

# SOMEONE TO REMEMBER

by Blair Ferguson

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I often write or speak about men who gave their all, who made the supreme sacrifice in defense of our freedom. These men are often remembered for the Medals of Valour they received posthumously and include **Ellis Sifton** and his Victoria Cross or **Fredrick Groves** who was memorialized by his parents' purchase of a new Altar Crucifix for Holy Angels. But not all were so fortunate. Sixty-three thousand Canadians lost their lives during the first World War and as Covid will hamper most from attending Remembrance Day services this year again, I thought I would give you someone to think about during your moment of silence at home.

**William Patrick Burns** was born March 13, 1893, to Michael and Catharine of 45 Manitoba Street in St. Thomas. Michael was a St. Thomas street-car conductor and the happy family attended Holy Angels Church for their spiritual needs. Young William was an altar boy and when old enough he became a member of the **Holy Angels Cadet Corps**. The Cadet Corps members were taught a lot about marching in formation and how to polish buttons and boots and even occasionally to fire old rifles. The 'glory' of war and high esteem for the military and its accomplishments was always forefront in the minds of the people of St. Thomas. Children would have read and remembered Alfred Tennyson's poem *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, which immortalized the charge of an over 600-strong cavalry into the face of Russian cannons, or the stand of "*the thin red line tipped with steel*" when the Highland Brigade stood firm with their rifles and fixed bayonets while Russian heavy cavalry bore down on them at Alma. Regrettably, the part often overlooked was the aftermath (less than half of the Light Brigade crawled back after their misguided charge). And yet, both battles would see streets named after them and one even a public school. Many other streets in our city are named to commemorate other battles or to carry the names of famous warriors, such as Wellington and Nelson. Such was (and still is) the world of young William Burns and others like him.

This story begins as two young friends decide to enlist, believing they be home by Christmas with a chest full of medals. William and his close friend and fellow Holy Angels Cadet **James Connoy**, enlisted in the city's newly formed Battalion: The 91<sup>st</sup> Combat Engineers Force (CEF). Coincidentally, their enlistment numbers would be identical except for the last digit. I won't go into the training of the young men in the interest of space and instead jump forward directly to France where the war was raging. William was transferred to the 75<sup>th</sup> Battalion, where he ran into Holy Angels Cadet Captain Frederick Groves, and then sent directly to the front, right into action. They were at the Somme.

William's first taste of combat came when the Canadian Corps was given the task of capturing the heavily defended German position known as the Regina Trench. On October 21, 1916, they attacked the ridge and captured it along with 1,000 German prisoners. Unfortunately, the east flank of the trench held firm and the Germans could not be displaced and so the 75<sup>th</sup>, along with other units of the Canadian Corps, were assigned to occupy and secure that end of the trench. As the Canadians crested the ridge, German artillery opened up on them with all they had and in the opening salvo Fred Groves, standing mere feet from William, received a direct hit by an artillery shell. William watched as someone he had known his whole life disappeared, literally turned into mist in front of his eyes. As he stood on the ridge, stunned about what is going on, another German shell landed a few feet from him and he was instantly buried alive under six feet of dirt. He scrambled for his life, no air in his lungs, as he frantically clawed and kicked his way clear. He, along with others, was then directed to the rear to a clearing station along with other wounded. As the little group proceeded to the aid station, a shell landed close by and again buried William and the others. This time, William was pulled to safety by two soldiers. Believe it or not, but as William resumed his trip to the battalion aid station he was again

buried by debris and dirt as German shells continued to rain down. He finally made it to the station where, having been buried three times in the span of an hour and having witnessed his friend blown to bits, he was looked over, given a cup of tea and sent back to the front.

The next day and the two following we would find William again at the front of the Battle of the Somme, where he would have experienced constant battle and danger. Finally, after two months at the front, William was done; he was a broken man and admitted to the Norfolk Hospital having been diagnosed with Neurasthenia, 'shell-shock' as it was known then. Today, we better understand and know how to treat **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder** (PTSD) and that is exactly what shell-shock was. At that time, however, shell-shock cases were treated with disrespect and ridicule. William was put into a Depot Battalion and went from hospital to hospital mopping floors and emptying bed pans. Imagine what must have been going through this young man's mind, being called a coward and a pansy, being laughed at, all the while wondering where was the glory or the dramatic charges and heroic stands. He'd been tricked: war is none of those things and instead mostly death and destruction. All Burns had seen was the hell on earth.

As 1918 rolled around, everyone knew the war was coming to an end. Germany was starving and the Kaiser was bankrupt. Back home in Canada, we had never stopped recruiting and forming up new Battalions. A few of these Battalions were headed by young, gung-ho Generals who, knowing the war was soon to end and not wanting to miss their chance at the '*Big Show*', were eager to get to the front to prove their worth. These men still had Tennyson's poems fresh in their minds and were daily reading distorted newspaper headlines and stories that always left the realities of war out so as not to distress or demoralize readers at the home front. Sadly, one of these Generals had the idea of rounding up men from the hospital and depot battalions to form up his own Battalion so as to have a chance at winning medals. Encountering men with shell-shock or minor wounds, he sat them down and began to spin his tale, "*You don't want to go home to your parents and have them think you're a nut job, do you?*" / "*What's your girl back home going to think of you returning without honours?*" / "*Don't you see I'm offering you the opportunity to clear your name, your one last chance to become a hero?*" / "*The Germans are broke and in retreat, we're just going in to mop up, there's no real danger.*"

William was deemed physically fit for active duty and headed back to the front with his old battalion, the 75<sup>th</sup>, and others that were sent to the battle of Arras. The war was actually far from over and the Germans were not in retreat but on the contrary preparing one last big push in an effort to end the war just like we were. For seventy-eight days, William survived life at the front while suffering through an absolute hell that I pray none of us will ever know. Arras and '*the last hundred days*' were just as brutal and horrible as the years before in the war. If anything, the Germans were more determined to fight and win. On June 4, 1918 William was in a trench on front-line duty. At some point he simply stood up and went 'over the top', armed only with his bolt-action, single-shot Lee-Enfield MKIII rifle, to charge a German machine-gun position. He took multiple bullet wounds to his chest and upon being retrieved from the field was taken to Clearing Aid Station No. 3 where he succumbed to his wounds. He now rests in the Bagneux British Cemetery in France. There is no Medal of Valour for William, no memorial Crucifix to commemorate him.

Please take a few minutes at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of this 11<sup>th</sup> month to remember young William Patrick Burns and the thousands of others 'un-sung' heroes to give these brave men and women the recognition and honour they so deeply deserve. I'll leave you with a request: To pray for ever lasting peace so we never again send our young men and now women to the horror that is war.

