

# George Taylor Denison IV

From bikes to bombs

1869 - 1917

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## Forward

*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 early Denisons and their place in early Toronto military and social life. This is especially true about the first three George Taylor Denisons. Less has been written about George Taylor Denison IV (lower left- hand corner below) who seemed to live in the shadow of his famous father – GTD III.*

*What motivated this forty-six year old man to leave his family at the outbreak of the Great War and heed the call? Was it a sense of duty or a chance for adventure in a far off land? Perhaps he felt the need to earn his father's approval and carry on the tradition of "The fighting Denisons" and take his rightful place in history.*



*As GTD IV was a senior officer in the fledgling Canadian military, there are plenty of official records available for study so the following story is about a middle aged man who felt it necessary to walk away from a privileged and comfortable life in small town Toronto and do his duty for King and Empire.*

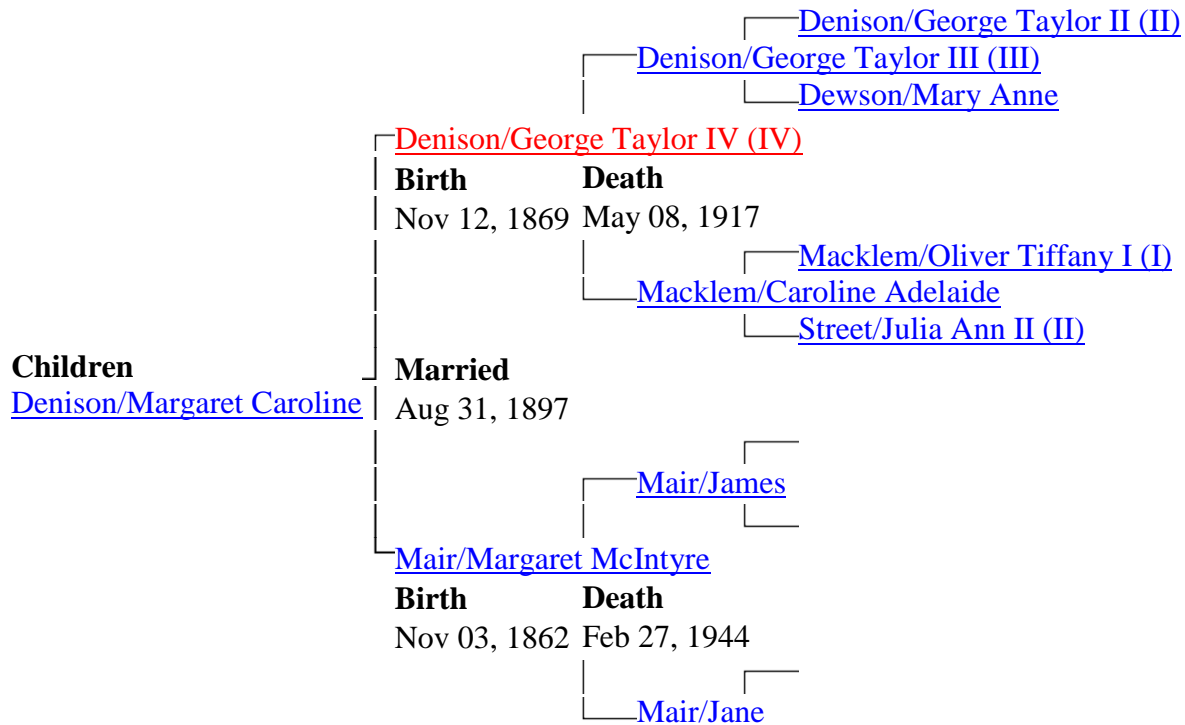
*Sadly, while he fought and survived the carnage of VIMY Ridge, he died along with his fellow officers and men and is buried in France. He is remembered at the Law Society of Upper Canada, Upper Canada College, St. James Cathedral in downtown Toronto and on the Cenotaph in St. John's Cemetery on the Humber in Weston, Ontario.*

*After reading this story, ask yourself; at forty-six years of age, would I voluntarily leave my law practice, wife and a fourteen year-old daughter to enlist for service overseas, on a bicycle?*

*I would encourage you to reflect on his life and times and proudly share it with children and grand-children.*

## About George Taylor Denison IV

Born on November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1869 in Welland, Ontario, George Taylor Denison IV was married to Margaret McIntyre Denison (nee Mair) and had one daughter. He was the son of Carolyn Adelaide Macklem and George Taylor Denison III, one-time police magistrate of the city of Toronto and winner of an award granted by the Czar of Russia for his book “*A history of cavalry from the earliest times, with lessons for the future*”.



