



Sapper Christopher Butler (Number 2008840) of the 12th Battalion, Canadian Engineers, Canadian Expeditionary Corps, lies in Étapes Military Cemetery: Grave reference LXVI.H.14.

His occupation before military service recorded as that of a *miner*, Christopher Butler appears to have left little behind him of the history of his early years in the community of Cupids, Dominion of Newfoundland. However *Ancestry.ca* records a Christopher Butler being on the passenger list of November 14, 1908, of the SS *Bruce*, travelling from Port aux Basques, Newfoundland to North Sydney, Cape Breton to seek employment as a miner.

Then, on February 22 of 1909, a Miss Harriet LeDrew sailed from Port aux Basques to North Sydney, also on the *Bruce*, to work in the industrial city of nearby Sydney as a domestic. This was then surely the couple which was to be married on August 21, 1909, and who later parented a daughter, Ethel, on July 29, 1910, and then a son, Cecil J. in 1913.

Then the stream of information appears to have dried up.

By the time of his enlistment, Christopher Butler was apparently residing in the city of Toronto as he recorded his address as being 1466, Dufferin Street. Having undergone a medical examination on April 29 of 1918, he attested on the morrow, his oath witnessed by a local Justice of the Peace.

The formalities of his enlistment were then brought to a conclusion by the Officer Commanding the Engineer Depot at Brockville, Lieutenant Colonel Samson, when he declared – on paper – that...*Christopher Butler...having been finally inspected and approved by me on this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation**.

**Although, somewhat confusingly, the date next to the Commanding Officer's signature is April 29, the day before the aforesaid attestation.*

Following these bureaucratic procedures Sapper Butler then proceeded to the Engineer Depot at Brockville, Ontario, for training before being posted overseas. It was during this short period that he wrote his will, on June 25 – in which he bequeathed his everything to his wife, Harriet - and also had two full dentures fitted.

Sapper Butler was one of the eight-hundred forty-two personnel of the 75th Canadian Engineers Training Draft which boarded His Majesty's Transport *Valacia* in Montréal on June 27, 1918, for the trans-Atlantic crossing. The ship sailed on that same date, docking in the English west-coast port of Liverpool eighteen days later, on July 15*.



(Right: *The photograph of the SS Valacia is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries Web-site*)

**According to the Canadian Expeditionary Force Study Group, before crossing the Atlantic, Valacia put into Halifax and embarked a further contingent of one-hundred eighty-five men – no unit identified – on July 3. This would explain the lengthy passage.*

In the year 1916, a camp-site adjacent to the town of Seaford on the East Sussex coast had been taken over by the Canadian forces. Upon the arrival of Sapper Butler's Draft in Liverpool, it was to Seaford that the unit* was transported in two trains and immediately *taken on strength* on July 16, 1918, the day following its arrival in England. The newcomers were thus now attached to the 2nd Canadian Engineer Reserve Battalion for further training prior to a transfer to the Continent and to *active service***.



****The Canadian Engineers Training Depot War Diary notes the arrival of only twenty-seven officers and five-hundred twenty-two other ranks on that date.***

*****Seaford was also the site of the Canadian Engineers Regimental Depot and the Canadian Engineers Training Depot.***

(Preceding page: The community cemetery at Seaford in which are buried a number of Canadian soldiers, including two Newfoundlanders: Frederick Jacob Snelgrove and Ebenezer Tucker – photograph from 2016)

This transfer to France came about on September 13, some two months after Sapper Butler's arrival in England, when a draft of three-hundred seventy-five *other ranks* was despatched from Seaford to the Canadian General Base Depot at Étapes – likely travelling via the ports of Southampton and Le Havre – where it was posted for three days.



(Right above: The French port-city of Le Havre at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card)

The contingent was then forwarded on or about September 17th to join the Canadian Engineers Reserve Pool, this apparently being a part of the Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp at Aubin St-Vaast, some forty kilometres south-east.



On September 28 a re-enforcement draft of six officers and seventy-nine *other ranks* – Sapper Butler among its numbers – was ordered to report to the 12th Battalion of the Canadian Engineers, a unit which was working in the area of Sailly, to the north of the main Arras-Cambrai Road and only some three kilometres from the city of Cambrai itself.

(Right above: The Monument aux Morts (War Memorial 1914-1918) which stands in the town of Cambrai: A historic community dating from at least Roman times, Cambrai was occupied by the Germans from almost the beginning until the last months of the Great War. – photograph from 2015)

The 12th Battalion of the Canadian Engineers had been organized and formed in France only months previously, as part of a re-structuring process, in May of 1918. In order to meet the numbers required to meet battalion strength, the unit had absorbed two other units: the 12th Canadian Engineers Field Company and also the 124th Battalion, Canadian Pioneers.



(Right above: The caption reads: A detachment of sappers constructing a road in liberated territory. The building of infrastructure was one of the major responsibilities of the Engineers and of the Pioneer and Entrenching Battalions. – from Illustration)

The 12th Battalion thereupon became a component of the 4th Canadian Engineer Brigade which, at the time that Sapper Butler reported *to duty*, was serving in the offensive to become known to Allied historians as *the Hundred Days*, the campaign which would bring the *Great War* to its conclusion.

When Sapper Butler arrived at his new unit on the following day, September 29, the 12th Battalion was working on road construction near Bourlon village*. There it was to remain until mid-day of October 2 when it... *ceased work at noon, pending orders to move. Training of reinforcements proceeded with daily, under Company arrangements.* (12th Battalion War Diary)



**The Canadians had evicted the Germans from Bourlon Wood in a fierce attack only two days previously, on September 27, after having crossed the Canal du Nord.*

(Right above: *Bourlon Village as seen from the heights of Bourlon Wood: the countryside visible in the background had been re-taken from the Germans in the weeks prior to Sapper Butler's arrival at the front (see above). – photograph from 2014*)



(Right above: *Canadian engineering troops repairing bridge-work during the advance towards Cambrai in the autumn of 1918 – from Illustration*)

The Battalion...*moved into the HINDENBURG front line S.E. of PRONVILLE, and was accommodated in dug-outs and trenches, there expecting to stay for a week* (Battalion War Diary). On that day and the next many of the men were engaged in construction and salvage.



But by that week's end, Sapper Butler had reported sick and was on his way to hospital.

(Right above: *A German gun-shelter in the Hindenburg Line, now in the hands of the Canadians. – from Le Miroir*)

The casualty report reads thus: *Pneumonia due to Exposure Military Duty*

By October 5, Sapper Butler had been admitted into the 7th General Hospital at Étaples for treatment to his pneumonia – *whether or, if so, where exactly he was given medical attention before this date is not recorded. What is recorded, however, is that on the 5th he was being considered by the medical staff as seriously ill; on the next day, the 6th, his condition had by then evolved to that of dangerously ill.*

(continued)

The son of John Butler and Virtue Butler (née *Dawe*, later deceased of tuberculosis on December 31, 1919) of South River, Conception Bay, Newfoundland, he was also husband of Harriet Jane Butler (née *LeDrew*) of Salmon Cove, South River, Conception Bay, and father of ten-month old – at the time of the 1911 Census (for Cape Breton) – Ethel and later, Cecil (see above).

Sapper Butler was reported as having *died of sickness* in the 7th General Hospital on October 8 of 1918.

Christopher Butler had enlisted at the age of thirty-three years: date of birth June 28, 1885 – although a copy of the Cupids' Methodist Parish Records has the date as June 20 of the same year.

Sapper Christopher Butler was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).



The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to criceadam@yahoo.ca. Last updated – January 23, 2023.