

Private Thomas Ash (Number 180575) of the 1st Reserve Battalion, Canadian Infantry*, is buried in Victoria (Ross Bay) Cemetery, British Columbia: Grave reference W.SW.44.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *carpenter*, Thomas Ash has left few clues about his emigration from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of British Columbia. All that may be said with any certainty is that by December of 1915, he, his wife and their four children were residing at Number 3249, Pine Street, Coverdale, in the capital city of Victoria, for that is where and when he enlisted.

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It was on December 8, 1915, that Thomas Ash presented himself in Victoria for a medical examination which found him...*fit for the Canadian Over Seas Expeditionary Force*...and also enlisted and attested on that same day. He had already been serving as a soldier in the 88th Regiment (*Victoria Fusiliers*) of the Canadian Militia for five months and was now signing on to serve overseas*.

**Canadian Militia Regiments were, by law, unable to serve outside the borders of the country. However, this did not preclude them from recruiting on behalf of the newly-forming Overseas Battalion into which the majority of the militiamen transferred within months after the Declaration of War.*

The 88th Regiment was one of the few Militia formations which metamorphosed into an Overseas Battalion and retained its numeric designation – the 88th Overseas Battalion (Victoria Fusiliers) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

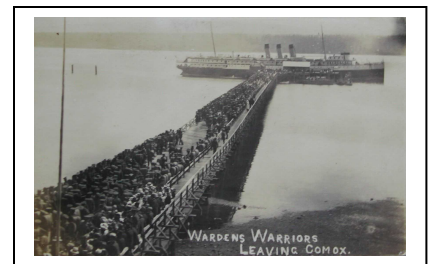
On that same December 8, the formalities of his enlistment were brought to a conclusion when the Commanding Officer of the Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Harold Joseph Rous Cullin declared – on paper – that...*T. Ash...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of the Attestation.*

Where the 88th Battalion underwent its training prior to departure for overseas is unclear. The personnel of the 88th Regiment of 1914 who, upon the onset of the *Great War*, had decided to enlist for foreign service, had spent only three weeks at the Esquimault Dockyards before being taken across the country to the military camp at Valcartier and thence to the United Kingdom.

The majority of the Regiment volunteered to fight and left Victoria in late August, 1914. Those who remained performed guard and other duties, or they signed up into the 88th Battalion when it began to form. A source from the University of Victoria suggests that the primary base for both the Regiment and the Battalion was *Willows Camp* (formerly the *Willows Exhibition* buildings) in Victoria.

It was to be on May 23 of 1916 that some eleven-hundred *all ranks* of the 88th Battalion boarded the steamer *Princess Charlotte* for the short journey from Victoria to the mainland, there to board a train for the long journey across the entire country. It was to take six days in all, the train stopping in many places en route, particularly in the country's capital where it was inspected by the Governor-general, the Duke of Connaught. On May 29 the 88th Battalion arrived in Halifax.

(Right: *The Princess Charlotte on another mission: carrying the 102nd Battalion (Northern British Columbia), the vessel pulls away from the dock at Comox. – from The Story of the 102nd Canadian Infantry Battalion from BC to Baisieux by Sgt. Leonard McLeod Gould, HQ, 102nd Canadians WW1: the photograph donated by Rob Piggott*)



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The 88th Battalion was to take trans-Atlantic passage on board His Majesty's Transport *Olympic* – sister-ship of *Britannic*, to be sunk in November of 1916, and of the ill-fated *Titanic* - and the unit embarked on May 31. The vessel sailed three days later, having taken on board also the 57th, the 89th, the 90th, the 95th and the 99th Battalions of Canadian Infantry – plus, according to a personal journal, an artillery battery from Toronto. The voyage lasted six days, *Olympic* docking in the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool on June 8, 1916.

(Right: *HMT Olympic*, on the right, lies at anchor along with *HMHS Aquitania*, centre, at Mudros Bay in the autumn of 1915. – from a photograph originally from the *Imperial War Museum, London*)



Upon its arrival in the United Kingdom, Private Ash's unit was placed on board a train and transported to the large Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe*, by that time established on the Dover Straits in the county of Kent, and in close proximity to the harbour and town of Folkestone, through which many Canadian troops were to travel to *active service* on the Continent.



(Right above: *Little remains of Shorncliffe Military Camp today apart from a barracks occupied by Gurkha troops. The Military Cemetery almost alone serves as a reminder of the events of a century ago.* – photograph from 1916)

This was not to be the case of the 88th Battalion. Undoubtedly its personnel presumed that the voyage to Liverpool had been the precursor to the Battalion being sent on *active service* to fight on the Western Front, but this was not to be. Many of those soldiers *were* eventually to serve on the Continent, but in other units, and the 88th Battalion was to be dis-banded*.