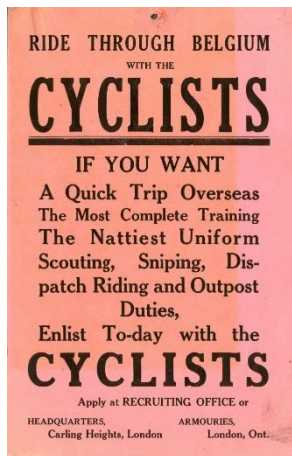
GTD IV was a member of a prominent Toronto family and following family tradition, he attended Upper Canada College (UCC) in Toronto from 1880 to 1888. Again, following tradition, he was commissioned as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the Governor-General's Body Guard in December 1889. He served for twenty years achieving the rank of Major at the outbreak of the Great War.

The family had strong ties to the Canadian and British militaries going back at least three generations. His direct ancestors had served in the War of 1812 and in every major conflict in British North America (later Canada) after that. Starting in 1822, they had served as officers (and often the commanding officer) of a voluntary cavalry troop founded by his great-grandfather, George Taylor Denison. Originally called Denison's Troop, this unit later became the Governor General's Body Guard and much later was renamed the Governor General's Horse Guards.

After leaving UCC, GTD IV went on to law school and later divided his time between practicing law at the firm of Denison, Miller and Livingston in Toronto and the Governor General's Body Guard militia unit (GGBG). He was also a member of the Canadian Military Institute and on summer weekends he would often attend family gatherings at Heydon Island on Lake Muskoka.

On August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1914 Britain declared war on Germany. At the time, Canada was obligated to also declare war. Canada quickly responded with the formation of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) which was made up of 111 infantry battalions containing many existing militia units such as the GGBG. Due to his extensive experience, GTD IV was requested by the military authorities to command the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division Cyclist Corps which had been initially formed at Toronto and Halifax in October 1914. He was commissioned as a Lieutenant Colonel on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1914.

With hindsight, the thought of men marching off to the carnage and horrible conditions of trench warfare half-way around the world with bicycles seems ludicrous



and a holdover from Victorian thinking. But at the time, most nations had embraced this recent technology as a way of promoting rapid movement of couriers and carrying out administrative tasks close to the action of modern warfare. It was also viewed as being more cost efficient and humane than relying on horses although our four legged friends were still used extensively as beasts of burden in WW1 and suffered terribly.

This poster is typical of the recruiting effort across Canada for what was portrayed as a somewhat romantic jaunt through picturesque French and Belgium country-sides. Men were sought as *"possessing more than average intelligence and a high standard of education"*.

It should be noted that the use of bicycles continued even throughout WW2 as well. Canadian troops landing on Juno Beach in 1944 often carried bicycles with them – some were collapse-able and there is a sculpture at Juno Beach made up of some of these technological, then modern-day marvels.

On December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1914 GTD IV attended a medical exam in Toronto and was described as blue-eyed, dark hair, 5'7" tall with fibrous veins on his left shoulder and a mole on his right shoulder blade. Although considered relatively old for active service, he was found to be fit and was formally attested on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1914.

Throughout the spring of 1915, the corps was equipped and trained for deployment. The Toronto Star wrote:

*"The unit which uses a green bicycle, a color which tends to make the machines invisible to the eye at a remarkably short distance, became well known to Torontonians owing to its frequent rides through the city streets. Rifles are carried on the machines. The divisional cycle corps is commanded by Lt-Col. G.T. Denison."*

PLATE V. (To face page 78.)  
SERVICE BICYCLE, MARK IV, IN MARCHING ORDER.



The corps, further described as “a modern and picturesque branch of the army” was made up of men from Toronto, Western and Eastern Canada. Being 250 strong, it left Toronto on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1915 with GTD IV’s father – GTD III on hand at Exhibition Stadium seeing them off.

We can only wonder at the mixed emotions his father must have felt – perhaps a blend of pride, duty to country but also perhaps a sense of dread? With bicycles in tow, they marched to Union Station and boarded a train for the newly established training camp at Valcartier, Quebec and then on to Montreal where they boarded the steamer CORINTHIAN, finally arriving safely in England on May 27<sup>th</sup>, 1915.

A second draft of recruits comprising 9 officers and 176 men left Halifax on June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1915 aboard the steamer CALEDONIAN arriving in England on June 22, 1915.



British or Canadian cyclists in France

## **George Taylor Denison IV and the war**

Although the cyclists had received training in Canada, a much more intensive course was laid on in England which consisted of musketry, bombing, and bayonet fighting coupled with the highly specialized role of learning signalling and topography techniques, range-finding, tactics and the use of Lewis guns.

During this additional training period (perhaps because of his age and rank), from March to April 1916, GTD IV acted as a conducting officer, commanding soldiers travelling to England from Canada and traveled back and forth in the execution of these duties. His service record indicates that he spent a month in Canada in late March of 1916.

