

The End Of The First World War

Early on the morning of Nov. 11, 1918 soldiers of the Canadian Corps cleared German defenders from the Belgian city of Mons. The Canadians were preparing to participate in another Allied offensive when they learned that Germany had just signed armistice terms which amounted to her complete surrender. The First World War would end at 11 am that day. It claimed the lives of over 60,000 Canadians, including 58 Gananoque area men.

The sudden Allied victory stunned soldiers on both sides. In early 1918, German armies had advanced close enough to Paris to shell it with artillery, but the tide turned as they suffered one million casualties. German commanders believed, however, that a negotiated peace was possible. That illusion was crushed at Amiens on Aug. 8, 1918 when the Canadian and Australian Corps drove the Germans back eleven kilometers and captured 12,000 prisoners. Amiens was followed by costly Canadian victories at the Queant-Drocourt Line and the Canal du Nord. The German request for an armistice was a shock to soldiers on both sides as most Allied commanders believed the war would last well into 1919.

It was at Mons in August 1914 that British and German soldiers fought their first battle of the war and it was there that the last Canadian soldier was killed. Canada relied exclusively on volunteers for most of the war, but heavy losses meant fewer men enlisted. Conscription came into effect in Dec. 1917 following a divisive election on the issue. Private George Lawrence Price, age 25, was one of about 24,000 draftees to arrive at the front during the last weeks of the war. He was shot in the chest and died two minutes before the war ended. His grave is located near those of British and German soldiers killed in the first days of the war.

The cost of the final drive to victory was staggering. Only a constant stream of reinforcements, including draftees, kept units up to strength. The Canadian Corps began Amiens with a strength of 103,000. By 11 Nov. 1918 11,882 had been killed and 32,750 wounded. Among the dead were 15 Gananoque area men: Harold Adair age 21; Ellis Gibbins 30 whose brother was killed in late 1917; Amyas Sampson 19; Eric Turner 18; Martin Flynn 35; William Applin 23; Millard Wright 26 whose brother would be killed in Normandy in 1944; Ernest Eastwood 41; Rolfe McKeil 21; Hugh Moss whose brother died of injuries in 1917; Frederick Davis 23; Frederick Fletcher 20; John Wallace 31; Harry Tryon 35; and Ralph Ranger 21.

Most Canadians who served hoped that their sacrifice would mean a better world. This soldier wrote on learning that his brother had been killed: *"For me I cannot conceive a worse tragedy, Father, than a wasted life, and one's life here at any rate is not wasted ... it is something to have come here and done what is expected of you ... Let us hope that the world after will be the better for it."*

It is not his fault or that of the hundreds of thousands of other Canadians who served during the Great War that 20 years after the armistice many of their sons and daughters would see the need to volunteer during the Second World War.