

Private Sydney Herbert Dawson and Private Eric Lawrence* Dawson

*This is the spelling used on Eric's birth registration and Canadian Army records but his gravestone at Adanac Military Cemetery and memorial at the Baptist Church in Oxford Road spelt it 'Laurence'.

Sydney and Eric's parents were John Wesley Dawson (b 1851, Mitcheldean, Gloucestershire) a furniture dealer and clerk and Elizabeth (née Stanford). They started their married life in Hednesford near Cannock, Staffordshire.

By 1891, John and Elizabeth had seven children; Winifred Stanford (b 1877); Percy John (b 1879); Raymond Walter (b 1881); David Arthur (b 1882); Sidney Herbert (1886); Cyril Joseph (b 1889) and Eric Lawrence (b 1890). John had become a 'Colliery Agent' and had moved the family from Hednesford to 40, Claremont Road, Bordesley Birmingham. They were sufficiently affluent to employ a general servant.

By the time of the 1901 census, the family had moved to 89 Trafalgar Road, Moseley and John had become a 'Coal Factor', someone who buys coal from the owners and sells it on to wholesalers or retailers.



Figure 1: Tindal Street School



Figure 2: The Birmingham Municipal Technical School in Suffolk Street, founded in 1895

Sydney was born on 29th September 1886 and his youngest brother Eric on 26th May 1890. They were both educated at Tindal Street School, Balsall Heath and Birmingham Municipal Technical School (now Aston University).ⁱ On March 23rd 1905, at the age of eighteen, Sydney set sail for Canada on the *SS Victorian* from Liverpool to St John's Newfoundland.ⁱⁱ He eventually settled in Lloydminster in Alberta having gained a

homestead to farm. At some point Sydney returned to England and successfully persuaded Eric to join him in Canada. On 19th March 1908, the brothers set sail for Canada on *SS Corsican*. A month later, on 21st April, Eric applied for his own homestead with the intention to reside there and farm the land. Despite his best efforts, Eric found the land not suitable for farming and on 22nd August 1910 gave notice that he was abandoning the land and joined Sydney on his farm as a labourer.

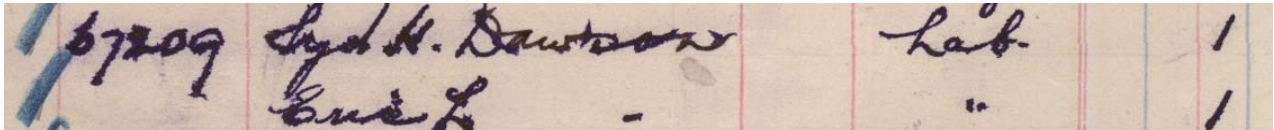


Figure 3: Passenger list for SS Corsican for 19th March 1908

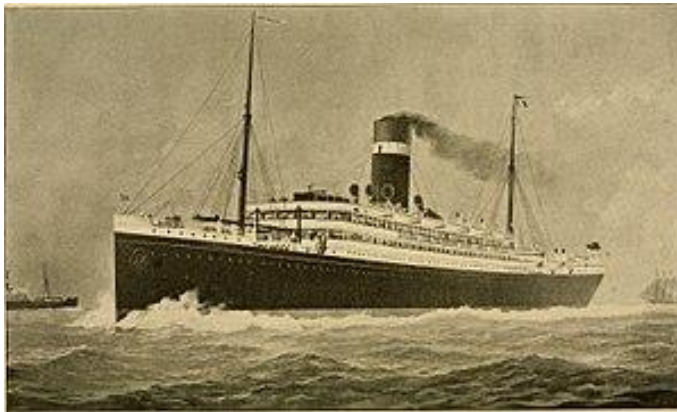


Figure 4: SS Victorian



Figure 5: SS Corsican

When the War broke out in August 1914, the world changed and Canada as a loyal member of the Empire was no exception. Young men rallied to the colours as volunteers in their thousands to support their 'Mother Country'.

Both brothers volunteered to join the 50th Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF). Eric attested first on 21st January 1915 at Calgary, Alberta as a Private, No 434383 and Sydney the following day also as a Private, No 434431.

