

REMEMBERED ON THE VIMY MEMORIAL

George Bothwell and George Stokes

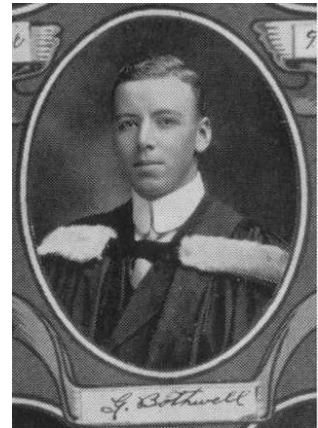
Inscribed on the ramparts of the Vimy Memorial at Arras, France, are the names of 11,285 soldiers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) who were posted as “*missing, presumed dead*” during the battles of World War One. Among those thousands, who’s graves are unknown, are two names from Perth, Ontario -- Lieutenant George Edwin Bothwell and Private George James Stokes.

Lieutenant George Edwin Bothwell

Among the tragic deaths of 66,655 Canadians in WW1, the death of George Edwin Bothwell was tragic in its own unique way.

Born at Perth in 1889, the son of Thomas C. Bothwell (1853-1948), a cooper, and Christina Grace McPhail (1856-1948), George Bothwell attend public school and collegiate at Perth and graduated from the University of Toronto Forestry program in 1913. He was employed by the Dominion Government Forestry Department, working in the Athabasca District of northern Alberta, when he enlisted with the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) at Edson, Alberta, on June 21, 1915.

Having previously served with the 101st Edmonton Fusiliers Militia Regiment, he was posted as a Private to the 49th Battalion (Edmonton), then promoted Staff Sergeant and sent to the 51st Battalion (Edmonton). On August 18, 1915, he was nominated for officer training and commissioned a Lieutenant in the 51st Battalion on January 21, 1916.



George Bothwell (1895-1916)
(Photo Courtesy UofT)

Bothwell embarked with the 51st Battalion on the SS *Missanabie* at Halifax and sailed for England on April 18, 1916. Landing at Liverpool a week later, he attended four weeks of additional officer training in May before landing in France on June 9, 1916. Four days later he transferred to the 1st Battalion Canadian Mounted Rifles (CMR) already in the field.



1st CMR Badge

The 1st Battalion CMR had been formed as a mounted infantry regiment on November 7, 1914, at Brandon, Manitoba, and reached France on September 22, 1915. Conditions on the Western Front offered no place or need for mounted troops, however, so the Battalion was converted to regular infantry and became one of four battalions forming the 8th Infantry Brigade. On June 2, 1916, the 1st CMR was among troops manning the 3rd Division's front when the Germans launched the assault that opened the Battle of Mount Sorrel. Its positions were overrun, and 557 of its 692 members (80%) were killed, wounded, or captured. Lieutenant George Bothwell was among reinforcements sent to rebuild the Battalion.

In France, Bothwell underwent further training in scouting, sniping, and trench mortars and was appointed the 1st CMR's Scouting and Intelligence Officer.

Shifted to the Somme, the 1st CMR was one of the leading Canadian Corps units in the attack that opened the great July-November 1916 Battle of the Somme. On September 15th, at Flers-Courcelette¹ it was in the first wave attacking Mouquet Farm, with Lieutenant George Bothwell's scouting platoon in the lead.² A few days later, Lieutenant George Currie³, who described himself as George Bothwell's "*oldest and best friend*", wrote to Bothwell's mother.

A new big attack was commenced by the British on a large frontage on the morning of the 15th. George was in charge of a party which raided a German strong point at Mouquet Farm, east of Albert. The raid was a complete success. One of the prisoners surrender to George with his hands up, but when George turned about to call an escort, the wretch shot him through the head. The German was at once killed by one of George's men. It was a dastardly trick and one which cannot be forgiven to that infamous race.

George was a most gallant soldier and died in a great cause. I visited his battalion as soon as we came out and great regret was expressed by everyone on his death. The attack made by the Canadians was a great and glorious success. My own regiment advanced to a depth of 2,000 yards in one place and took many prisoners, but our losses were severe. The carnage is awful and the sights I have witnessed in this war have been enough to turn my heart to stone. The war will last a long time yet, but every Bosch⁴ I kill in future will be in revenge for George.

