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From Alberta to Avion: Private Herbert Peterson, 49th Battalion, CEF

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From Alberta to Avion

Private Herbert Peterson

49th Battalion, CEF

Ken Reynolds

The sun filtered in softly through the old windows of the church, its rays reflecting off the walls, the floors, the pews, the gathered mourners, and the casket itself. At the same time, the church was cold, unheated, the doors left wide open throughout the morning ceremony on 7 April 2007.¹

The church was the Saint Louis Chapel, constructed within the confines of the Citadel in the city of Arras in northern France. More than three centuries old, and bearing the names of French and (occupying) German soldiers etched in its doorway, the chapel is also a memorial to the First World War dead of the French Army's 3rd Engineer Regiment. Their names and the dates of their deaths line the walls inside the building.

The funeral service began with scripture readings followed by the hymn "What A Friend We Have in Jesus." Colonel Karl McLean and Captain Catherine Morrison, chaplains in the Canadian Forces, continued the service with scripture readings and prayers. A military piper played "Flowers of the Forest" as a lament and Padre McLean then gave the Meditation, led the mourners in The Lord's Prayer, and pronounced the Blessing.²

The mourners included members of the deceased's family, VIPs from the Canadian and French governments, military, and diplomatic corps as well as a handful of other civilians. A Canadian Forces' bearer party – eight young soldiers of The Loyal Edmonton Regiment – had already placed the casket inside the chapel by

the time the mourners arrived. Outside stood a military firing party, awaiting its role at the interment ceremony. Media representatives had also been on site, but when the private funeral service commenced, many of them made their way to the cemetery.

The service and the interment – the location, the size of the military presence, the large number of media in attendance – were on a grand scale for the funeral of a soldier who had served as a private in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF). The funeral may have been the most well-attended for any single Canadian killed during the First World War. In any case, the circumstances were not typical. But, then again, nothing about the death, discovery and reburial of Private Herbert Peterson could be described as typical.

Herbert Peterson, born on 14 December 1895, was 20 years old when he joined the 137th "Overseas" Battalion, CEF, in Calgary, Alberta, on 22 February 1916. Enlisting as a private with the serial number 808723, Peterson provided information on his family and background and underwent a medical examination to determine if he was fit for service.³

On his attestation form Peterson gave his address as Berry Creek Post Office, Alberta, and listed his mother, Julia Peterson, of the same address as his next of kin. He was described as a farmer, single, Presbyterian, with no previous military service. Peterson's medical examination revealed that he was five feet, nine inches tall, had a chest measurement of 39 inches fully expanded, a fair complexion, blue eyes, and brown hair.⁴

ORIGINAL 808723

ATTESTATION - PAPER.
Folio.

CANADIAN OVER-SEAS EXPEDITIONARY FORCE.

QUESTIONS TO BE PUT BEFORE ATTESTATION.

Herbert Peterson
Berry Creek P.O. Alberta Canada
Saratoga Kansas U.S.A.
Berry Creek P.O. Alberta Canada
Feb 22nd 1895
Harrison

1. What is your surname?
2. What is your Christian name?
3. In what Town, Township or Parish, and in what County were you born?
4. What is the name of your next-of-kin?
5. What is the address of your next-of-kin?
6. What is the relationship of your next-of-kin?
7. What is the date of your birth?
8. What is your Trade or Calling?
9. Are you married?
10. Are you willing to be vaccinated or re-vaccinated and inoculated?
11. Do you now belong to the Active Militia?
12. Do you ever served in any Military Force?
13. Have you ever performed at home the duties of a Soldier?
14. Do you understand the nature and terms of this Over-Sea Expeditionary Force?
15. Are you willing to be attached to serve in the Over-Sea Expeditionary Force?

DECLARATION TO BE MADE BY MAN ON ATTESTATION.

I, Herbert Peterson do solemnly declare that the above are answers made by me to the above questions and that they are true, and that I am willing to fulfil the engagements by me now made, and I hereby engage and agree to serve in the Canadian Over-Sea Expeditionary Force, and to be attached to any arm of the service therein, for the term of one year, or during the war now existing between Great Britain and Germany, should that war last longer than one year, and for six months after the termination of that war provided the Majesty should so long require my services, or until I am discharged.

Date Feb 22nd 1916 Herbert Peterson (Signature of Recruit)
L. B. Harrison (Signature of Witness)

OATH TO BE TAKEN BY MAN ON ATTESTATION.