The first contingent of forty thousand Canadian soldiers arrived in Plymouth in February 1915 and boarded trains for Shorncliffe in Kent. Their biggest fear was that the War would be all over by Christmas and before they had personally been given the chance to confront the 'hated Hun'. There was no perception of the horrors that awaited them within the foul trenches of Flanders or France, nor that the conflict would exact a huge price on a whole generation of Canadian men. Sydney's CEF records note that he arrived at Shorncliffe on 28th June 1915 as part of the second contingent of Canadian soldiers. On completing his training, Sydney was drafted to the 10th Battalion in France and was on strength by 8th August 1915. From the time Sydney arrived in France to the middle of September 1915, a 'strange tranquillity persisted across the Canadian front. Apart from the activity of snipers on both sides and one small patrol clash in no man's land, the only hostilities were an occasional exchange of light shelling by the opposing artilleries.'ⁱⁱⁱ



Figure 6: Private Sydney Herbert Dawson

This did not mean it was an easy time for the Canadian troops. The deprivations and insanitary conditions of the trenches lead to thousands of cases of diarrhoea and outbreaks of dysentery. Sydney succumbed to a bout of the former on 22nd August 1915 and was evacuated to No 3 Canadian Field Ambulance and hospitalised, returning to his battalion a week later.

The next major battle the Canadian Battalions trained for was the Somme Campaign of 1916. Before the campaign began, Sydney was given nine days leave home from 16th May 1916.

Returning from leave, Sydney rejoined the 10th Battalion (part of 1st Canadian Division, 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade) in the front line immediately north of the Ypres-Comines railway, centred on Hill 60. Two days into what is now referred to as 'The Battle of Mount Sorrel' (2nd-13th

June), Sydney received a gunshot wound to his left knee and right hand. He was transferred by hospital ship to Fort Pitt, Military Hospital in Chatham on 9th June. Five days later, he was transferred to St Bartholomew's Hospital where new techniques were being developed to aid the healing of wounds and shorten the recovery period for soldiers.^{iv}



Figure 7

Male Ward in St Bartholomew's Hospital. This posed photograph shows five nurses standing behind a group of recovery soldiers in army hospital uniform. In the picture two amputees can be seen alongside a number of bed bound men.

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Canadian Convalescent Hospital, Woodcote Park, Epsom.

No. 934431 Rank Pte. Name Dawson, S.H.
 Corps 10th Religion C.E. Age 29 Page, A. & D.
 Disease or injury G.S.W. Lt Knee Rt Hand
 When and where wounded
 Admitted from Chatham Date 7.7.16 Discharged to CEAC Date 12.8.16
 Hut No. Bed No.
 Service 15/12 Service Field Force 9/12
 Transferred on . . . to . . . Results

After a period of convalescence in Epsom from 7th July to 12th August, Sydney was returned to the 9th Reserve Canadian Battalion based at Folkestone. On 11th September 1916, he was back in France with his old battalion serving in 'C' Coy.

The 10th Battalion was involved in a series of operations from 8th September 1916, primarily defensive actions which were successful, north of Albert, France near the town of Boiselle.

On the morning of September 28th 1916, the 10th Battalion was relieved. Its trophies were: Prisoners, six officers, 116 other ranks, four machine guns, a large quantity of bombs, ammunition, rifles, and equipment. Its losses were: Ten officers and 320 N.C.O.'s and men.

On 2nd October 1916, the 10th Battalion began the march to the Lens-Vimy Sector. Carency and the Souchez area was reached on 2nd November and the Battalion moved into the trenches two days later.^v The weather steadily deteriorated which precluded major operations. Then, at midnight on 10th /11th November 1916, the final assault went in, covered by what was described as a 'perfect' artillery barrage. The remaining enemy positions were quickly secured and the Ancre Heights battle came to a successful conclusion.^{vi} The action was not without casualties, one of which was Sydney. He suffered a gunshot wound to the abdomen and was taken to No 22 Casualty Clearing Station where he died on November 14th aged 30.^{vii}



Figure 8
Villiers Station Military Cemetery where Sydney is buried in plot III 3B

Sydney's brother Eric embarked in the third contingent of Canadian soldiers from Halifax, Nova Scotia aboard the *HMT Orduna* on 27th October 1915. The ship arrived in England on 4th November.



Figure 9: HMT Orduna

After a period of training, Eric embarked for France on 10th August 1916 arriving in Le Havre the following day. While in France, the 50th CEF fought as part of the 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade, based in Albert. Like his brother, Eric found himself from 11th to 18th November attacking the German front line as it crossed the Ancre river. The original plan had been reduced in scope from an attempt to push the Germans back five miles along the Ancre to one that pushed the Germans back at most two miles and to capture Beaucourt. One final attack was made, on November 18. This began in snow and sleet and descended into chaos. On the right of the line the 4th Canadian Division captured its first objectives, Desire Trench, but elsewhere little was achieved.

