

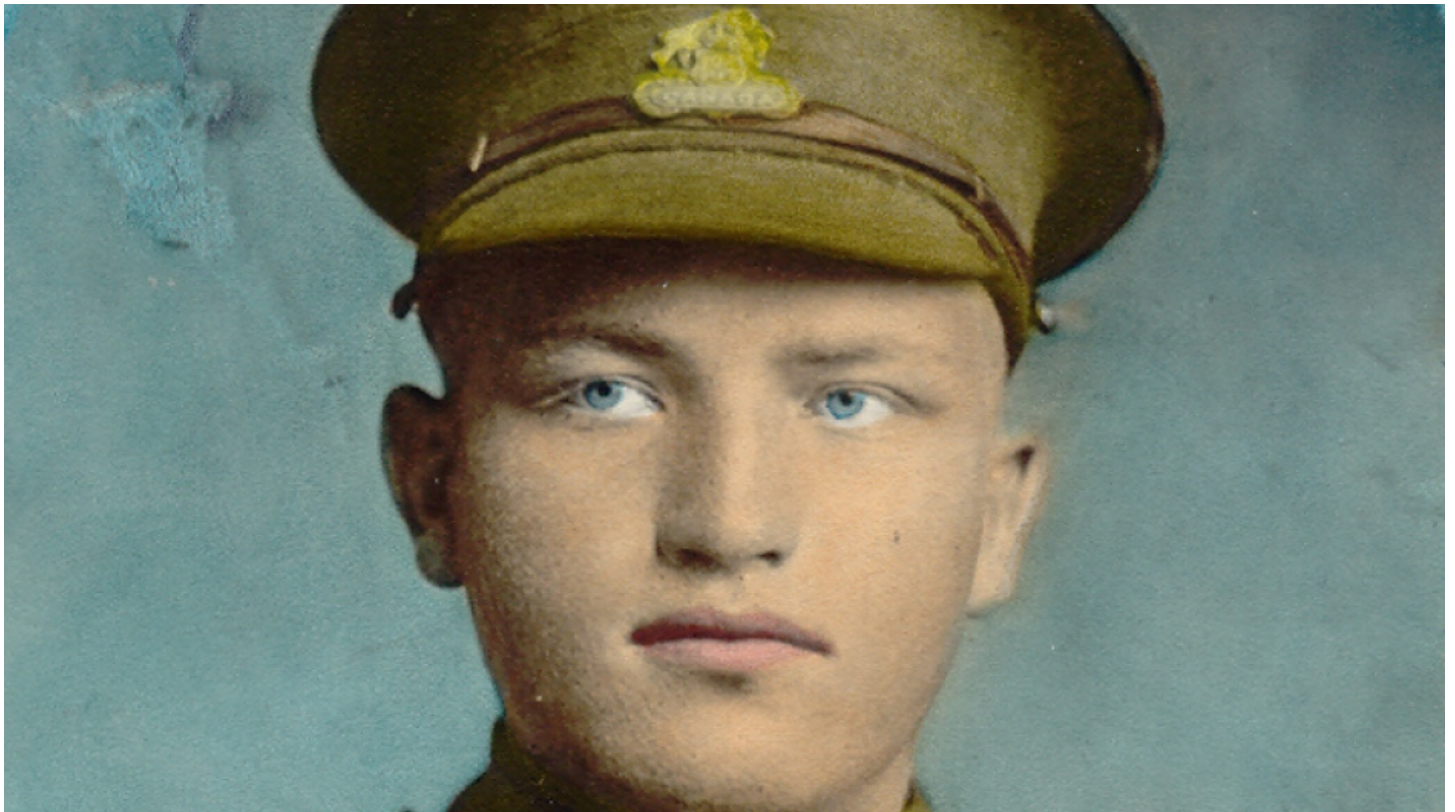


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## 'No job for a boy': WW I through eyes of a Canadian teen soldier

Dozens of letters from Sask. boy paint vivid portrait of First World War

By Amber Hildebrandt, CBC News | Posted: Nov 07, 2014 10:22 AM ET | Last Updated: Nov 10, 2014 3:30 PM ET