I, Herbert Peterson do make Oath that I will be faithful and bear true Allegiance to His Majesty King George the Fifth, His Heirs and Successors, in Peace, Crown and in any lawful manner, and will observe and obey all orders which His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, shall give me, and will defend His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, in Peace, Crown and in any lawful manner, and will defend His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, in Peace, Crown and in any lawful manner, and will defend His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, in Peace, Crown and in any lawful manner.

Date Feb 22nd 1916 Herbert Peterson (Signature of Recruit)
L. B. Harrison (Signature of Witness)

CERTIFICATE OF MAGISTRATE.

The Recruit above named was questioned by me that if he made any false answer in any of the above questions he would be liable to be punished as provided in the Army Act.

I have taken care that he understood each question, and that his answer to each question was given freely and voluntarily, and that he was duly sworn as required by and the said Recruit has made and signed the Declaration and taken the Oath before me, at Calgary this 22nd day of Feb 1916.

L. B. Harrison (Signature of Justice)

Private Herbert Peterson's attestation papers.

Description of Herbert Peterson on Enlistment.

Apparent Age 20 years months
Height 5' 9" ins.
Weight 129 lbs.
Complexion Fair
Eyes Blue
Hair Brown
Distinguishing marks, and marks indicating congenital peculiarities or previous illness.
Scar on left shin
3 small scars on upper arm

Church of England Yes
Presbyterian Yes
Methodist No
Episcopal or Congregationalist No
Roman Catholic No
Jewish No
Other denominations No

CERTIFICATE OF MEDICAL EXAMINATION.

I have examined the above-named Recruit and find that he does not present any of the causes of rejection specified in the Regulations for Army Medical Services.

He can see at the required distance with either eye; his hearing is good; he has the use of his joints and limbs, and he is considered to be in no respect unfit for any description.

I consider him fit for the Canadian Over-Sea Expeditionary Force.

Date 22nd February 1916 Calgary

S. J. Jewell (Signature of Medical Officer)

CERTIFICATE OF OFFICER COMMANDING UNIT.

Herbert Peterson having been fully approved and inspected by me this day, and his Name, Age, Date of Attestation, and every particular particular having been recorded, I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.

Date Feb 23 1916 137th O. S. E. F.

Records of Herbert Peterson's CEF service are few and far between. His personnel file has fewer than 15 pages and does not contain much useful information, a situation not uncommon for a private from that time. However, other historical documentation does provide some historical context to Peterson's early military career, even if it does not mention him specifically.⁵

The 137th Battalion was raised in Calgary, beginning in late 1915. Initial training was mostly conducted within the city until, in late May 1916, the battalion assembled at Sarcee militia training camp southwest of the city. This would be the home of the battalion for the next three months, as it continued its training alongside several other Alberta-raised CEF battalions.⁶

In mid-August 1916, the battalion left Alberta, travelling by train to the east coast, with a stop in Ottawa to be inspected by The Duke of Connaught, Governor General of Canada. On 24 August the 137th Battalion – 32 officers and 932 non-commissioned officers and men – sailed from Halifax aboard the troopship SS *Olympic*. The ship arrived in Liverpool five days later. Soon after, the entire battalion reached to Witley Camp,



Photo courtesy of Veterans Affairs Canada

This posed portrait of Private Herbert Peterson was taken while he was still a member of the 137th Battalion, CEF.

St. Louis Chapel, the site of the funeral service for Private Peterson, inside the Citadel in Arras, France

Surrey, approximately 50 kilometres south of London. Another three months of training followed. However, this Alberta battalion was not destined to serve in France. Instead, like the majority of CEF infantry battalions, the 137th slowly withered away, drafts of its soldiers being used to reinforce battalions already in the field. Between the end of November 1916 and early January 1917 large numbers of reinforcements were sent to the 10th, 31st, 49th and 50th Infantry Battalions and, in the latter month, the troops remaining in the 137th were merged with men from other battalions to form a new reserve battalion in England. Officially disbanded on 17 July 1917, the 137th "Overseas" Battalion is now perpetuated by The King's Own Calgary Regiment (RCAC).⁷

Private Herbert Peterson was one of the 137th Battalion soldiers sent to reinforce a fighting battalion. On 7 December 1916 he was formally transferred to the 49th Battalion and he joined the unit in France on or about 20 January 1917.⁸ When Peterson arrived, the 49th Battalion was in brigade reserve in the village of Neuville-St. Vaast, on the western slope of Vimy Ridge. He was not alone as a newcomer to the battalion. Sixteen non-commissioned officers and 45 other ranks had arrived on 19 January, another 71 soldiers the following day.⁹

