

Herbert and Iden Leeder Video Transcription

AT2023.013.011

“I am sitting several feet below the level of the ground and using my water bottle as a writing desk, and for music the whine and bursting of the shells. How’s that? Well we don’t mind it unless they land to close and that not very often.” Words of Herbert Leeder, September 7, 1918, in France.

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

Approximately 2,000 Bruce County men and woman enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Over 650 did not come home or died later from wounds sustained in the course of duty. This is the story of brothers Herbert and Iden Leeder.

Herbert and Iden Leeder were born in Saugeen Township and helped their parents work on the family farm. They were two of at least 125 soldiers from Bruce County drafted to the war under the Military Service Act.

The act became law on August 29, 1917 and required men between the ages of 20 and 45 to join the military if asked to do so. This was called “the draft” and “conscription.”

Men whose farms needed them to plant and harvest crops could apply for an exemption from mandatory military service, although it was not always given. Herbert Leeder had to make the tough decision of answering the call of duty or applying for an exemption.

His family were devoted church members with an aversion to the War. Herbert found himself torn between his sense of civic responsibility and his religious beliefs. He eventually enlisted in London, Ontario on January 8, 1918, and would soon join the 1st Depot Battalion. He first trained in London, and by early March he was in England, stationed at Bramshott Camp and later at Witley Camp for training.

In a letter dated May 3, 1918 to his parents, he expressed his internal struggles:

“I did not really want to come but thought that one of us would have to. But I was wrong and you don’t know how sorry I am for it. ...I am praying that the Lord sees fit that he will allow me to come back to you again.”

Herbert’s older brother Arthur Iden Leeder was also drafted, and he enlisted on the same date as his brother. Iden, however, did not have to go to England until several months after his brother, in the summer of 1918.

Meanwhile, Herbert continued to write home. In a letter dated June 23rd, he writes:

“My, if I only could have realized the value of church services sooner. No one knows what it is to be here and see evil of every description and think of what I left. I know it is my own fault. I certainly see things in a different way than I did... I now realize... too late what the church means. It is everything. ...I hope that I have not brought discredit upon the church with what I have done.”

However, Herbert remained committed and completed his training by June 1918. By late August he was transferred to the 31st Battalion and was stationed in France. He continued his correspondence. Instead of focusing on negative war experiences, he often wrote about the beauty of the French countryside, which reminded him of Bruce County farmland. He also commented on the techniques and old-fashioned equipment French farmers used to harvest crops compared to what he was used to back home.

On August 17 the brothers briefly reunited in England at Witley Camp, with Herbert writing “Just a half day, but of course that was better than not at all.” Herbert’s last letter home to his family was dated September 25, 1918 from France. He closed it with, “I am feeling fine and hope you are all the same.”

At 0900 hours on October 11, 1918 the 31st Battalion started their offensive campaign in the Battle of Iwuy. They encountered heavy enemy fire before even reaching Iwuy village. Herbert Leeder was one of six soldiers of the 31st Canadian Battalion that was killed in action that day. Herbert is buried in the Niagara Cemetery in Iwuy, France.

From Iden’s diary, we learn that he heard of his brother’s death over a month later on November 20th.

Iden himself remained at Witley Training Camp and was never sent to the front lines. Although the armistice was signed on November 11, 1918, Iden did not return home to Bruce County until nine months later in August 1919. This was due to the challenges of transporting so many people back to Canada after the war.

To sustain morale, the military promoted physical training, organized sports, and recreational activities. It also expanded Khaki College, established in 1917, to offer educational courses

to convalescing and idle troops. Iden attended a Khaki College agriculture course beginning in December 1918.

Over 24,000 conscripted Canadian men were sent to France to execute a continuous series of offensives by Allied troops which led to several successes in the final campaign of the First World War, known as the Hundred Days.

Herbert and Iden Leeder are an example of the courageous commitment that many Bruce County families showed, sacrificing, and serving, fighting, and dying, for our freedom. We thank you, and we salute you.