

Sergeant John Percy H. Bole – WW1 Veteran: Vimy Ridge, Lens, 2nd Passchendaele

By Catherine Elson, Belcarra South, BC, November 17th, 2017.

Shortly after I submitted an article for the April 2017 issue of the 'Belcarra Barnacle' on the 'Battle of Vimy Ridge', I received Percy Bole's "full/complete" CEF (overseas) military file. Wading through this information and the official War Diaries of the '54th Battalion', as well as, doing quite a bit of digging and fact checking, I decided to update my original article...

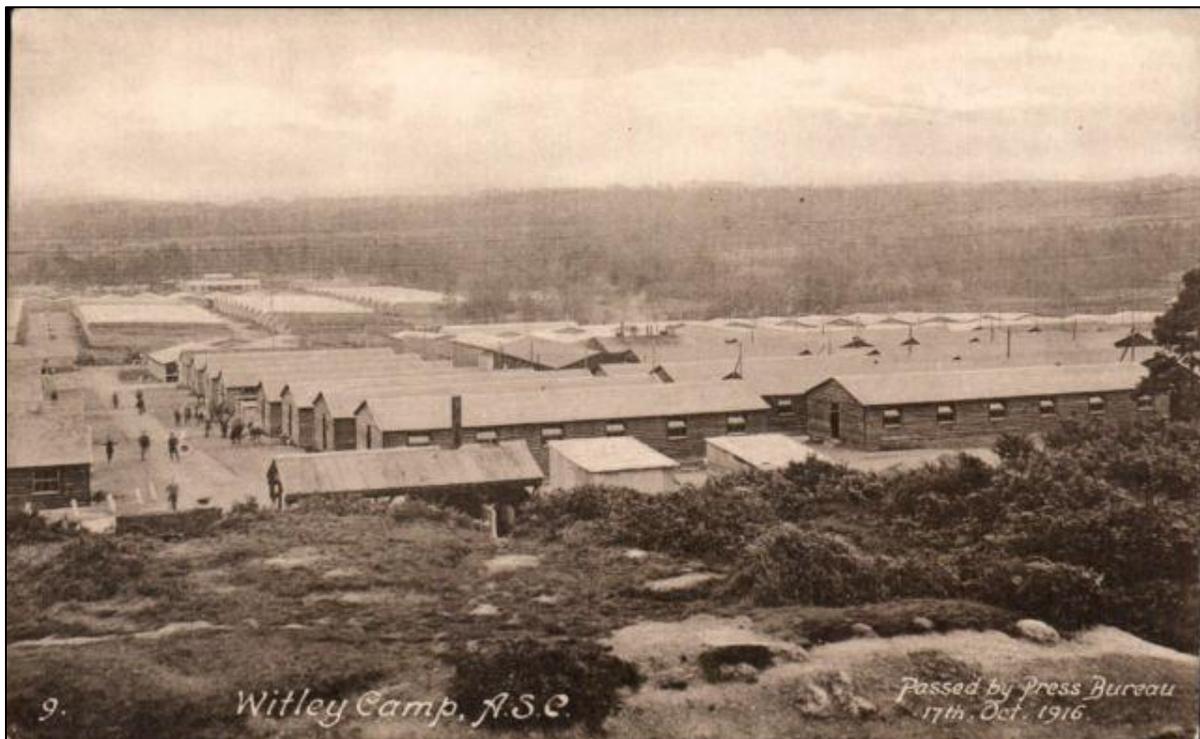
April 9th, 2017, marked the 100th Anniversary of the 'Battle of Vimy Ridge', and it is worth noting that a long-time Belcarra resident was one of the 97,000 Canadians who fought in this pivotal battle of World War 1 (WW1).

John "Percy" Hampton Bole, the son of Judge Wm. Norman Bole who named 'Belcarra', was well-known in his own right as the patriarch of the "Bole Estate", a 143-acre property that stretched south along the shoreline from the Belcarra picnic grounds to the 'Admiralty Point Military Reserve' and across to Bedwell Bay. He was also one of 620,000 Canadian soldiers who served in WW1.