Authorized in November 1914, the 49th Battalion CEF – nicknamed the "Edmonton Regiment" – had been recruited mostly in that city. In June 1915 it had sailed from Montreal with a strength of 36 officers and 996 non-commissioned officers and men. After further training in England, the 49th sailed for France in October 1915 as part of the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade, 3rd Canadian Division. The Edmonton unit saw its share of combat between the fall of 1915 and mid-1917 (before and after Private Peterson's arrival), including a modest, yet necessary, role as "moppers-up" during the Canadian assault on Vimy Ridge in April 1917.¹⁰

After the successful attack on Vimy Ridge by the Canadian Corps, eastward movement by the Canadians slowed down immensely during the next few weeks. The troops were exhausted and were facing another line of prepared German

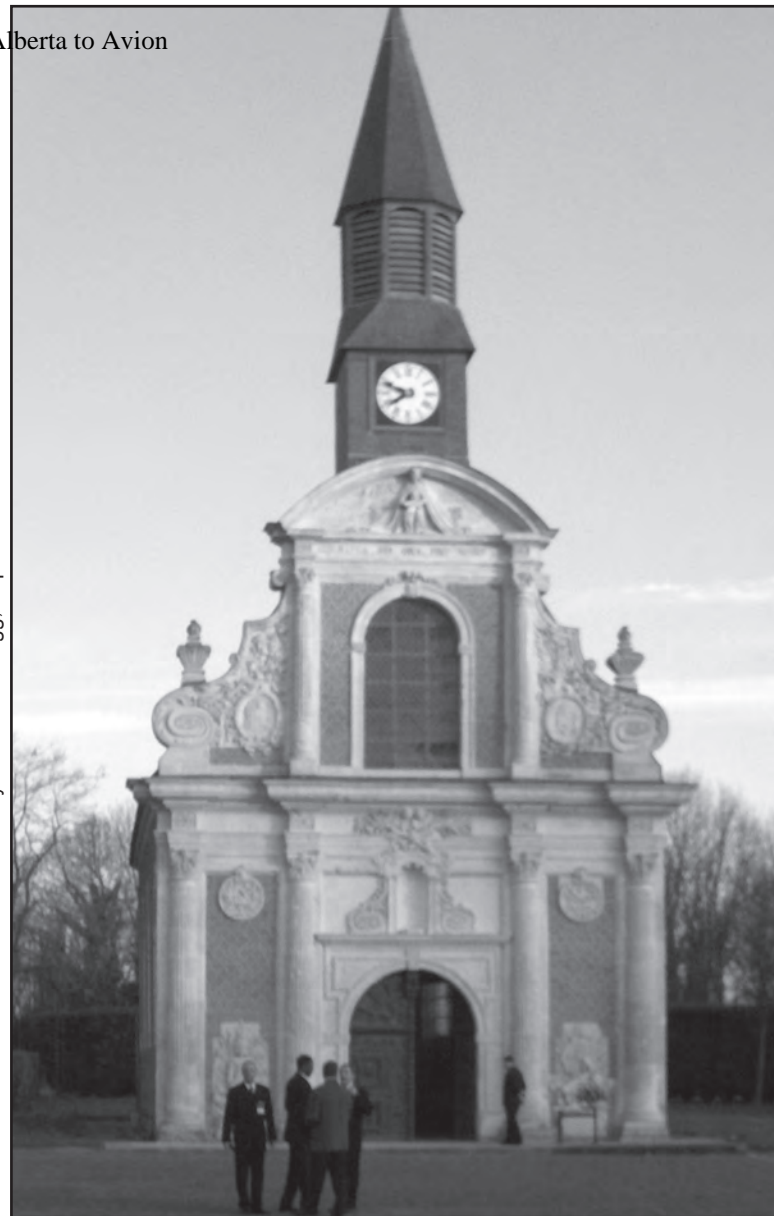
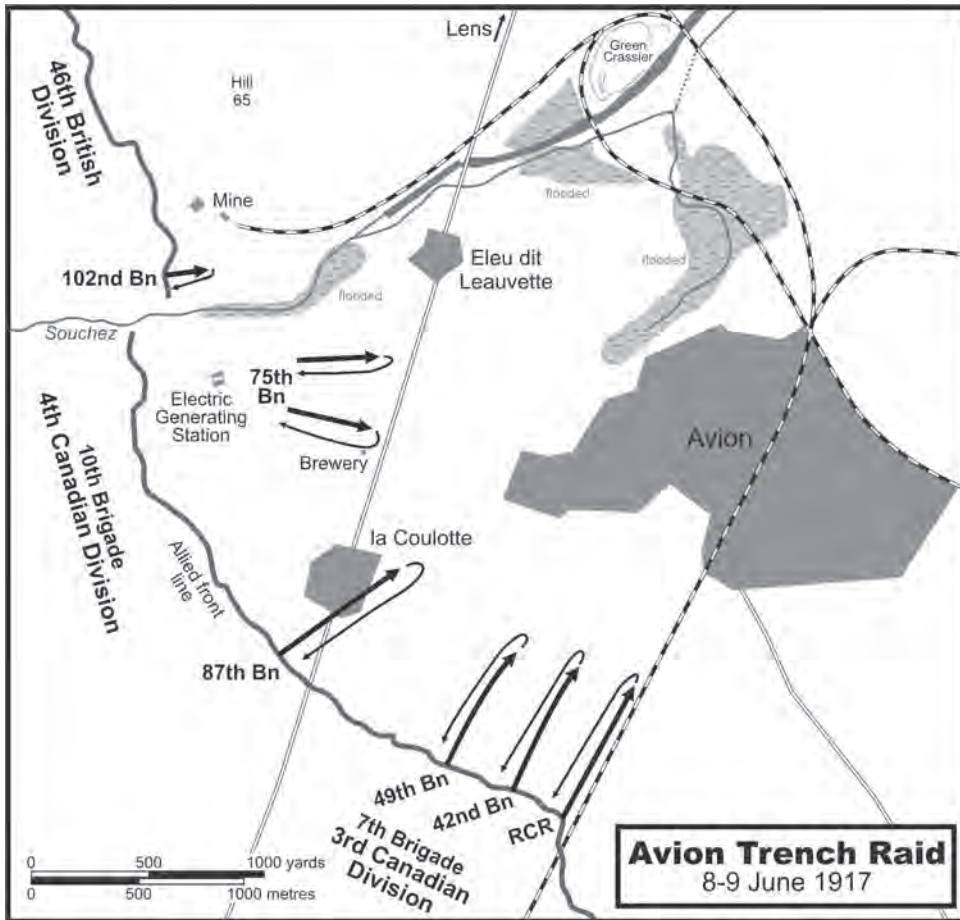


