



Henry Ormsby Boyd

The road to Al Zubair

1892 - 1916

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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. A focal point for the family history is St. John's Cemetery on the Humber located in Weston, Ontario.

Canada in the early twentieth century was a very different place in a different time. Ties to Britain and the empire were very strong and our family was a leading proponent of service to the mother country.

The following story is about a restless young man swept up with war fever and eager to fight for King, Country and the British Empire. At time of enlistment, Henry Ormsby Boyd was 22 years old, not married and had recently moved to Ontario with his parents.

The Boyds are a small sub-branch of the Rusholme branch of the Denison family and there are few records of Henry's early life.

There are no veterans of the Great War left alive today, but public interest in this dreadful conflict has seen a tremendous surge of interest by descendants of those veterans. Much attention has been paid to battles on the Western Front between the Allies and Germany. There has been much less focus on the conflict between Britain, and its colony (the subcontinent of India) against Germany's ally, the Ottoman Empire. This empire controlled areas now known as Turkey, Egypt, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Macedonia, Hungary, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, parts of the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa.

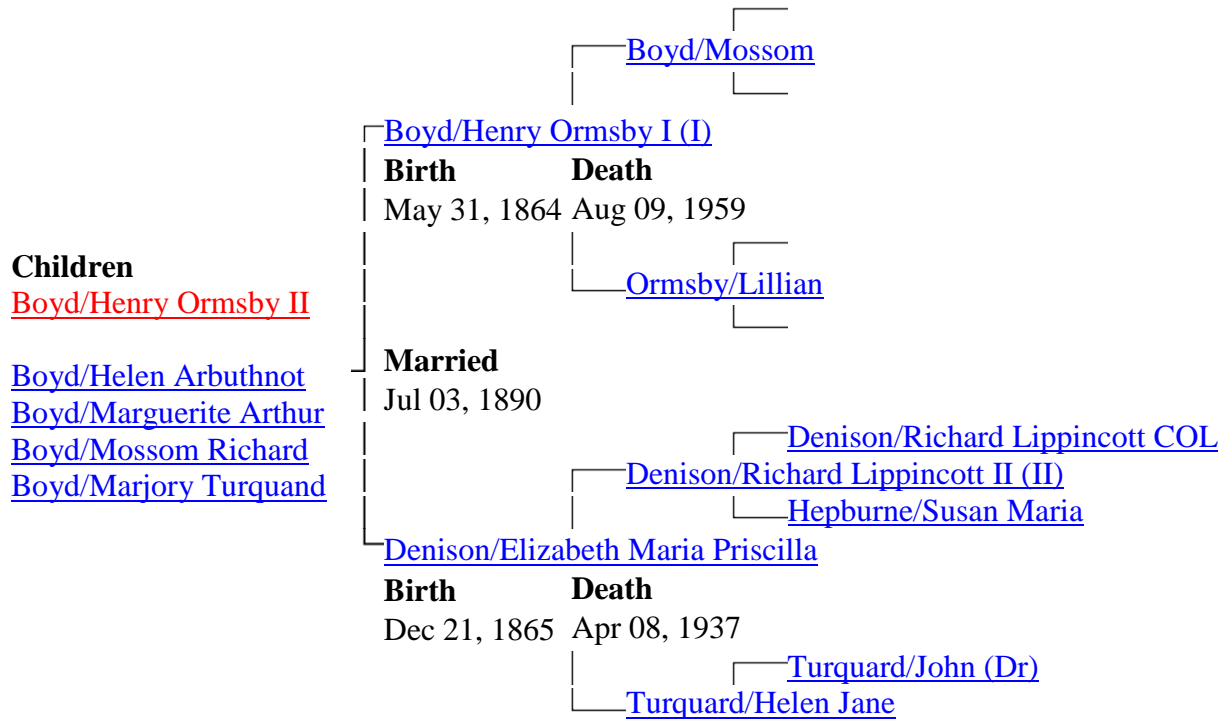
Henry died early in the Great War - in the blistering heat of Mesopotamia and is remembered on the Basra Memorial in Iraq, the cenotaph at St. John's Cemetery on the Humber and on the cenotaph in Bobcaygeon, Ontario.

Despite considerable research, including contacting the Boyd museum in Bobcaygeon, I cannot completely vouch for certain aspects of his personal and military service which was complicated by the tradition of naming male children with their father's exact name, the family move and Henry's inter-service military transfers.

I hope you find this story interesting and encourage you to reflect on his life and times. Please share this story with children and grandchildren so that Henry is no longer forgotten and his service to Canada and the British Empire is preserved.

About Henry Ormsby Boyd II

Born on January 1, 1892 in Calgary, Henry shared his father's exact name. He was the son of Dr. Henry Ormsby Boyd and Elizabeth Maria Priscilla Denison and a grandson of Mossom Boyd, and Richard Lippincott Denison II on his mother's side. Henry had three sisters and one brother. His brother, Mossom Richard Boyd was killed in France at VIMY on Nov 18th, 1916 some six months after Henry died.