Percy "joined-up" in January 1916 (before conscription) and spent almost three years overseas. In 1917, he spent 10 months on the front lines, in France and Belgium, and fought in three major battles that took place that year: the 'Battle of Vimy Ridge' (April), the 'Battle of Lens' (August), and the '2nd Battle of Passchendaele' (November).



J.P.H. Bole, 1925
(CVA Port P185)



'Witley Camp', Surrey, England, October 17th, 1916.

He began his service as a ‘Private’, and was promoted to ‘Sergeant’ on his arrival in England. He reverted to ranks for the battle of ‘Vimy Ridge’ (as did all non-commissioned soldiers) but was promoted again to ‘Sergeant’ shortly after. The following year, he took officer training and became a Lieutenant. His military file refers to him though as “Sergeant John Percy H. Bole” as that was his rank during the majority of his active duty at the Front. In the latter part of his service he was stationed in England, at the ‘British Columbia Regimental Depot’ at Seaford, East Sussex, and at ‘Witley Camp’, Surrey, 40 miles south of London. He returned six months after the war ended during the final phase of demobilization of Canadians troops abroad ... likely a very changed man.

Percy’s Pre-War Years

Percy was born in New Westminster in 1882. His family home was at 310 Royal Avenue, New Westminster, B.C.

In his youth, Percy and his younger brother Garnet spent their summers at Belcarra Bay at the “Bole Ranch” [District Lot 229] which was a very popular picnic destination during the 1880s and 1890s. The two boys would have also visited their maternal grandparents in Keremeos who had purchased the old Hudson’s Bay Company Post property there and operated a mill and store nearby.

Tragedy struck the Bole family in 1896 when young Garnet died at age eleven.

The following year, at age fifteen, Percy enrolled at the ‘Royal Military College’ (RMC) in Kingston, Ontario. He attended RMC from 1897-1899. On his return to B.C., he began his career as a barrister/solicitor and was called to the bar in 1904. He married in 1906, and he and his wife Eveline Maude Bertha (*nee* Brown) had two daughters, Norma and Florence. They also had a son Garnet who died in infancy. The young family lived next door to Percy’s parents at 320 Royal Avenue in New Westminster.

In 1904, Percy’s parents sold the Belcarra Bay property, and as the sale was finalized in 1907, they purchased a narrow 96-acre strip of land south and adjoining the picnic site, a former Moodyville timber lease that had recently reverted to the Crown.

On January 1st, 1914, Percy “pre-empted” a 46-acre property south and adjoining his parent’s property on the inlet, a former Hastings Mill timber lease.

Percy Signs-Up and Heads Overseas

John Percy Hampton Bole enlisted into the Canadian Infantry and the ‘121st Battalion’ — the ‘Duke of Connaught’s Own Rifles’ (Irish) in New Westminster on January 8th, 1916. He was immediately assigned the rank of ‘Private’.

He was called to serve with ‘Canadian Expeditionary Forces’ overseas in June 1916, and on August 14th, 1916 — two years to the day since WW1 had been declared — Percy embarked with the ‘121st Battalion’ on the ‘Empress of Britain’, landing in England ten days later. After a two-week at ‘Bramshott Camp’, Hampshire, and a promotion to (A/S Br) Sergeant, he was “taken on strength” into the ‘16th Reserve Battalion’ at Seaford, East Sussex, where Canadian reserve soldiers were assembled and received training before heading to the Front.



54th Battalion, France, 1917.

In February 1917, Percy was transferred to the '54th Battalion' already in France for the lead-up to the British-led 'Arras Offensive' in which Canadian Corps were to play a major role. Preparations had begun the previous month for an attack on German held 'Vimy Ridge', and troops were being rallied at battalion headquarters at 'Chateau de la Haie' south of 'Servins' in the Vimy sector. Percy joined his unit there on February 19th and began alternating between tactical training and providing relief to other Canadian battalions working desperately to repair front line trenches and to dig an 'Assembly Trench' for the impending major operation.