On September 19th Bothwell's name was entered in the Battalion records as "*reported missing, believed KIA (killed in action), September 15, 1916*". On October 1st an additional entry noted "*no further information*". Finally, on December 27th, the record was closed with the entry "*Previous report, missing, believed killed, now [determined] killed in action, September 15, 1916, France or Belgium*".



Bothwell Vimy Memorial Engraving

¹ The Battle of Courcelette saw the first use of the 'creeping barrage' and of tanks.

² Although the attack gained ground, the Canadians did not take the strong point; but the assault was considered a successful diversion from the main attack on Courcelette.


³ Lieutenant George Selkirk Currie (1889-1975), Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, awarded Distinguished Service Order (DSO) and Military Cross (MC), promoted to Lieutenant Colonel by the end of WW1. During WW2 served as Executive Assistance to Minister of Defence James Ralston 1940-1942 and then as Deputy Minister of Defence (Army) 1942-1944. Founding partner in the accounting firm of McDonald, Currie & Co., renamed Coopers & Lybrand Canada in 1973 and PricewaterhouseCoopers in 1998.

⁴ A derisive term used by the Allies during World War I, a shortened form of the French slang 'alboche', itself derived from 'caboche' ('head' or 'cabbage').

MURDERED BY PRISONER

Lieut. Bothwell Treacherously Killed by German Prisoner.

While detailing an escort to take the prisoners to the rear of the lines, Lieut. G. D. Bothwell, of Perth, Ont., was shot and instantly killed by one of the German prisoners who managed to conceal a revolver in his clothes. The murder was instantly avenged according to information received by his friends. Lieut. Bothwell was in charge of a raiding party at Mouquet Farm, when he lost his life.



Lt. Bothwell was a graduate in Forestry at the University of Toronto and was employed by the Dominion Government in Western Canada on the outbreak of war. He enlisted for overseas service as a private at Edmonton. Later he received his commission and was made scouting and intelligence officer of a C.M.R. unit. He had been in the trenches about a year.


Toronto Star, Dec. 9, 1916

Toronto Star, December 9, 1916.

TREACHEROUSLY KILLED

Lt. G. E. Bothwell Killed by Prisoner Who Had Surrendered.

Lt. G. E. Bothwell, of Perth, Ont., lost his life while in command of a raiding party at Mouquet Farm on Sept. 15. While he was detailing escorts for the German prisoners after the surrender he was treacherously killed by one of the prisoners who had a concealed weapon. The murder was instantly avenged. Lt. Bothwell was a graduate in Forestry of the University of Toronto. He was connected with the Forestry Department of the Dominion Government in the Rockies when he joined the 51st Battalion in Edmonton as a private. Since going to the front, Lt. Bothwell was chosen to take a special course in scouting and sniping, and also in trench mortar. Later he was made scouting and intelligence officer of the 1st Canadian Mounted Rifles.



Toronto Evening Telegram, December 8, 1916.

Toronto Evening Telegram, December 8, 1916.

In a November 1916 letter,⁵ 1st CMR "brother officer and chum"⁶, Lieutenant D. D. McLaws⁶, told Bothwell's mother that her son had been "*interred near the scene of his death and his grave marked with a wooden cross*".⁷ That may have been true in the moment and the grave later obliterated, or perhaps that account represents only McLaws' attempt to ease the pain of a grieving mother, but Lieutenant George Bothwell's remains were never recovered from the battlefield. On February 13, 1920, the Cross of Sacrifice was sent to mother⁸ and his name later engraved on the Vimy Memorial. Bothwell is also commemorated on Page-56 of the *First World War Book of Remembrance*⁹ and with a cenotaph raised by his family in Elmwood Cemetery, Perth.

⁵ *Perth Courier*, November 10, 1916.

⁶ Lieutenant David Douglas McLaws (1884-1959), 1st Battalion Canadian Mounted Rifles, later promoted Captain, awarded Military Cross 1918, survived the war.

⁷ *Perth Courier*, November 10, 1916.

⁸ George Bothwell's brother, Lieutenant Austin Bothwell (1884-1928), served with the 174th Battalion. He survived the war.

