

Philip Francis le Cornu

Philip Francis Le Cornu is my great-uncle, on my mother's side of my family. My main memory of Uncle Phil is that his photo was on the wall of my grand-mother's sitting room. I was aware that Uncle Phil had died in the First World War, although no-one ever mentioned any details.

Recently I have found Uncle Phil's diary for 1917 and, whilst the diary contains only short notes, it has given me an insight into his life at that time.

I am lucky that our daughter has been collating our family tree, so I do know some of the details of his early life and it is remarkable how much information can now be found on the internet. I am also grateful to Anna Baghiani at La Societe Jersiasie for her help.

Philip Francis le Cornu was the youngest of the four surviving children of Philip Francis le Cornu who married Mary Ann Seager. Philip snr is recorded as living in St Ouen in the censuses from 1861 to 1891. But by the 1901 census there has been a change in the circumstance of the family.

Philip jnr was born in 1894, his birth was registered in St Peter. He is recorded as living in St Brelade in the 1901 census with his mother and two of his sisters (my grand-mother Eva and Amy) with his mother's father, their grand-father. His other sister, Hilda, was living with her cousins in St Ouen, indeed she continued to live in St Ouen with and, later in a reverse of roles, looking after her cousins for many years.

Like so many young men at this time, Philip needed to make his own way in the world and aged 15, he travelled to Halifax, Canada from Liverpool in April 1909 on the SS Dominion. The SS Dominion was launched as the Prussia for the Hamburg America Line, in the same year as Philip was born; the Prussia was sold in 1898 to the Dominion Line and it was rebuilt to carry 200 first class, 170 second class and 750 third class passengers.

In 1911, Philip is recorded in the Canadian census as a lodger living in Malbaie, Gaspé with Adelard Comeau. His occupation is Salesman in the 'Gen Stores', working 80 hours per week for an annual salary of 275 dollars in 1910. He is also recorded as speaking English and French. He shared his lodgings with two colleagues from the 'Gen Stores', one a book-keeper called Harold Orvjsa and a salesman called Charles Godfray, also from the Channel Islands, who had only worked for 9 weeks in 1910, so was presumably a more recent arrival.

Malbaie is now known as Saint Georges de Malbaie, presumably to avoid confusion with a town called La Malbaie further to the east between Gaspé towards Percé.

Philip had probably been taken on as an apprentice by a company such as Robin, Jones and Whitman, as were so many young Jersey men. The company offered employment on the basis of an indenture, which by today's standards appears quite oppressive : "... he shall not haunt ale houses, taverns, play houses or any other place of debauchery; but in all things behave himself .. as a good and faithful Apprentice ought to do". Apprentices were also forbidden, amongst many other things, from getting married. The Societe Library has an example dated 1910.

Robin, Jones and Whitman was formed in 1904 and ran many general stores in Gaspé, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia and continued in business till 2004.

Charles Robin was one of the first Jersey men to establish a fishing station in Quebec, just six years after the English had taken control from the French. Charles Robin and Company was formed in 1766 and is recognised as the second company to be registered in Canada, the first was the Hudson Bay Company. The collapse of the Jersey Banking Company in 1886 forced Charles Robin & Co into bankruptcy leading to a number of mergers and eventually the formation of Robin, Jones and Whitman.

Philip clearly maintained strong links with Gaspé and made many friends, as his diary records that after joining the army in 1916 he returned to Gaspé for Christmas and he mentions getting together with 'Gaspé boys' later on when he is in France.

It appears that Philip came back to Jersey early in 1916, as his name is on the passenger list on the Missanbie from Liverpool to Paspiaç in April 1916. It is likely this was the first time he had been able to return home in seven years.

Philip joined the Canadian Army on September 12th 1916. He gave my grand-mother, his sister, as his next of kin, who was at that time living at Les Chateigners, St Ouen. His army number was 1054442 and he was enlisted into the 244th Kitchener's Own. He has written in the front of his diary his height as 5 foot 7 inches, weight 150 (10 stone 10 pounds or 68 kg), shoe size 7, collar 15, gloves 8, hat 7.

