

John Denison

Admiral
Royal Navy
1853 – 1939



Bertram Denison

Lieutenant
King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry
1883 - 1914

A father and son's story of duty and sacrifice

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Foreword

As a member of the Rusholme branch of the Denison family, I have always been interested in the role the Denisons played in early Canadian history. Much has been written about the Denisons and their place in early Toronto military and social life.

This is especially true about the first three George Taylor Denisons, Admiral John Denison (brother of George Taylor Denison III) and his son Bertram Noel Denison. It is not clear why the Admiral (we will refer to him as “John”) broke with family tradition and entered naval life serving in Her Majesty’s Royal Navy. His colourful career took him to the far corners of the earth in addition to personally serving the Royal Family.

Canada did not have a formal navy in the latter half of the nineteenth century and wanting a life at sea, it seemed natural for the family to push John into Britain’s Royal Navy which at the time was the most powerful on earth and obligated to provide maritime defence on both Canadian coastlines and indeed in the Great Lakes as well.

The war of 1812 between Canada and the United States ended with a stalemate. Canadian military leaders and politicians remained wary of their southern neighbour’s expansionism and military power for many years after, thus relying on the Royal Navy for security. Canada would not achieve formal nationhood through confederation for another fourteen years after John’s birth and remained virtually defenceless in her own right until early in the twentieth century.

The following story traces John’s spectacular career as the first Canadian to fly an Admiral’s pennant in the Royal Navy and his son’s attempt to follow in his father’s footsteps. As fate would have it, this was not to be!

Bertram suffered and died in France where he is buried. He is also memorialized on the cenotaph in St. John’s Cemetery in Toronto. His father, the Admiral died peacefully near Portsmouth, England on March 9, 1939 where he is buried. There is a unique carved memorial stone, commemorating him and his wife in our cemetery which has fascinated me for many years.

I would encourage you to reflect on the life and times of this famous father and son and proudly share this story with children and grand-children.

Timothy Martin

(Great, great, great nephew of John Denison)

About Admiral John Denison

Admiral John Denison was born into privilege at the family home “Rusholme” in Toronto on May 25th 1853, and entered the Royal Navy as a cadet on *HMS Britannia* at Dartmouth, England at the age of thirteen.



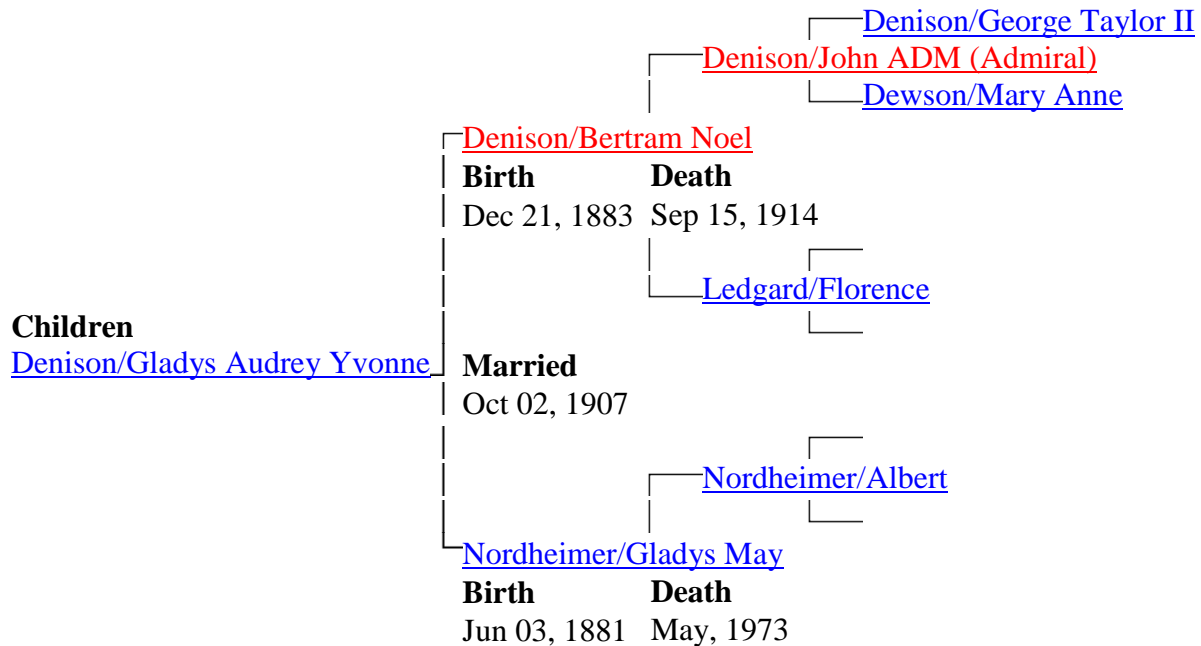
Denison Brothers – John is front row, right

He was a brother of George Taylor Denison III who at one time was a colourful police magistrate of the city of Toronto.