Battle of Vimy Ridge

The 'Battle of Vimy Ridge' commenced on Easter Monday, April 9th, 1917 at 5:30 a.m. It opened with a phenomenal burst of artillery fire that provided a curtain of smoke and flames for the first wave of 15,000 to 20,000 soldiers leading the advance up the western side of the escarpment. The 54th Battalion, in coordination with three other battalions within '11th Brigade', 4th Division, ascended the northern flank through heavy machine gun fire, mortar rounds, cratered earth and barbed wire toward the fortifications above. They were met with fierce resistance and at one point had to fall back but by the end of the second day, and a coordinated effort with the '10th Brigade', they achieved their objective to capture and hold 'Hill 145'.

In all, it took three days of continuous fighting for the Allies to force the German Army from their stronghold on 'Vimy Ridge' and into retreat. Many prisoners were taken and many lives were lost,

on both sides. Canadian Forces alone suffered 10,602 casualties — 3,598 soldiers were killed, and another 7,004 were left wounded.

Battle of Lens

Percy remained with the '54th Battalion' on the front lines in France, and later Belgium, all through 1917. After Vimy, and a full month's rest, the Battalion stayed on in the 'Zouave Valley' moving into front line positions on the 'Vimy-Angres Line' (June), and then on to 'Lievin/Lens' (July-September) where they participated in a major battle in August in which the Canadian Corps were partially successful in capturing high ground around 'Lens', including 'Hill 70'. For their part, the 54th pushed heavy patrols into the centre of 'Lens' but were sent back to the outskirts. At one point, the Germans began using flame throwers and there were many casualties from the use of blistering mustard gas.

Although not as successful in securing new ground in and around 'Lens' as they had hoped, the Allied commanders agreed they had achieved one of their main objectives — the diversion of five divisions of German troops from the 'main Salient' at 'Ypres'.

During the summer of 1917, when not actively fighting and in reserve in 'Gouy-Servins' near 'Lievin', the '54th Battalion' soldiers were billeted in ruined houses and cellars in the area where they scavenged fruit and vegetables from neighbouring farms and there was always a danger of being shot by enemy snipers.

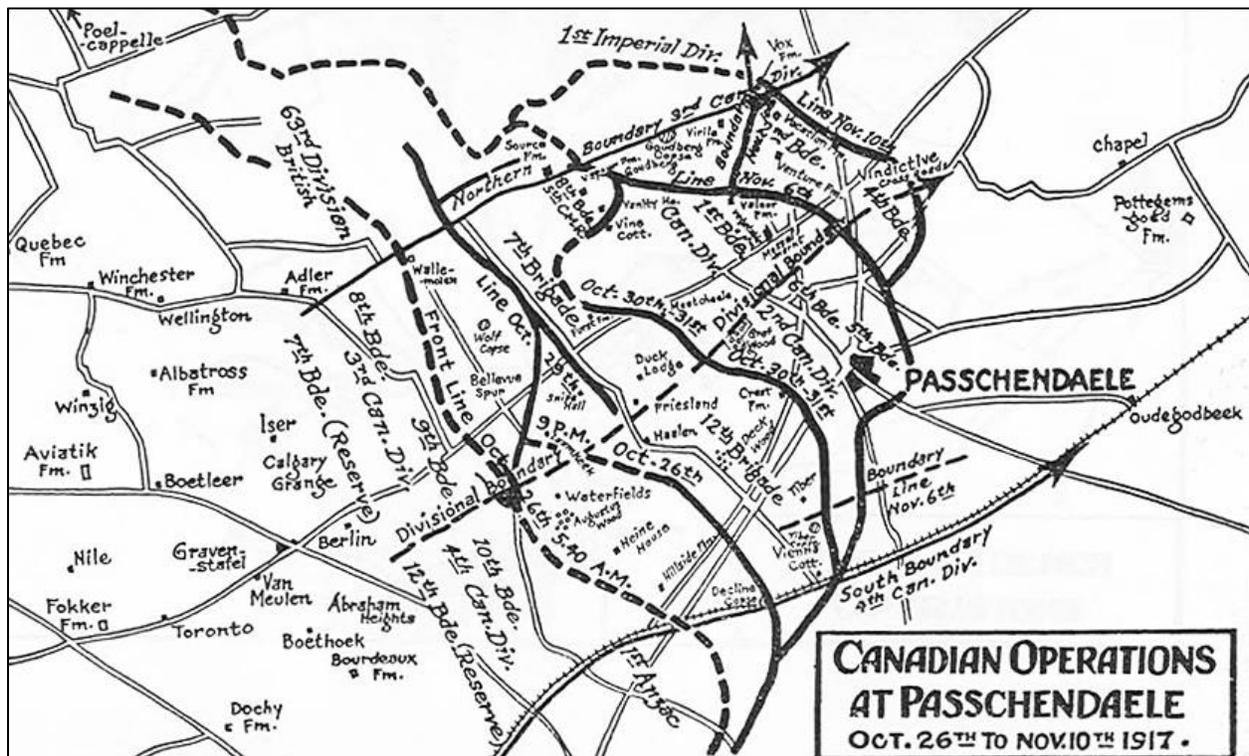
Throughout September the Battalion anticipated a 2nd attack on 'Lens' but that action never materialized. Instead, the Allied commanders changed their focus to 'Ypres' and the 'main Salient'.