Photo by Ms. Laurel Clegg, Department of National Defence

positions. Much of the Corps' supporting artillery was withdrawn to join British operations to the north. Nonetheless, by May the officers and men of 1st (British) Corps and the Canadian Corps had been ordered to concentrate against enemy positions in the area of the Souchez River in an attempt to break the German defensive line between the village of Avion, south of the city of Lens, and the western portion of Lens itself.¹¹

The 4th Canadian Division, on the left of the Canadian Corps' front, was ordered to capture the village of la Coulotte, an electrical generating station, and a brewery in the area between Avion and the Souchez River. Attacks by the division in late May and early June drew repeated German counterattacks that were broken up by Canadian artillery and small arms fire.¹²

The limited artillery support available made it very costly for the Canadians to hold



Map drawn by Mike Bechthold ©2008

The 49th Battalion, along with the rest of the 7th Brigade, had come out of the front line on 21 May and been placed in rest billets west of Vimy Ridge. The battalion remained there for the next couple of weeks, training for upcoming attacks in the Avion sector. The Edmonton men trained four hours a day on taped ground laid out to resemble the enemy trenches south of Avion. Coloured flags were used to represent enemy dugouts, machine gun nests, and trench mortar positions. On 5 June the battalion learned that the proposed attack had been transformed into the trench raid described above.¹⁵

Zero hour for the raid was 2345 hours on 8 June 1917. The weather helped in terms of concealment as visibility was described as poor. It was not, however, comfortable for

such positions. Canadian Corps headquarters recommended to First Army that captured ground should not be held. Instead, operations should take the form of large-scale raids where the Canadian troops would attack in enough strength to guarantee they would overwhelm the German defenders facing them. Once the enemy troops manning the trenches were eliminated or repelled and the trench systems damaged beyond use, the raiders would withdraw to Canadian positions. First Army agreed.¹³

The first raid carried out by the Canadian Corps in this manner took place on the night of 8-9 June, when six Canadian battalions attacked along a front of more than 3000 metres, extending from the railway embankment (the Vimy-Avion rail line) along the Corps' right boundary to north of the Souchez River along its left boundary. The 11th Infantry Brigade (4th Canadian Division) supplied the raiders on the left flank, the 102nd, 75th and 87th Battalions, CEF. On the right, the raiding force included The Royal Canadian Regiment, 42nd and 49th Battalions, CEF, of the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade (3rd Canadian Division).¹⁴

the troops, with a light rain falling and a gentle wind blowing from 2315 hours onward. The raiding parties were assembled in the jumping off trenches in front of the main Canadian front line, the 49th Battalion personnel having arrived by 2335 hours. The 49th placed three of four platoons from each of its four rifle companies in the jumping off trench. The fourth platoon of each company was held back on the front line, the four platoons forming a composite rifle company.¹⁶

