

## **Chapter 9 - Theodore Goes to War**

### **Tales From the Front**

#### **Cpl. Harry Austin at the Second Battle of Ypres**

The First Battle of Ypres occurred between 19 October and 22 November 1914, when the Allies captured the city from the Germans. The Second Battle of Ypres began on 22 April, 1915, with an attack of poison gas on British and Canadian troops. The battle continued until 25 May, 1915. It was during this battle, Canada's first major engagement in the war, that the Canadian troops established their reputation as a formidable fighting force.

Corporal Harry Austin was the first young man from Theodore to enlist, and just one of the many Canadian soldiers who fought in the Second Battle of Ypres. According to his military records, he was the son of Manly Austin one of Theodore's early residents. He had been born in Gronwood, Wisconsin, USA on 6 April, 1891, several years before the family arrived in Theodore. He became a carpenter before joining the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion in Winnipeg on 14 December, 1914. He was appointed Lance Corporal 10 February 1915.<sup>1</sup>

After training in Winnipeg Austin's battalion sailed from Halifax to England on the S.S. Vaderlant on 21 February, 1915. The voyage, apparently, was a pleasant one and without incident. The ship, carrying a total of 3,000 Canadian soldiers, stopped for two days at Queenstown, Ireland, before sailing for Bristol England escorted by the Cruiser Essex. From there they were taken to Folkstone, a town about ten miles from Dover. Austin survived the war, and was welcomed back at Theodore at the end of April 1919.<sup>2</sup> After the Battle of Ypres he wrote a

letter to his parents in which he described his experiences. The letter, published in *The Yorkton Enterprise* on 1 July, 1915, appears below.

“We got some pretty stiff training there and on April 26<sup>th</sup> we left Folkstone for France, crossing the channel in a troopship and landed at Boulogne. We then took train to Popperinge, Belgium, where we found that we were reinforcements for the first Canadian contingent, which had been badly cut up at Ypres which was only about ten miles away. I happened to be in a bunch that reinforced the 10th Battalion.

The 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion went into action at Ypres 1,100 strong and came out 400 strong. We were sent into the reserve trenches only one mile from Ypres and right on the Yser canal bank. I got a good chance to see Ypres and got a few souvenirs. Ypres was a sight that you never get twice in a lifetime. We stayed in the trenches at Ypres for six days and then were relieved. Five or six days is all one can stand at a time. We went back to the billets to rest,

After we had rested for six days we were sent further south in the line in the Festubert district. Here we had some pretty hot fighting. Our Battalion got into a pretty tight place. We were sent into front line trenches that had just been taken from the Germans. We found all kinds of dum-dum bullets and one saw bayonet. Well we are here for four days watching the Germans like cats.

There was a terrible artillery duel going on. Our artillery got the best of it and then shelled the German trenches in front of us. That night we attacked their trenches. They opened seven machine guns on us. We lost heavily. We charged right up to their trenches. They stayed in the trenches till we got close enough to use the bayonets. Then they jumped over the back of their trench and ran. We took the trench.

Well, the next day we got hits from their artillery. The first shell that came over burst right over our head and killed two or three men on one side of the line and three men on the other. I don't know how in the world I escaped. Their shrapnel was terrible. After the Germans had shelled us till they thought we were pretty well driven out of the trenches they attacked us. They had to cross a piece of open ground. We just mowed them down. We used rifle and machine gun and bombs. They just ran out of men and did not succeed in getting the trench back. We lost over half of our men in the engagement. There are very few men of the original 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion left.

The 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion have gone through two bad fights and we have been in action again since the fight at Festubert but I cannot tell you about them now as we have to let three weeks elapse before we can write about any place we have been or what happened.

Well, I suppose you want to know what I think of the war. To be sure, we don't seem to make much progress here. The German soldier has all the grit of the British. But their artillery is good. And they seem to have lots of ammunition. We would have them beaten in no time if it was not for their artillery. Their line don't seem to weaken at all on this part of the line in spite of the constant pounding it gets.

