

100 Years Ago: First Souris Casualty in WWI

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100 years ago this week, Souris residents were learning that a hometown hero and the first local to volunteer to fight overseas had become the town's first casualty in the Great War.

Pte. Robert Bruce Brommell was killed in action at the infamous Second Battle of Ypres, as Germans pummelled Allies forces from three sides with bullets, artillery shells and chemical weapons. He survived the horror of the world's first large-scale poison gas attacks only to be shot in the head and buried in an unmarked battlefield grave.

"We're pretty proud of what he did, for us and the country," says Michael Brommell, a relative living in Lorette, MB. "He gave his life for the greater cause."

On May 11, 1915, newspapers in Brandon and Winnipeg carried the news of Brommell's death. The Manitoba Free Press (now Winnipeg Free Press) published this story:

*Word was received in Winnipeg yesterday from Souris that Pte. Bruce Brommell, of the 8th Battalion, had been killed in action. He is a son of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Brommell, of Souris, and enlisted for overseas service with the Manitoba Rangers. Pte. Brommell had a reputation as a hero before he went to the war, having saved three people from drowning; in the Souris river. He was one of the best liked young men in the town and the news of his death has been a great shock. The late Pte. Brommell was 21 years of age. He was born at Altona in southern Manitoba. He had been employed in the Customs house at Souris.**

*(NOTE - Brommell was 20 at the time of death, and born at Altamont, MB)

Bruce Brommell's war story begins in August, 1914, mere days after Canada joins the Allied fight against Germany. Nineteen year old Brommell enlists with the 99th Manitoba Rangers based in Brandon and immediately travels to CFB Valcartier, a new military camp established in Quebec for training the volunteer army.

"He was somewhat unique," says Suyoko Tsukamoto, a Brandon anthropologist and curator of an award-winning collection of artifacts and stories regarding Westman residents' involvement in World War I. "The first wave of volunteers were predominantly British-born Canadians but Bruce Brommell was born in Manitoba. He certainly displayed a strong sense of nationalism."

Government records show that Brommell arrives in Great Britain on October 14, 1914. He is among the very first in the Canadian Expeditionary Force to be deployed, with the 8th Battalion (90th Winnipeg Rifles). Brommell, military service number 1062, has just turned 20.

"The 8th Battalion, nicknamed 'Little Black Devils', is sent to France in February, 1915," says Tsukamoto. "In April, Brommell joins troops from France, Britain and a host of Commonwealth countries in a series of bloody engagements in Belgium that come to be known as the Second Battle of Ypres."

Fighting begins April 22 when the Germans unleash chlorine gas on unsuspecting Allied forces. The gas destroys soldiers' respiratory organs, causing painful death akin to drowning. With no protection against the lethal fumes, French and Algerian troops flee in disorder, allowing the Germans to pour through the gap in the Allied defense.

Brommell and others are told to cover their faces with urine-soaked socks or handkerchiefs to neutralize the gas. It's just another challenge for the Canadian troops, who are dealing with frequently malfunctioning rifles, unreliable machine guns and inferior webbing equipment that quickly rots and falls apart in the wet trenches.

The next several days bring new attacks and counterattacks, with enormous human toll. The 8th Battalion fights with distinction, including heroics by Sgt-Major Fredrick William Hall to rescue wounded men - actions which lead to his death and posthumous Victoria Cross for valour. Hall is one of three Winnipeg neighbours who receive the award, resulting in the renaming of Pine Street to Valour Road.

Canadian casualties at Ypres are one in every three, including Pte. Bruce Brommell, who is shot April 25, 1915, while stationed at St. Julien, Belgium.

Details of the fierce fighting and Brommell's death are revealed in a letter from the front lines, written by Sgt. Fred Cookman on May 7 and printed in the Brandon Daily Sun (now Brandon Sun) on June 1, 1915:

We were called out early one morning to reinforce the firing line and got into the trenches under a heavy rifle fire. Our platoon then went over to the trenches that had been occupied by some of the third brigade. We held about a hundred yards of that trench and the Germans were coming over in mass on our left. We were shooting them down at a great rate, but they also got some of our men. Poor Bruce Brommell got a bullet through the head. He was a boy from Souris.

There is no cemetery funeral. A handwritten note on Brommell's service record reads "Provisional Missing Memorial". Further notation indicates he is buried "in unmarked grave, just behind trenches of Grafenstafel Ridge afterwards occupied by the enemy".

Eight days after Brommell is killed, the horrors at Ypres compel another Canadian soldier, Maj. John McCrae, to pen *In Flanders Fields*, which will become the most well-known poem ever written about war.

122,000 die during the Second Battle of Ypres. 55,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers are buried in unknown graves. In 1927, their names are immortalized on the Menin Gate Memorial at Ypres.

"We travelled to Belgium and saw his name at Menin Gate a few years ago," says Michael Brommell. "It was a fantastic experience. There also used to be a plaque in the church at Altamont where Bruce was born until the building was sold a few years ago. My mother has the plaque now."

In the Souris-Glenwood Cemetery, Brommell is the first gravestone visitors will see as they pass through the main gate. Joseph Brommell, who worked as a tailor in Souris, and wife Margaret were buried there in the 1930s. In the shadow of the Brommell headstone is a marker for their son, which reads:

In memory of Robert Bruce
First Souris Volunteer
Great War - 1914

The Honour Roll at the Royal Canadian Legion in Souris lists Brommell as the first of 62 local residents to be killed during service in World War I; farmers, trades people, students and professionals who gave their lives for others' freedom.