At zero hour the Canadian artillery and machine gun barrage opened up on the German positions. The raiders moved out of their jumping off positions. The 49th's portion of the raid was spread out along a frontage of 500 metres with a depth of attack from the startline to the final objective of about 500 metres.¹⁷

The Canadians were expecting the initial enemy reaction to come from their machine gun nests along the front as well as from artillery to the rear. The 49th reported its first encounter with enemy artillery fire at 2349 hours, but the German fire was minimal. German machine gun fire was almost non-existent. "C" and "D"

Companies of the 49th, the battalion's lead troops, entered their first objective to find it badly damaged. There was no real opposition to the 49th's attack and most of the entrances to the enemy dugouts were largely filled in. A few German prisoners were taken and two Stokes mortar shells thrown into each open dugout entrance to destroy them.¹⁸

The second enemy position was the German support trench line. It seems to have been even more severely damaged, reportedly being practically demolished and barely recognizable. There was still no substantial German opposition and "A" and "B" Companies of the 49th leapfrogged through "C" and "D" Companies to advance on the battalion's final objective. This trench, too, was practically destroyed and its few remaining occupants put up very little opposition before being taken prisoner. What was described as a "fairly large number" of German soldiers were seen retreating ahead of the 49th, suffering from the continuing Canadian artillery barrage. It had been just 21 minutes since the attack began.¹⁹

The 49th Battalion held this position for more than an hour and went about its assigned task of destroying the enemy trench, in particular the dugouts. The battalion later recorded having blown up 20 dugouts using mobile charges and Stokes mortar shells. Casualties suffered by the 49th up to this point were evacuated to the rear, the few prisoners captured proved useful as stretcher-bearers. During this period an enemy machine gun on the battalion's left flank began firing into "D" Company's position. The charge undertaken to eliminate the enemy fire led to a handful of Canadian fatalities. An increasing volume of artillery fire on the 49th's position also began to make things quite uncomfortable and, it would seem, that most of the battalion's casualties were suffered during this period and the subsequent withdrawal.²⁰

At 0115 hours "A" and "B" Companies began to fall back toward the Canadian lines. Half an hour later the rearguard from the two companies also vacated the final objective, gathering any casualties found as it withdrew. "C" and "D" Companies followed at 0200 hours, likewise retrieving any casualties. A 7th Brigade report later stated that all of its troops had completely withdrawn to Canadian lines by 0330 hours.²¹



Top: Well turned out Canadian soldiers march to the front, June 1917.

Middle: Canadian troops have their wounds attended to at an Advanced Dressing Station following a battle in June 1917.

Bottom: German troops captured during a Canadian attack in June 1917 make their way to the rear.

Overall, enemy losses suffered in the raid were calculated at 722 – including 250 Germans killed in the trenches, an estimated 312 killed in 78 destroyed dugouts, another 100 wounded, and 62 taken prisoner. The 49th Battalion claimed 165 Germans killed and 35 captured as its portion of the total.²²

As for Canadian losses, 7th Brigade reported 335 officers and men killed, wounded and missing. Of this total, the 49th Battalion suffered more than half (172) – reporting in its war diary entry for 9 June 1917 a total of 24 officers and men killed, 132 wounded, and 16 officers and men missing.²³

After the war was over and the final numbers tallied, the numbers of officers and men serving with the 49th Battalion killed during the 8-9 June 1917 trench raid turned out to be 36 – 20 men whose bodies were recovered and buried plus 16 officers and men declared missing, their remains not found in the years immediately following the war. The latter soldiers were among the thousands of names later carved into the Vimy Memorial.²⁴

The story of two of the 16 missing men, however, was not entirely over. In October 2003 workers installing a gas pipeline in the southern suburbs of Avion came across the remains of two bodies. Such an occurrence is not unheard of in northern France. The police were called in to investigate. When it became clear these were not recent victims of foul play, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) was notified. Roy Hemington, an Exhumation Officer with the commission, investigated. Then Ian Nelson, Senior Head Gardener, Lens Group, CWGC, collected the remains and took them to the commission's facility in the Beaurains neighbourhood of nearby Arras.²⁵

