

He was a soldier

Forgotten photos found in an old desk only add to the mystery of my grandfather

By TED BROWN

A single picture of him with his rifle in England, another of him with his parents and my great uncle Harry as he prepared to go off to war, a watch, a ring and a couple of medals and some old English coins seemed to be the extent of the collec-



PTE. FRED J. BROWN

tion—and the extent of my knowledge of my grandfather's time overseas during The Great War.

Almost all that I know for certain is the year was 1918, and my grandfather, Fred John Brown was overseas.

Where, I'm not sure.

I do know he spent time in England, from his service records that I acquired for the National Archives of Canada. But for how long and exactly where, I'm only guessing—the records are sketchy at best.

For several years now I've had a burning desire to find out what I could about Pte. Fred J. Brown, who signed his attestation papers May 13, 1918, in

Hamilton. He'd had a medical examination in Georgetown October 25, 1917, but it had taken until May for his call to come in.

Attached to the 2nd Canadian Overseas Regiment (2nd COR) he obviously had his basic training in Canada, and by his records, he sailed for Seaford, England, August 1918, as a member of the Canadian Machine Gun Corps (CMGC).

Yes, he was a machine gunner—that weapon that poured so much death and devastation out through its hot barrel, at the approaching enemy.

My grandfather wasn't very talkative about his war service. And being only 9 years-old when he died, I didn't have much chance to ask him.

Besides, little children didn't need to know about such things.

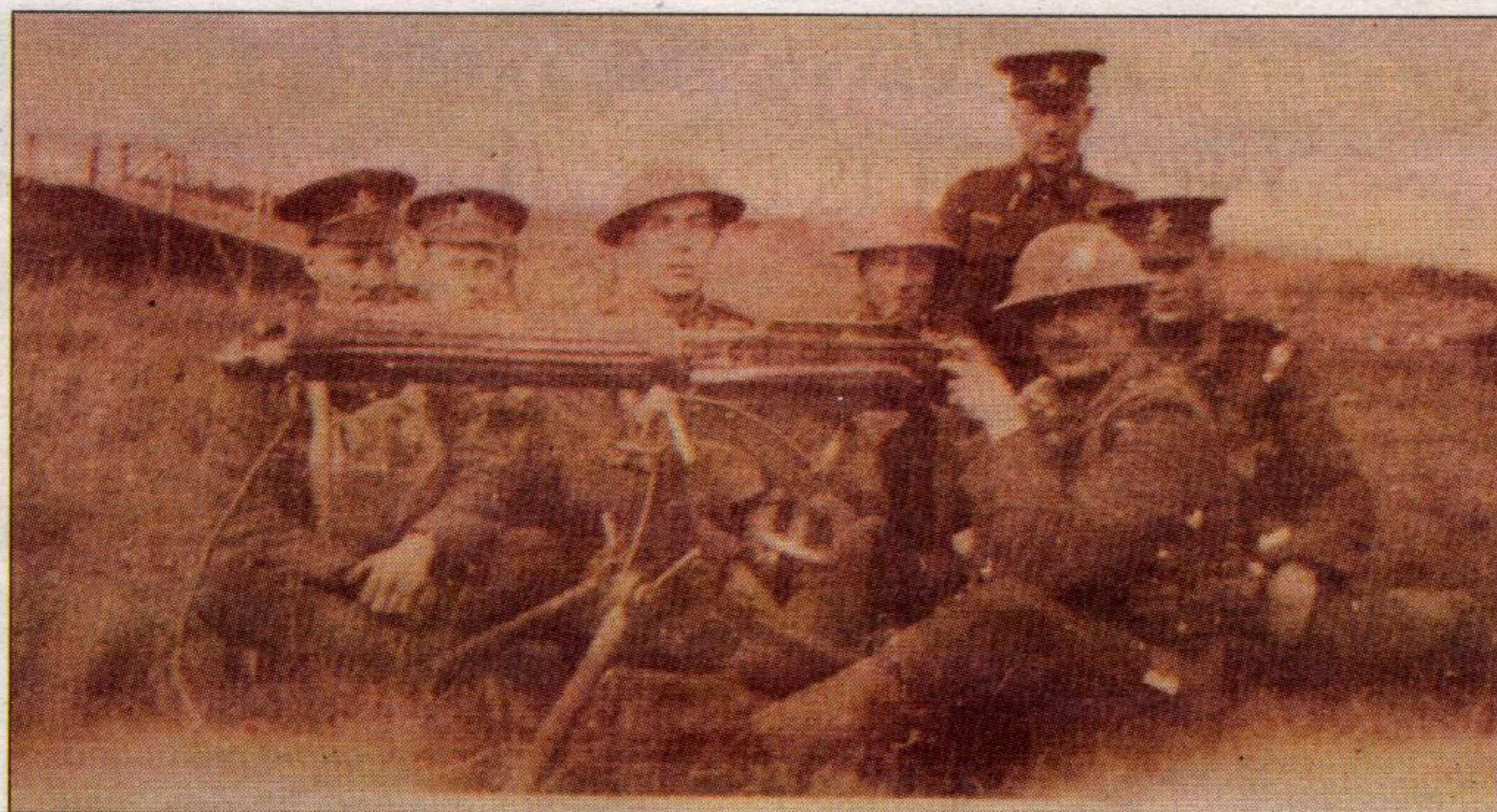
In later years, I recall my dad talking about him saying he opted to become a machine gunner "cuz it sure as hell beat going over the top to be machine gun fodder for the other side."

