



**Sergeant William Slade (Number 501160) of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Tunnelling Company, Canadian Engineers, of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in La Clytte Military Cemetery, Grave reference II.F.5..**

***(Right: The image of a Canadian Engineers cap badge is from the Wikipedia web-site.)***

**(continued)**



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *miner*, there appears to be no available documentation *a propos* William Slade's early life in the area of Salmon Cove, Carbonear, in the Dominion of Newfoundland. All that may be said with any certainty is that by January of 1907 he had emigrated to Cape Breton in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia for it was then and there that he was to be married.

On January 2 in the community of Sydney Mines he took the hand of a Miss Alexis McDonald, she some seven years his junior, in the course of a Methodist ceremony. The couple appears to have had only two children, Jane in 1909 and Hazel two years later, in 1911. By the time of the second arrival, the young family had moved from Sydney Mines to the community of Dominion, Number 6, in close proximity to Donkin and the larger mining-centre of Glace Bay.

His attestation papers, his first pay-records and a medical report all show that it was on November 18 of 1915 that William Slade enlisted, attested – this witnessed by a local justice of the peace – and was first remunerated by the Canadian Army for his services to the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Tunnelling Company of the Canadian Engineers, he having been *taken on strength* by the unit on the same day.

The medical examination in question, which found him...*fit for the Canadian Expeditionary Force*...was not to be undertaken until a week later, on November 25, in the Ontario town of Pembroke where the Company was being mobilized. The examination's findings were fortunate as, back on November 18, the commanding officer of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Tunnelling Company, Major Robert Percy Rogers had already brought the formalities of Sapper\* Slade's enlistment to a presumed conclusion when he had declared – on paper – that...*Wm Slade...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

*\*The original Nominal Roll of the unit designates the (private soldier) rank as that of a Trooper.*

Sapper Slade was soon to be on his way back to the East Coast to take ship to the United Kingdom. It was in the harbour at Saint John, New Brunswick, that on New Year's Day, 1916, he and the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Tunnelling Company boarded the SS *Metagama*\*.



(Right: *The image of the trans-Atlantic liner Metagama is from the Metagama – Great Ships web-site.*)

*\*Unlike her sister ship Missanabie, the Canadian Pacific Ocean Services vessel Metagama was not requisitioned but continued her trans-Atlantic service during the Great War. She did, however, as on the occasion cited here, carry Canadian military personnel overseas.*

*In June of 1924, Metagama was rammed off the east coast of Canada by an Italian ship but was close enough to be able to reach St. John's, Newfoundland, with a thirty-five degree list and fourteen feet of water in the hold. There had been no fatalities.*

The Company was not to travel alone; also on board *Metagama* were the 5<sup>th</sup> Re-enforcing Draft of the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery, the 7<sup>th</sup> Canadian Stationary Hospital, the Motor Air Lines Section, the Number 2 Cable Station and the 1<sup>st</sup> Pioneer Battalion Base Detail.

*Metagama* sailed on the day of Sapper Slade's embarkation, January 1, and docked in England – likely Liverpool as this was a scheduled port for her – nine days later, on January 10. But from there it is not absolutely clear to where the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Tunnelling Company was posted for its short stay in England – although a single source suggests that it was *Denham Camp* in Buckinghamshire, to the northwest of London\*.

*\*The source is the record sheet of 501077, Sapper Albert, who was awarded a five-day detention for having been absent without leave. The incident is documented as having taken place at Denham Camp which at the time was also an aerodrome and Royal Flying Corps establishment.*

As noted above, the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Tunnelling Company was not to remain long in the United Kingdom; there was a sense of urgency on the Continent. In mid-February the unit again took ship, likely in the English south-coast port of Southampton, and crossed to the French industrial port-city of Le Havre, situated on the estuary of the River Seine, the Company's three-hundred twelve *all ranks* landing there on February 16.



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

Sapper Slade was now on *active service*.

\* \* \* \* \*

The need for specialized formations of tunnellers had become evident during the late winter and early spring of 1915 when the Germans were to show that they had already prepared for a subterranean campaign and had stolen a march on the British who were now struggling to catch up. Thus the first British tunnellers – many of them miners by trade – were to be engaged in establishing measures such as counter-mines and listening-posts to neutralize the German threat.

The British had encouraged the Dominions of the Empire to form and train tunnelling units to bolster their own, British, numbers; thus the Canadian Expeditionary Force was eventually to organize three such companies\*.

*\*It was in fact the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Tunnelling Company to be first to serve on the Continent (see \* below) as it had been organized there from personnel already on hand in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions.*

The 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Tunnelling Company, after having arrived in France and having spent a week in or in the vicinity of Le Havre and the nearby Canadian Base Depot, then straightway made its way northwards to serve in the area of Armentières\*, immediately to the south of the Franco-Belgian frontier.