Hemington reported that three small buttons, one large button, and a metal cap badge had been recovered with the remains. Neither identification discs nor any other form of personal identification were found. A search of records available to the CWGC revealed the buttons and badge came from the 49th Battalion, CEF. According to their records, the only time the 49th Battalion suffered missing fatalities in this area during June and July 1917 was on 9 June during the trench

raid south of Avion. The commission's database reiterated the fact that the Edmonton battalion suffered 36 fatalities that night, the remains of 16 never being recovered. Hemington concluded: "We have at least one soldier of the 49th Bn. Canadian Infantry who was killed on the 9th June 1917." There was no clear evidence the second man was from the 49th, but no alternatives were apparent either.²⁶

The CWGC's report on the remains was sent to Colonel Yvan Houle, then Defence Attaché with the Canadian Embassy in Paris. Tim Reeves, a Director with the CWGC, signed the report submitted to the Canadian authorities. In it he confirmed the commission's preliminary conclusion that one of the remains was definitely Canadian, while the other might possibly be Canadian with no other apparent alternative. Now there was a decision for Canadian officials to make. Reeves wrote: "The Commission's policy in relation to the discovery of remains is to report the facts to the appropriate member government. It then lies with that government to decide whether and if so, how, to pursue further identification. In the meantime we hold the remains until we are given burial instructions."²⁷

The report continued by suggesting that the two sets of remains be reburied in the CWGC cemetery closest to the recovery site in which other Canadians killed during the same battle or around the same period of time were buried. Reeves recommended La Chaudière Military Cemetery, about two kilometres away from the recovery site. This site contains 906 burials, including 638 Canadians. Fourteen of the latter were fatalities suffered by the 49th Battalion, CEF, during the trench raid of 8-9 June 1917.²⁸

Reeves then went on to note that the two "remains were thoroughly intermingled and it is not possible to separate them. In these circumstances remains are buried together in a single grave marked by a single headstone containing an appropriate inscription (eg 'Two unknown Canadian soldiers of the Great War')." The CWGC would await the Canadian government's response as to the burial.²⁹ The tone of the report, although very sympathetic, clearly indicated that the CWGC is not used to a government proceeding any further in terms of identification. If nothing found on, or with,

The author pointing out Private Peterson's name inscribed on the Vimy Memorial

the remains provides a name or the context of the location does not lead quickly to a positive identification, they are normally re-interred.

That, however, was not the approach taken by the Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH) at the Department of National Defence (DND). Using a combination of historical, genealogical, and scientific research, DND personnel and outside specialists immediately began to attempt to identify these two lost warriors. Colonel Houle forwarded the CWGC report to DHH where Major Jim McKillip was the head of the informal casualty identification team. Part of his duties was “overseeing the identification of uncovered remains of wartime [Canadian] casualties.” The CWGC’s report on the Avion remains triggered a four-year long search (to date) for the identities of the two men.³⁰

Investigation by DND officials into cases of recovered remains typically involves clues provided by the remains themselves, artefacts found associated with the remains, and the historical context of the recovery site. Sometimes, personal items are found with remains, making the task of identification simple. Or, if a downed aircraft is discovered, the aircrew is already known from existing records. In other instances, a non-personal, but tightly-defined, artefact – a unit cap badge, for example – combined with historical context (unit X only lost one soldier in a given area during the war) makes identification only a little more complicated.

The initial historical research into the Avion case – the response to the data provided by the CWGC report – mostly confirmed what the commission had already concluded. The buttons and badge found on the site were, indeed, those of the 49th Battalion, CEF. Some of the other artefacts recovered – parts of a gas mask, bits of uniform, part of an entrenching tool, a button cleaning tool, a shell casing, a shrapnel ball, and a pouch of .303-calibre ammunition – helped confirm the remains were those of a Canadian or British soldier, but did nothing to narrow it down any further. Hand grenades had also been found at the scene, but they had been removed and destroyed by French authorities before CWGC personnel had arrived in Avion.³¹

Photo by Steve Austin, Veterans Affairs Canada



Historical records confirmed the presence of the 49th Battalion in the area south of Avion on 8-9 June 1917, the death of 36 members of the battalion during that night’s trench raid, and the failure to recover the bodies of 16 of those men. The personnel records of the 16 men were reviewed at Library and Archives Canada, searching the all-too-thin documentation for background and medical information. Reports on the trench raid – from unit, brigade, and divisional levels – were examined and first-hand accounts sought out. All of this was compared to the available physical evidence provided by the artefacts and the physical remains found at the Avion site.