2nd Battle of Passchendaele, Flanders

In early October, Percy's battalion was transported by motor lorry, bus and train to Belgium to 'Ypres' (Flanders) and then 'Potijze', where they relieved heavily fatigued British and Australian troops who had already suffered great casualties throughout August and September in the '1st Battle of Passchendaele'. The four Canadian Divisions then fought the '2nd Battle of Passchendaele', the main assault taking place November 3rd – 10th. Soldiers battled with machine gunfire, gas shelling, and artillery fire all around, and aerial bombing from overhead, often engaging in hand to hand combat with rifle and bayonet. There was no accommodation, and soldiers lived and slept in the mud. Miraculously, their rations continued to arrive on a regular basis brought in by mule pack teams. For those who fought there it is remembered as "the worst days of their lives".

Prior to the main assault at 'Passchendaele', the '54th Battalion' worked tirelessly from October 22nd to November 3rd sending out work parties each night under the cover of darkness to construct dugouts, carry grading materials, and to lay "bath mats" (wooden slats) on the muddy battlefield for their artillery units going forward. After 10 days of backbreaking work amid snipers and artillery fire, the 54th went into reserve and support positions. They thought their work was done when the main assault ended, but on November 12th they returned to the battlefield to defend newly gained territory against ongoing counter attacks.

On November 17th, 1917, after everything had finally quieted down, the '54th Battalion' was relieved and were given full rest for one month.



England, Armistice, and Return to Canada

After the intense battle at ‘Passchendaele’ and having served ten months at the Front, Percy applied for officer training in England. He was transferred on December 17th, 1917, and after a brief stay in hospital in January 1918 (possibly for scabies), he was “taken on strength” into the ‘16th Reserve Battalion’ at the ‘British Columbian Regimental Depot’ (BCRD) in Seaford, East Sussex. The BCRD became his main base for the next eight months, though he was seconded for two months (February/March) by the ‘Cadet Training School’ at ‘Bexhill-On-Sea’ near Seaford, likely to assist the Gas Units. In March, he was fined eight days pay for drunkenness.

In July/August 1918, Percy undertook officer training and was promoted to Lieutenant on August 8th. He was immediately taken into the ‘8th Reserve Battalion’ at ‘Witley Camp’, Surrey, located about 40 miles southwest of London where the main focus was artillery and machine gun training.

Percy never returned to the front lines again, and remained at ‘Witley Camp’ through Armistice on November 11th, 1918, and after during the repatriation of the troops from Europe. He returned to Canada in May 1919 in the final phase of ‘Demobilization’ and the return of all ‘Canadian Expeditionary Forces’ from abroad.