There it was associated with British tunnelling companies until the month of May of that year when it moved some kilometres further north into the *Kingdom of Belgium*.

While some sources have the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Tunnelling Company travelling to the *Ypres Salient* 'for instruction' immediately after its arrival in France, this is apparently incorrect. The unit's War Diary records it going to Ste-Marie Cappel in northern France.

It was there that for the first week in March its sections were attached for that instruction to companies – the 171<sup>st</sup> and 250<sup>th</sup> - of the Royal Engineers and to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Tunnelling Company which itself had only just been formed at Ste-Marie Cappel in January, a bare two months earlier.

On March 8 the Company War Diary records... '*Armentières...Started to take over front from 182 Coy R.E....*'. Two days later the 182<sup>nd</sup> Company moved away, leaving three officers attached to the Canadian unit.

Even though the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Tunnelling Company was a unit of the Canadian Corps, it would appear, according to the Company War Diary, that it was very much still to continue to work in conjunction with Royal Engineer and other British troops. Thus, although by the end of March of 1916, the unit was well into the tunnelling business, it was still operating at the time at Armentières to the south and appears not to have been involved in the combined British and Canadian *Action of the St-Éloi Craters*.

That confrontation began on March 27 when the British had detonated a series of mines under the German lines and had followed up with an infantry assault. All was not, however, to go as planned: the British attack had become bogged down, not least of all because of the problem of crossing the craters caused by its own mines which had by that time become filled with water from the prolific rain.



(Right above: *An attack in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines, possibly at St-Éloi – from Illustration*)

Thus neither did the Canadian contribution to this combined effort go as had been anticipated, that is to say with the Canadians taking over from the presumed British success by consolidating and further developing the newly-won positions. Instead, on or about April 4-5, they picked up the attack where it had been left off by the exhausted British to immediately find themselves up to the knees – and at times the waist – in water, disputing shattered trench-systems and those flooded craters.

Some two weeks later the confrontation officially came to a close with the Germans holding their lines and the Canadians having incurred some fifteen-hundred casualties.

Of course, in the course of this subterranean warfare, the Germans miners were also busy, at times in the same areas as the British, and there was, not infrequently, underground fighting when one side broke into – at times on purpose, at other times inadvertently – the other side's tunnels and galleries.

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(Right: *The remains of a construction built at Messines in 1916 by the Germans to counter-act the British tunnellers: they sank twenty-nine wells – one seen here – from which horizontal galleries were excavated to intercept the British tunnels being dug under the German lines. – photograph from 2014*)



The underground war was in a class all of its own and it must be near-impossible to imagine the feelings and emotions of even the most seasoned miners as they toiled in those primitive conditions, metres under the surface. The Company War Diary entry for April 24 - the Company serving in and under the forward area in the vicinity of Armentières at the time - reads partially as follows: *Heavy strafing along the whole Front. Lieut. Flett and nine sappers entombed in mine at Trench 88...*

Being buried alive was probably the eventuality that most tunnellers dreaded. On this occasion the... *entombed party liberated after 18 hours – none the worse for their experience.* The story did not always enjoy such a happy ending.

(Right: *Railway Wood and, just perceptible in its fringe, the white Memorial to the twelve Royal Engineers who were buried alive while working in tunnels beneath this place: Their remains are there to this day. – photograph from 2015*)



In May of that 1916, the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Tunnelling Company was moved to the north-east, to the area of Zillebeke in the *Ypres Salient*, to an artificial rise known as *the Bluff\** which was at that time in British hands but being continually contested, not least of all below the surface, by the tunnellers of both sides. Not long afterwards, it would seem to have been during the month of August, work was also begun by the unit in the sector of St-Éloi which had already seen such work (see above) some months prior.

*\*It was a narrow ridge which had been created by the spoil from an attempted, but failed, construction of a canal; however, it provided its occupiers with a good strategic vantage-point in an otherwise flat landscape.*

Back during the months of May and June, Sapper Slade was to be promoted of two occasions: on May 28 he was appointed to the rank of lance corporal while on June 11, a bare two weeks later, he put up a second stripe with his elevation to corporal.

In the late summer and autumn on 1916, the four Canadian Divisions, at that time all stationed in Belgium, had been ordered to be withdrawn to serve in the ongoing British offensive at *the Somme*. They were not to return north into Belgium for another year, not until October of 1917.

This was not, however, to be the case with Corporal Slade. On September 18 he began a nine-day furlough although there appear to be no details in his dossier as to where or how he was to spend his time. He reported back *to duty* on September 28, having spent a single extra day at the Canadian Base Depot at Rouelles, close to Le Havre.