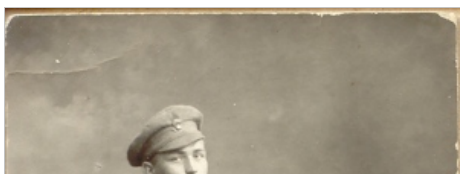
### Sandy trenches and the seaside

Pte. Roy Clarence Armstrong stands tall in the black-and-white photo, a solemn look on a smooth face still pudgy with baby fat. He stares into the camera, hands tucked neatly behind his back, one pocket flap open in cheeky disregard of the army's rules.

Beside him sits "sidekicker and friend Bill Cox," a man with hollowed cheeks and the hint of furrows on his forehead.

"Please don't judge that photo I sent too harshly," Roy implores in a letter to his mother, suddenly enveloped in teenage insecurities. "It was taken in a hurry."

It was one of the last pictures his family would ever see of the small-town Saskatchewan boy.





Roy Armstrong sent this picture to his family of himself and his "sidekick" and friend Bill Cox posing for a picture in France. (Family photo)



Camp Hughes grew to become the second largest community in Manitoba after Winnipeg. (Legion House Museum)



Camp Hughes has more than 10 kilometres of trenches for training. (Legion House Museum)

roy.

Roy, the son of a Saltcoats town blacksmith, enlisted to fight in the First World War just after turning 17, despite protests from his family. Excited at the prospect of heading off to war, he knew little of the fate that awaited him.

The picture is dated August 1917, two months before he was to die in the thick mud of the battlefields of Passchendaele, but more than a year – a lifetime in a teen's world – into what began as a grand adventure in a foreign land.

Roy was one of about 20,000 underage Canadians who lied about their age to try to fight in the First World War and encountered recruiting officials willing to turn a blind eye to a youthful visage. Instead, recruiters focused on weeding teens out of the ranks of enlistees using height and weight as indicators of age.

Nobody challenged Roy about his age on the unusually warm winter day of March 20, 1916, when the fair-haired, grey-eyed teen walked into a Winnipeg recruitment office to sign up for a war a continent away that was raging into its 20th month.

The medical officer dutifully describes the boy on his enlistment papers: A single Methodist man who works as a clerk, stands 5-foot 8-and-a-half-inches tall, and has a chest with a 38-inch girth.

Beside the "Apparent Age" heading, he's listed as 18. No proof was required. Since he was taller than the average Canadian back then, officials were unlikely to doubt the stated age.

A month later, he's approved. The teen becomes Regimental No. 874936, a number he scrawls across the top of many of his letters.

By early June, Roy settles into life at Camp Hughes, a military training site carved out of the rolling fields of southwestern Manitoba near the town of Carberry. It was one of Canada's premier military training facilities, with more than 10 kilometres of training trenches.

To Roy it is simply a place of "beastly hard work."

At first, he describes it all in wonderment – the 160 tents crammed with eight or more men each, and a hillside church service that draws 15,000 men.

"Some church, eh!," the boy exclaims in one of his [letters home](#).

The camp grew that year to become the second largest community in Manitoba after Winnipeg.

His only complaint about his stark surroundings is the omnipresent sand seeping into the beds of the recruits, blowing into their eyes and filling their food.

"The average man," he jokes, "[eats] 1 pound of sand a day."

Like the thousands of other soldiers-in-training, he spends many of his days digging trenches in the rural Prairie landscape and then training in them. As many as 1,000 men fit in the zigzagging trenches at a single time.

Each unit spends at least one 24-hour period learning the elaborate trench warfare system. Soldiers use the front-line trench to enter no-man's land to attack the enemy, while others stand in a support trench further back to provide cover. Communication trenches located along the sides help move soldiers around the battlefield.

Roy describes the mock battles in great detail in letters to his family.

