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### **Too Young to Shave; Too Young to Fight**

by Barbara J Starmans

*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. I consider him fit for the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force. Apparent age, 18 years.*

And so began the WW1 military service of my great-uncle, Hector Bulmer on 24 January 1916, four days after his 16th birthday. Born in Lancashire, England in 1900, Hector was the eldest son of Daniel and Eliza Bulmer, Salvationists, who immigrated to Canada in 1905. At 5 foot, 6-1/2 inches and one hundred and five pounds, Hector was slight and was not yet shaving, but he was anxious to serve and the enlisting officer was willing to ignore the evidence in front of him and accept Hector's word that he had just turned 18.

On the Sunday afternoon prior to Hector's enlistment, Lieut-Col. J.C. Wright of the 169th Overseas Battalion addressed a crowd at Loew's Theatre in Toronto and urged the young men to get out of civilian clothes and into uniforms, declaring that "every man looked better in uniform anyway." He added, "If you get into uniform you won't have that rotten feeling that you have when you go down Yonge street, and the uprightness of the body that the military training will give will indicate your uprightness of mind when you get into khaki." The Toronto World reported that "Over Two Hundred Men Rushed Hysterically to Enrol in the Hundred and Sixty-Ninth." The crowd was so large that "Till early this morning the examining and attesting staff of the 169<sup>th</sup> Battalion was busy at the Pearl Street Armories putting the men thru." It is not known if Hector was one of the men at Loew's Theatre but it seems likely because the very next day he filled in his enlistment papers, falsifying his birth year as 1898, and at the bottom of the first page was sprawling signature of Lieut-Col. J.C. Wright.

The scene at the Bulmer family home that Monday evening can only be imagined. Daniel Bulmer, Hector's father, had enlisted in early September 1915, joining the 83<sup>rd</sup> Battalion under Lieutenant-Colonel Pellatt and had completed his training at Camp Niagara at the end of October. His battalion was currently stationed at the nearby Riverdale Barracks awaiting orders, so he may have had leave to be home that night. Hector's mother Polly would have been cooking dinner with the help of his nineteen year old sister Winn. At thirteen, his sister Doll probably set the table with the help of ten year old Ivy while his brother Jack, who was only seven, might have tried to keep three year old Myrtle out of the way. When the family finally gathered around the table, they would have bowed their heads quietly while one of the younger children said grace and then the noise level would have risen while the food was passed and all the children tried to talk at once. Perhaps Hector would have clinked his fork against his glass and blurted out the news of his enlistment. There was probably a moment of silence while his mother took in the situation and Winn might have patted her awkwardly in compassion. But although Polly was probably vehemently against the idea of Hector becoming a soldier, Hector's own father had

so far spent the war close to home playing in the band with his battalion and keeping up the spirits of the troops. With the battles of Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele still almost two years in the future, the people of Toronto did not yet understand the realities of the war in Europe and probably wouldn't until the telegrams began. Hector's enlistment was grudgingly accepted by his family.

After completing basic training at Camp Niagara, Hector Bulmer, private with the Bugle Band of the 169<sup>th</sup> Overseas Battalion, like many other young soldiers, made out his last will and testament. In it, he left all of his meager personal possessions to his mother and signed his name in a clear school boy hand. Then finally, after months of training and waiting, the 32 officers and 887 other ranks of the 169<sup>th</sup> Battalion boarded a train bound for Halifax. The first draft of men from the 169<sup>th</sup> had sailed with the S.S. Metagama on October 18, but Hector left with the second draft a week later on 25 October 1916, aboard the S.S. Corsican. Throughout the journey, they would have worried about submarines lurking under the cold waters of the Atlantic but the crossing passed with little more than some seasickness and the discomfort of wearing lifebelts everywhere. On 5 November they arrived in Liverpool, spending little time there before they boarded a train that would take them to Bramshott in the north of Hampshire.

Hector's first ten days in Hampshire would have been spent in quarantine before his battalion moved to the main Bramshott Camp. Recruits rose at 5:30 to the sound of reveille and collapsed into their billets by 9:30, tired from the marching and drills. In the main camp, they slept in billets on the floor of clapboard huts, trying to draw warmth from a small shared stove. Infantry training lasted a full nine weeks and was followed by a signalling course.

In January of 1917, the 169<sup>th</sup> along with the 92<sup>nd</sup> and 95<sup>th</sup> Battalions were absorbed by the 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Reserve Battalion under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Chisholm. Shortly afterwards, a note was scrawled in Hector's file. "Stop payment Feb 1/17. Discharged to Canada". Proof of Hector's age had arrived in the form of his British birth certificate and preparations were underway to send him home. At the last moment, something or someone intervened and the note was crossed out and his pay was resumed. Hector would not be returned to Canada but now the army knew he was only 17, neither would he be sent to France.

In April they moved to West Sandling, Kent. The conditions there were terrible. The ground was wet and muddy and it wasn't uncommon to see large rats in the huts. But they were just forty miles from London and with train fare at only four shillings, many of their weekend leaves would have been spent in the city. The street lights there were painted black on the top and sides so that the light only shined downward and the result was that it was miserably dark on the streets, but there was fun to be had for an adventurous boy.

