

Lost airman's letters tell of final year

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Days later we find they are confined to camp due to an outbreak of spinal meningitis in a neighbouring camp. No Thanksgiving dinner on the ranch.

Occasionally, interspersed with the letters which he writes separately to each parent, we find a letter to one of his sisters.

Bessie bears the brunt of his sibling chiding on December 6. He blames his not having written to her on a "mean dig" she included in her last letter. In the same letter he refers to the Victory Bond bought for her, and reminds her when she next sees him, "I will be a brisk but very dignified 2nd Lieut. I hope, and of course you will have to treat me as such and do no more of your underlining stunts."

Later when she wants to work on the farm, Tom suggests that they "let her get a little experience in the garden at home."

Baby brother Georgie gets a few comments. Tom wonders how he is enjoying his Christmas present, and months later supposes that he is still running around with his "phovel". Georgie is not yet five. He will soon attend school and later will have few recollections of his big brother. In Scotland, obviously missing his baby brother, he asks, "When is Georgie going to write me?" Many letters pass on messages to his grandma. For some reason he refers to his letters to her but there are no copies of them in his files.

Nothing could ever happen to me ...

His letter to his mother on December 6 could only have deepened the grief eight months later. In it, he reassures his mother, "and for goodness sake never be alarmed about not receiving letters because nothing could ever happen to me ..."

Events of national and international significance fall into the letters.

On December 6, 1917 the harbour of Halifax was destroyed in the collision of the Mont Blanc and the Imo. The Mont Blanc was carrying tons of explosives

when it drifted into the dock with no one at the helm. Over 1,900 were killed in the blast and the ensuing fires that ravaged the city and harbour, crowded with wartime shipping. No blame was ever laid in the largest man-made explosion until the atomic age.

Five days later Tom writes to his dad about the explosion. In the same letter he enthuses about casting his first ballot for the Unionist Party and Lieut. Gen. Mewburn. It was a vote for conscription.

Not surprisingly, the historical literature backs Tom's view of the vote.

The 1917 election was entirely about conscription. The traditional two-party election in Canada was abandoned, as politicians crossed party lines to either support or oppose conscription. The Liberals became the voice of French Canadians who did not want any part of the war. The Conservatives, who became the Unionists when pro-conscription Liberals joined them, became the voice of English Canadians who were in favour of increasing Canada's war effort. Canada's most violent and bitter election resulted in a majority for Borden's Union government, and the implementation of conscription in Canada.

Sydney Mewburn was elected in Hamilton East. Everyone enlisted in the armed forces was allowed to vote, including women. It was the first time they had been allowed the vote. Two years later every non-native woman in the country was on the election rolls.

In a later letter, he mentions the possibility of the arrival of prohibition.

His final Christmas and New Years are spent at Fort Hicks; he had been delayed inexplicably on his return north and failed to reach home as hoped.

For a month there are no entries. Presumably he was home on leave in January, 1918 before boarding the *S. S. Tunisian* on January 27, leaving Canada forever.

Part II, next week



Tom Martin stands in front of his biplane in this World War I photo. It is the only photo Anne and Pieter Wyminga have of "Uncle Tom".