

## George Whitford Nelson Video Transcription

AT2023.013.008

“We are just finishing up a turn in Reserve and will be back in the trenches soon. The shells and guns get to be such a daily occurrence that we think nothing of it. We had several big shells dropped on a village where we are quartered. They certainly make us all skip when they commence to drop and if a shell, which I think is coming directly to me, comes over me, I am going to dive for the first ditch whether it has water in it or not, Ha Ha.” Words of Major George Whitford Nelson, November 21, 1915, from Belgium.

My name is Cadet Corporal Sarah Elliott from the Royal Canadian Air Cadets, 340 Griffin Squadron.

Approximately 2,000 Bruce County men and woman enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force during the First World War. Over 650 did not come home or died later of wounds sustained in the course of duty. This is the story of George Whitford Nelson.

He was born in Elsinore in 1884 to farmers Sam and Sarah Ann Nelson. After public school, he attended Business College, and then went on to take military courses designed to train officers for the militia. He moved to Toronto and worked as an accountant at a brick factory.

George served as a Captain and Commanding Officer with the 32nd Regiment for 15 years before enlisting in the First World War on November 7, 1914. Because of his military experience, he was quickly promoted to Major with the 2nd Canadian Division of the 18<sup>th</sup> Battalion.

He sailed from Halifax on April, 18, 1915 on the SS Grampian and was stationed in Belgium by September. His letter written a month later on October 28, 1915 gives a hint of what he experienced on the front lines: “We are resting out of the trenches at a little village behind lines. We have had it pretty steady since we came over and I can afford a little rest. I am billeted at a Belgium home and for the second time since leaving England I have been in a real bed.”

In a January 1916 letter, he tells his friends how much he and his men appreciated receiving their box items, including socks. He said: “Dry socks are the main thing over here. You see the trenches are so wet that with the continual standing and walking in wet trenches and mud and water that the men get what they call trench feet. ... It takes an awful lot of looking after. The officers personally see that each man washes his feet in cold water and rubs grease on them.” He went on to explain in detail the system they had devised for washing and drying socks.

On February 14, 1916, George's hand was shattered by an artillery shell bursting nearby. He was hurled several feet and knocked unconscious by the concussion of the blast. He returned to England to get well, but his wound became infected and healed very slowly.

In March 1916, his wife, Edna, and two young children braved the Atlantic by ship to travel to England to be with George while he recovered. This was a daring act for the young family as just four months before, the hospital ship SS Anglia sunk after striking a mine laid by a German U-boat.

Although away from the front lines, they could still hear them. In a letter to her sister-in-law on June 29, 1916, Edna said: "Since Sunday, we can distinctly hear the sound of the British guns in France and Belgium. They have kept up a steady pound ..."

In the spring of 1916, George went back to the front line to the dismay of Edna. However, after only a week his hand started swelling and he was unable to complete his duties. In a letter home dated May 28, 1916 he wrote: "I was foolish to go in so soon. So I've made up my mind to get good and well this time."

Nevertheless, recovery whilst on medical leave proved to be frustrating for George and he voiced in a June 21, 1916 letter, that "I will get lots of fighting yet. I don't think I would be satisfied if I were back in Canada. I want to stay and see the finish."

Despite his strong will and determination, George was eventually struck off strength in September 1916 and sailed home to Canada. He was re-taken on strength in August 1917 and was assigned Deputy Adjutant and Quartermaster General at the headquarters for the Military District Depot No. 1 in London, Ontario. He also assisted with the recruitment of new soldiers. He spent at least three months recruiting in the Bruce County district in 1917. The Southampton Beacon newspaper reported that between 60 and 70 recruits were secured during that time.

In April 1918, George was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel. He was officially discharged from duty on November 15, 1919, on general demobilization. He was awarded the 1914-15 Star for his service during the early campaign of the First World War.

George Whitford Nelson's legacy endures through the letters he wrote and many photographs he took of the places he served and the soldiers he fought beside whilst abroad. It was clear from Nelson's photographs and letters that he valued being a part of the front-line action and overseeing his men.

Nelson's lengthy service record and multiple military appointments also show his determination, loyalty, dedication, to his country. We thank you, and we salute you.