No pen or picture can describe the devastation and demolition caused by the war. Every building within reach of their big guns have been shelled by the Germans. Every part

of the country the Germans have been through is in ruins. Men women and children have been murdered. The Germans think it is their duty to do all the damage possible. It does seem a shame to destroy such a fine country. France is a low-lying country, drained by ditches and canals. Wheat, oats, rye and all kinds of fruit are grown of the farms. Every farm has a big orchard. Apples, pears, plums, cherries and grapes are grown. Some of the cherries are nearly ripe and we will be having some fruit to eat. It is amusing to see them farm here. One generally sees an old man or boy out with one horse on one section of harrows. But they have got every bit of land into crop right up to the firing line. Of course, all the men are away to the war.

We have a great time learning the French language. I was telling one of my friends the other day that I could understand now how it was that the foreigners in our country did so much talking with their hands. We have to go through so many gestures to make the people over here understand us.<sup>3</sup>

### **Pte. John A. Gunn, Prisoner of War**

John Alexander Gunn was only four years old when his father, Donald Gunn, settled at what was then called Devil's Lake. He attended school at Whitesand, Yorkton, and Orcadia. In 1902 he enlisted to fight in South Africa, but the war was over before the Canadian troops arrived. He was already a member of the 16th Light Horse militia based in Yorkton when first World War began and by July of 1915 he was in England training at Shorncliffe, Kent.

John Gunn was among those who fought the Battle of Sanctuary Wood in the early summer of 1916. His father, Donald Gunn, received a telegram stating that his son was missing and believed killed in action. By the end of June word was received that he was alive and a prisoner of war at Duimen, Westphalia, Germany.<sup>4</sup>

Several of John Gunn's letters to friends and family home were printed in *The Yorkton Enterprise*. One of the first letters resulted in the following news item on 24 August, 1916.

Mr, W, Pickering is in receipt of a postal card from Pte. J. A. Gunn, of "A" (Yorkton) Co., 1st C.M.R., who is now a prisoner in Germany, and while he does not complain of his condition it is evident that he is very hungry and that parcels would be very appreciated.

As Private Gunn is a native of this district and exceptionally well known. The *Enterprise* feels certain that it is only necessary to publish his address to ensure the sending of a generous supply of parcels by his many friends.<sup>5</sup>

As a follow-up *The Yorkton Enterprise* published the following item just one week later.

In our issue of August 24 we published the address of Pte. J. A. Gunn, who is a prisoner of war in Germany, and asked his friends in this district to send him parcels of food. That we were justified in doing so is proven by the following postal card which we received from him yesterday:

“Would you mind giving my address to anyone that would be kind enough to send me an occasional parcel. The same would be thankfully received and duly acknowledged.”

“I am quite well and looking forward to the day when the green hills of the St. Lawrence loom in sight once again.”<sup>6</sup>

The next letter published in *The Yorkton Enterprise* appeared at the end of September 1916.

Miss A. M. Gunn, of Devil’s Lake, has received an interesting letter, dated July 30, from her brother, Pte. J. A. Gunn, of the 1<sup>st</sup> C.M.R., who is at present a prisoner at Barrack 5, Dulmen, Westphalia, Germany. The excerpts published below will prove of interest to his many friends in [the] Yorkton district:

Just a line to say that I am quite well and in the best of spirits. We have lots of good water, and the camp is kept very clean, and the buildings are new and comfortable. My first card was written to the Canadian Red Cross, London, who are supposed to look after us in regards [to] comforts but as yet have not received anything from them, so try and send a parcel as often as possible until I advise you otherwise. In addition to the things I named in my first letter you might include a few pounds of breakfast bacon, cocoa, chocolate, grapes and an auto stop shaving outfit: also an Ingersol watch would be useful. The coat, sweater, underclothes, and gloves which I mentioned need only be light weight wool as the winters are quite mild in this part of the world. I suppose you were anxious and worrying as to what had become of me but I guess an old dog for a hard road.<sup>7</sup>

Toward the end of 1917 *The Yorkton Enterprise* printed more news about John Gunn.