The Denisons were a prominent family for many years in Toronto and many are buried in St. John’s Cemetery on the Humber in Weston – an early village, now part of the present day City of Toronto.

In 1878, he married Miss Florence Ledgard, of Ellar Close, Roundhay, Yorkshire, and had a family of three sons and two daughters. His son Bertram Noel Denison, served in the Royal Navy and later as a

Lieutenant in the British army with the King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry.



John Denison's life at Sea

Following the Denison family tradition, John attended Upper Canada College (UCC) at the tender age of nine in 1862 and left in 1867. He was remembered in the March 1908 edition of the *Busy Man's Magazine* as "*a bright, merry lad*". It is not clear why he ended up on a different path of service from the rest of his family and entered the Royal Navy as a cadet.

In his book *The Denison Family of Toronto*, David Gagan reports that "*John had to be pushed into the Royal Navy and the British government had to be begged to take him in as a midshipman*". Regardless, John's career spanned the globe with interesting and varied postings. Serving in the Royal Navy however meant that he spent little time in Canada but did visit whenever possible while on duty and between training and postings.

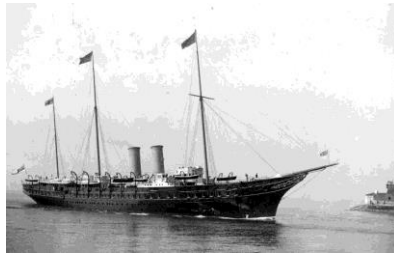
Highlights of his naval career:

- 1867 Naval Cadet, Royal Navy aboard the *Britannia*
- 1867 Training aboard *HMS Aurora*
- 1869 Appointed Midshipman
- 1873 Appointed sub-lieutenant, RN
- 1878 Appointed lieutenant, RN
- 1891 Appointed Commander, RN
- 1893 Served as Commander of the Royal Yacht *Victoria and Albert II* until 1896
- 1896 Appointed Captain, RN
- 1901 Commanded *HMS Niobe*
- 1903 Commanded the Battleship *Montagu* in the Mediterranean
- 1904 Appointed Superintendent, Pembroke Dockyard
- 1905 Appointed Aide de Camp to King Edward VII
- 1906 Appointed Rear Admiral
- 1908 Appointed Commanding Officer, Home Fleet
- 1913 Appointed Vice-Admiral, RN
- 1914 Retired, then mobilized for WWI service
- 1914 Appointed temporary captain, *HM Yacht Marynthea*
- 1916 Appointed temporary commodore, RN Reserve
- 1917 Awarded Distinguished Service Order (DSO)
- 1917 Appointed Senior Naval Officer, East coast of Ireland
- 1919 Demobilized from active service

Over a period of fifty years of service advancing his career, John served on no less than thirty-two Royal Navy ships stationed from the South Seas to China and the Mediterranean and witnessed a naval arms race between Britain, Germany and France. Four postings are of particular interest:

- In 1869, he briefly served on the *Victory* which years earlier had been Lord Nelson's famous flagship in the Battle of Trafalgar.
- In 1871, while serving on the *Agincourt*, he survived a near-sinking as the ship had run aground.
- In 1874, while serving on the *Tamar* he managed to avoid food poisoning from a bad pigeon pie which felled many other crew members.

- As commander of the Royal Yacht *Victoria and Albert II* during the years 1893 to 1895 he went with the Duke of Connaught - who was representing the Queen - to St. Petersburg, Russia to attend the coronation of the new Czar. (The duke later became the Governor General of Canada). The Duke then took John with him to Moscow. On the return voyage, John accompanied the duke to Stockholm, where they were entertained by the King of Sweden.



As he rose to more senior ranks he earned the respect of his superior officers and was mentioned in dispatches and reports such as:

- May 1893 Rear Admiral Seymour reported on Commander John Denison stated that ...*"He has a great command of his temper and might be especially useful in some service requiring unusual nicety of manner and self-restraint. ..."*
- Sep 1904 Admiral Douville commented on Captain John Denison thus ...*"a very good and steady officer, physically strong, well worldly [sic] of advancement"*.
- Jun 1917 Admiral John Denison D.S.O. was mentioned in Admiralty dispatches...*"He has done his work excellently at Kingstown, and brought his Station to a high state of efficiency"*.