At the same time, he was a prime target for the enemy—the first one they wanted to take out when they rushed the trench from their side, through the artillery shell holes, endless mud and dead bodies, that made up a place called No Man's Land.

A recent discovery of some of his pictures in an old desk drawer have given me a little more insight into the



A few medals, English coins and his watch make up the collection of Pte. Brown's wartime effects.



Machine gun training in preparation for action overseas.

life and times of Pte. Brown as he spent a small part of his life on the other side of the ocean.

I found pictures of him and his regiment— informal pictures where his smiling face is prominent in the front row. (When you're only five foot six, you're destined to be a front row person.)

I found pictures of him marching with his outfit, and the date is actually printed on the photo— June 21, 1918.

I found pictures of some close friends, as they pose together for snapshots to be held on to for posterity.

I found pictures of a young lady with a soldier's hat on, another with a Union Jack behind, all sharing light moments.

My grandfather sent back one photo that had information of the back. It read: "Pencil mark is Budger, of Acton. There are six Browns in this picture. Sure is a common good old name."

My dad always said his favourite line was "I was a late entry to the war—I really didn't see action."

It was the 'really' part that I question.

He did talk of staying on after the war in England, working for nine months as he broke open wooden crates of brand-new Lee Enfield .303 rifles, still covered with grease from the factory, to place them on a block where he hit them with a sledge hammer, breaking them in half, throwing the wooden stock in one pile, the metal in another to be melted down.

I could only imagine how many rifles it would take to keep a group of men busy breaking them in half—for nine months.

When I spoke with First World War veteran Gilbert English many years ago, (when Gilbert was 102 years-young) he told me how soldiers saw some pretty horrific things yet weren't supposed to let them bother them. Blown apart, decomposed bodies, mud, mud and more mud, and all sorts of injustices to both the land and its people were everyday sights to soldiers.

Veterans of The Great War, as it was called, returned with images in their heads and no place to talk them out-only let them hopefully fade away into



Machine gunner Pte. Brown at his barracks camp in England.

the inner recesses of their brains.

They were men dammit— men weren't supposed to let things bother them!

What I perceived as an inclination to not talk on the part of my grandfather could very well have been a means of dealing with painful memories, simply letting them fade into oblivion.

