

Ross Elwood Denison

A shoemaker goes to war

1896 - 1918

Timothy R. Martin
Mississauga, ON
Catchacoma74@yahoo.com

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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 where many descendants and their spouses of Captain John Denison rest in peace.

Canada in the early twentieth century was a very different place in a different time as a dominion of the British Empire. Personal ties to Britain were very strong and our family was a leading proponent of service to the mother country when called upon at the outbreak of World War One.

At the start of the war, Canada's population was approximately eight million. Over 650,000 Canadians enlisted with over 424,000 serving on the western front. Of these: 66,000 men died in the trenches and killing fields of France and Belgium.

There are no Canadian veterans of the "great war" alive today, but interest in this dreadful conflict has experienced a tremendous surge by historians and descendants of those veterans.

The following story is about a young shoemaker from Ontario eager for adventure and to fight for King and Country. At time of enlistment, Ross Elwood Denison was nineteen years old, not married and with no military experience.

Being only a private and the fact that his time in Europe was cut short, there is precious little documentation about his service. His story is not that unique as tens of thousands of young Canadian men like Ross volunteered to serve, were wounded, gassed and died in the "war to end all wars".

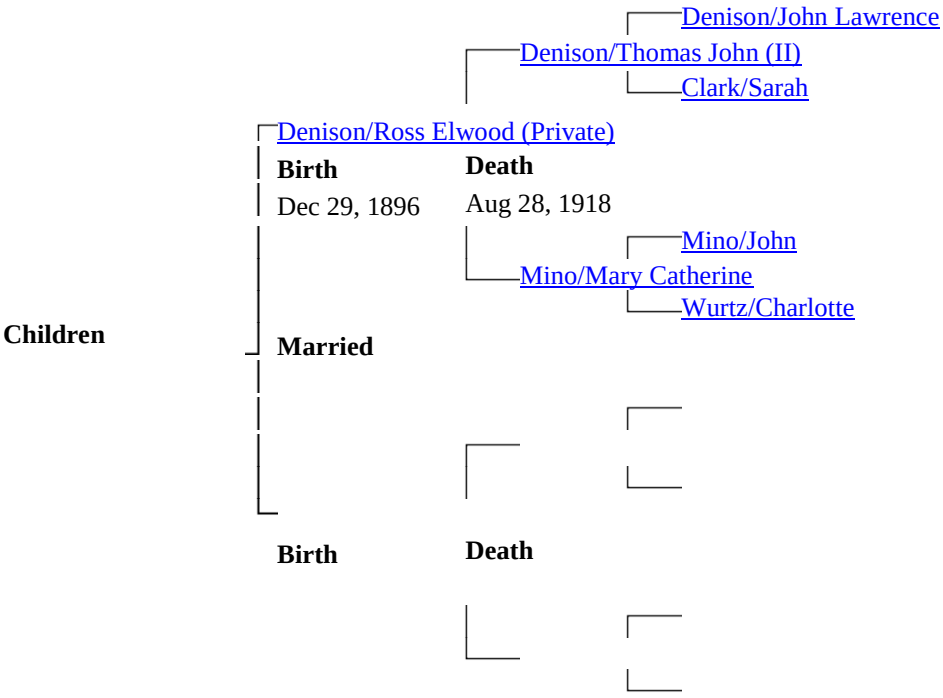
I hope you find this story interesting and encourage you to reflect on his life and times. Please share this story with children and grandchildren so that Ross is no longer forgotten and his service to Canada and the British Empire is preserved.

Author's Note:

"AI" was helpful in the research for this document however the majority of the textual content was created by me and by me alone.

About Ross Elwood Denison (aka Ross Ellwood Denison)

Born on December 28, 1896 in the small village of Huttonville Ontario (now part of Brampton), Ross was the son of Thomas John Denison and Mary Catherine Mino, both being forty one years old at the time. As documented in the 1901 census, Ross (known as Rossy) shared the 175 acre farm with his parents and five sisters. Ross later moved and became a shoemaker with the Burlburt Shoe Company in the village of Preston which has since been swallowed up by present day Cambridge.



When war broke out in 1914 we can only assume that Ross, a nineteen year old shoemaker was eager to break away from quiet village life and see the world. He would later become another tragic statistic suffered by the “Fighting Denisons” which have an extensive military history seeing service in the Northwest Rebellion, the Fenian Raids, the Boer War, the war of 1812 and the First and Second World Wars.

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

There is no individual tombstone or marker at the family cemetery for Ross. His body is buried in the Wancourt British Cemetery near Arras, France.

