

The Great War Remembrance Project

Hugh Megraw

Anyone who has read personal accounts of soldiers of the World Wars will be familiar with the scenario of a young man, not yet old enough to enlist, who lies about his age to enable him to join the Army. Hugh Megraw's story is similar, with one notable exception. When he lied about his age, it was not because he was too young to serve, but because, in fact, he was too old.

Born December 11, 1863, Hugh Megraw was raised on the family farm in Greenock Township, near Paisley. Details of his life published in the Paisley Advocate in December of 1916 showed that he came from a family with a strong military tradition. His father, John Megraw, was a veteran of the Fenian Raids and his brother, Ainsley, was active in the militia, achieving the rank of Major in the 32nd Bruce (County) Regiment. Hugh was also a member of the 32nd, eventually earning the rank of Sergeant Major.

Hugh Megraw was a carpenter by trade, but when he moved to British Columbia in the 1890's he took up mining and prospecting. According to the Paisley Advocate, "....when this war broke out he at once took an active interest in the military preparations. At Brideswell, B.C., he trained the local home guard organized. When these men enlisted for overseas services, their officer desired to do the same, but was turned down."

What inspired him to attempt to re-join the Army? Patriotism undoubtedly was a factor. He may also have wanted to make use of his extensive militia training and offer it when his country needed it most. Whatever his motivation, Hugh Megraw's determination finally resulted in his successful enlistment as a Private in the 102nd Battalion at Kamloops, British Columbia in October, 1915 and shortly thereafter he was drafted into the 54th. His attestation paper listed his age as 44 years and 10 months, barely under the 45 year maximum, but he was actually 51 years old.

Raised in the Kootenay area of British Columbia, the 54th Battalion arrived in England in late 1915. After a period of training in England, the battalion would eventually be transferred to France in August, 1916, as part of the 11th Brigade, 4th Division, Canadian Expeditionary Force. The 54th were given a brief period of familiarization with trench routine and very quickly assumed the normal rotations into the front lines in Belgium.

Moving south in October, the 54th Battalion joined the rest of the Canadian Corps, then in action in the Somme area near Courcelette. The battalion began to do their rotations into the recently won front-line trenches. When rotated out of the line "on rest", members of the

battalion were put to work carrying supplies forward. The shelling of previous battles had obliterated any useable roads, so pack mules and men were used to carry the tons of food, water and ammunition several miles to the front.

The 54th Battalion moved into the front lines again on November 13th. An attack was planned to capture a German position known as Desire Trench. Twice postponed, the attack took place on the November 18th.

The 54th Battalion Diary contains the following summary of the attack on Desire Trench that day.

“Very cold and commenced snowing in early morning, which later turned into rain. The Battalion strength 12 Officers and 500 O.R. assembled for attack on Desire Support Trench in two trenches dug on the night of 17th about 100 yards in front of Regina Trench. Preliminary bombardment, in accordance with daily routine, took place from 5:45 to 6:00 am. Real barrage commenced at 6:10 am. The Battalion moved out from the trenches and formed up close behind the barrage, opening out into 4 waves as the barrage advanced. Rate of advance of barrage, 50 yards every two minutes. The objective, Desire Support Trench, was taken according to program and a line established 100 yards beyond it. Prisoners captured in Desire Support Trench totalled 1 Officer and 51 O.R. (other ranks).

The operation was conducted with great precision and exactly in accordance with orders received, the men showing the greatest intelligence, endurance and courage. During the six days the Battalion was in the line the weather conditions were very trying, four days of very cold weather being followed by snow and rain.

Total casualties:- 2 officers killed, 11 wounded. 42 O.R. killed, 160 wounded, 23 missing.”

The official history of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, written by Colonel G. W. Nicholson, gives some additional details of the attack that day.

“The first snow of the winter fell during the night of 17-18 November, and the operation began shortly after six next morning in blinding sleet which later changed to driving rain. The battle was fought under the worst possible conditions. The infantry, groping their way forward through the freezing mud, had difficulty in identifying their snow-covered objectives and repeatedly lost direction. The wonder is that in circumstances so desperately bad our troops could make any gains at all. What they accomplished is a tribute to their physical stamina, self-sacrifice and dogged determination.”

Hugh Megraw was killed during the attack that day. His Circumstance of Casualty card records the barest details of his death. He was listed as "Killed in Action" with the location given as "Attack on Desire Trench, North of Courcellette".

The attack on Desire Trench was a battle fought on the last day of the disastrous Somme campaign. British Commander, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, called off offensive operations on November 19. British, Commonwealth and French casualties totalled six hundred thousand. German casualties were estimated to be approximately the same.

The following article was published in the Hedley, British Columbia Gazette dated Dec. 7, 1916:

"Mrs. S. E. Hamilton received a telegram stating that her brother, Hugh Megraw, had been killed in action. Deceased was well known in Similkameen and Boundary districts, having lived for a number of years at Camp McKinney. He joined the 54th battalion at Vernon. He was born at Paisley, Bruce County, Ontario, and was 52 years of age. He was in the militia, 32nd battalion, for a number of years, and took a qualifying course at the Kingston Military College. Major Megraw (brother Ainsley) and his sister have the sympathy of many friends in their bereavement."

An editorial appeared in that same issue of the Hedley Gazette. While it didn't name Hugh Megraw specifically, it undoubtedly referred to him and other men like him.

"Thousands of Canadians now at the front, who couldn't be induced to make a misstatement in business, did so in order to have the privilege of fighting for the flag. That is Canada and the Empire. When men between fifty and sixty years of age will enlist as under 45, there is not much fear as to the outcome of the war. Men at that age are not looking for glory or plaudits. They are fighting for something more than praise."

Hugh Megraw is buried in the Adanac Military Cemetery near Miraumont, France. He is commemorated on the Paisley cenotaph and a memorial cairn in the Greenwood area of British Columbia.