There's a certain bravado in his letters. He brags about being among the 250 "best men" from his battalion sent into a mock battle. But when Roy's group runs three miles in single file – each man six feet apart – and reaches mock enemy lines, they die.

"Of course, we used blank cartridges," he [assures his mother](#).

He's glad, though, that other platoons break through. It's a lesson in the sacrifices of war, but fortunately not a deadly one.

In September, his departure to Europe imminent, Roy is vaccinated. He signs over half his \$1.10 daily pay to his family and writes a will bequeathing his possessions to his mother.

He leaves Camp Hughes on a train on Oct. 15, 1916, seeing his sister Gladys briefly as his 184th Battalion passes through Winnipeg.

Several days later, the battalion arrives in Nova Scotia. There, the soldiers land on a "little deserted village on Cape Breton Island" called Broughton to live in "hovels" that miners once occupied before the coal company went broke.

Despite sleeping on homemade straw mattresses, the prairie boy marvels at his new surroundings, especially the seaside about five miles away.

"I had my first duck in salt water," he [tells his sister Gladys](#). "I also saw several seals swimming around about a hundred yards from shore."

Even as he prepares for war, he tells his parents to pass along a message to a friend, urging him to "put the army craze out of his head."

"It's no job for a boy and I shouldn't be here," he [admits in a letter](#), a rare moment of reflection.

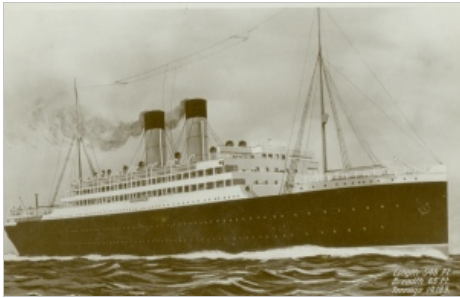
Still, he continues the charade of a boy in a man's job.





## Rollerskating and crimes of boredom

After a week on sparsely populated Cape Breton Island, Roy's 184th Battalion departs Oct. 31, 1916, on HMT Empress of Britain.



The 170-metre Empress of Britain carried soldiers from Canada to England during the war. (Canadian War Museum/George Metcalf Collection)

The ocean liner docks in the west-coast city of Liverpool after more than 10 days at sea. Roy suffers from seasickness almost the entire way, and one rough day at sea leaves a few soldiers hurt.

Roy's battalion then travels about 400 kilometres to the east coast to settle down in Shorncliffe Army Camp in Kent. The camp serves as a key training ground for the Canadians and the Brits, and often is a soldiers' gateway to the Western Front.

The 17-year-old has little time to settle in. Within a week, the lie about his age catches up with him.

"Well, Mother, you will be pleased to hear at I can't go to France until I am 19 years old and as I am under 18, they may send me back to Canada," he [writes on Nov. 24, 1916](#).

Roy doesn't say whether they've indeed discovered his true age. It could be simply that he's believed to be 18 and those under 19 were forbidden to fight in the frontlines.

He says only that all those under 18 have been placed with a group of wounded soldiers and kids under 16 years of age. He cautions his mother: "You must not build up hopes on this."

## **"I must do my duty and protect our home as Wilf can't go," writes Roy.**

Several of the boys have been "claimed by their people and gone back to Canada," he [writes](#), suggesting his mother could do the same.

Around this time, he's sent to a "forsaken camp" called Shoreham Camp, an isolated spot about 100 kilometres away.

Roy is re-assigned to the 34th Battalion, which had been rejigged in September to become an informal "Boys' Battalion," where boys were readied for war in preparation for when they turned of age. The following year, it would be formally named the Young Soldiers Battalion and quickly reach its 1,000-soldier capacity.

The removal of teens and others from battalions reverberates through Shoreham Camp. Another soldier, Amos William Mayse, describes losing a quarter of his battalion because the soldiers are deemed medically unfit, overage or underage.



On home soil, Roy's mother, Minnie Armstrong, desperately contacts the military asking for her son's return, but is rebuffed.