⁹ Kept under protective glass in the Memorial Chamber of Canada's Parliament Buildings.

Private George James Stokes

On the final day of Battle of the Somme, November 18, 1916, Private George James Stokes went 'over the top' for the first time, never to be seen again.

Stokes was born at Perth in 1895, the son of George Jennings Stokes (1856-1942), a coal carter, and Jemima Sawyer Heath (1859-1934). He was educated at Perth Public School and was working as an apprentice machinist when he enlisted with the CEF at Smiths Falls on April 10, 1915, joining the 38th Battalion (Ottawa).

After basic training at Camp Barriemfield, with a strength of 994 officers and other ranks Stokes' Battalion embarked on the SS *Caledonian* at Montreal on August 1, 1915, and sailed for Bermuda.

Over the next 10 months they garrisoned the island and completed their training before embarking for England on the SS *Grampian* on May 29, 1916. Arriving at Devonport in early June, the Battalion underwent further training at Bramshott Camp and then crossed the channel on August 14th. Disembarking at Le Havre, France, the 38th became part of the 4th Canadian Division, 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade.



38th Battalion Badge

The Battalion went into the line near Kemmel Hill, at the southern end of the Ypres salient, where they remained until 23 September 1916 when, with other units of the 4th Canadian Division, they were sent to join the remainder of the Canadian Corps on the Somme.

On November 17th, Private George Stokes' 38th Battalion took over a section of Regina Trench¹⁰ on the front line in the Ancre River valley and prepared for an attack on Desire and Grandcourt Trenches. Stokes and his Battalion went 'over the top' for the first time the following morning. The Battalion War Diary for November 18, 1916, recorded,

Batt. in front line. Attack commenced at 6:10 a.m., 87th Batt. on right, East Surreys on left flank. All Batts. obtained their objective. Large list of casualties. Snow early in the morning, later turning to rain.

The assault began in snow and sleet and descended into chaos. Five Battalions of the 4th Division, including George Stokes' 38th, succeeded in capturing Desire Trench, and the 38th and 87th even broke through to Grancourt Trench. But they were forced to withdraw. As always, the mud served the defenders, preventing the use of the few available tanks, and making all communication difficult. Somewhere between Regina Trench and Grancourt Trench, Private George James Stokes #410199 disappeared, most likely vaporized by shell fire. His service records provide no detail, stating simply "1916-11-18, reported from base, killed in action".

¹⁰ A former German trench captured by the Canadian 4th Division three days earlier.

In the assault on Desire and Grancourt Trenches, Stokes was one of 545 casualties sustained by the 38th Battalion. With the withdrawal of the 38th from Grancourt Trench, the First¹¹ Battle of the Somme was over. Over five bloody months on the Somme Canadian troops suffered more than 8,000 dead for a gain of 2.5 kilometers of mutilated farmland.



Stokes Vimy Memorial Engraving

The remains of Private George Stokes were never recovered. In August 1920 his father received his son's 'War Service Gratuity' of \$150 and in April 1922 his mother received a 'Memorial Cross'. Subsequently, Stokes' name was engraved on the Vimy Memorial. He is also commemorated on Page-169 of the *First World War Book of Remembrance* and on a family gravestone in Elmwood Cemetery, Perth.

Vimy Memorial

Designed by sculptor Walter Seymour Allward the Canadian National Vimy Memorial was constructed between 1925 and 1932 and was dedicated by King Edward VIII on July 26, 1932. Located on the site of Canada's victory at the Battle of Vimy Ridge¹², it honors all Canadians who served during the First World War but bears the names of only those who lie in unknown graves.



Engraved on the base of the memorial are the words: *"To the valour of their countrymen in the Great War and in memory of their sixty thousand dead this monument is raised by the people of Canada".*

- Ron W. Shaw (2024)

¹¹ The Second Battle of the Somme (aka the Battle of Saint-Quentin) was a partially successful German offensive against Allied forces fought over the same ground between March 21 and April 5, 1918.

¹² Fought April 9-14, 1917. Among 10,602 casualties at Vimy Ridge there were 23 young men from Perth. See <https://www.perthhs.org/documents/vimy-ridge-april-1917.pdf> elsewhere on this site.