He was to also receive further promotion during the coming month of October, 1916, to the rank of sergeant. To accompany his third stripe there was also an increase in his pay: after the daily one dollar and ten cent pay – and the ten-cent per diem field allowance – of a corporal, he now received one dollar thirty-five cents plus fifteen cents\*.

*\*It may also be that, as a miner – a specialized and dangerous job - he received a bonus.*

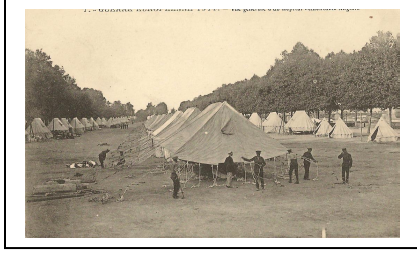
During this period of the *First Battle of the Somme*, the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Tunnelling Company continued its dangerous work at *the Bluff* and at *St-Éloi*, honeycombing both areas with tunnels. At times the enemy was heard doing likewise and small amounts of explosives were often detonated to collapse the German workings – and of course, the Germans reciprocated. Asphyxiation from gas or from a lack of oxygen was a further common danger, and on the surface enemy snipers and artillery both took their toll as did further mishaps associated with the handling of explosives.

It was also about this time that the entire underground of that area was being transformed into living-quarters for large numbers of troops: not only dug-outs and shelters but dormitories, work-shops, kitchens, medical facilities and communication tunnels – such as those soon to be used at *Vimy Ridge* - were now being excavated.

(Right above: *One of the subterranean displays – this one of a medical facility - in the museum at Zonnebeke, Belgium – photograph from 2014(?)*)



It is perhaps not too surprising, given the environment in which these men were obliged to work, that Sergeant Slade was to contract a case of bronchitis. On December 11, 1916, he was evacuated from the front and admitted into the 53<sup>rd</sup> (*North Midland*) Casualty Clearing Station, established at the time in Belgium at *Mont des Cats* – which has nothing to do with any feline species.



Apparently the bronchitis had been treated before it could develop into anything more serious; Sergeant Slade was released back to his unit eleven days afterwards, on December 22.

(Right above: *A British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and when the necessity arose – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War – from a vintage post-card*)

From June of 1916 when the *Battle of Mount Sorrel* had drawn to its close, the Canadian Corps, as seen above, had remained in Belgium until the late summer and autumn of that year when it had, over a number of weeks, withdrawn for training before having been deployed in the *First Battle of the Somme*.

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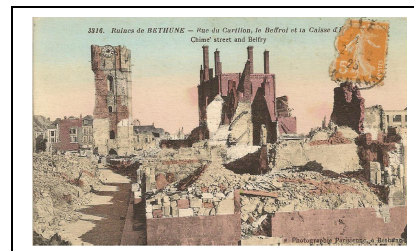
(Preceding page: *Wounded troops being evacuated in hand-carts from the forward area during the First Battle of the Somme – from Le Miroir or Illustration*)



(Right: *The remnants of the Grande Place (Grand'Place) in Arras had already been steadily bombarded for two years by the end of the year 1916 – from Illustration*)

By the end of that November of 1916 the Corps was leaving *the Somme* to be posted in the sectors just north of the city of Arras, and in those leading northwards to the city and mining-centre of Lens and beyond, as far as the venerable town of Béthune.

There it was to remain, to serve in the *First Battle of Arras* and in offensive operations in those same sectors, until October of that year of 1917, when its sacrifices were to be required in the maelstrom that was *Passchendaele*.



(Right: *This image is of the historic northern town of Béthune by the end of the Great War, but by the winter of 1916-1917 its destruction was already well under way. – from a vintage post-card*)

The winter of 1916-1917 was quiet along the entirety of the *Western Front* – as were to be *all* the winters of the *Great War* – although of course there were always incidents to remind one that it was war-time.

There was still a daily count of casualties, as ever caused mostly by the enemy's artillery-fire and by his snipers, but it was sickness, of all kinds, that kept the medical services busy: tonsillitis, influenza, bronchitis – as has been seen – pneumonia, tuberculosis, conjunctivitis, scabies, trench-foot and frost-bite, venereal disease, debility, the list goes on...as well as the standard cuts and bumps, strains and bruises - and a perhaps surprising amount of dental work.

During this quiet time, all of the Canadian units were withdrawn in rotation to rest – but also to train – in the rear areas: parades; presentation of decorations; inspections; bayonet fighting; route marches; musketry; drill; instruction; physical training; familiarization with weapons both *ours* and *theirs*; visits from politicians, brass and per-times royalty; and on the lighter side, sports and the occasional concert – even a bath from time to time.



