

Canada's last man to fall

Private George Lawrence Price died minutes before the end of WWI, waving to a pretty face

By **KATHLEEN HARRIS**

OTTAWA -- He was the last man to fall in the "War to End All Wars."

Across Europe, civilians were already rejoicing a ceasefire to the bloody conflict as Allied soldiers still stuck in the trenches kept on the heels of retreating enemy troops. Canadian Pte. George Lawrence Price was positioned firmly on the front line as moments counted down toward precious peace.

According to one historian, he rose just briefly to greet the wave of a woman he spotted above. And at 10:58 a.m. -- just two minutes before Armistice was officially signed at 11 a.m., Nov. 11, 1918 -- the 25-year-old farm labourer was shot in the right chest by a German sniper near the Belgian city of Mons.

At that moment, Price earned the "grim distinction" as the last known Canadian -- and likely the last Allied soldier -- to die in combat in the First World War.

"He epitomized the sadness, the waste of the Great War and certainly the casualties," says Tim Cook, an author and World War One historian at the Canadian War Museum.

Cook said word had already gone out that Armistice would come in to effect at 11 a.m., but it took some time to reach front-line units like the one Price was in.

"He had been told stay down and for whatever reason -- was he looking to steal a first kiss or a last kiss, or to time it with the Armistice to have a story to tell his grandkids? Who knows," he said. "And then, the war ends."

While his story and name are not well known, Price is a poignant symbol of the mind-boggling blood loss and sacrifice Canadians will honour this week by pinning poppies on lapels and attending solemn ceremonies at cenotaphs. Remembrance Day carries special significance this year as it marks the 90th anniversary of the end of the First World War, and Canadians will pay tribute to the war dead of distant generations in past and modern-day conflict in Afghanistan.

It will be a day of celebration of victory and sad tribute to the fallen -- much like Nov. 11, 1918 itself.

Wild cheers of celebration erupted in London and other cities at the war's end that day, but stunned silence prevailed at the front lines. Men stumbled in awe or stood frozen in tears among a sea of bodies that were their fallen comrades.

"Among the combat soldiers there was almost disbelief that this horrendous event was over," Cook said.

Canada had entered the war as a British colony and emerged as a definable, self-governing dominion that had proven itself as an international player and viable military force. Troops, most of them civilians, returned home to pick up their lives and rebuild the country, some with post-war shock or permanent disabilities. They returned with a new sense of the Canadian identity, though many soon became disillusioned and were forced to face a great depression, the rise of fascism, and ultimately, another new world war.

In all, some 620,000 Canadian troops served in the First World War, and some 60,000 never returned. Still regarded as Canada's "coming of age," it took an enormous human toll on the battlefields and the home front.

Steve Harris, chief military historian with the Department of National Defence, said the passage of 90 years has led the critical chapter in Canada's history to become an "orchestrated memory" learned and re-lived through commemoration and history books.

"The events like the re-dedication of the Vimy memorial or the Passchendaele movie will bring it back in to focus, but whatever Canadians now think about it is very much orchestrated by these well-defined events," he said.

Harris said there has been a "resurgence of remembrance" in recent years, prompted in part because Canadians draw a contemporary link with casualties in Afghanistan, and in part because there is an acute awareness of the dwindling number of Second World and even Korean war veterans.

Only one Canadian veteran of the First World War survives today -- 108-year-old John Babcock.

There is also special significance in the fact that 90 years after Armistice, Canada is back at war.

"I'm not sure any war can end all wars. The assumption was that it was so costly that no rational actor could produce like circumstances again; that they would draw back," Harris said. "Not every world leader is a rational actor. The expectation that the misery of these four years of war would keep other people from being stupid, erratic, emotional or whatever, fell through."

Just a stone's throw from where Price was killed, a monument stands today as tribute, erected by a small group of comrades 50 years after his death.

The bilingual plaque reads: "To the memory of Private George Lawrence Price 256265 of the 28th North West Battalion, 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade, 2nd Canadian Division, killed in action near this spot at 10.58 hours, November 11th, 1918, the last Canadian soldier to die on the Western Front in the First World War. Erected by his comrades, November 11th, 1968."

It is within half a mile of where the first casualty of the First World War was killed, a Briton who died in August 1914. Ironically, they are buried in the same cemetery, along with some German soldiers.

"For some people who are truly cynical, it basically says the first world war was four years spent fighting over half a mile," Harris said.

For a while, Price became a symbol in the anti-war sentiment that followed Armistice, of senseless death in a futile war. He was central in a 1928 libel trial over an article published in a Port Hope newspaper that suggested Gen. Arthur Currie unnecessarily sacrificed lives by sending them in to advance on the Germans when ceasefire was imminent.

