



# Walter Wallbridge Denison DSO

Barrister, Soldier, Author

1880 - 1944

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February, 2025

## 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 early Denisons and their place in early Toronto military and social life. This is especially true about the first four George Taylor Denisons. Less has been written about Walter Wallbridge Denison (top row below).*

*Walter was no ordinary young man seeking adventure in a far-off land. What motivated this thirty five year-old well-educated barrister to heed the call at the outbreak of the Great War? Being un-married at the time, perhaps he felt the need to earn his father's approval and carry on the tradition of "The fighting Denisons" by applying his professional legal skills in a battlefield setting.*



*As a lawyer, Walter was commissioned a senior officer in the fledgling Canadian military. There are some official records available for study but little is available about his time before and after the war. It is because of this dearth of information, I have researched and written this story in order that his service for King and Country is not forgotten.*

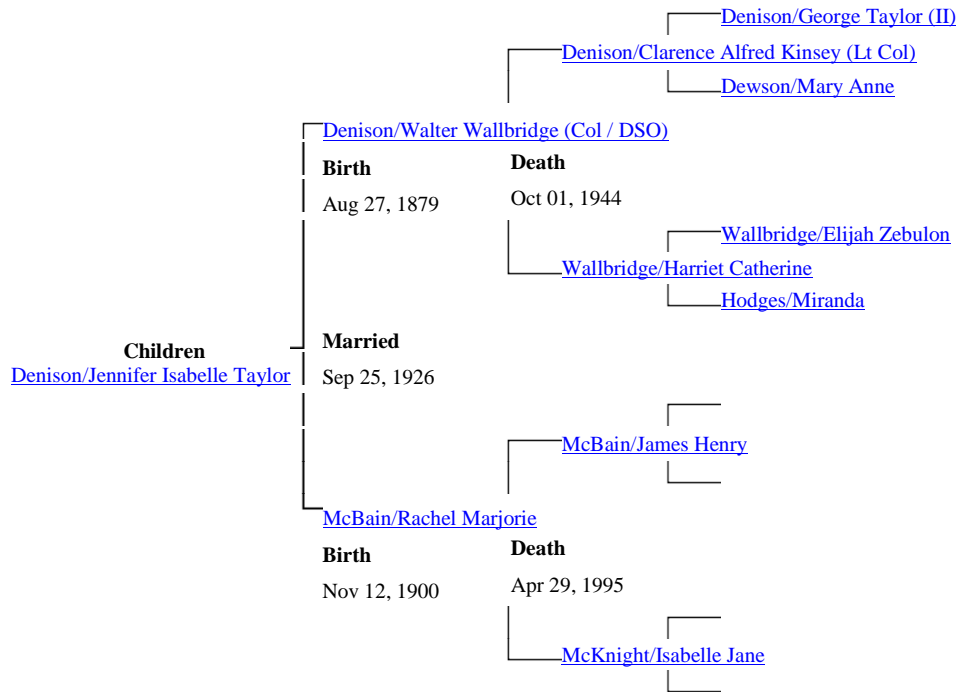
*Fortunately, he is remembered at the Law Society of Upper Canada and Upper Canada College. He and his wife are*

*buried at St. John's Cemetery on the Humber in Weston, Ontario.*

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

## About Walter Wallbridge Denison, DSO

While there is some confusion about his year of birth, I believe he was born on August 27<sup>th</sup>, 1880 in Toronto, Ontario. He was the son of Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Alfred Kinsey Denison and Harriet Catherine Wallbridge. After the war he married Rachel Marjorie McBain on Sept 25<sup>th</sup>, 1926 in Oakville, Ontario. They had one child - a daughter named Jennifer.



## The early Years

Walter lived at 55 Prince Arthur Avenue in Toronto with his sister and parents. In his early years he successfully recovered from bouts of Diphtheria and Pneumonia.

Born into a prominent Toronto family and following family tradition at the age of 13, he attended Upper Canada College in September of 1892. He left in January, 1893 for England with his family, returning to continue his studies from January 1894 to 1897. He was one of ten Denisons to attend this famous Toronto private school.

Studies continued at the Royal Military College (RMC) for two years and finally on to Trinity College where presumably he earned his law degree.