His signature was witnessed by Corporal H. Vibert. I am indebted to Trevor Vibert who has suggested that this is most likely to be Harry Vibert who was born in Perce in 1891. Harry was the son of Frank and Mary Vibert who are recorded in the 1911 Canadian census, Frank was a farmer. Harry survived the First World War and served in the Second World War as well.

After spending Christmas in Gaspé he arrived back in Montreal on December 29th. He was then stationed at the Peel Street Barracks and a member of the 244th Kitchener Own Battalion.

His diary records regular route marches, guard duty and various drills, including musketry. There is also training in trench warfare. Philip also records the bath parades, which are not that often.

The diary contains reference to friends only by initials so it is impossible to identify who he meets, goes out with or goes to dinner with.

It seems that there was time off in the city as he notes his regular visits to a number of Montreal theatres. In all, he goes to the movies or theatres over twenty times during the 12 weeks that he is stationed in Montreal. He only mentions once what he went to see, on the 17th February, a Saturday evening, he sees a film called "The Girl Phillipa". This film was released in 1916 and is described a romantic thriller by IMDB, on the internet. The film starred Anita Stewart (as Phillipa), Frank Morgan and S Rankin Drew, who also directed the film. IMDB includes this synopsis of the film "Phillippa, a Balkan princess, is kidnapped and taken to France as a child at the turn of the century. There she is raised among spies and in low society. As Phillipa matures, and war approaches, she falls in love with an American artist, who helps her when she discovers her true identity and endeavours to return to her native land".

The Gaiety theatre is the one that Philip visits the most. The Gaiety opened as a movie theatre in 1909 at 539 St Catherine West. It was a converted house in a street which had a number of movie theatres at the time it remained much the same until it closed in 2000.

Philip also visited the Orpheum, built in 1907 as Bennett Theatre, seating 1100 people, it was known for American vaudeville shows at this time. Another was the Imperial, built in 1913 as a movie theatre seating 2,300, and is still a cinema today.

Another theme in his diary is the Montreal Wanderers Ice Hockey team; Philip notes the results and went to see them play at least twice at the Montreal Arena. This was the final season of the National Hockey Association, a league for professional ice hockey teams, disrupted by the War and internal disputes. The Wanderers had been one of the most successful teams, but they only managed to win four of their twenty games in the season, which was split into two halves, ending on the 3rd March. Philip had stopped recording the results, presumably frustrated with his team's performance !

Sunday 18th March Philip records that there is a farewell Church Parade, it is the first mention in his diary of the imminent voyage to Europe. The next week seems to one of hectic preparations, he says "all is excitement" and there are streets packed with visitors and guards to see them off. On Friday the 23rd they board a train to take them to Halifax, arriving at 11pm on Saturday, with a 30 minute stop at Moncton. They had to stay on the train until 10:30 on Sunday 25th March and then marched to their ship, the SS Lapland, and were on board at 4pm. The next couple of days are taken up with gun practice, life belt drill and eventually the convoy leaves Halifax at 4pm on Wednesday.

The SS Lapland had been crossing the Atlantic since 1909 and was notable for being chartered by the White Star Line in 1912 to bring the surviving Titanic crew back to England.

The convoy was made up of the armed merchant cruiser HMS Calgarian, SS Metagama which had been built in 1915, SS Missanabie which was built in 1914, SS Southland, launched as SS Vaderland in 1900, but renamed to avoid sounding German and the RMS Saxonica, built in 1900 and the largest Cunard liner at that time.

After a few days it is clear that Philip is not a very good sailor, and on the 31st March he writes "blowing a gale". The following day he says that he was seasick and that there are heavy seas. The next day is no better with very heavy seas and he is feeling so unwell that he is released from gun drill. Luckily, the weather is calmer by April 3rd and for the remainder of the Atlantic crossing the weather and the seas are a lot calmer. The highlight of each day appears to be the life boat drill!

On the 6th April, he reports that the only one other ship of their convoy, the SS Metagama was visible, but then at 4pm they sight land. The crossing had taken nine days, but unfortunately, the most dramatic aspect of the voyage was just about to occur: at 1:30 am the ship hits a mine, Philip notes that one man drowned and seven or eight were wounded.