For many years, I have driven through Bobcaygeon on the way to our cottage in the Kawarthas. I knew the Boyd name was important to the village's history but did not make the connection to our ancestor. The Boyd brothers (sons of Dr. Henry Boyd) are memorialized in the small cenotaph located in a park-like setting next to the Trent Canal lock #32. Indeed, the good doctor and his wife actually designed the cenotaph.



Henry was born on January 1, 1892 in Calgary, Alberta. The Canadian west was still a wild and remote region of Canada. Alberta and its neighbour Saskatchewan were still districts of the Northwest Territories until they were established as provinces on September 1, 1905.

Although Henry was born in Calgary, his family resided in Sheep Creek, Alberta. His father served to put down the Riel Rebellion in 1885 and later married Elizabeth Maria Priscilla Denison in 1890. Shortly after Henry's birth in 1892, the family moved to Ontario where Henry (senior) studied medicine at Trinity College in Toronto. Upon his graduation in 1897 (aged 33) and at the urging of Boyd cousins, the family moved to Bobcaygeon where Henry practiced medicine caring for the large number of family members employed in the various Boyd enterprises.

Henry (junior) grew up and attended the public school in the tiny village of Bobcaygeon throughout his early years as the village was transitioning away from being a lumbering centre dominated by his uncle, Mossom Martin Boyd. The village had only been incorporated in 1876 with a population of about 1,000 at that time and passenger railway service would not even arrive until 1904.

He went on to continue his education as a boarder at St. Albans Cathedral School in Toronto and later joined the Bank of British North America (later merged with the Bank of Montreal in 1918). It is not clear if he actually worked at the Bobcaygeon Branch.

When war broke out in 1914, we can only assume that Henry, a twenty two year-old bank clerk was eager to break away from quiet village life and see the world. He would soon become another tragic statistic suffered by the "Fighting Denisons" which have a

rich military history seeing service in the Northwest Rebellion, the Fenian Raids, the Boer War, and the First and Second World Wars.

A cenotaph honouring the contributions of the Denisons and Kirkpatrick to the war effort in 1914 -1918 and 1939 -1945 is located at the family cemetery in Weston, Ontario and Henry's name can be found on the north face.

There is no tombstone at the cemetery for Henry as his body was never recovered. In point of fact, because there were so many deaths in the war, the decision was made by the Canadian government to not transport remains back to Canada even if their bodies had been found.



Henry and the war

On August 4th, 1914 Britain declared war on Germany. At the time, Canada was obligated to also declare war and quickly followed up with the formation of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF).

Henry took a medical examination in Toronto where it was noted that he was physically fit but had a knife wound scar over his right knee. He presumably made his way via rail from Toronto's Union Station to the newly established training camp of Valcartier, Quebec.

Lacking formal military experience and higher level education, he enlisted as a private with the newly formed 17th battalion, Nova Scotia Highlanders. He was formally attested into service on September 28th, 1914 with regimental number 46459. He listed his father as next of kin.



The battalion embarked for overseas service from Quebec City on September 30th, 1914 aboard S.S. *Ruthenia* and disembarked in England on October 14th with a strength of 44 officers, 624 other ranks. They proceeded to the Bulford Camp on the Salisbury Plain.

The London Gazette reported that Henry was promoted to 2nd Lieutenant on February 4th, 1915.

The Battalion was renamed the 17th Reserve Battalion, CEF on April 29th, 1915 to provide reinforcements for the Canadian Corps in the field. The battalion, along with others, formed the Canadian Training Depot at Tidworth Barracks in Wiltshire.

Impatient to get to "The Front" for the action in a more active unit, Henry transferred to the 15th Battalion known as the 48th Highlanders of Canada on January 23rd, 1916.

At about the same time, Henry again transferred to the 6th Battalion, South Lancashire Regiment, in Kitchener's newly re-organized British Army which was also stationed at Tidworth.



It appears that Henry avoided the debacle at Gallipoli but in February, 1916 was ordered to Egypt with the rest of the 6th battalion for the relief of the besieged garrison commanded by General Townshend at Kut al Amara in Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq).

Lt. Henry Boyd was initially put in charge of transportation of the Mesopotamian Force travelling down the Tigris River to relieve the garrison.

About Kut al Amara:

Kut al Amara, was a small town with a British fortress in eastern Iraq, on the left bank of the Tigris River, about 160 kilometres south east of Baghdad.

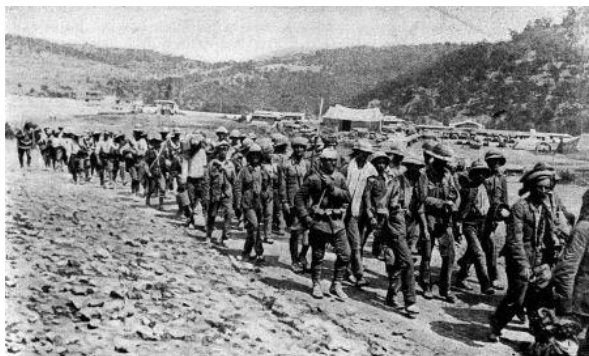
The Siege of Kut al Amara between December 3rd, 1915 and April 29th, 1916 was an important episode of the war between the Ottoman Empire and Great Britain. The surrender of approximately 13,000 British-Indian soldiers after 147 days of siege and shortages of rations was the worst surrender in the history of the British army up to that point, and a great victory for the Ottomans.