(Right above: *A view of the coastal town of Folkestone almost a century later as seen from the white cliffs of nearby Dover* – photograph from 2009)

**Before the end of the Great War, Canada was to despatch overseas some two-hundred fifty battalions – although it is true that a number of these units, particularly as the conflict progressed, were below full strength. At the outset, these Overseas Battalions all had presumptions of seeing active service in a theatre of war.*

However, as it transpired, only some fifty of these formations were ever to be sent across the English Channel to the Western Front. By far the majority remained in the United Kingdom to be used as re-enforcement pools and they were gradually absorbed, particularly after January of 1917, by units that had by then been designated as Canadian Reserve Battalions.

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Such was to be the case with the 88th Battalion: its personnel, including Private Ash, was to be transferred and absorbed into the 30th Reserve Battalion on July 18, 1916, only forty days after having disembarked from Olympic.

And Private Ash himself was never to cross the English Channel.

The 30th Reserve Battalion into which he was transferred had also recruited in British Columbia and had been mobilized in Victoria. It had arrived in the United Kingdom prior to the 88th Battalion and had, in April of 1915, been designated as a reserve battalion. It was stationed at *East Sandling*, a coastal subsidiary camp of the *Shorncliffe* complex and was to remain there until it itself was absorbed by the 1st Reserve Battalion in January of 1917.

Such was eventually to be the case with Private Ash, transferred to the 1st Reserve Battalion on January 4 of 1917. However, in the meantime, it appears that he may either have had medical problems or he began an administrative job as, on or about August 8, 1916, he became the responsibility of the CCAC, the Canadian Casualty Assembly Centre* Office at Folkestone**.

****This was a bureaucratic department created in May of 1916 to organize sick and/ or wounded personnel arriving from the Continent for hospitalization, convalescence and rehabilitation in the United Kingdom. It proved not to be very efficient and was disbanded in August of 1917, only sixteen months after its inception.***

*****But he remained On Command with the 30th Reserve Battalion – meaning that it was the 30th Reserve Battalion which was to decide his future.***

As seen above, on January 4, 1917*, Private Ash was one of those absorbed from the 30th Reserve Battalion by the 1st Canadian Reserve Battalion (*British Columbia*) stationed at the time at Dibgate, a further subsidiary camp at *Shorncliffe*.

****The Battalion itself was officially formed on that same day.***

This newly-formed 1st Reserve Battalion was soon on the move and on March 8 of 1917 was ordered to the vicinity of the coastal community of Seaford in the adjacent county of East Sussex. This was also the locale of the British Columbia Regimental Depot to which Private Ash was transferred from the 1st Reserve battalion on May 25, 1917.



(Above right: The community cemetery at Seaford in which are buried a number of Canadian soldiers, including two Newfoundlanders: Frederick Jacob Snelgrove and Ebenezer Tucker – photograph from 2016)

While there is nothing recorded *a propos* the health of Private Ash in his records, it must surely have been recognized by this time that he was not fit for further service overseas or elsewhere. To this end he was sent to the Canadian Discharge Depot at Buxton in the county of Derbyshire...*pending transfer to Canada.*

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Private Ash is documented as having returned to Canada on board HMT *Scandinavian*. The ship departed Liverpool on June 15, 1917, and docked at Québec eight days afterwards, on June 23. His files record him as finally discharged on that June 15, presumably from *overseas service*, as he is then recorded as also having been discharged as medically unfit at Québec on July 17, 1917. Whether this final discharge was attended personally by Private Ash or if it was performed *in absentia* is not recorded.



(Right above: *The image of the SS Scandinavian is from the bing.com/images web-site.*)

On July 10, 1918, less than a year after his ultimate discharge from military service, Thomas Ash was dead. His decease was considered to be a consequence of his war-time activity and the circumstances of his death were reported in the military archives: *Died of Streptoceic (sic) Pneumonia following operation for Cancer of Stomach. Death related to service.*

The son of Richard Ash and Ann(e) Ash of Harbour Grace, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Isabella, Robert-John, William-Henry and to Joseph.

Thomas Ash was also husband to Jennie – to whom he had allotted a monthly fifteen dollars (a second source records twenty dollars) - with whom he had four children: possible Cecil, Eddie, Jennie and Richard.

Thomas Ash had enlisted at the apparent age of forty-four years: date of birth at Harbour Grace, Newfoundland, January 20, 1871 (from attestation papers). However, the Church of England Parish Records cite his birth date as March 7, 1861, some ten years earlier*.

**Which may explain why some records cite him as being fifty-five years of age at the time of his repatriation.*



Private Thomas Ash was entitled to the British War Medal for his overseas service. (He was eligible for it once he left Canada.)

With sincere appreciation to Chief Warrant Officer (ret'd) Wade Greeley for the photographs of Private Ash's tombstone and grave.

The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to criceadam@yahoo.ca. Last updated – January 25, 2023.