

John Bates

Private 808938, B Company, 49th Battalion, Alberta Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF)

John Bates was born in Chartridge, Chesham on 27 March 1895. His parents were Arthur and Sarah Ann. Neither Arthur nor Sarah, who was always known as Annie, seemed to know much about their parents or place of birth as on the 1911 Census return (the first to be completed by themselves), Arthur states that he was born in Bedfordshire but does not know in which town or parish and Sarah can only state that she was born somewhere in Buckinghamshire. Arthur married Sarah Ann Randall, the marriage being registered in Amersham in 1893 and John was the first of four surviving children. Arthur was a farmer and the family moved around the area living at Langley Farm, Holmer Green and by 1911 at Park View, The Kennels, Amersham. On the 1911 Census return John was seventeen years old and working on the family farm: his siblings Beatrice, Eva and Philip were also at home.

On his Attestation papers, signed on 25 February 1916, John gave his profession as farmer and stated that he had been in Canada for two years. He gave his address as Wainwright, Alberta. He attested at Calgary, Alberta, aged 21 years, was 6 ft and ¼ ins tall, with a fair complexion, brown hair and blue eyes and was passed fit for service in the 137th Battalion of the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force. They trained at Sarcee Camp under the direction of their Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel George W. Morfitt. Part of the training exercise was to move thousands of stones from the river up Signal Hill, a bluff overlooking the camp, and present them in the number representing each battalion. As Camp Sarcee also housed army engineers, the efforts were first designed on paper and then mapped out using string. What originally started as discipline or a “make work” project to alleviate boredom, soon turned into friendly competition between the battalions in an attempt to preserve their memory and make their mark. To lay claim and identify themselves as a unit before being dispersed, the numbers of stones were painstakingly hauled up the hill, arranged and whitewashed before each of the units deployed to active duty. Many of these stones can still be seen today as a memorial to the men who assembled them.

On 21 August 1916, marching behind their twenty-seven-member brass band, they embarked for Europe from Halifax, Nova Scotia, aboard the S.S. *Olympic*. They arrived at Liverpool on 30 August. The 137th was merely a recruitment unit and after training John embarked for France on 5 December and joined the 49th Battalion on 7 December 1916. For the first nine months of 1917 they spent their time training, on working parties repairing trenches and avoiding snipers. It was not until the middle of October that the 49th Battalion was moved, by train, to Ypres and on to the main battle front near Passchendaele.

Towards the end of October a major offensive began and the soldiers of the 49th Battalion moved from the Wiltje area to take up a position to the right of Gravenstafel to Bellevue Road. They were under heavy enemy shelling and were also sustaining casualties from bombs dropped from aircraft. The weather during the night of 28 – 29 October 1917 was cold, wet and a gale was blowing but the night of 29 – 30 October was bright and clear and movements could be seen at a distance of 200 yards, so it is probable that the Germans noticed that preparations were being made for an attack. The attack began at 5.40 a.m. with “B” and “C” Companies forming the first wave with “D” and “A” following at 30 paces. They were immediately met with heavy opposition from German machine guns and shell fire which caused many casualties. During the offensive that day five officers and sixty five other ranks were killed. John Bates was in “B” Company and was one of those killed that morning. In addition, thirteen officers and two hundred and sixty other ranks were injured.¹

¹ *War Diary of 49th Battalion Canadian Expeditionary Force*, Canadian Archives

The supplementary report sent a few days later is highly critical of the way the attack was organised. The enemy could see the preparations for attack and were ready for it, launching an artillery barrage within two minutes of the opening Canadian barrage. Assembling troops behind a line already known to the enemy as our front line was clearly wrong. However, the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel R H Palmer, was very complimentary about his troops.

“The work of all ranks under the very trying circumstances preceding, during, and after the attack was of the highest quality and whilst the Battalion failed to gain its objective I am of the opinion that it materially improved the situation on its front forward of Bellevue and that very heavy losses were inflicted on the enemy who was holding the Area in great strength”.²

Private John Bates was killed in action on 30 October 1917, aged 23, in the **Battle of Passchendaele**. He was awarded The British War Medal, 1914-18 and The Allied Victory Medal. John's mother, Sarah Ann (Annie) Bates, was awarded the Memorial Cross, a Canadian Medal awarded to the mother, widow, widower or next of kin of any member of the Canadian Forces who loses his or her life in active service, including peacekeeping, and other such international operations.

John Bates is remembered with Honour and buried in
Passchendaele New British Cemetery, Zonnebeke, Belgium (Grave ref. VIII.E.12)



(Photograph taken in May 2010 – H.Garas, during a visit by Chiltern U3A to Flanders in 2010)

Passchendaele New British Cemetery was a concentration cemetery made after the Armistice when graves were brought in from the battlefields of Passchendaele and Langemarck. Almost all the burials are from the autumn of 1917. The cemetery now contains 2,101 burials and commemorations of the Great War. 1,600 of the graves are unidentified.

² Supplementary Report to *War Diary 49th Battalion Canadian Expeditionary Force* dated 4 November 1917, Canadian Archive