A controversy over youth in battle is simmering in Canada, with recruiting officials all too



Roy (lower left) stands tall with members of the 184th Battalion during training at Camp Hughes in Manitoba. (Family photo)



Roy grew up in Saltcoats, Sask., in the early 1900s. (Town of Saltcoats)



A glimpse of the rations soldiers received in the First World War. (Library and Archives Canada)

willing to turn a blind eye and mothers begging for change.

“They feel within them the first stirring of manhood, and all around them is the tense excitement of a nation at war. They cannot know what they are going out to meet,” Alison Craig writes in a scathing opinion piece in the Winnipeg Free Press in April 1916. “Yet we allow them to be taken advantage of.”

For Roy, it wasn’t just excitement, but also a sense of responsibility because his brother had a physical ailment that prevented him from joining.

“I must do my duty and protect our home as Wilf can’t go,” he writes to his sister Bea. “He can help Dad out financially and that is more than I can do, as I am sorry to say I am inclined to be a spendthrift.”

Stuck in the Boys’ Battalion, Roy has time on his hands. He learns to roller skate and travels to Northampton and London, where he revels in getting noticed by the ladies.

“The Janes gave me so much attention that [I] began to think I was good looking,” he writes on Dec. 12 to Gladys. “I bet you’re laughing. I got so stuck up that I would only talk to the good looking ones.”

Still, he feels momentary pangs of homesickness at Christmas.

“Take it from me, a lot of fellows do not appreciate their homes half enough in Saltcoats,” he writes in a letter dated Dec. 27 to his mother back in his home town. “I often wish I was in dear old Canada.”

After the holiday season, he’s broke and distraught.

“I haven’t been able to raise even the price of a stamp,” he writes, apologizing for the lack of letters.

He begs his parents for \$20, only to send a letter soon after retracting it, worried he’s angered them with his request. He promises his parents that he’s not drinking – a vow he made before the war.

It could just be costly food eating up his pay cheques. For many at Shoreham, this is the first time they’ve felt real hunger. Many also end up purchasing pricey treats to supplement their boring rations.

Roy complains of many lonesome hours, the “awful sloppy weather,” and working as a “scrub woman in our canteen” until his fingers hurt too much to push a pen.

“I am doing my country more harm than good by staying here,” he muses.

In a sulky letter in January, he confesses to his parents that he was caught doing “one of the worst crimes over here”: leaving camp without permission.

Roy and a friend, frustrated by their inability to get a pass to leave the camp, decided to take off to a nearby town for the evening but missed the last train back to the base. An officer arrested them as they walked out of a hotel. Each was fined \$4 and confined for two days in camp.

“I am so disgusted with this business I don’t feel like writing or doing anything, but I suppose I have no one to blame but myself,” he writes on Jan. 12.

**“I am doing my country more harm than good by staying**

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here,” writes Roy.

But it's about to get worse.

Later that month, he ends up in a month-long quarantine after a fellow soldier is diagnosed with mumps – right before an expected transfer to work in London.