However, the details of what exactly happened to those 16 missing men remained unknown. What they experienced during the raid, how they died, even where (in general) they died are questions with no clear answers. The incomplete



La Chaudière Military Cemetery, south of Avion, France.

and, sometimes, contradictory nature of surviving documentation from 1917, the partial hints provided by the physical remains, and the immense changes to the battleground over the last 90 years (including the appearance of a large coal slag heap in the midst of the June 1917 battlefield) made a battlefield reconstruction of the circumstances extremely difficult. Nonetheless, it appears that the two Canadians may have been some distance ahead of the raid's final objective, the German third trench line, which appears to still partially exist south of where the remains were found. Did they rush forward, pumped with adrenaline, chasing the enemy? Did they get lost in the night and find themselves ahead of the rest of the battalion? Did the Germans remove and bury their remains the day after the raid (when German medical personnel were seen working through the area)?³²

The truth will probably never be known. Two members of the Lakehead University forensic team participated in the identification process – Tal Fisher and David Ratz – and conducted research into the circumstances of the two deaths

on 9 June 1917 and developed their own theories and conclusions.³³ However, their subsequent examination of the ground in France, alongside DND historians, raised as many questions as it answered.

It was already clear by early 2004 that historical information alone would not be sufficient to move the identification of these two soldiers any further ahead. At this point the best that could be said is that two unknown soldiers (out of sixteen possible names) of the 49th Battalion, CEF, had been discovered south of Avion. The only prospect of continuing the investigation, and a technique which DND was beginning to use, was the introduction of testing for deoxyribonucleic acid – what most of us know as DNA – into the process.

Dr. Carney Matheson, a forensic scientist with Lakehead University's Paleo-DNA Laboratory, was contacted by DND "to help pursue an identification of the archaeological remains with the intention of employing genetic analysis" in the case. Since the remains found at Avion were

still being held at the CWGC facility in Beaurains – and would not be transferred to Canada – Matheson was required to travel to France to conduct his initial examination. He accompanied Dr. Vera Tiesler-Blos, anthropologist with the Autonomous University of the Yucatan and adjunct at Lakehead, to Beaurains where she carried out a forensic anthropological analysis of the remains.³⁴

Tiesler separated the remains, “sorted [them] by skeletal element and arranged [them] according to their anatomical distribution.” After laying out the bones, the pieces were then catalogued and examined. The remains consisted of most of one skeleton and sizeable portions of the other. In addition to allowing the two scientists to search for any particular identifying features, this process also provided the opportunity to estimate an age range for each fatality, as well as rough heights and apparent medical conditions.³⁵

One of the discoveries noted in the original CWGC reports and detailed by Matheson and Tiesler-Blos was the presence of a dental prosthesis with one of the remains. Significantly, the prosthesis bore a serial number. None of the enlistment documents for the 16 missing members of the 49th Battalion described such a dental condition, making it likely that the work was done while the individual was serving in the CEF, perhaps by Canadian Army Dental Corps personnel.³⁶ Unfortunately (and excruciatingly for this author), no dental records could be found for the 16 soldiers.

Nonetheless, by comparing the scientific information gained during the forensic anthropological analysis with the historical information provided by DHH, the Lakehead team was able to reduce the number of possible candidates from the original total of 16. The rough age and height estimates eliminated some

Members of the Peterson family during the interment ceremony at La Chaudière Military Ceremony. Seated in the centre of the photo are Doreen Bargholz (left) and her brother, Herbert Arthur Peterson (right), the niece and nephew of Private Herbert Peterson. Among the assembled VIPs are Cliff Chadderton, CEO of The War Amps (seated at left), General Rick Hillier, Chief of the Defence Staff (standing behind Chadderton) along with the former governor-general, The Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson and her husband, John Ralston Saul.



Photo by MCpl Jill Cooper, Department of National Defence



The burial party of The Loyal Edmonton Regiment carrying Pte. Peterson's casket into La Chaudière Military Cemetery for the interment ceremony

soldiers from the list, leaving five possible names for one body, four for the other.³⁷

At the same time, genealogist Janet Roy – another member of Matheson's team in Thunder Bay – led the genealogical effort, “doing the painstaking work of tracing the family lineages through birth certificates, baptismal records and marriage files.” It would do no good if DNA were extracted from the two remains with no living family to compare it to. Her investigations reached other genealogists and family historians in Canada, the United States, Great Britain, Ireland, and Ukraine. Once living family of the remaining candidates were identified and contacted, Roy told them about the project “and asked if they would be willing to participate. At this stage they were asked to donate a biological sample.”³⁸