Post WW1

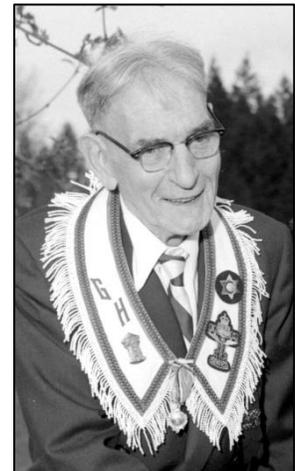
While Percy was serving overseas, his wife Eveline had received his pay and a monthly separation allowance which was the practice for all servicemen overseas. However, their marriage did not survive the war. Sadly, their youngest daughter Florence had died in 1918 while Percy was in England. The marriage broke-down, and in 1920 they filed for divorce. Shortly after, Eveline and their daughter Norma moved to California.

Two years later, Percy was married a 2nd time, to Norah Kathleen (*nee* McAllister). Their daughter, Sheila, was born in 1925. Throughout the 1920s, the family lived in a house in Vancouver's West End.

People who knew Percy said he was somewhat of a character and spoke of his having suffered shell shock — post-traumatic stress disorder by our understanding today. It is thought that this condition, as well as the death of his parents — Wm. Norman Bole (1923) and Florence Blanchard Bole (1928) — may have led to his early retirement and a move to his Belcarra property in 1932. It is there that he proceeded to build his permanent residence, the 'Bole House', as well as a one lane supply road through the bush to Bedwell Bay, and a number of cottages along the shoreline.

During these years, 'Percy' Bole also maintained a public profile and was well-known in certain circles as J. P. Hampton Bole. While remaining a loyal member of the 'Royal Military College' throughout his life, he was also an enthusiastic and lifelong member of the 'Native Sons of British Columbia', a Victorian-era (Euro-centric), fraternal organization of business affiliates, mostly professionals and shop keepers, who espoused "pioneer values" and strongly supported public education in B.C. Percy was 'Grand Factor' of the 'Native Sons' from 1930-1933, and subsequently was also 'Grand Historian'.

[The 'Native Sons' are credited for reclaiming and restoring thirteen Hudson's Bay Posts in the province, as well as, the old 'Hastings Mill Store' — now a museum and the oldest building in Vancouver. They are also noted for their sponsorship of the annual presentation of a 'Good Citizen' medal from 1922-1987 to noteworthy British Columbians. A highly regarded event, the 1933 award ceremony at Stanley Park was attended by 10,000 people. The award presented was to then Chancellor of UBC, the Hon. Dr. Robert McKechnie.]



J.P.H. Bole, 1958
(VPL 78952)

Remembering Percy and the Great War

Percy named his permanent home at Belcarra 'Starboard Light Lodge', and he and his family lived there without electricity, telephone, or road access until the mid to late 1950s. They parked their car at Deep Cove and used their boat 'Veronica' to travel back and forth to the city.

Percy named the small road that meandered through the property 'Kay Avenue' in honour of his wife. It eventually connected to Bedwell Bay Road when that road arrived in 1959, and had a red gate at its entrance. Tenants living in the cottages, coming and going in their cars, were reminded to honk often when using it, and to keep the 5-mph speed limit.

Percy lived at his house in Belcarra until 1961. He died in 1966 at the age of 84, and is buried in the 'Fraser Cemetery' in New Westminster. His grave is on a gentle slope directly below his parent's cenotaph overlooking the Fraser River. He is buried with his brother Garnet Seymour (1885-1896), his infant son Garnet Blanchard (b./d.1906), and his young daughter Florence Blanche (1912-1918).



J. Percy Hampton Bole's House 'Starboard Light Lodge', Belcarra, c.1935 — built in 1932.



J. Percy Hampton Bole's House Sign — 'Starboard Light Lodge'

A Footnote to Vimy Ridge

That Percy Bole and many others had to risk or lose their lives in brutal combat one hundred years ago is hard to comprehend. Nevertheless, many feel strongly that the ‘Battle of Vimy Ridge’ was a defining moment in Canadian history where Canadian soldiers proved their mettle and helped to establish the identity of a fledgling nation. In 1922, in gratitude to Canadian soldiers who came to their much-needed rescue, France ceded 179 hectares of ‘Vimy Ridge’ to Canada to commemorate its sacrifices in the First World War. The ‘Canadian National Vimy Memorial’ sits atop ‘Hill 145’.