John's career as a senior naval officer could not have been easy. Between appointments, his salary was cut in half and for extended periods of time he was separated from his wife and family. He was even sanctioned by the Admiralty and a board of enquiry for a safety violation that resulted in the accidental death of one of his crew members.



John Denison – early years

On top of all this he had to navigate his way through the frustrating bureaucracy as a “colonial” in a rigid class-based service steeped in tradition which was evolving from wooden warships to a more modern steam-powered steel fleet.

Somehow, throughout his busy career and world travels, John managed to marry Florence Ledgard in 1878 and they had five children, the first-born surviving less than a month. Bertram Noel Denison was born in 1883 in Scotland. His short but tragic career will be discussed later.

John, his wife and two daughters visited Toronto in the summer of 1907 for the wedding of his son Bertram at St. James Cathedral where he was described in society papers as “Gentleman John” and being:

“One of the most courtly and considerate of men. Of engaging manner, and possessing a quiet, jovial nature, he at once finds a warm place in the hearts of all who come in contact with him, either in a social way or in the discharge of his official duties”

It appears that John's social standing and skills played a large part in his steady advancement through the ranks of the Royal Navy where he was respected by all – even deserters!

John was officially retired just prior to WWI, and in the 1920s and 30s he and his wife travelled back and forth from England to Canada via steamship. On one of his visits, John came to Muskoka Lake and purchased an island in 1925 near the rest of the Denisons and built a modest cottage.



John and Florence Denison

He named it “Firebrand” after a gunboat he commanded in China while in the Royal Navy. In addition he acquired a launch for access purposes to the island and named it the “Firequeen”.

There is a great story which has been passed down through the family about John and his launch. It goes something like this:

One day the Admiral was visiting Heydon Island in his launch, the Firequeen. He accidentally shifted the boat into forward gear as he was docking and managed to cause some damage to the dock. My father (John Hamilton Martin) witnessed this as a small boy and was sent to retrieve the broken boards set afloat. This caused much consternation and embarrassment for the poor admiral!

My Grandmother, Mary Eileen Macklem often repeated this story saying the whole family breathed a sigh of relief when her great uncle - the Admiral, retired before WWI as the Royal Navy was critical to the defence of Great Britain.

John's wife Florence died in 1936 followed by John in Alverstock, near Portsmouth, England on March 9, 1939 where they are buried.



Many streets in Toronto are named after the Denisons and their family homes (Denison, Bellevue, Rusholme etc...). In the centre of Toronto, Admiral Road honours our very own admiral - John Denison, D.S.O.

This is the memorial stone for John and Florence at St. John's Cemetery on the Humber, Weston, Ontario.

About Bertram Noel Denison

By now you are wondering about Bertram and his role in this story. He was born in 1883 in Greenock, Scotland so technically was not a Torontonion or Canadian. However, because of his lineage he is informally considered a Toronto hero.

In 2014 on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of WWI, The Toronto Star wrote an extensive article about Bertram. In it, the article describes Bertram and his relationship with his famous father:

“As a 5-year-old, the boy was already dreaming of following in the footsteps of his father.

In a touching letter — a treasured possession of Bertram Denison’s granddaughter Jocelyn Davidson-Arnott — written from HMS Firebrand in Shanghai, John Denison responds to his son’s ambitions, having learned about them in a Christmas note from home.

“Mother tells me you would like to be a sailor someday,” John writes. “If so, you will have to study very hard as the examinations are so difficult and you also must be very kind to your little sister. Sailors are always kind to girls. You see, they are not so [sic] strong as boys.”

Bertram attended Eagle House Preparatory School in Sandhurst, England and later as a 13-year-old he attend Harrow School in northwest London, where he wrote his examinations to become a cadet on HMS Britannia. Bertram passed with the top marks, receiving a score of 1,987 out of a possible 2,250. He was also 500 points ahead of the next best entrant. Quite an achievement considering he was suffering from scarlet fever at the time!



Bertram Noel Denison

At sixteen, Bertram was serving as a midshipman on the *HMS Doris*. This was at the outbreak of the second Boer War in South Africa in 1899.

Britain like other colonial powers had claimed possession of vast territories in Africa. The Second Boer War (1899 – 1902) was fought between the British Empire and two independent Boer states, the South African Republic (Republic of Transvaal) and the Orange Free State. The root cause of the war was the discovery of diamonds and gold in these Boer states.