The attack was a relative success. Beaumont Hamel and Beaucourt were captured, but Serre and the northern part of the German line remained untouched. Once again mud intervened to help the defenders, preventing the use of the few available tanks, and making all communication difficult. Eric was reported 'missing after action' on 19th November as the battalion was relieved. It was not until June the following year that

Eric, for official purposes, was 'presumed dead'. He was killed 4 days after his brother Sydney. Eric was twenty-six years old.^{viii}

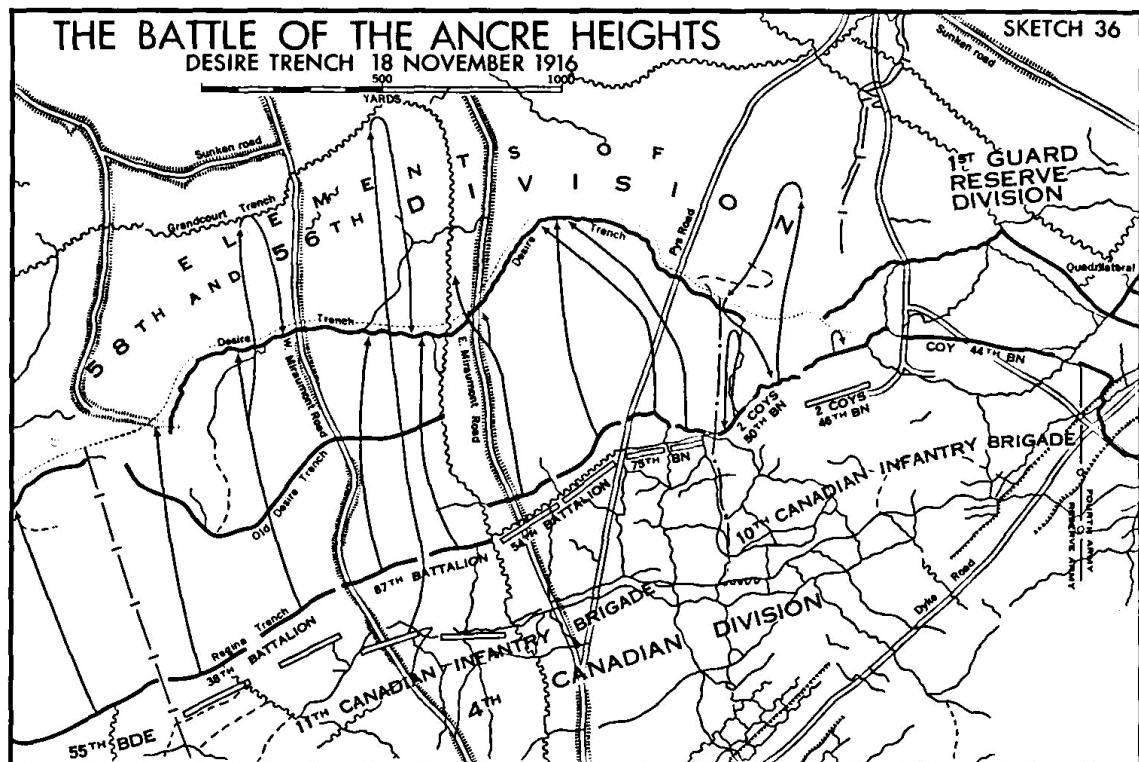


Figure 10: Map showing the area in the Somme where Sydney and Eric as part of the Canadian Division were located in November 1916

The 18th November 1916 now officially marks the end of the Somme Campaign. The Battle of Ancre created an Allied held salient, which proved to be a very dangerous area to be posted over the winter of 1916-17.



Figure 11. Eric's body must have been found eventually as he has a burial plot at Adanac Military Cemetery, Miraumont and Pys, Reference II C 39. It bears the inscription 'Our remembrance though unspoken may reach him where he lives'.

Sydney and Eric are also commemorated on the Tindal School WW1 memorial (below left) and also at Calvary Church of Christ, previously the Baptist Church, in Oxford Road, Moseley (below right) where they had been choir boys. At the time of their death the parental address was 3, Caroline Road, Moseley.