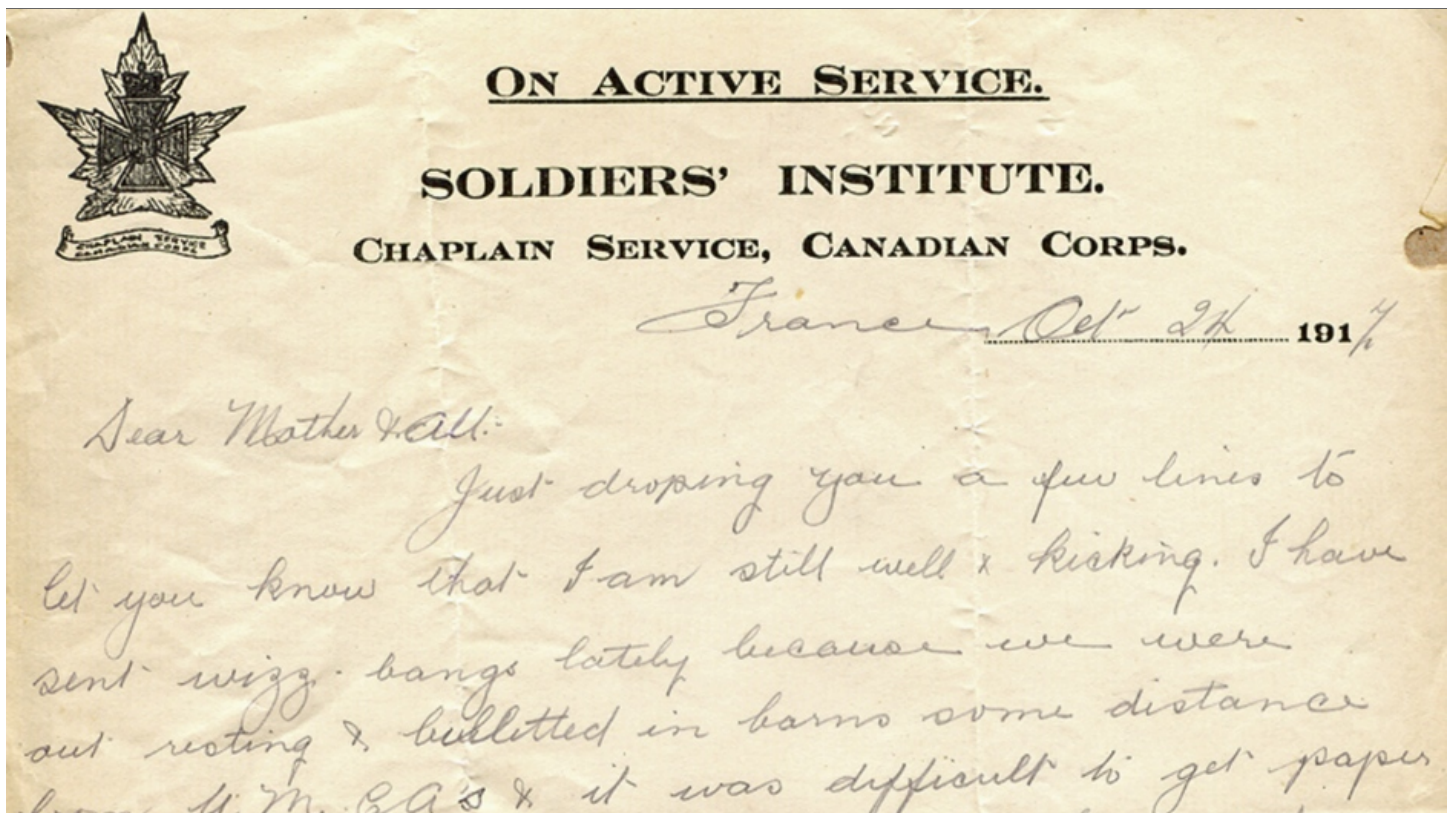
“There is no more news, as I am shut up in a hut with a guard at the door,” he laments.

Meanwhile, back home the pressure is growing for Canada to take action on the issue of teenage soldiers.

In January 1917, the government cracks down on underage soldiers. It orders boys under 16 and 1/2 to be returned to Canada, unless they're drummers or buglers. Those who are older remain in England, training until they turn 19 and can join the troops on the front lines.

The government also admits to favouring 19-year-old soldiers; they have fewer family responsibilities than older men and the military felt they made better soldiers.

But soon Roy finds out that the growing focus on age back home means little in the trenches, where the military is desperate for fresh, able-bodied men.



## Whizzbangs and trench-tool tables

In early March of 1917, a year after signing up for his big adventure, Roy is still confined to the Boys' Battalion in Britain and is wholeheartedly aching for home.

He writes an [unusually wistful letter to his mother](#) about dreaming of “a big sheet of line paper on which is written discharge, then home with you, Dad and all the rest sitting around the supper table.



Soldiers show off their bayonets at Shorncliffe, a key training camp for Canadians before heading to the Western Front. (Library and Archives Canada)

“On the table [is] some homemade bread, butter, fried potatoes, sausage meat, layer cake, bananas and cream,” he writes. “You will think me an awful eater when I get home.”