Due to the more static nature of the war in the early years, the Corps duties were not those for which they had been trained. They were relegated to traffic control, sapping and mining, trench guiding, manning listening posts, and as battalion runners for despatch riding duties.

One gets the sense that senior officers were not quite sure what to do with the many Cyclist Corps and owing to the diverse nature of the Corps duties the Cyclists had undertaken, it had become almost impossible to keep track of them. To that end the various corps were reorganized into five divisional Cyclist Battalions and renamed the "Canadian Corps Cyclist Battalions" by May of 1916.

Again, perhaps because of his age, GTD IV was not allowed to take the Cyclists to the front in France. Anxious to get into the action, on August 19, 1916 he transferred to the 19<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion and voluntarily took a reduction in rank to Major for which he was paid \$80.00 a month. This was not uncommon as there was a glut of officers largely due to the chaotic recruiting practices in Canada at the start of the war.

Little did GTD IV know that later during the last hundred days of the war, the work the Cyclists had been initially trained for came into constant use in forming the vital links between the infantry and cavalry and keeping in close touch with the retreating Germans. All the above duties coupled with additional reconnaissance tasks, proved more dangerous than the early work they had undertaken. By war's end, 23% of the Cyclists had been killed and the men had adopted "Suicide Battalions" as their nickname.

Lastly, it is interesting to note that a Canadian Cyclist was the first allied soldier to cross the Bonn Bridge into Germany at war's end.

The 19th Infantry battalion (known as the Argyles) had arrived in England in 1915 and trained for several months. On September 14th, they embarked for France.



Landing at Boulogne in the early morning of September 15th, the men made their way inland by train and foot toward the battlefield.

With the arrival of 2nd Division (including the 19<sup>th</sup>) on the continent, a new Canadian Corps was formed, composed of the 1st and 2nd Divisions. As stated earlier, GTD IV joined the battalion on August 19<sup>th</sup>, 1916

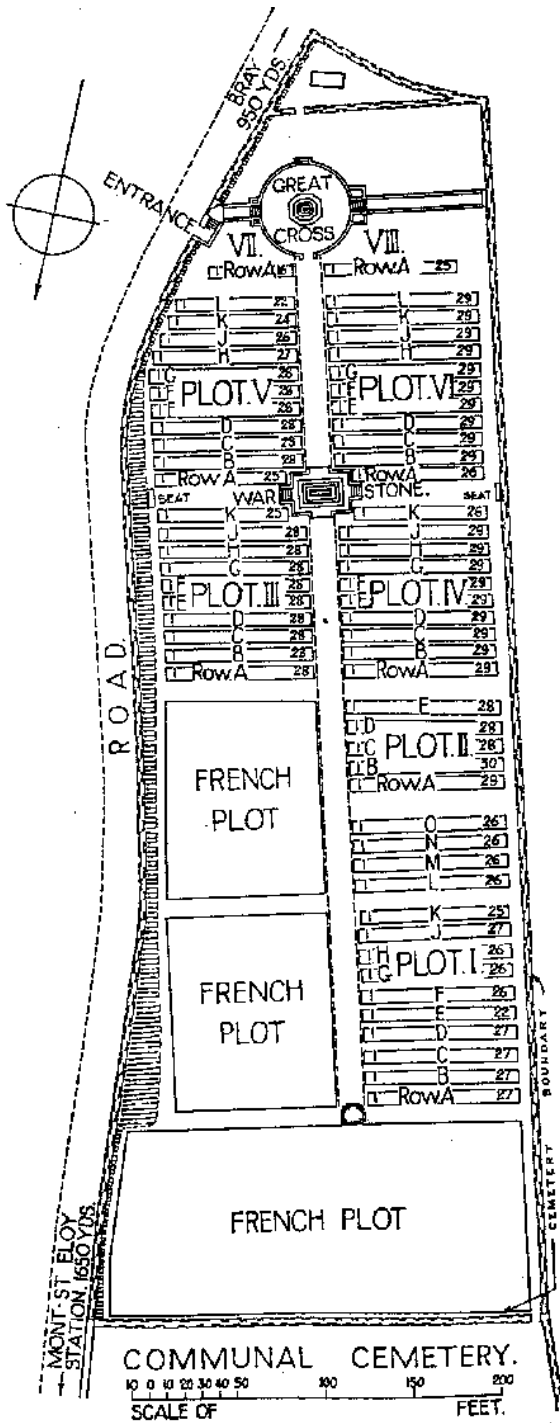
GTD IV soon found that he was again denied front-line action with the 19<sup>th</sup>. Between September and November 1916, he was assigned to act as town major for the 4th Brigade. Town majors ensured the good order of troops stationed in towns behind the lines. In addition, from December 1916 to April 1917, he acted as the brigade's transport officer. He must have been completely frustrated at this point and rejoined the 19th Battalion for front-line action on mid-April 1917.