Mr. W. Pickering is in receipt of a letter from Pte. J. A. Gunn of the 1<sup>st</sup> C.M.R., written from Kriegs-Gefangenenlager Wahn (Rhld), a German prison camp, on November 14, to which camp the writer was transferred to in August. Pte. Gunn says that he is quite well and wishes to thank his many friends in Yorkton and district for the parcels forwarded to him following the announcement of his whereabouts in *The Enterprise*.

He says Canadian prisoners are well looked after now, so far as food supplies are concerned, by the Red Cross Society. Pte. Harper is with him and they are as well treated as can be expected under the circumstances. The prisoners rise at 5 a.m. and retire at 9

p.m. and get plenty of exercise and fresh air. Up to then there had been no frost but the weather was cool and wet. Prisoners are allowed to write a postal card every Sunday and a letter twice a month.

The final letter from John Gunn to appear in *The Yorkton Enterprise* was written to Miss T. H. Bucknum from a hospital in Switzerland and he was safely away from Germany. In it he summarized his time as a prisoner of war.

Switzerland Jan. 5, 1918.

You will no doubt be surprised to learn that I am now here getting further away from home all the time instead of closer. But will be back some day and will appreciate it all the more, after the rough trip which I have had. "All is well that ends well."

I arrived here on December 28, from Sprottau, in Schlesia, which place I left on the 6<sup>th</sup> of December for Mannheim in Baden where we were detained until the morning of the 27<sup>th</sup>, and that night crossed the frontier at Constance, after having almost nineteen months "on the inside alooking out." Was not sorry to leave Germany, I can assure you, as we had a pretty rough time there. The discipline is awful and the food is not fit for a human being and had it not been for the parcels we were receiving we could never have lived on it.

I was two months in the camp at Duimen in Westfalia, near the Holland frontier. I was also five months on a bridge-building job, with a hundred more, on the Rhine, and as the conditions there were very bad I was taken ill and sent to a large hospital in Cologne and after three months there, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March last was sent to the eastward in Sprottau, in Schlesia. After four months in a hospital there I was deemed well enough to be discharged, to await internment in Switzerland. You will see by this that I have seen a good bit of Germany, and also had some queer experiences. However, I hope that the balance of the journey will be easier going. With a good many more I am quartered in a fine hotel away above the clouds and have a lovely view of the Alps. They are very nice but not so high or great as the Rockies. The food is good and we have spring beds and real sheets, which is quite an agreeable change to what we have been used to." In this short letter I have just skipped over the last nineteen months.<sup>8</sup>

Private John Gunn's military experience is mentioned for the last time in *The Yorkton Enterprise* at the end of May 1919, when the following item appeared:

Pte. Gunn was taken prisoner in the third battle of Ypres in June 1916 while wounded, only sixty men of the battalion surviving the engagement. He suffered all the brutalities and cruelty that Hunnish militarism could inflict until, broken in health, he was sent to a rest camp in Switzerland to recuperate. He was there until liberated following the

signing of the armistice and although he received every care and attention since is not yet recovered from his terrible experiences. He left yesterday to spend a couple of months with his father, Mr. Donald Gunn, Devil's Lake, and anticipates that the peace and quiet of this delightful spot will do much to restore him to his former vigour.<sup>9</sup>

### **F/O W. A. Kirstatik, RCAF Honored For Devotion to Duty.**

F/O W. A. Kirstiuk, former Theodore resident - awarded the DFC. The decoration was announced by RCAF headquarters on February 21. In the list of nine DFCs to BC airmen, seven are from Vancouver.