Canadian National Vimy Ridge Memorial atop ‘Hill 145’ in France

A Footnote to Passchendaele

It’s important to note that no territorial gains were made by the Allies in the two battles at ‘Passchendaele’. The “rotten old Salient” stayed under German control to the end of the war. While one and a half million soldiers from Britain, Germany, Australia, Canada and New Zealand were there to witness the event, the casualties were excessive — nearly half a million soldiers were killed or wounded during three and a half months of battle — from August to November 1917 — on the muddy fields in Flanders. Lest we forget!

Percy’s Footnote to the Great War?

An excerpt from *The Vimy Trap: Or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Great War*: “A different view of history urges us instead to remember other traditions such as diplomacy and resistance to war, urges us not to fight but to discover other ways of facing the serious issues that can and do lead to war. That perspective has been shared by a vast number of Canadians from 1918 to our own time — people for whom the appropriate slogan for the Great War was not “Birth of a Nation” but “Please God — Never Again!”

Special Thanks:

I would like specially to thank Jim Millar of ‘Port Moody Station Museum’ who provided Sergeant Bole’s full CEF military file (all 54 pages of it) and whose interest in the Bole Residence in the early 2000s led to its — and later the ‘Belcarra South Cottages’ — heritage designation and inclusion in the ‘City of Port Moody’s Heritage Register’ and ‘Canada’s Historic Places Register’ — see historicalplaces.ca.

Photos:

J. Percy Hampton Bole, 1925 (*City of Vancouver Archives, CVA Port P185*).

J. Percy Hampton Bole, 1958 (*Vancouver Public Library, VPL 78952*).

Vimy Ridge Memorial Site, France (*Canadian War Museum*).

54th Battalion, Summer 1917.

Camp Witley, Surrey, England, October 17th, 1916.

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CEF Soldier Detail #760779 (full file) – Sergeant John (‘Percy’) H. Bole.

Canadian Great War Project – 54th Battalion War Diaries, Battle of Vimy Ridge.

Canadian War Museum – Battle of Vimy Ridge.

Royal Military College Yearbook 1966 – J. P. H. Bole Obituary:

“John Percy Hampton Bole died in Vancouver on 7 March, 1966. He was the son of Judge William Norman Bole, known as “lightning justice” in the reign of Queen Victoria. He attended RMC from 1897-1899 (Kingston, ON) and then entered law in B.C. He served overseas in the First World War with the ‘121st Battalion’ and in France with the ‘54th Battalion’. He retired from the practice of law in 1933 to enjoy his estate in Belcarra on the Indian Arm, BC, where he gathered a valuable collection of Indian artifacts and later donated to UBC. Until the time of his death, he was a regular and interested member of the RMC Club.

Veteran’s Affairs.

Vimy Foundation.

Wikipedia: 121st Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Forces (CEF), 54th Battalion, 4th Canadian Division, Bramshott Camp, Chateau de la Haie, Battle of Vimy Ridge, Hill 145, Battle of Lens, Hill 70, 2nd Passchendaele, British Columbia Regimental Depot, 16th Reserve Battalion, Seaford, Bexhill-en-Sea, 8th Reserve Battalion, Witley Camp.

About the Author:

Catherine Elson currently resides in one of the several cottages Percy built on his property in the 1930s and 1940s. As a past resident in the early 1970s, she rejoined the Belcarra South community in 2005. As a full-time resident since 2005, she is also a member/director of the ‘Belcarra South Preservation Society’ which was established in 1976 to preserve the cottages when the property became part of ‘Belcarra Regional Park’.

In 2003, the ‘City of Port Moody’ awarded heritage designation to the ‘Bole House’, and in 2014 to six of the seven cottages that are now situated within Port Moody municipal boundaries. The one cottage in Belcarra, ‘Mayo Point Lodge’, has been deemed a “special study area” by ‘Metro Vancouver’ as they endeavour to expand park amenities to the property now referred to as Belcarra South.