(Right above: *A detachment of Canadian troops going forward during the winter of 1916-1917 – from Illustration*)

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And some personnel went to school: in the case of Sergeant Slade it was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Bridging School to which he was ordered for a period of twelve days, from the last day of March until April 4.

When the Canadian Corps stormed *Vimy Ridge* and its surrounds on Easter Monday of April 9, 1917, the first day of the *First Battle of Arras*, the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Tunnelling Company was one of the few units of Canadian troops not to participate. It was still digging in Belgium for an offensive to begin two months later, on June 7.

(Right: *The Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, has stood on Vimy Ridge – photograph from 2010*)



That tunnelling being undertaken by Sergeant Slade and his fellow miners ceased towards the end of May when the completed galleries began to be filled with high explosive. It appears that the final tamping-down of the charges was completed during the last week in May, as the only similar excavation work mentioned in the War Diary of June 1 to 6 was... *Work continued of Battle Headquarters for Brigades & Battalions* (June 1)... then... *Dugouts nearing completion* (June 4)... and finally... *Dugouts completed* (June 6).



(Right above: *The Messines (today Mesen) Ridge almost a century after the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Tunnelling Company dug in the earth underneath it - photograph from 2014*)

The 1<sup>st</sup> Tunnelling Company War Diarist takes up the story of the attack at Messines Ridge of June 7, 1916: *...all infantry evacuated from Dugout system by 2.00 am and Gallery & stairways strutted. Final check on time by Captain Thorne, who, at zero hour gave the word (go). Very heavy shock, followed by an immense...flame 150 to 200 feet high, was the result. Underground effects not as heavy as expected. Forty minutes later a patrol of four Officers & one Sergeant inspected new Crater. Crater about 300 feet in diameter & 40 to 50 ft deep. A wounded German dug out from debris about 30 ft from lip of Crater, informed us, that all dugouts on his left were full of men, and that they were "all dead". No trace of these dugouts could be found...*

(Right: *Lone Tree Crater, the result of one of the nineteen mines to be detonated on June 7, 1917. Today it is a place for reflection and a symbol of peace. – photograph from 2014*)



The taking of the *Messines Ridge* had been necessary for the next phase of the offensive to proceed. However, the mine explosions had been so devastating that it was to take eight weeks before roads could be built across the stricken landscape in order that the required equipment and supplies for the attack might be moved to the forward areas.

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(Right: *A detachment of Canadian sappers constructing a road somewhere on the Continent – from Illustration*)



This second stage in this two-part offensive was officially designated the *Third Battle of Ypres*, but the campaign came to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that - ostensibly - was one of the British Army's objectives.

On June 8, Sergeant Slade and the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Tunnelling Company began to construct the necessary thoroughfares over the broken terrain . Only days later this work was handed over to another unit and for the next number of weeks the Diarist reported much construction and re-construction of dugouts. Even on the day when the advance recommenced, July 31, the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Tunnelling Company... *went 'over the top' with the first wave of the attack for the purpose of locating, examining and repairing enemy dugouts for occupation by Coy. and other H.Q. as the attack progressed.*

For weeks the Company had been based in and about the community of La Clytte to the south-west of Ypres. From there its sections – small groups of up to twenty led by a sergeant – were ordered to their various tasks.

There is no precise report on how Sergeant Slade met his death: the casualty report cites merely *killed in action, 23/7/17*. The Company War Diary entry of that July 23, 1917, offers nothing more: *Routine work, Sect. 1. Sect. 2 finished dugouts in Spoilbank south of Lock 6 on Canal and deep dugouts beside bridge close to White Chateau. Sect 4 Routine work.*

The War Diarist reported no casualties on that date – or on any of those before or after.

The son of William Slade, fisherman, and of Catherine (also found as *Kate*) Slade, of Salmon Cove and area, Carbonear\*, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Jordan, James, Michael and Ann Hazel.

*\*Although his file cites Salmon Cove, Bay de Verde, most of the family information comes from the Carbonear Methodist Parish Records.*

He was, as seen above, also husband to Alexis – to whom as of January 1, 1916, he had allocated a monthly twenty dollars from his pay, and to whom in a Will penned on February 12 of 1916, he had bequeathed his all – and was father to Jane and Hazel.

William Slade had enlisted at the *apparent* age of thirty-four years and one month: date of birth at Salmon Cove, Carbonear (also Bay de Verde), Newfoundland, October 25, 1881 (from attestation papers and confirmed by Methodist Parish Records, Carbonear).

Sergeant William Slade 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](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 24, 2023.**