Soon after, in late March, Roy’s spirits rise when he’s moved to Shorncliffe, Canada’s key training camp. Roy gets excited when he hears in early April – just two months after turning 18 – that the army needs 200,000 more men this spring.

“There is a chance for me yet,” he exclaims in a letter to his parents.

The Battle of Vimy Ridge happens shortly after. In the fierce fight, nearly 3,600 Canadians die and 7,000 more are injured as soldiers capture the heavily fortified ridge in northern France.

A day after they emerge victorious on April 12, 1917, Roy gets the call to duty.

“Mother, it has come at last,” [he writes](#). “I was warned yesterday that I am on a draft for France. It sure was a surprise to me, as I haven’t done any drill since I came over.”

The teen is assigned to the 78th Battalion, which saw its numbers decimated at Vimy Ridge. More than 60 per cent of its 800 men were killed or injured in the historic battle that saw all four of the Canadian military divisions fight together for the first time.

Roy soon sets off to meet his new battalion in the field. He crosses the English Channel by boat, then travels to meet up with his battalion in northern France.

**“It certainly will be glory when I return. Mother, I know you will find me a much better boy than you found me before I left.”**

By May, Roy is settled into a new camp near Souchez in the far north of France and getting a taste of the hardships of a soldier’s life.

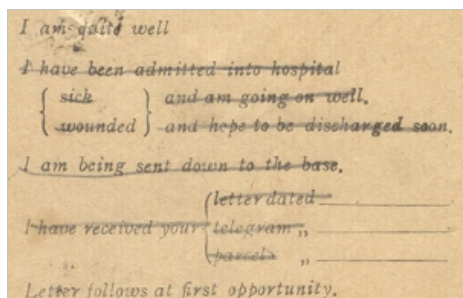
With the Boys’ Battalion, Roy had gotten plump from the better and larger food portions fed to the still-growing teens. Mere weeks into his deployment, though, he notes that the training is “relieving me of my over share of flesh.”

He begs his mother to send more food. “Send a few eats, as I have a big gap and can’t get it filled,” he writes.

At one point he’s living in a dugout, where four dirty planks are fashioned into a bed and his entrenching tool – a small spade – serves as a desk for writing letters. Rats “nibble at my belongings while I’m asleep and even have the nerve to lay on my face,” he writes to his sister.

It takes only a little luxury to make his day. “Had a bath today and it sure was jake,” he writes on May 20, 1917.

The military aimed for soldiers to bathe every 10 days, but it didn’t always work out that



One of the whizzbangs sent by Roy.

way. Lice and diseases often thrived as a result.

"They gave us a change of underclothes and it sure is some [relief] to get rid of my numerous friends," he writes. "They tickle a fellow so much with their fond caresses. It is rather unpleasant."

Letters from Roy then become a rarity. He defaults to whizzbangs – specially designed war postcards named after the British term for German supersonic shells because they were quick notes. The cards list several statements for soldiers, such as whether or not they are well and when they last received mail.

In each whizzbang, Roy simply crosses out the statements that don't apply, leaving "I am quite well" untouched to tell his family his status. Writing anything else on the postcard is forbidden, and brings the threat that censors may destroy it.

But he does find opportunities for a few longer letters. In one, he writes that France is beautiful in the spots not shelled by war.

"We don't have a very pleasant time of it, but we are here for a good cause ... and are winning out," he writes on May 30, 1917. "It certainly will be glory when I return. Mother, I know you will find me a much better boy than you found me before I left."

Roy reveals few details of his location over the summer of 1917. The 78th battalion is involved in a number of actions, mostly in supporting roles. One of them is the Battle of Hill 70, a campaign in late August in France's Nord-Pas-de-Calais region that was intended to draw German troops away from Brits fighting near Passchendaele and kill as many Germans as possible.

In October, Roy's battalion travels north to the Passchendaele area, arriving by train in the Belgian city of Ypres.