The 19<sup>th</sup> Battalion had avoided the bloodbath of the Somme, but was in the thick of fighting in and around VIMY Ridge which was part of a larger action known as the Battle of Arras. VIMY Ridge is a strategic, elevated location overlooking the Douai Plain. Occupied by the Germans, the British High Command was determined to capture the high ground but failed in repeated attacks. The task fell to the Canadians commanded by General Curry (later knighted by the King).

Every Canadian schoolchild knows that the success of VIMY was a pivotal point in the Canadian war effort and nationhood. GTD IV finally saw action there and although the Canadians suffered over 10,600 killed and wounded - he survived. After the battle, the battalion withdrew and engaged in smaller actions leading up to the defence of the nearby village of Fresnoy.

GTD IV was killed in action on May 8th, 1917, when the Germans recaptured the village which had been taken by the Canadians only five days earlier. The 19th Battalion was mauled in the battle. Eleven of its 19 officers and 225 soldiers of other ranks in the forward area became casualties. The battalion's war diary states that most of those men were killed outright by German shrapnel shells.

Interestingly, post-war records indicate that two officers and 17 men of other ranks were captured by the Germans on May 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> and were included in the casualty reports. Was GTD IV first captured then inadvertently killed? Although unlikely, it is possible.



ECOIVRES MILITARY CEMETERY.



Major George Taylor Denison's body was recovered and is buried in the Ecoivres Military Cemetery which is near the towns of Mont St Eloi, Arras and Fresnoy, and overlooks the VIMY battlefield.

His headstone is located in Plot V, Section J, and Row 4 amongst 1,728 other Commonwealth soldiers. Of these, 165 Canadians met their maker at the battle of VIMY Ridge.

To commemorate the battle of Fresnoy, in 1919 a mountain in British Columbia was renamed "Fresnoy".





City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 7938

Upon his death, the colonel of his battalion wrote *“We have lost a very dear comrade and a splendid soldier, one who could have had a safe position behind the firing line, if he had desired, but who conceived it to be his duty to fight”*

When news of GTD IV’s death arrived in Toronto, his father (GTD III) was conducting a session in police court. Then 79, the elder judge sat motionless before quietly exiting to his chambers. He was later heard to remark, that his son *“would wish no better death than to die for his country.”*



The “death penny”, sent in 1919 by the British government to the next of kin of all commonwealth soldiers who died in the Great War and financed by German war reparation payments

## Epilogue

*I cannot help but comment on the relationship between GTD IV and his father GTD III, which may be a little difficult to follow:*

- *1863 - GTD III married Carolyn Adelaide Macklem. He was 24 and she was 21. They had six children (one being GTD IV born in 1869)*
- *1885 - Carolyn died of Cancer*
- *1887 - GTD III married Helen Amanda Mair. He was 48 and she was 22. They had one child.*
- *1897 - GTD IV married Margaret McIntyre Mair (Helen's older sister). He was 28 and she was 35*

*So GTD IV ended up being married to his step mother's older sister. The Mair clan was active in the Canada First Movement which appealed to the Denison family's strong nationalistic beliefs and in early Toronto, this multi-generational union of the socially prominent families was noteworthy.*

*In the fall of 2019, my wife Karen and I toured the Great War battlefields of France and Belgium. One cannot help but be struck by the close proximity of these horrendous battles and trench warfare conditions where millions of soldiers were killed and wounded. The losses experienced by the family in this conflict effectively brought to an end the military and social influence of the Denisons in Toronto.*



*Lastly, while in France, we were able to visit Juno Beach, the site of the Canadian landings in Normandy on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1944. At the visitor centre this sculpture made up of actual bicycles used in the invasion is on display. As discussed earlier, they played a role in both world wars and were central to GTD IV's earlier war-time experience.*

*This story is written as a nod to Alan Medcalf who has spent his adult life promoting the sport of Cycling in Canada. He and friends rode across Canada and for a short time owned and ran a bicycle repair shop. Alan is married to Celia Medcalf (nee Ross) a direct descendant of George Taylor Denison III.*

## Acknowledgements

- Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol 12, O.A. Cooke
- 19<sup>th</sup> Battalion and the Canadian Corps in the First World War - David Campbell
- St. John's Cemetery on the Humber
- Upper Canada College - Roll of Service archives
- The Great Canadian War Project
- The Commonwealth War Graves Commission
- Law society of Upper Canada
- The Toronto Star
- Muskoka Recollections 1870-1985 - Shelagh Kirkpatrick Bowden
- [www.findagrave.com](http://www.findagrave.com)