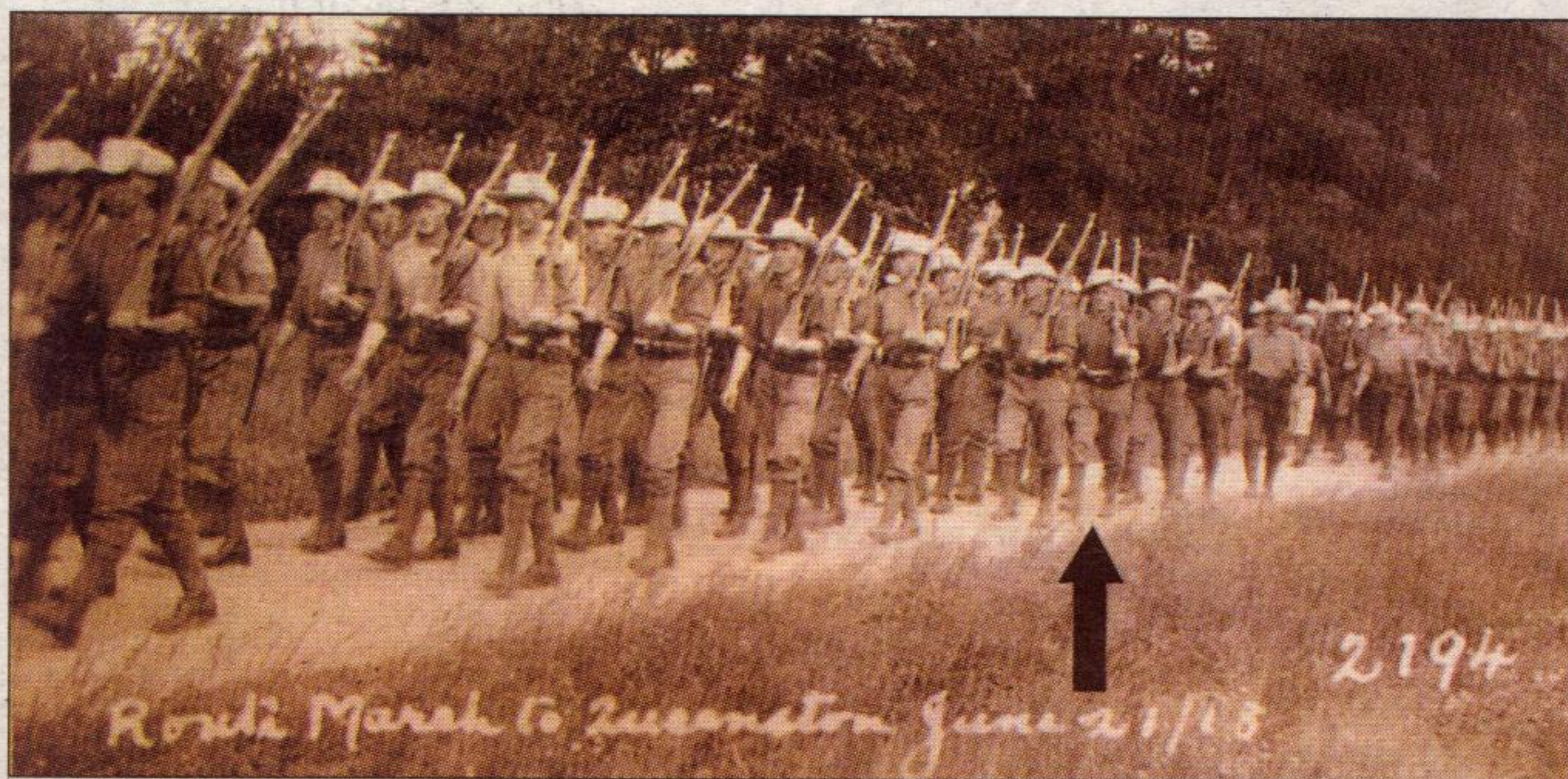
If he saw action, I'll probably never know.

If he trained a machine gun on approaching enemy coming out of the mist, it makes no difference.

And if I never learn anything more, it matters not, even though I'd love to find out.

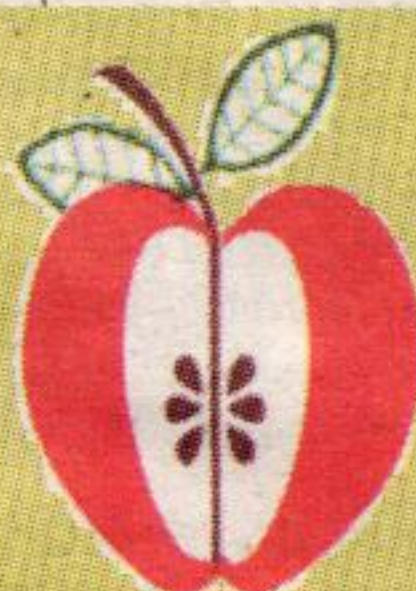
I know he served his country and served her well.

And that's all I 'really' need to know.



Pte. Brown (arrow) marching with his unit June 21, 1918

Remembrance Day NOVEMBER 11 Please take time to remember!



APPLE Auto Glass®

354 Guelph Street, Georgetown

905-873-1655

MORE THAN JUST AUTO GLASS

- Truck Accessories
- Upholstery
- Heavy Equipment Glass

NOW FEATURING

novus® WINDSHIELD REPAIR SYSTEM