For months, British, Australian and New Zealand troops had unsuccessfully fought to take Passchendaele Ridge in Flanders from the Germans. In October, Canada is ordered to take over.

Arthur Currie, commander of the 100,000-strong Canadian Corps, objected to the battle, saying it would cost too many lives, but he is given no choice.

Roy and his battalion are greeted by a bombed-out town as they exit the Ypres train station. What was once farmland drained by irrigation systems is now mud as far as the eye can see. Duckboards – wooden platforms – are laid out to allow passage through a battlefield littered with rotting corpses. A wrong step leads soldiers into quicksand-like muck, impossible for some to escape.

Rain adds to the misery. Even in the days leading up to the battle, Roy writes about the "beastly sloppy" weather.

"It looks like it doesn't intend to stop raining until next spring," he tells his mother on Oct. 24.

He apologizes for the lack of letters. He can't find any paper.

A couple of days later he writes his brother, assuring him, "Fritz hasn't got my number yet."

That same day, he also writes a short letter to his mother. It's largely mundane, thanking her for a parcel of cakes and complaining about wet weather.



The muddy fields of Passchendaele proved challenging for soldiers. (Library and Archives Canada)







Soldiers lay duckboards down. As slip off the wood walkways could leave a soldier mired in mud. (Library and Archives Canada)

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At the end, he asks his mother about boots she'd promised to send. "I hope you sent size eight or nines as my feet have enlarged of late," writes Roy.

The 18-year-old is either still growing or his feet are swelling in the wet battlefields.

As always, he signs off, "Your Loving Son, Roy."

It would be the last letter his family ever received from him.

Roy's battalion reaches the front at 1:20 a.m. on Oct. 29, part of a brigade sent in to relieve the front line soldiers as the Canadians begin the second part of a multi-pronged attack.

After a day of reconnaissance, troops spend hours digging a "splendid trench," Lt. Col. Jas Kirkcaldy writes in the 78th Battalion war diaries.

A commanding officer visits the soldiers at 1 a.m. on Oct. 30 in the trenches and reports they are "calm and confident."

As the sun rises over the muddy fields, it's a clear but cold and windy morning when the troops begin advancing at 5:49 a.m., "like men on parade," writes the lieutenant colonel.

"The spirit and coolness of the men was wonderful as they moved forward," he adds.

Eight minutes pass before German soldiers begin firing, hitting close to a couple of captured German "pill boxes" – small, low concrete structures often hidden inside buildings or covered in earthen camouflage to allow troops to survive massive bombardments.

Roy is killed in the first few minutes of the fight. He'd slogged only a few yards through the muddy battlefield when shrapnel hit him in the back, according to the army's death registers. He died instantly, and his body was never recovered.

It may have been enemy shelling that killed the young soldier, but it could also have been friendly fire, the result of malfunctioning artillery falling short of its intended target.

Roy was one of 70 soldiers from the 78th Battalion killed that day. More than 280 were wounded.

He died the same day as his friend Bill Cox, whom he'd affectionately called his "sidekick" in letters to his family. The 29-year-old private was one of six men who went missing that day and was later presumed dead.

As for Roy Armstrong, war records list him as 19. A newspaper obituary states the truth: "Pte. Armstrong was only 18 years of age."





## Memorials and fading memories

A decade after Roy Armstrong's death, his name was engraved on the stone walls of Menin Gate in West Flanders, Belgium. It appears alongside those of 55,000 other missing soldiers, including 6,940 Canadians.

His name was also carved into a granite obelisk in his hometown of Saltcoats, Sask., commemorating 79 townsmen who died in the war.



A cenotaph in Roy's hometown of Saltcoats, Sask., commemorates his sacrifice as well as 78 other townsmen. (Family photo)

His battalion's contribution to the war is unforgettable. The 78th Battalion helped Canadian troops achieve their ultimate goal – capturing the village of Passchendaele.

But nearly 100 years after Roy's death, there's no longer anyone alive who ever met the teen. Despite the name engravings and historical accounts, the memory of Roy fades – even in his own family.