Bertram served with honour and his naval record reports that he was *“recommended for advancement when qualified”*.

However at about this time while at sea, Bertram suffered terribly from seasickness. It was an ironic turn for this promising young officer and forced him to leave the navy. In 1902, he transferred to the British army. This would prove to be a disastrous choice as casualties in the army were much higher than in the navy during the Great War.

In 1906, Bertram was sent to Toronto as a lieutenant in the fledgling Canadian forces and was an infantry instructor. That same year, he commanded troops sent to Hamilton, Ontario to help quell an uprising during a streetcar strike.

The rest of the pre-war years in Toronto consisted of social engagements such as tea parties, dinners and dances. Bertram's striking good looks and fluency in French and Italian coupled with his family's connections ensured a steady stream of invitations and interest from young women.



Gladys May Nordheimer

On October 2nd, 1907, Bertram married 26 year old Gladys May Nordheimer whom he had met through a fellow officer in his regiment. It must have been one of the highlights of Toronto's social calendar.*

The ceremony was held at St. James Cathedral complete with extensive floral decorations, nine bridesmaids and a detachment of soldiers. His father (Admiral John Denison), mother and two sisters travelled from England to attend. It is interesting to note that Gladys descended from Jewish immigrants yet was married in a high Anglican service.

Married life in early Toronto was pleasant for Bertram who lived in the posh district of Rosedale while employed as an infantry instructor at the Stanley Barracks in what is now the Toronto Exhibition grounds.

A year later Bertram returned to England and rejoined the 2nd Battalion, King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, which for some time was stationed in Ireland. It is not clear if Gladys travelled with him at that time but she was definitely in England in December, 1908 for the birth of their daughter Gladys Audrey Yvonne Denison (we will refer to her as "Yvonne") in London.



**Gladys' father, Albert Nordheimer was a famous music dealer, publisher and piano manufacturer in Toronto. The Glen Edyth drive and Nordheimer ravine names all trace back to Gladys's family roots. My parent's house was located on Boulton Drive built next to the ravine which flooded in Hurricane Hazel killing 81 Torontonians in 1954. The ravine was later buried in the mid 1970's as part of the Spadina subway construction and is now a walking park.*

Life was good for the “gentleman soldier” but there were war clouds forming on the horizon and the whole world as he knew it would change.

Bertram happened to be in Canada in 1914 and family lore suggests that when Britain declared war on Germany he was staying on the Denison-owned Beachgrove Island in Muskoka building footpaths. Upon hearing the news, he lay down his tools and promptly left to rejoin his regiment in Ireland. Such was the sense of duty to King and Country engrained in all the “Fighting Denisons”.

Bertram and the War

Initially assigned to the war office, he quickly left with his regiment as it was being sent to France. The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was tasked to reinforce the French army on the western front which was being pushed back to the outskirts of Paris by the superior German forces.

The battle of Mons was a shocking British defeat with 1,600 British soldiers killed. The inexperienced BEF was forced to withdraw under fire and the way seemed clear for the German army to enter Paris. British high command ordered a last stand at Le Cateau to slow the German advance.

The slaughter continued on August 26th at Le Cateau with 7,812 British soldiers killed, wounded and missing. Bertram’s regiment alone suffered 600 casualties and Bertram himself was gravely wounded in the head as he manned a machine gun while being over-run by the Germans.

Surrounded by dead men, horses and the carnage of war, Bertram lay blinded and mortally wounded for more than a day in the late summer heat and mud until German forces took him prisoner and delivered him to a nearby church. A few days later he was moved to a makeshift hospital called L’Ecole des Filles. A German doctor operated on him and attempted to remove the bullet - but it had entered behind his left ear and could not be removed.

During his stay and recovery, Bertram - while in pain insisted that his dose of morphine be given to a terribly wounded gunner lying next to him. This earned the admiration and respect of the French nurses who thought he would survive but eventually tetanus set in and he died later on September 15, 1914.

At first it was assumed that Bertram died on August 26th the day of the battle and upon hearing the news Bertram’s father, Admiral John Denison sent a cable to his brother George Taylor Denison III saying “*Bertram killed in action*”. This news was reported in the Toronto Star as “*Toronto’s first victim of War*”. Eventually, the war would take some 3,000 Torontonians.

Due to limited communications and the fog of war, the Star article proved to be premature and confusion ensued as to Bertram's rank, regiment and date of death. He was even rumoured to be a prisoner of war.

