

Billy Huston, Fort William's First World War I Casualty

By Mark Chochla

W. J. "Billy" Huston was a 5' 7" brown haired, brown-eyed young man who excelled in several sports "being an athlete of immense skill and strength." He arrived in Fort William from Wiarton, Ontario, in 1902 with his wife, Edna and secured contracts to build houses during this early building boom.

Huston became involved in the civic life of the community as the recording secretary of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, a school trustee, a city councilor in 1910. He participated in almost all sporting institutions in the city. The death of this popular and respected man in 1915 had a profound effect on Fort William. He was the town's first World War I casualty. News of his death reached the town by 4 Feb of that year. All play at the Fort William curling club stopped in the middle of the first afternoon draw to pay tribute to Huston who was perhaps the club's best skip. Dignitaries recalled his contributions to public life, his enthusiasm, unselfish nature and sportsmanship

An expert marksman and member of the Fort William Rifle Association and the 96th Lake Superior Regiment, Huston enlisted with the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry with the encouragement of Major General Sam Steele. This put him into the war, as a sharpshooter, almost a year before the local 52nd Battalion entered the fray.

What follows is a reconstruction of events leading to Lance Corporal Huston's death from letters to his wife, eyewitness reports from his Princess Patricia's comrades in the trenches, Privates J.A. Small and William Langford.

The Princess Patricia's arrived in La Harve, France on 21 December 1914 making them the first and only Canadian Infantry Regiment in the war in 1914. They spent the first week in Blaaringham digging trenches then marched up the muddy road and into the zone of conflict at Dickebusch, West Flanders, Belgium. Soaked to the skin and exhausted, regimental orders sent the soldiers into the trenches that night. Veteran soldiers were shocked at these orders, but the regiment was eager and willing.

The trench environment was poisonous. Water in the trenches topped rubber boots, Trench Foot and typhoid were claiming victims and dead bodies littered the battlefield. The men were targets of the regular sniper fire from the front and from the rear. Billy Huston was likely among the twelve men, crack shots under the command to Lieutenant Colquhoun, who quickly picked off many of the enemy snipers.

On 6 January 1915, the regiment's first night in the front line trench, the Princess Patricia's suffered a serious loss that cast dark cloud over the regiment and was an omen of tragedies to come. While patrolling the maze of trenches in the inky night, Captain Denzil Newton found himself outside his regiment's perimeter. A sentry challenged him, and not hearing his reply, accidentally shot the Captain.

According to J.A. Small, Lance Corporal Huston volunteered for a dangerous mission on 25 January 1915. He guided Lieutenant Colquhoun to a certain trench and, while returning, was asked by some engineers for the route to another trench where they were to do some electrical wiring. While trying to locate this trench, Huston came across a wounded soldier and proceeded to carry him to the safety of a nearby trench. According to Private Langford, an enemy sniper shot Huston in the stomach as he entered the trench.

Billy Huston was carried to the rear of the trenches and lived for four hours but never regained consciousness. Buried five miles behind the firing line in Dickebusch cemetery, Lance Corporal Huston's grave is beside that of Captain Denzil Newton.

Before he left for France, 30-year-old Billy Huston wrote to his wife, Edna, about possibility of death or injury, which he minimized with his usual optimism about the future. "Don't worry about me," wrote Billy, "For if I am hurt the government will give you a free pass to come and see me. If worse happens, all you will get is a cable, but I hope to be back to build more houses in Fort William within a year and I expect to be wearing an officer's uniform, with V.C. [Victoria Cross] medals and you will be proud of the boy who went away."



Like Billy Huston, the Lakehead's first casualty in World War I, these soldiers were eager to get overseas because everyone felt the war was to be over quickly. But the fighting lasted for over four years and, like Huston, many seen here did not come home.