

REMEMBERING GREENOCK VETERANS

THOMAS BABCOCK



Thomas Babcock was born in Bruce Township, the son of John and Mary Babcock. His date of birth was January 17, 1896. In 1901, the family was still living in Bruce Township but by 1911, 15 year old Thomas Babcock was living on a farm in the north part of Greenock Township, near Paisley, with his father and three siblings.

In January 1915, Thomas Babcock travelled to Walkerton to enlist. His attestation papers show all of the information that was standard for those forms. His next of kin was listed as his sister, Mrs. Richard McGregor of Paisley. His occupation was listed as labourer. He had spent an unspecified period of time in the Canadian Militia as a bugler. Upon his enlistment, Private Thomas Babcock, A2463, became a member of the 34th Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force.

After a period of initial training, the 1st Reinforcing Draft of the 34th battalion, including Thomas Babcock, sailed for England. The ship was the SS Corsican and it left Montreal on the 19th of June 1915. Shortly after his arrival in England, Thomas Babcock was attached to the 11th Training Battalion at Shorncliffe, in July 1915. He was transferred to France and joined the 1st Battalion (Western Ontario Regiment) in August.

The 1st Battalion was not involved in any major battles during the late summer and fall of 1915 but they continued to do a regular rotation through the trenches in Belgium. Many of the battalion war diary entries describe their time in the lines as “quiet” or sometimes “very quiet”. These terms were relative of course. The unit endured constant sniping, rifle grenade attacks, enemy patrols and frequent devastating artillery bombardments during that time.

Conditions in the trenches varied according to the place and the season. It is a given that the trenches were muddy, vermin infested and cold during the fall and winter months. Trench conditions were not often mentioned in the battalion war diary except for an entry in the in November 1915. The trenches occupied by the 1st battalion were described as “very wet, with up to 3 ft. of water in places”. The time spent in the front line could be monotonous, cold and very dangerous. An anonymous soldier once described his time in the trenches as “90% bored stiff, 9% frozen stiff and 1% scared stiff”. This sentiment was likely shared by the men of the 1st Battalion.

New Year’s Eve 1916 found the 1st Battalion in the front lines near Wulverghem, Belgium. That night, there was an incident that was very uncommon at the front. The 1st Brigade (1st Battalion and 3 other battalions formed the 1st Brigade) diary described the situation. “Enemy tried to make truce. New Year’s greeting shouted across to us.” The 1st battalion Intelligence Report also described the situation. “Enemy showed signs of wanting to patch up a truce last night, calling over at us and putting lights on his parapet.” Apparently, the battalion was in no mood for a truce as the diarist goes on to state. “We answered with rifle fire”.

Private Thomas Babcock was granted nine days leave to England on January 10, 1916. A few days after his return to the 1st Battalion he was reassigned to the 46th Trench Mortar Battery. The 46th was a unit of the 1st Canadian Division as was the 1st Battalion. The typical trench mortar battery consisted of the commanding officer, four section officers and 60 other ranks to look after up to eight mortars.

Trench mortars were developed by the British early in WW1 to counter the devastating effect of the German equivalent, the minenwerfer. A trench mortar was a particularly effective weapon because its high trajectory allowed the mortar bomb, with careful aiming and a little luck, to drop directly into an enemy trench. Trench mortars were often used to bombard positions that were suspected of harbouring enemy machine guns or snipers. Sometimes they were used to harass enemy positions and prevent supplies and reinforcements from reaching the front lines.

The trench mortar’s effectiveness guaranteed a quick response from German artillery when its position was discovered. For this reason it has been reported that the average infantryman knew that when trench mortars were set up in his immediate area, he could count on plenty of attention from the enemy. Both sides were always anxious to locate a Trench Mortar and have their artillery destroy it. To avoid that fate Trench Mortars changed positions often. Some Allied troops reportedly referred to their Trench Mortar Battery’s as the “shoot and scoot mob”. To the infantry, left behind to endure the retaliatory artillery bombardment, it can be assumed that they had other, less polite terms to describe them.

The diary for the 46th TMB (Trench Mortar Battery) starts in January 1916 and describes the day to day routine of the battery. An interesting entry from February 17 illustrates the work done by the battery and reveals a sense of humour in the author. "Fired four bombs at mound N36 d 5 ½.2. All bombs fell on target and did considerable damage. They also seemed to annoy (sic) enemy and he was distinctly peevisish for some time after".

Tom Babcock had a brother, Andrew, who was also serving in Belgium & France with the 18th Battalion. Andrew wrote a letter home in April 1916 that was published in the Paisley Advocate on May 3, 1916. In that letter he talks about his recent transfer to the Transport Section of his battalion. The danger posed by German whiz-bang and coal box artillery shells is also discussed ("if they light anywhere near a fellow they have a very uplifting effect"). He also talks about meeting his brother, Tom. "I saw Tom the other day. He has moved up a little closer to us now, in fact he is only about a mile from here. He is looking his old self yet. I think he has grown about two inches since he came out here. Suppose you heard that he transferred to the trench mortar battery. All the other boys are hearty, as far as I know. Andrew"

Thomas Babcock rejoined the 1st battalion shortly before they returned to the front line trenches at Mount Sorrel, Belgium. The battalion was attacked on the 26th after two mines were exploded in adjacent trenches. The attack was successfully repulsed but the battalion still suffered 50 casualties during that action. The 28th of April was a fine bright day. It was noted in the battalion war diary that the artillery was very active all afternoon but became quiet after 10:00 pm. The casualties suffered or details of events were not recorded in the diary but Thomas Babcock was killed that day. His Circumstance of Casualty report simply states "Killed in Action, 28 April 1916".

Andrew Babcock, in another letter published in the Paisley Advocate, fills in some of the details of his brother's death. The letter was dated May 24th and was sent from Belgium. The article states that Tom Babcock was killed instantly by shrapnel which struck him in the head. It goes on to quote Andrew Babcock. "Poor Tom had been sent back to the battalion before the 1st went back to the trenches. He was a good brave little fellow, and a brother to be proud of, as he did his duty without a murmur. I got this from the boys of his company, also from the trench mortar battery. He was also very popular with both the men of the battery and the 1st Battalion. I went to the 1st Battalion headquarters to find out where he is buried, and have got the map location of same, so I will be able to find it any time, providing, of course, that the Germans don't make an advance over that part of the ground and destroy the crosses, but I think that is very unlikely to happen. Poor fellow is buried in the same grave with 28 of his comrades, and I know that he would rather die for the good old Union Jack than for any other cause. Although we will miss him very much, yet we have the satisfaction of knowing that he has done his duty as a man and as a Canadian."

Thomas Babcock is buried at the Sanctuary Wood British cemetery, 5km east of Ypres, Belgium. He is commemorated on the Paisley Cenotaph and the Greenock Memorial plaque at the Bradley Community Centre. Thomas Babcock was 20 years old.