After the war, Bertram's parents (John and Florence) travelled to Le Cateau, visited their son's grave and toured the battlefield. The Star article reports that in a letter to Bertram's widow dated Sept. 26, 1919, John Denison describes the war-torn countryside around Le Cateau as being *"in an awful state"* with *"no undamaged trees most being cut down or shot away."* He went on to describe the *"miles and miles of wire entanglements and dumps of stores, projectiles, occasional wired-in enclosures for prisoners."*

Bertram's parents were then taken to the school where he died. A woman named H el ene Casbille, who had tended to Bertram told the couple that *"his left eye was blackened but that he was not at all disfigured, that he was not paralyzed and could talk very well, was cheerful and pleased with the cakes that they brought him. They knew he was seriously wounded but when he had lasted for nine days after the operation, they began to hope he might recover, but tetanus set in and he died of it."*

This eye-witness account must have provided a small degree of comfort to the grieving parents.

Bertram was later re-buried by the Germans in Le Cateau Communal Cemetery in front of Row B, Plot III along with almost 700 other commonwealth soldiers.



Le Cateau Communal Cemetery



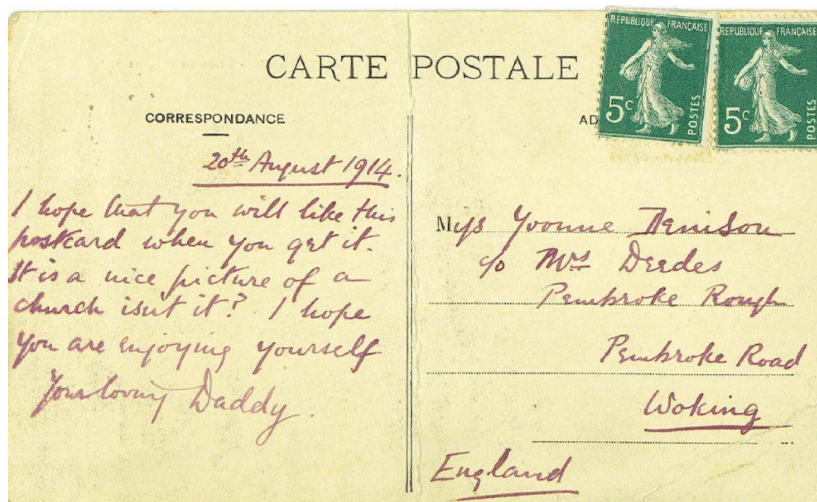
Bertram Denison's Headstone

Epilogue

In this 'war to end all wars' millions of soldiers were killed, wounded or missing. The devastation wreaked upon families on both sides of the conflict was profound and long-lasting. Bertram's death was no exception. John and Florence could not have taken comfort in the press attention he received as "Toronto's first victim of War".

He died at the age of thirty having been married only seven years and left behind a five year old daughter. His father and mother had to live with the loss of their son for twenty-five years.

Bertram's granddaughter, Jocelyn Davidson-Arnott kept this touching postcard of a church in France sent by Bertram to his five year old daughter Yvonne in England. It was dated August 20, 1914 - six days before he was shot.



The postcard, signed "Your loving daddy" was saved by a French civilian.

It was delivered to Yvonne late in 1918 after the war when she would have been only nine years old.

Yvonne grew up never really knowing her father.

Bertram's widow remarried in 1925 to Lieutenant Colonel Frederick George William Draffen DSO, MBE and lived out her life in England. She died in 1973 being 92 years old.

Bertram's daughter married Lieutenant Commander Archibald Frank Davidson-Arnott in 1941, had two children and died in 2008 being six months shy of 100 years old.

Acknowledgements

- The roll of pupils of Upper Canada College, Toronto: January 1830 to June 1916 by Archibald Hope Young
- The Busy Man's Magazine: March 1908 edition, Maclean Hunter Publishing Company – from Cadet to Rear Admiral
- The Denison Family of Toronto 1792-1925 by David Gagan
- Muskoka Recollections 1870 - 1985 by Shelagh Kirkpatrick Bowden
- The Commonwealth War Graves Commission
- Nauticapedia, Wikipedia, Wikitree
- The Toronto Star
- <http://www.commodoretrust.org.uk/1904Dennison.html>
- Jocelyn Davidson-Arnott - Bertram Noel Denison's grand-daughter
- Shelagh Bowden, Ned Martin, Nick Macklem – family members
- Justice Robert Main - Retired and genealogist