The Wikipedia entry for SS Lapland confirms that she was mined off the Mersey Bar Lightship but managed to reach Liverpool. The entry goes on to say that she was requisitioned in June 1917 and converted to a troop ship, which suggests that when Philip was on board she was still operating as a

passenger ship. Later that year, SS Lapland brought the first unit of the United States Air Service to join the War.

Having arrived in Liverpool the Canadian troops are marched on to a train at 9am and they arrive in Shoreham at 7pm.

Shoreham was established as an army camp very soon after the declaration of war due to its strategic position on the south coast of England with railway connections, harbour and airport. It was the location for the formation of Kitchener's Third Army in 1914. Initially, Shoreham was a tented camp but the winter of 1914/15 was very wet and huts were built to replace the tents. By the time Philip arrived at Shoreham, the camp had become a wooden town which could accommodate 10,000 men. There were a number of shops for troops run by local traders, but also YMCA and Church Army recreational huts and a church.

From another soldier's letters (Roger Lamont, 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles) which are available on the internet, who was in Shoreham from November 1916 to February 1917, we have a description of his first impressions of Shoreham : "They never have any snow here, the grass is nice and green, the cattle and sheep feed outside the whole year round. We are in huts, 22 feet wide and 60 feet long. There are 32 men to a hut, one coal stove and we have each a mattress and 4 blankets. We are getting lots to eat, never got fed so good since we left Owen Sound. There is a flying school nearby and aeroplanes are flying around like birds. The trains are far different and travel about a mile a minute. We are having a medical examination tomorrow as there have been quite a few men turned down from other companies. Shoreham is on the coast and only 20 miles to France. The worst trouble over here is the money as it is pence, shillings, half-crowns and crowns".

Philip was in Shoreham only two months later, and on the 12th April he records snow! The two soldiers' accounts are very similar about life in the camp, which has a more rigorous training regime than that in Canada. Almost every day there is a route march with either musketry training, time on the rifle range or training for gas helmets. There are also lectures from officers, whose names are difficult to make out.

On April 26th, Philip notes that he has received his first letters from Canada, a month after he left Halifax. But on May 2nd he has six days leave and he travels to London and then to Southampton arriving in Jersey at 9am the following day.

He spends much of his time with his sister, Eva (my grandmother) and her husband Henry Le Marquand, who, he writes, were living at Les Landes, although his diary has their address as Les Chateigners. He also mentions that he visits Henry at the prisoner of war camp.

Thanks to Ian Ronayne, I now know that most of the prisoners left the camp early 1917, travelling to the UK escorted by their RDC guards. A group remained behind, however, to work at the harbour. They were initially guarded by men drawn from the Militia under the command of Colonel Stocker. After the Militia disbanded, the camp's guards came from their replacements, the Royal Jersey Garrison Battalion.

Philip's notes simply record that he goes to town, spends some time in St Mary, and goes to St Ouen's Church on Sunday evening. On May 8th he left Jersey at 6:30am to return to Shoreham.

Back in camp, the training continued, Philip notes drills, bombing, live bombing, gas training, trench digging and first aid. This seemed to be more intensive and specific and on May 22nd Philip volunteered to be in the first draft for the 14th Royal Montreal Regiment and that day was spent packing and he left Shoreham at midnight that day.

Philip volunteered for the first draft of the 14th Royal Montreal Regiment on May 22nd and spent the day packing and he left Shoreham at midnight for Folkestone, leaving at 8pm for France. Their first camp was at Boulogne and he notes that it was very hot. The next day they leave for Etaples.

Etaples was another training camp which now has a degree of notoriety due to the mutiny which took place in September 1917. It certainly had a reputation for intensive training in gas warfare and bayonet drill, and long sessions of marching at the double over the sand dunes. The camp was also known as 'The Bull Ring' for its reputation for severe discipline in order to 'inculcate the offensive spirit'. Philip refers to going to the bullring for training on a number of days.

On the May 28th the rest of the Canadian troops arrived in the camp and the following day all the Gaspé 'boys' got together for a reunion and Philip reports that they had a 'great time'.