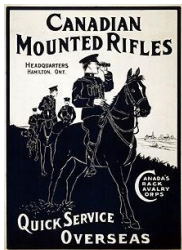
Five other early Denisons had attended RMC where cadets are given an identification number at time of enrollment and his was #425. During this time he was also a member of the Governor General Body Guard militia (GDBG) ultimately achieving the rank of Major. The 1901 census listed Walter as living in Toronto, Ward 6.

The Denison family had strong ties to the Canadian and British militaries going back at least three generations. Walter's 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 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.

## Walter and the War

In the years leading up to the war, Walter divided his time between his law practice and the GGBG.

On August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1914 Britain declared war on Germany. At the time, Canada being a Dominion within the Empire, was obligated to also declare war. Canada quickly responded with the formation of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) which consisted of 111 infantry battalions. On Nov 5<sup>th</sup>, 1914 The Canadian Mounted rifles (CMR) was brought up to strength with exiting militias including the Governor General's Body Guard, the 2nd Dragoons, the 9th Mississauga Horse and the 25th Brant Dragoons. Recruitment posters such as this often depicted a rosy and misleading adventure overseas in the CEF.

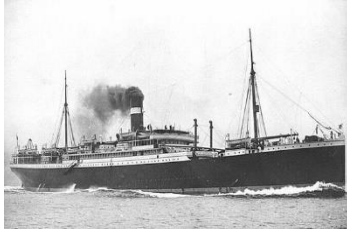


Walter was single with no children and at the ripe old age of 35, he enlisted in Toronto on November 24, 1914 with the 4th Division of the Canadian Mounted Rifles. He was commissioned Major and on his attestation papers listed his father Lt. Col. Clarence A. Denison as his next of kin. He was described as being 5'9" tall, ruddy complexion, 159 lbs, grey-brown hair with a vaccination scar on his left forearm.



4th CMR in training, most probably at the Canadian National Exhibition grounds, Toronto, in early 1915. Image credit: [Trafalgar Township Historical Society](#)

Early in 1915, The Governor-General, H.R.H. the Duke of Connaught, inspected the unit which was rumoured to be deployed to Egypt. However in war-time, plans change and the 4th was ordered to hand over their horses as chargers for the officers of the 2nd Canadian Division then heading overseas. This meant that the 4th effectively became an infantry unit and was relocated to Niagara-on-the-Lake for further training.



*S.S. Hesperian*

In June, The 4th was moved to the hastily created training camp at Valcartier, Quebec joining the 5th and 6th CMRs for further training. On July 18th, Walter and the 4th boarded the S.S. Hesperian at Quebec, also transporting the 5th CMR, and Brigade HQ Staff, to England.

(It is interesting to note that the same ship was later torpedoed by U-20 under the command of Kapitanleutnant Walter Schweiger on September 6th, 1915 with the loss of 32 lives. However, he is better known as the commander who sank the **Lusitania** earlier in May which outraged neutral America).

The CMRs arrived and disembarked at Plymouth and sent by train to Shorncliffe, Kent arriving there later in the day to march into tent billets at Dibgate Hill. Training continued and new equipment and weapons issued even while enduring German Zeppelin bombing raids.

The 4<sup>th</sup> CMR including Walter arrived in France on Oct 24, 1915 and participated in many engagements in and around the Ypres Salient on the western front.

Historian and author Chris Baker has detailed the movements of the CMR throughout the war and has documented the 4<sup>th</sup> division action at Sanctuary Wood which I have summarized as follows:

Walter and the 4<sup>th</sup> took up position at Sanctuary Wood (later named Hill 62) near Ypres, Belgium in late May, 1916. On June 2<sup>nd</sup> the calm, beautiful morning was shattered by a sudden bombardment and mine detonations by German forces. Approximately 700 men were in front-line service at the time with a confirmed loss of around 620 men (195 killed, 358 taken POW, plus 70-75 or so wounded who were able to make it back to safety). With a loss of 87% of the regiment it was a disastrous day for the 4th.

Despite counter attacks by the Canadians, the Germans succeeded in capturing the high ground around Sanctuary Wood several days after the battle on June 2.

The divisional commander - Major General Mercer, was wounded twice and later died while being evacuated and only three officers out of twenty two survived so it may be assumed that Walter was one of them.

On July 30, 1916 Walter was attached to the CMR headquarters and in August was awarded the **Distinguished Service Order (DSO)**. Given his Legal training, he was also appointed Permanent President of Court Martials and Divisional Claims Officer.



