess Charlotte to start their way to Halifax, onboard Titanic's sister ship Olympic with seven-thousand troops to Liverpool, arriving 8th June. He left his sisters to fend for themselves in rural Oak Bay raising chickens and goats.

Further training at Otterpool and Shorncliff, East Sandling camps before the 88th was broken up with the men transferring to other Battalions. Cecil went to the 28th Northwest Battalion (Winnipeg), where he fought with the 6th Infantry Brigade, 2nd Canadian Division from Sept 1916 (Somme) to mid-April 1917 (Vimy). His sisters sent many tins of Victoria's chocolates which he shared with his fellow soldiers.

Witnessed the horrors of Gas, marveled at the first use of Aeroplanes, fought with the first Tanks at the Somme and got injured just days after capturing Vimy Ridge at Thelus. Cecil spent the next 9 months at hospitals: Etaples France, Cambridge Military Hosp. at Aldershot, Hilders Military Hosp. at Haslemere, Bearwood Canadian Convalescent Hosp. at Wokingham and Kirkdale Canadian Hosp. at Liverpool.

He got married in London just before returning to Victoria in January 1918. Cecil enjoyed raising goats and Salmon fishing with the Saanich Inlet Anglers while living and working in Oak Bay, then retiring to Cowichan Bay and Duncan with his wife Clara, until his passing in 1948.

Y.M.C.A letterhead

My Dear Hilda,

France Nov 30th 1916

Many thanks for the glad news you send .. as to the supply of Stevenson's on the way. The last lot you sent were the most appreciated present I have ever had. I took them with me on our last & worst spell of the front line at the Somme & fed them to the wounded. One old chap I found by the side of a communication trench had dragged a shattered leg across No Mans Land for two days & nights & he was in a very sad way & very bad temper but a handful of chocolates cheered him up wonderfully.

. . . .
With fondest love to you and the others, I remain
Your loving brother
Cecil

The Infantry Battalions for the overseas Canadian Expeditionary Force mobilized at Victoria:

- 30th Reserve Battalion CEF
- 48th Battalion (British Columbia), CEF
- 67th Battalion (Western Scots), CEF
- 88th Battalion (Victoria Fusiliers) CEF
- 102nd Battalion (Northern BC), mobilized at Comox, CEF
- 103rd Battalion CEF, Victoria
- 143rd Battalion (BC Bantams), CEF, Beacon Hill & Sidney camps

Notable officers and men of the 88th as mentioned in the letters:

- Lieut.-Col. H.J. **Rous Cullen** O.C
- Major B.H. **Harrison**, second in command
- Major E.A.I. **Pym**
- Capt. R. **Houghton**. M.O.
- Capt. **Gray**
- Col. the Rev. G.H. **Andrews**, chaplain. (*1st rector of St. Mary's Oak Bay 1911*)
- Capt. Thomas. B. **Pemberton** in command of No.2 Company
- Capt. A. **Gray**.
- Capt. H.D. **Twigg**
- Lieut. R.H. **Finlayson**, (*Grandson of Hon. Rodrick, wounded April 16 1917, died of injuries April 25th*)
- Lieut. R. **Howard**, (*KIA Somme*)
- Lieut. H.G E. **Pocock**,
- Lieut. **Lukin Johnston** (*Former editor Cowichan Leader, British Colonist, Lost at sea after Hitler interview 1938*)
- Lieut. Alan. **Morkill**, (*kept in touch with Cecil in Victoria after the war*)
- Pte. **Hayward Irwin Browne** (*From Oak Bay, KIA Vimy, His widow kept in touch with the Unwins after the war*)
- Pte **Bledsoe** (*Alberni*)
- And **Micky**, the 88th mascot

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OTHER SOURCES:

Cecil Unwin Collection, Letters, Postcards and photos, 1916 -1917, held by Ron Meuse
