

Personal Stories of the Great War Related to Lt-Col William Cowan of Toronto

My Grandfather, William Cowan, was an entrepreneur/businessman who played an active role in preparing Canada's army at the beginning of the Great War. He was 44 years old when war broke out and fell ill in late 1914, so he served only in Canada. He served in various ways in supporting Canada's emergence onto the world stage through its Great War effort.

There had been no significant permanent Canadian army before the war, just reserves. William Cowan worked his way up to commanding officer of the Canadian Army Service Corps before the war (akin to a logistics unit).

Plans had been made with Britain that if war was declared and was Canada called upon, my Grandfather would play a leading role in setting up a training camp at Valcartier, near Quebec City. My Grandmother told me of the Toronto Police finding him swimming with his 3 small children at his summer home on Centre Island, on the day war was declared, to give him orders to report to Valcartier. At Camp Valcartier he served as Chief Transport Officer, helping to set up and run the large 'ad hoc' camp, and organize transportation to England of the first Canadian Expeditionary Force. He was intimately involved in managing equipping and transporting the 33,000 man strong First Division in September 1914. My Father reported that some of these early recruits were Montenegrin refugees who had fled the Balkans, a region that was the flashpoint that lit the fuse of the Great War. Poor health took my Grandfather out of active service after a few months at Camp Valcartier.

Life at Camp Valcartier must have been hectic as no camp existed when war broke out, it trained and organized Canada's First Division within about 45 days of the declaration of war, and had to cope with many more volunteers than expected. Conditions at the camp may have accelerated my Grandfather's health problems.

Upon returning to civilian life, one of my Grandfather's businesses became the manufacture of ammunition shells. He had seen that the shortage of such supplies constrained the deployment of the many enthusiastic Canadian volunteers in the Second Contingent.



You cannot see detail of my Grandfather in the picture, but definitely realize that horses were expected to be a big part of the processes of war, before it began. In fact 7,500 horses were part of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

The Great War service of many members of St James Square Presbyterian (including my Grandfather) is remembered on a plaque now located on the east wall of the sanctuary at Fairlawn Avenue United Church.

Following the War my Grandfather was Chair of St James Square United's Board of Managers just before it amalgamated with Bond Street United, to form St James-Bond United on Willowbank Blvd in the new suburb of North Toronto. Coincidentally, Rosalie and I joined St James-Bond in 1974.

An interesting family fact from the *post-war* era is that the stained glass windows in the Peace Tower, in Ottawa, were installed as a partnership with another one of my Grandfather's business enterprises: stained glass window manufacturing primarily as memorials in churches. The Peace Tower was constructed after the Great War and dedicated, in the words of Prime Minister Borden, to be a "memorial to the debt of our forefathers and to the valour of those Canadians who, in the Great War, fought for the liberties of Canada, of the Empire, and of humanity."

John (and Bill) Cowan

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