Sir Douglas Haig

Walter was mentioned in a dispatch from Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig and reported in the London gazette as follows:

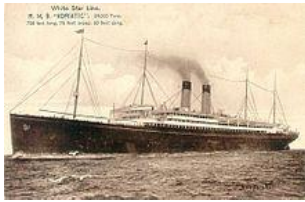
*"For conspicuous gallantry. He held on to his position under an intense bombardment and later, after retiring in order to make a stand at another post, collected a few men and went back to gather information."*



The Distinguished Service Order was instituted in 1886 and awarded for action while under fire.

There were a total of over 8,900 awarded during WW1, eight were received by members of the 4th CMR. Of those, Walter's was awarded on August 19, 1916.

For the rest of the war, Walter remained with the 4<sup>th</sup> CMR, earning officer pay starting at \$147 a month plus a field allowance of \$30 a month less his payroll deductions for Victory War Bonds and the purchase of a Colt personal sidearm. He was granted leave a number of times including treatment for mumps at the St. Omer hospital in 1917. On January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1918 he was appointed personal Aide de Camp to Major Aikins of the CMR as reported in the London Gazette.



S.S. Adriatic

Hostilities finally ceased on November 11, 1918 and Walter was sent back to England Feb 10<sup>th</sup>, 1919. Two months later he boarded the S.S. Adriatic, a luxurious British ocean liner of the White Star Line for his trip back to Canada where he was officially decommissioned on April 22, 1919.

## Life after the War

After the war, Walter divided his time between the law and the GGBG when in 1921 he became the ninth Denison to command the Governor General's Body Guard.

In that year, the Toronto Blue Book listed his address as 55 Prince Arthur Ave and belonging to the Toronto Hunt club and the Toronto Golf club.

He took up employment at the Department of the Provincial Secretary of Ontario where over the years he authored the following books currently found in the Law Society of Ontario great library:

Denison's Manual of companies: being the practice of the Department of the Provincial Secretary of Ontario in all company matters, complete with forms, a full dissertation of no-par value shares, and the important statutory changes of the 1928 session / by Walter W. Denison.

Toronto: Canada Law Book 1928 2nd ed. KF 1415 .ZB3 D46 1928

The A.B.C. of company incorporation in Ontario: being a handbook on the practice of the Department of the Provincial Secretary of Ontario in all company matters, complete with forms / by Walter W. Denison.

Toronto: Canada Law Book Co. c1925 KF/1415/.ZB3/D458/1925 GLST

On Sept 25th, 1926 at the age of 46 he married Rachel McBain and in 1935 a daughter, Jennifer was born. Also in 1935 the Toronto Blue Book listed him as living at 116 Kendal Ave, and belonging to the Canadian Military Institute, and the Toronto Golf club.

Walter Wallbridge Denison died on Oct 1, 1944 and is buried at the family's St. John's Cemetery on the Humber. His wife, Rachel died on April 29, 1995.



## Epilogue

While Walter was not particularly famous, as a professional lawyer, he did manage to carry on the Denison tradition of military and social service. As such, in addition to his DSO, he qualified for the following three campaign medals:



Left to right:

**1914-15 Star**

(Awarded if the soldier was in the theatre of war between 5th August 1914 and 31st December 1915)

**British War Medal (1914-1920)**

(Awarded if the soldier entered a theatre of war, or served overseas)

**Allied Victory Medal (1914-1919)**

(Awarded if the soldier had entered a theatre of war, not just served overseas).

Additional medals were awarded for noted action or conspicuous bravery. In all, 223 of these medals (210 medals plus 13 Bars) were awarded to 195 men who served at some time with the 4th CMR.



Sanctuary Wood (Hill 62)

Canadian Memorial 3 km east of Ypres, Belgium

## Acknowledgements

- St. John's Cemetery on the Humber
- Upper Canada College - UCC War Book
- Law Society of Upper Canada
- Wikipedia
- Toronto Blue Books – 1921 and 1935
- The Great Canadian War Project
- The 4<sup>th</sup> CMR war diaries
- The Commonwealth War Graves Commission
- [www.veterans.gc.ca](http://www.veterans.gc.ca)
- Chris Baker web site: Battles - France and Flanders: the 'Western Front'.
- [www.findagrave.com](http://www.findagrave.com)
- Trafalgar Township Historical Society