Figure 12

Tindal School WW1 memorial

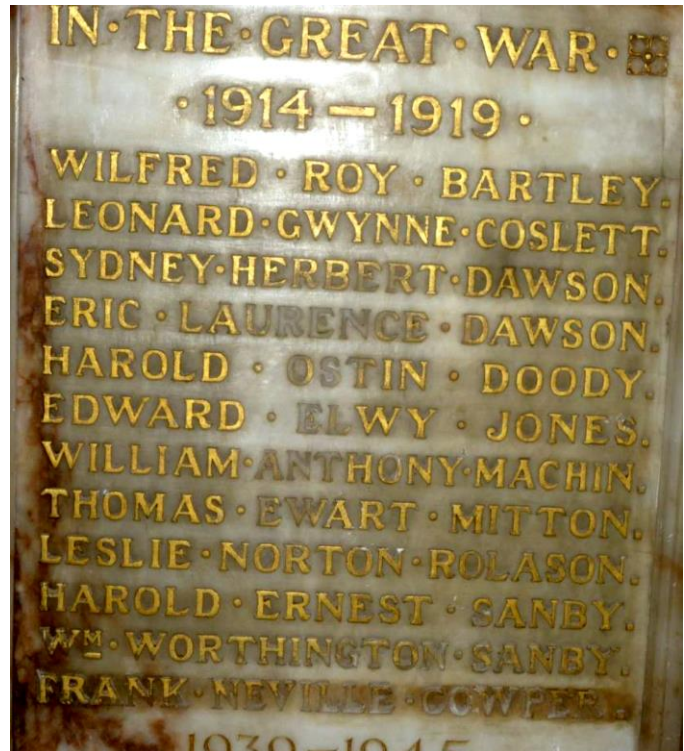


Figure 13

WW1 memorial, Calvary Church of Christ, Oxford Road, Moseley,

Written and researched by Edwina Rees Moseley Society History Group with thanks to Jim Hone for his preliminary write up.

Endnotes

- i British Army, De Ruvigny's Roll of Honour 1914-1918
- ii Passenger Lists leaving UK 1905, Find My Past
- iii Canadian Expeditionary Force: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War. Col G.W.L. Nicholson, CD, p108
<https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/themes/defence/caf/militaryhistory/dhh/official/book-1964-expeditionary-en.pdf>
- iv St Bartholomew's Hospital Archives: Notes on War Surgery, 1914, pp 1,2 and 1916
<http://www.meaningsofservice1914.qmul.ac.uk/archive/st-bartholomews-hospital-archives>

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- v The Story of the 10th Canadian Battalion 1914-1917, Holland, J.A.
<http://www.canadiangreatwarproject.com/writing/10th.htm>
- vi Canadian Expeditionary Force: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War.
Col G.W.L. Nicholson, CD, pp 192/3
<https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/themes/defence/caf/militaryhistory/dhh/official/book-1964-expeditionary-en.pdf>
- vii Canadian service record for Private Sydney Herbert Dawson, Ancestry
- viii Canadian service record for Private Eric Laurence Dawson, Ancestry

Illustrations

- Figure 1 Tindal Street School, Birmingham Images, The Library of Birmingham
<https://www.search.birminghamimages.org.uk/details.aspx?ResourceID=9913&ExhibitionID=9915&SearchType=2&ThemeID=995>
- Figure 2 Aston University.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aston_University
Original source : "*The Early Years*". Retrieved 16 July 2015.
- Figure 3 Passenger Lists leaving UK, 1908, Find My Past
- Figure 4: *SS Victorian*
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RMS_Victorian
- Figure 5 *SS Corsican*, Norway Heritage
http://www.norwayheritage.com/p_ship.asp?sh=corsi
- Figure 6 Birmingham Central Library microfiche archive of local newspapers
- Figure 7 Bartholomew's Hospital, male ward
<http://www.meaningsofservice1914.qmul.ac.uk/medicine/male-ward-st-bartholomews-hospital-1914-1918>
- Figure 8 Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Villiers Station Military Cemetery
- Figure 9 *HMT Orduna*
https://www.britisharmedforces.org/troopships/troopship_38.gif
- Figure 10 Map of the Battle of Ancre, Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1918 : The Last day of the Somme Battle
<http://canadianexpeditionaryforce1914-1919.blogspot.com/2016/01/the-last-day-of-somme-november-18-1916.html>
- Figure 11 Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Adanac Military Cemetery

Figure 12 Tindall Street WW1 memorial

<https://www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk/memorial/195852/>

Figure 13 Calvary Church of Chsist, Moseley, WW1 memorial. Photograph taken by Edwina Rees