One of the seven names listed was that of PO Walter Kirstiuk, only son of Rev. D. Kirstiuk, and the late Mrs. D. Kirstiuk of Vancouver, formerly of Theodore.

A blanket citation covering the awards, said the men had completed numerous operations against the enemy, and had displayed "the utmost fortitude, courage and devotion to duty."

Walter was born and educated in Theodore, and it was during the residence of the family there that his mother passed away. He enlisted with the RCAF in 1942, received training in Ontario and Quebec and Nova Scotia. He went overseas in August, 1943.

All his relatives and friends rejoice in the honor won by Walter, and although he is instructing at present, they are looking forward having him back in Canada before long.<sup>10</sup>

### **F/O G. A. Hanson**

The crew of F/O G. A. Hanson, son of Mr. and Mrs. A. Hanson of Nipawin, pilot in an RAF Lancaster squadron are becoming known as "the flying colanders." In some 15 trips they've been peppered five times by flak. With F/O Hanson are F. E. Colean, navigator (35 Fennell Ave.) And F.Sgt. F. R. Stanley, rear-gunner (138 Cape St.) both of Hamilton, Ont .

Hanson's troubles started on his second "dickie" trip when he went along as second pilot to a veteran RAF pilot. Over Nuremburg they were attacked by a twin-engined enemy night fighter, driving it off with gunfire. Since then his aircraft has been hit by flak at Trier Ludwinshafen, Krefeld, Cologne and Wesel. Three times they had an engine knocked out by flak and returned on three motors.

Their worst experience was due to weather, however. Flying alternately through fog, rain and sleet, they lost two motors due to icing conditions, 60 miles inland from the French coast. Losing height rapidly they made their way back to sea and got rid of all their bomb load except the 4,000 pound "cookie." Down to 2,800 feet by this time they did not dare jettison their big bomb so low. They limped back to land at an emergency air field in Britain with their bomb still aboard.

Their pneumatics were shot, away over Krefeld. Back at their home airfield they landed safely, on three engines and without brake pressure to slow their speed down the runway. At Cologne, their air bomber got "perspec" in his eye. Over another target, their mid-upper gunner received a chunk of flak in the seat of his trousers. It bruised but didn't penetrate.

## **Others**

A reminder that others besides Canadians and those who served in the Allied forces made worth-while contributions to victory in the last war comes from John Datema of Theodore. He was one of three Hollanders who left here on January 11, 1941, in response to a call from the Netherlands government. His companions were John Zandee and Pete Bylsma. John was the first one to return to Canada after two and one-half years service. Eighteen months of which was in the Dutch West Indies. There he experienced the biggest attack on the western hemisphere when the Japs attempted to capture the world's biggest oil refinery on the island of Aruba. John Zandee returned a week ago after going through hell in Holland, escaping three times, barely with his life. Pete Bylyma is still in Holland where he served with the paratroops but is expected back this fall. These are three of many others in this area of the province who rendered valued service during the late conflict in other than the Allied forces. They are no less deserving of honor on this account, although the public are less liable to hear of the contributions they have made.<sup>11</sup>

**Notes:**

1. Canadian Archives Harry Austin 81031
2. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*, 1 May, 1919.
3. "Tenth Battalion Lost 700 Men at Ypres Battle: Thrilling story of fighting from April 28 to end of May told by corporal Austin," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 1 July, 1915.
4. Anaka, Joyce. *Donald Gunn: Family History*.
5. "War Prisoner Wants Food," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 24 August, 1916.
6. "War Prisoners in Need of Food," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 31 August, 1916.
7. "Pte. Gunn Writes From Prison Camp," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 21 September, 1916.
8. "Huns Prisoners Food Not Fit for Humans," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 28 February 1918.
9. "Thirteen Men Return Home From France" *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 22 May, 1919.
10. "Theodore Native Son Awarded DFC.," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 15 March, 1945.
11. "Theodore Hollanders Thrilling Experience with Dutch Forces," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 30 August, 1945..