Ross and the war

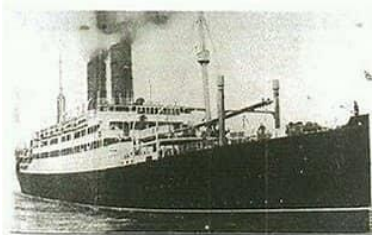
On August 4th, 1914 Britain declared war on Germany. At the time, Canada being a dominion of the empire was obligated to also declare war and quickly followed up with the formation of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF).

Ross took a medical examination in Galt on November 25th, 1915 and was described as 19 years old, fair complexion, hazel eyes, 5'7.5 tall and generally fit for service. He also signed his attestation papers naming his father as next of kin and was assigned service number 730086 with the 111th South Waterloo infantry battalion.

By today's standards it seems absurd that a 19 year old shoemaker with no military background could be enlisted into the army and sent quickly overseas, but the government was determined to raise a credible expeditionary force and resorted to many ways of attracting recruits including supplying fanciful postcards such as these to be sent back home and to friends.



After initial training in London, Ontario Ross and the battalion of 25 officers and 637 other ranks boarded the newly retrofitted SS Tuscania on September 25th, 1916 at Halifax, Nova Scotia and arrived at Liverpool, England on October 5, 1916. He was transported to the West Sandling Camp in Kent near London and the port of Folkestone, made an acting Lance Corporal and re-assigned to the 35th Canadian Infantry Battalion.



SS Tuscania

Of note, the SS Tuscania was a luxury liner of the Anchor Line, a subsidiary of the Cunard Line and named after Tuscania, Italy. Sadly, in 1918 the ship was torpedoed and sunk by the German U-boat UB-77 while transporting American troops to Europe with the loss of 210 lives.

With the sudden arrival of boatloads of raw recruits, military planners reassigned men to various reserve battalions. Ross was no exception and was sent to the 4th reserve battalion in Bramshott on April 17th, 1917. There he was hospitalized with appendicitis.

Perhaps due to the appendicitis scare and despite the fact that Ross had designated his father as next of kin on his attestation papers, he changed the next of kin to his mother Mary on his standard military will created on August 3, 1917.

Once recovered and anxious to get to "The Front" he was reverted to the rank of private, left Bramshott and crossed the channel on the 8th of December, 1917. He was again re-assigned - this time to the 18th Battalion and taken on strength December 16th, 1917 and actively participated in all field operations.

By 1918, the tide was slowly turning for the allies as Germany was experiencing food riots at home, low troop morale and the infusion of fresh troops from America on the allied side. Four Canadian divisions including Ross and the18th Battalion operating in the Arras area were tasked with breaking through German defences on August 26th in support of the 'Hundred Days Offensive' to bring an end to the war.

Nearby, the Sensee river valley saw heavy fighting. German forces utilized the river and its canals as defensive positions, which British and Canadian forces ultimately crossed to liberate the surrounding towns. It was there in the second battle of Arras on August 28th that Ross was killed by an artillery shell. The official 18th Battalion war diary recorded the day's action and it is a fair assumption that Ross was one of the ten killed that day just seventy-five days before war's end. Diary entry:

"Zero hour for this day's operation was set for 12.30 noon. Bn. was in support of 20th Bn.

Heavy casualties were suffered in the advance to the slope of the SENSEE RIVER, machine gun nests and wire in the German line being equally heavy. Capt. Mackedie was shot through the hand and instantly killed rushing a German gun post; Lieut. Cole, shot through the eye, was afterwards found dead; Major Graham and Lts. Lawrence [sic], Donaldson and Krug were wounded. Under terrific fire the Bn. was compelled to temporarily withdraw and take up a line in the sunken roads fronting the German wire East of the SENSEE RIVER. 52 O.R. arrived as reif. 3 O.Rs on leave. Approx. casualties all ranks, 10 killed & 70 wounded."

(Note: O.Rs = Other ranks and Bn = Battalion)



Wancourt British Cemetery

Although originally listed as missing, his remains were located and Ross was later buried along with 221 other Canadians at the Wancourt British Cemetery located near Nord-Pas-de-Calais.

On September 28th, 1918 Thomas J. Denison was informed of his son's death and on November 18th the Toronto Star reported the sudden death of Ross's mother Mary from heart disease thought to be aggravated by the news of Ross's death. Ross's parents are buried in St.John's Cemetery on the Humber in Weston, Ontario.



Headstone for Ross - section IV.A.30 - note the name misspelling



The Cross of Sacrifice at Wancourt and every Commonwealth war cemetery worldwide

Appendix

Ross is also memorialized as follows:



Cambridge war memorial



St John's Cemetery on the Humber Cenotaph



Personalized Death Penny issued by the British government to the families of fallen soldiers funded by German reparation payments

Acknowledgements

Libraries and Archives Canada

1901 Canadian Census

Wikipedia

Toronto Star

18th Battalion CEF war diary

Wancourt British Cemetery