The training continued till June 10th, and then Philip's Battalion moved to the front, a journey that took three days. He does not mention how they travelled so it is likely that they marched. It is not entirely clear the route they followed or where they ended their journey as Philip does not give that detail. He records that he takes part in working parties repairing roads and filling shell holes starting at 7pm or later working till 2 or 3 in the morning. He notes that they are often shelled whilst doing this and that there is a lot of shrapnel.

Occasionally Philip notes that he meets friends from Gaspé. Although he does not use their full names, for example "saw Charlie and Syd le M had a great chat". I believe 'Syd le M' is Private Sydney Le Marquand who was from Newport Pointe, Gaspé. It is possible that Sydney survived the war.

In the middle of July Philip records that they are near Villers-au-Bois, so for the first time it is possible to identify that he is along the Western Front to the west of Lens. The fine weather changes and every day Philip notes thunder and lightning, and then, poignantly on Sunday 29th July is the following entry "no parades – write - my 23rd birthday – rain and mud mud mud".

It seems that the rain gets even worse and on the 2nd August he writes "everlasting rain and mud to knees", on the 3rd "still raining – loaf around all day – mud to knees – wash clothes" and then on the 4th "3rd anniversary of war – still raining – mud from head to foot".

It is clear that parcels from family and friends were a great relief. At this time he mentions that he has received a parcel from each of his three sisters in the course of a week. One was clearly packed with food as he writes "parcel from Eva – Ed and Archie also had parcels – great feed."

Then on the 15th August he writes "hit about 5am – both legs – Butler stuck by me all the while".

On the 15th August the Canadian forces launched an attack along the front in what we now know as the Battle of Hill 70. This was a successful offensive to capture the high ground to the north of Lens, which was considered tactically more important than the city itself.

Much later in the diary Philip records the actual events of that fateful morning :

“We are supporting 15th , barrage from 4:20 the shelling and machine gun fire is terrific. 5:00 a party of us go up to about 100 yards behind the front line with bombs. We have just reached there and all again moving when I get hit in both hips. Many are getting worse as our boys have just come up to a nest of his machine guns about 20 yards ahead. Bullets are thick as hailstones. After being hit I make a bit of noise and soon fall unconscious. When I come to Butler my friend has stopped with me and I have all gear off. I only ask for water and if both my legs are gone as that is the feeling I dropped into, thinking a shell (whiz b) had taken both off. I ask Butler to end my troubles but no he will not. I go under again and during that time Butler has found another of our boys and a stretcher from our old front line. It is a long way and a hard trip to the advance dressing station so they try to get their prisoners to help carry me but they all wounded. I wake and find myself on stretcher after a few drinks of water for which I am craving they start off over the top at great danger to themselves. I at last get to the dressing station and shortly leave, so Butler afterwards told me. They were shelling heavily, glad I was unconscious. I then go to field camp. Pretty bad but they decide to let me keep my leg.”

Philip was moved to the field hospital and on the 21st to the base hospital. There they operated on him, “stretch right leg – left leg getting on very well”. Even here the war is close by, and there is an air raid which drops six bombs. His diary entries become very sketchy at this point, but on October 8th he writes “consult surgeon inspected me – found strong enough for blighty”. On October 11th he travels by train for Le Havre and then on the hospital ship Panama, arriving in Oxford at 3pm three days later, and “lots of visitors”, but he does not name them.

Philip does not record his treatment. The next entry we have is April 10th 1918 : “I am sent to Canadian hospital at Orpington for discharge but I develop an attack of appendicitis. Get over that ok.” Then; “Again during first days of May I have very high temperature and on 12th it is 105 and I am scarcely able to move so they take me to theatre right away and give me quite a gash. On Sunday I have a very bad haemorrhage and still very weak. I’ll lose my verve alright and very like a baby for first week. Getting over that glad to say.”

On that positive note, the diary ends. Philip never left hospital and died of his wounds on 14th September 1918. He is buried in St Mary’s Churchyard, his name is on the Canadian Roll of Honour and the memorial at St Ouen. His sacrifice will always be remembered.

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