After the lost legal case, Price lost a prominent place in Canadian history. But despite the drama and historic value attached to his death, Harris said placing individual significance on one soldier's death may not be deserved.

"Somebody who died 15 minutes later because of wounds suffered on Nov. 6 is no less dead, and his sacrifice no less great," he said.

A special tribute to Price will take place in Mons this Remembrance Day, and here in Canada his memory will also be honoured in a historical display. Saskatchewan Military Museum Curator Keith Inches sees Price's story as one of ironic tragedy; the native of Nova Scotia had been working as a farm labourer near Moose Jaw and his widow employer didn't pay him the wages owed.

He took bedding in lieu of payment, and she pressed theft charges.

"The judge said go to jail or join the army," Inches said.

Price enlisted in 1917 and joined the legions who never came back. According to research conducted by the museum, he was among a small group of Canadians who entered a series of houses where German fire had been heard just minutes before.

After searching the second home, a single shot rang out, hitting Price in the chest.

"He's not necessarily a heroic figure. If anything, it's tragic -- or maybe you can look at it as a good thing because there weren't any after him -- at least in that war," Inches said.

Canada's First World War legacy of bravery, battle, blood and loss continues today.

"It was not the War to End All Wars," said Cliff Chadderton, a Second World War veteran and chairman of the National Council of Veteran Association.

"Those men who fought in terrible conditions and helped give Canada its identity came back to be thrown into depression and then forced to watch their sons and daughters go off to war. I would hope we might find rising out of the 90th anniversary an even greater respect for them all. And the soldiers in Afghanistan are showing tremendous courage."

PRIVATE GEORGE LAWRENCE PRICE, #256265

- Born Dec. 15, 1892 in Kings County, Nova Scotia
- Moved to Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan as a young man to work on the fall harvest
- Enlisted in the 210th Infantry Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary
- Force on Oct. 15, 1917 and received basic training in Regina before he was posted overseas
- Transferred to the 15th Canadian Reserve Battalion on Feb. 6, 1918 and to the 28th Canadian Infantry Battalion May 1, 1918
- He was gassed on Sept. 8, 1918 in the Canal-du-Nord area, sent for treatment then returned to his unit on Sept. 26, 1918
- Killed in action 10:58, Nov. 11, 1918, the last Allied forces fatality of the First World War
- Buried at the St. Symphorien Military Cemetery in Belgium
- Posthumously awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal

CANADA IN WORLD WAR I

- Canada entered the war in 1914.
- Between 1914 and 1918, more than 650,000 Canadians and Newfoundlanders joined the military to fight in the First World War, the "War to End All Wars."
- More than 170,000 were injured and more than 66,000 lost their lives in costly battles such as those at Beaumont-Hamel and Passchendaele.

- The struggle involved virtually the whole country and made enormous demands on the Canadian people, whether they were involved in the fighting or remained at home to work in industry or farming to support the war effort.

- Canada's contribution to this great struggle, including the triumph at Vimy Ridge, was seen by many in the world as Canada's 'coming of age' as a country and enabled Canada to finally receive recognition on the international scene.

- Four Canadians were awarded the Victoria Cross -- the Commonwealth's highest award for bravery -- for their part in capturing Vimy Ridge.

- Canadian John McCrae wrote the poem "In Flanders Fields" while on the battlefield.

- The first Remembrance Day took place throughout the Commonwealth on November 11, 1919. It was held to commemorate the end of the First World War on Monday, November 11, 1918, at 11:00 a.m.

-- Source: Veterans Affairs Canada

June 28, 1914 - Events leading up to the First World War.

August 4, 1914 - First World War begins.

October 3, 1914 - Canadians set sail for England.

April 22, 1915 - Canadians see first major action at Ypres.

May, 1915 - Almost 2,500 Canadian casualties at Festubert.

July 1, 1916 - 1st Newfoundland Regiment goes over the top at Beaumont-Hamel.

September 15, 1916 - Canadians attack Courcelette in the Battle of the Somme.

April 9, 1917 - The Battle of Vimy Ridge.

November 1917 - Canadians and British capture Passchendaele.

June 19, 1918 - Canadian Nursing Sisters killed in Etaples, France.

April 21, 1918 - Canadian pilot Captain Roy Brown helps shoot down the Red Baron.

July-August, 1918 - German u-boats attack Canadian ships off the East Coast.

August 8, 1918 - Triumph at Battle of Amiens, and the beginning of Canada's Hundred Days.

September 27, 1918 - Canadians breach the German's Hindenburg Line at Canal du Nord.

October 14, 1918 - The youngest Newfoundlander earns the Victoria Cross.

November 11, 1918 - Armistice signed, fighting ends.

June 28, 1919 - Treaty of Versailles signed, officially ending the war.