Henry and the 6th Battalion making their way down the Tigris River were under constant attack and never made it to the fortress in time to assist the defenders.

General Townsend held on desperately, even asking help from a Russian Cossack force of 20,000 which was in Persia at the time. The Russians arrived too late. The British government even tried to bribe the Ottomans to get their survivors out to safety.

A team of officers including T. E. Lawrence (better known today as **Lawrence of Arabia**) was sent to negotiate the secret deal with the Ottomans. The British offered £2 million and promised they would not fight the Ottomans again, in exchange for safe passage of Townshend's troops. The Ottomans refused the deal.

Backed into a corner with his troops starving, General Townshend arranged a ceasefire on 26th and, after failed negotiations, he simply surrendered on April 29th



1916. Almost immediately the British officers were shipped up the Tigris by boat to Bagdad where despite being prisoners they were treated reasonably well.

However the non-commissioned troops were forced to march in the oppressive heat to the prisoner of war camp in Bagdad and ultimately on to Mosul where they endured forced labour. Approximately 1/3 of the prisoners died along the way.

Under constant attack, Henry and the 6th Battalion withdrew up the Tigris River. While in charge of a work party digging trenches, Henry was killed instantly by a stray Ottoman bullet at Biet Aleesa on the Tigris River on May 12th, 1916 and was buried.

Having no known grave, Henry is commemorated on panel 23 of the Basra Memorial at Al Zubair in Iraq.

About the memorial:

The Basra memorial was located on the main quay of the naval dockyard at Maqil, on the west bank of the Shatt-al-Arab, about 8 kilometres north of Basra. Because of the



sensitivity of the site, the memorial was moved by presidential decree in 1997. It was taken apart block by block and re-erected 32 kilometres along the road to Nasiriyah, in the middle of what was a major battleground during the first Gulf War.

Over 40,000 casualties are listed under the regiment they served within rank order. Reflecting the racist attitude of British society at the time, a total of

30,000 Indian soldiers are not individually named on the Basra memorial, despite fallen British soldiers being so named. Only Indian officers were accorded that honour. The deaths of the non-commissioned men are commemorated by regiment but simply as "and 258 other Indian soldiers" or "and 272 other Indian soldiers".

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission knows the Indian soldiers' identities and has launched a project to find ways to publicize them both in India and in Britain.

Sadly, It was reported in 2013 that the memorial had suffered deliberate vandalism, with some of the its items missing which include the Cross of Remembrance and the bronze plaques from the Wall of Remembrance carrying the names of the fallen including that of Henry Ormsby Boyd, aged 23.

From the Commonwealth War Graves Commission web site:

"Whilst the current climate of political instability persists it is extremely challenging for the Commission to manage or maintain its cemeteries and memorials located within Iraq.

The Commission continues to monitor the situation in Iraq and once the political climate has improved to an acceptable level the Commission will commence a major rehabilitation project for its cemeteries and commemorations.

Before considering a visit to Iraq the Commission strongly recommends that you check the advice given by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office on the travel section of their website: www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/travel-advice-by-country/ "



CROSS OF SACRIFICE.
Erected by the Imperial War Graves Commission at St. Jude's
Cemetery, Englefield Green, Egham, Surrey.

Epilogue:

After the fall of Kut al Amara, British forces gradually prevailed and the Ottoman Empire collapsed with the cessation of hostilities in 1918. The empire was broken up by the Paris peace treaty into separate countries and to this day, Iraq continues to be unstable, wracked by tense relations and conflicts with Iran and other neighbouring states

As a lowly 2nd Lieutenant swept up in the first truly global war, Henry only played a minor role in a geography he must not have known or understood. He followed in the footsteps of his great grandfather, grandfather and father in the service of the British Empire and died half way around the world in the heat and dust of Iraq.

Henry's father enlisted in the Canadian army medical corps and survived the war. However, he suffered a repeat loss with the death of his other son, Mossom in France who is commemorated at the VIMY Ridge memorial.

Despite a road, island and museum all named after the large Boyd family it no longer dominates Bobcaygeon society today. St Albans Cathedral School in Toronto was closed, the Bank of British North America is no more, Britain no longer has interests in the area and the Bazra memorial was moved, later vandalized and is no longer accessible to historians and family descendants.

Tragically, at every point in this story, Henry's service and sacrifice seems to have been trivialized and all for naught. Despite scant and often confusing research material available, I hope his short life during troubled times will now be remembered and this story has been accurately presented.

Acknowledgments:

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission
- UK National Archives
- Brian and Barbara McFadzen - Boyd Museum, Bobcaygeon, Ontario
- Bank of Montreal Memorial of the Great War
- Canadian Great War project
- UK Wartime Memories Project: 6th Battalion,
South Lancashire Regiment
- Wikipedia – 17th and 15th Battalions, CEF
- St. John's Cemetery on the Humber – Weston, Ontario, Canada