As the summer sun began to dry the ground of West Sandling camp in June 1917, Hector developed a sore throat and fever and was dispatched to the nearby Moore Barracks Hospital at Shorncliffe on 12 June. With a very swollen right tonsil, he was initially diagnosed with tonsillitis but a swab submitted for testing showed KL positive and his chart was revised to show he had diphtheria. Hector was one of about fifty cases of diphtheria and diphtheria carriers treated at Moore Barracks that summer. Dosed with salt washes and gargles, the infectious soldiers were kept in the hospital until three successive tests showed that they were no longer contagious. While in the hospital, further testing revealed that Hector had myopia astigmatism. His eyesight was seriously impaired in both eyes as a result of a childhood prank involving firecrackers, and that without corrective lenses, he was close to being legally blind. Hector was finally discharged on 25 July and at the end of the following month, on 30 August 1917, he was transferred to the 1<sup>st</sup> Central Ontario Regimental Depot and then transferred again on 21

September 1917 to the Canadian Army Medical Corps at the West Sandling depot. The army was getting ready to send Hector home to Canada.

Three months after his discharge from the hospital, on 9 November 1917, Hector was transferred to the Canadian Discharge Depot at Buxton but his departure was delayed one more time. After developing a toothache, Hector underwent a dental extraction on 12 November and then finally on 17 November, Hector boarded the Saxonnia, leaving Liverpool on 17 November 1917 and arriving in Halifax on 30 November where he was transferred to a troop train only days before the SS Mont-Blanc, a French cargo ship, collided with the Norwegian SS Imo near Halifax, causing a massive explosion in Halifax harbour. Hearing of the explosion, Hector's family was frantic with worry, and waited desperately for news of Hector. Unaware of his close brush with disaster, Hector sauntered nonchalantly into the kitchen on his arrival home, and had to support his mother Polly as she swooned with the relief of seeing him safely home at last.

On 18 January 1918, ironically six days before his eighteenth birthday, Hector Bulmer, boy soldier, was officially discharged from active service.

## **Research Documents**

### **Attestation Papers**

My interest in Hector Bulmer's WW1 service began when I discovered his attestation papers at the Library and Archives Canada <http://bit.ly/1lg9kN> website while searching for records of other WW1 soldiers in my family. The attestation papers are now also available on Ancestry.

### **Service Records**

Knowing that Hector was barely 16 years old when he enlisted, I was intrigued and requested copies of his complete service file from LAC. The forty-three page file arrived about six weeks later in the post and from it, I was able to piece together the details of Hector's adventure. As part of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration of the First World War, the service files of the 640,000 soldiers from the WW1 Canadian Expeditionary Force are currently being digitised. Although paper copies can still be ordered, digital records are expected to be available online at the LAC website and on Ancestry, beginning in 2014, with a projected completion in 2015. <http://bit.ly/1lg9kN>

### **War Diaries of the First World War**

The surviving war diaries of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) are online at Library and Archives Canada <http://bit.ly/1ismztF>. By following the unit transfers in Hector's service file, I was able to view the activities of each unit he was with while he was in England.

## **[Boxout] Boy Soldiers of WW1**

Canada

According to the Canadian Great War Project website, some 2267 enlisted soldiers were under 18 while a further 16375 gave their age as between 18 and 20. But since there are no records that show the true ages of the recruits, the exact numbers can never be known. In fact, so many underage Canadian boys were in England that in July 1917 the Boy's Battalion was organised. It was commanded by Major K.L. Palton and became known as the Young Soldiers' Battalion in September of the same year. Boys under the age of eighteen were drafted from other units and were given a graduated course of training along

with a general education. Canadian soldiers known to be under the age of 19 were not necessarily discharged and sent home, but neither could they be sent to the front to fight in the trenches.

#### Australia

James Charles (Jim) Martin enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force in April 1915. Born in Tocumwal, NSW on 3 January 1901, he was 14 years and 3 months old. Jim died at sea near Gallipoli, Turkey on 25 October 1915. Find-a-Grave: <http://bit.ly/UnYXLl>

#### Belgium

Crown prince Leopold of Belgium joined the Twelfth Line Regiment when he was 13. His father, the king, told his commanding officers that he should not be given preferential treatment but should work in the trenches until he had blisters on his hands.

#### England

John Travers (Jack) Cornwall served aboard the HMS Chester as a sight-setter. During the Battle of Jutland in June 1916, despite being mortally wounded, and while ignoring the fire that had broken out aboard the ship, 16 year old Jack continued firing at the Germans until he died. He was awarded the Victoria Cross posthumously and was given a hero's funeral. <http://bit.ly/TeW3rT>

#### Ireland

John Condon enlisted in the Royal Irish Regiment and died on 24 May 1915 near Ypres at age 14. Find-a-Grave: <http://bit.ly/TeUpqf>

#### United States

In 1917, when he was 16, Frank Woodruff Buckles tried to enlist in the Marine Corps but was turned down for being too small. The Navy also turned him down, saying he had flat feet. But the Army accepted him and he joined the Ambulance Service, having been told that it was the fastest way to get to France. When he died at age 100 on 27 February 2011, he was the last surviving American WW1 veteran and he was buried at Arlington National Cemetery on 15 March 2011. New York Times: <http://nyti.ms/TfeGMu>

In nearly every country that was involved, young boys saw WW1 as an adventure. Many tried to enlist but how many of them were accepted, how many of them saw battle and how many were injured or killed may never be known.

#### Find Out More

##### Library and Archives Canada (LAC)

With new records being posted often, the LAC links referenced within this article are subject to change. Visit their home page at <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/Pages/home.aspx> and follow the menus to First World War records.

##### Guide to Sources Relating to Units of the Canadian Expeditionary Force

This guide has a section for each military branch and contains background information and record source references. <http://bit.ly/1ldmrR>

##### Canadian Great War Project

<http://www.canadiangreatwarproject.com/>

YouTube

Britain's Boy Soldiers <http://youtu.be/aS8QWcSE5G4>

Boy Soldiers of WW1 <http://youtu.be/dJNEaSwx2m8>