Matheson, technicians, and students at the Lakehead University lab conducted the genetic comparison of the DNA extracted from the remains with the samples provided by family members. The testing proceeded along two

lines, based on the gender of the living family member. A DNA sample from a “maternal related individual” would allow for testing using the “mitochondrial” form of DNA. Unfortunately, an insufficient number of maternal related individuals were found amongst the relevant families. Testing had to rely upon the use of “Y chromosome short tandem repeat” DNA from paternal related individuals, of which there was at least one member from each of the relevant families.³⁹

Among those descendants asked for a DNA sample was Herbert Peterson. Peterson provided a sample (a swab of his cheek cells) in 2006 and again in early 2007. The latter test, and resulting comparison, positively matched the DNA from one of the Avion remains in February 2007. The sample from the Lethbridge, Alberta resident was the final piece in identifying his long-lost uncle and namesake, Private Herbert Peterson, 49th Battalion, CEF.⁴⁰

The second set of remains from Avion has yet to be identified, but work on the case continues.

Some media reports state that Private Peterson was the first “unknown” soldier from the First World War to be identified through the use of “DNA forensics.”⁴¹ Such a pronouncement is inaccurate, even though he was the first to be identified using Y-chromosomal DNA. Regardless, the Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence may have hit the mark with its opinion: “Modern science and good investigative work helped to identify the remains as those of Private Peterson.”⁴²

The day before the re-interment ceremony saw the final preparations for the funeral at the CWGC facility in Beaurains. Laurel Clegg, a forensic scientist with DHH, continued her behind-the-scenes work liaising with the various players in the identification process and making sure everything, from research to testing to burial preparation, continued to go smoothly. Her role, never in the limelight, was essential to the entire process, in particular her ability to pass information between the military, historians, scientists, CWGC personnel, and funeral staff

– groups which do not always speak the same language.

On this day she and a handful of others were assisting Allan Cole and Rick Pedder from McKinnon & Bowes, the funeral firm responsible for preparing Canadian military remains for burial. In an informal, yet completely professional manner (as Allan and Rick were being interviewed by CBC Radio), Private Peterson's remains were placed in the casket and sealed up. CWGC staff offered to carry the casket from the preparation room to the hearse. The offer was politely, but firmly, refused. The sudden appearance of Canadian nationalism led to six Canadians in the room taking on this symbolic task.

The Loyal Edmonton Regiment's burial party returned the casket to the hearse after the morning ceremony in Arras on 7 April 2007. The funeral procession then began the journey from Arras, over Vimy Ridge, to just south of Avion. The destination was La Chaudière Military Cemetery, the resting place originally recommended by CWGC.

The interment ceremony itself followed normal military burial procedure, the exception being the large attendance of uniformed mourners (including the entire Canadian Forces' contingent in France for the rededication of the Vimy Memorial two days later) and media. The burial party carried the casket through the throng of onlookers into position in the right front corner of the small cemetery. A committal service was spoken, followed by prayers, the firing of volleys, and the playing of the Last Post. After a moment of silence and the playing of the Rouse, the Canadian national flag atop the casket was folded and presented to the Peterson family (niece Doreen Bargholz and her husband Douglas as well as nephew Herbert Peterson and his son Kevin) by Lieutenant-Colonel Hans Brink, commanding officer of The Loyal Edmonton Regiment. The casket was then lowered into the grave.

When this author, the DHH historian on the identification team, last saw Private Herbert

Peterson, he was resting quietly in La Chaudière Military Cemetery, the turf replaced on his grave and the headstone firmly in place. It had been five days since Peterson was interred there, nearly ninety years later than his peers. But, without a doubt, he was finally where he belonged.

Notes

My thanks to Laurel Clegg, Major Jim McKillip, and Major Paul Lansey from the Directorate of History and Heritage, Department of National Defence, Janet Roy, Thunder Bay, Ontario, and Patricia Legrand, Commonwealth War Graves Commission, for their assistance with this paper.

1. Unless otherwise specified, this, and subsequent, uncited accounts of the events relating to Private Peterson's 2007 funeral come from the author's personal notes and first hand memories of the events.



The headstone for Pte. Herbert Peterson in La Chaudière Military Cemetery.

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4. Peterson personnel file, attestation paper, 22 February 1916.
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18. 7th Bde raid report; 49th Bn raid report.
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20. *Ibid.*
21. LAC, RG 9, III D 3, vol. 4893, WD, 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade, 8 June 1917; 7th Bde raid report; 49th Bn raid report.
22. 7th Bde raid report; 49th Bn raid report.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Stevens, pp.405-11; Commonwealth War Graves Commission, "Debt of Honour Register," <www.cwgc.org/debt_of_honour.asp?menuid=14>.
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29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*; Bruce Campion-Smith, "DNA solves Vimy mystery," *Toronto Star*, 4 March 2007.
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