More than 60 letters tucked away by his mother provide the only glimpse of the boy he was and the man he became. The letters have been trickling down through different hands in the family through the generations.

Gaylen Armstrong, Roy's nephew, came across a folder stuffed with more than 60 of the letters while helping his sister move. "When I started to thumb through it and saw all these letters, you start to live the situation in a very small way."

Gaylen says he was impressed by his uncle, since he could have given his family a dimmer picture of war, but didn't.

"I got the impression reading those letters that he was being very considerate and didn't say what it was really like," Gaylen said. "I thought for an 18-year-old, a 17-year-old, that was pretty bloody mature."

A few of Roy's letters are also in the hands of another family member, a descendant of a sister Roy never knew. Grace was born several years after Roy's death, becoming the sixth child in the large family.

"When the family got together, [Roy] was the one that had died in war and that was it," said Grace's son, Bill Anderson, who lives in Surrey, B.C. "He gave his life and he'd basically become part of history, a forgotten part of history."

Several years ago, Gaylen Armstrong sent the folder of Roy's letters to the Canadian Letters and Images Project in hopes that others might enjoy reading copies of the worn, brittle pages.



Grace was the sister Roy would never know. She was born after Roy died in the war. (Family photo)

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Run by Vancouver Island University historian Stephen Davies, the program digitizes letters from soldiers, publishes them online and then returns the letters to the families in neat organized binders.

“These [letters] literally come out of closets and attics. They’re not seen anywhere else,” said Davies. “Families do want to hold onto their valued family heirlooms, but they’re also proud of their ancestors and want to share their stories.”

“It’s kind of a win-win situation for us,” added Davies. “We get to borrow them, they get to know people care.”

Though Roy’s own family pays passing attention to the letters, his nephew Gaylen wants historians, researchers and the general public to have access to them to help illuminate even a little corner of life on the World War I battlefield.

“We have a tendency to take for granted what wars are like and the suffering,” said Armstrong.

He also wants the public to appreciate what drove Canadian teenagers to fight in Europe.

Going to war not only promised big adventure, but guaranteed food and shelter for the most destitute. It also provided desperately needed income for families back home.

“Life for everybody on a farm in rural Saskatchewan was not the most exciting time,” said Gaylen. “People didn’t have two pennies to rub together.”

Daniel Black, who co-authored *Old Enough to Fight*, a book about teenage soldiers, says the issue wasn’t generally considered a political hot potato at the time. Mostly, the outcry came from mothers.

For a time the military fulfilled some parents’ requests to remove underage sons from the army. The practice stopped after a court ruled in 1915 that a pact existed between the army and an individual soldier regardless of age.

Though the issue of underage soldiers came up in the House of Commons in 1916, the matter doesn’t appear to have been pursued in the following years, says Black.

So boys continued to sign up. Two as young as 10 enlisted but never made it to the Western Front, according to historians. Many of the approximately 20,000 teens who lied about their ages were between 14 and 17.

“They kind of figured they were invincible,” said Black. “They were young and healthy and invincible. Why not go over and do your bit and come back and maybe be a bigger person for it?”

Some teens did win military medals for their brave actions. Others were wounded or cracked up under the stress of battle, carrying physical and mental scars for the rest of their lives. Many never made it home - historians estimate more than 2,200 were killed.



Minnie Armstrong sits in the spot where she learned of Roy's death in 1918. (Family photo)

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A picture of happier times. Roy Armstrong (front) poses with his brother Wilf, sister Bea and a friend, before heading to war. (Family photo)

It's unclear when North American attitudes toward the use of underage soldiers changed. When the Second World War began in 1939, boys still appeared in the ranks of the army, navy and air force, says Black. Only in recent years has global sentiment cemented against sending child soldiers into battle, with many countries agreeing to not use them.

Some have suggested that the First World War was a different era when boys like Roy were considered men even before turning 18. Still, as mature as Roy seems in his letters, signs of his youth clearly seep through.

His nephew, Gaylen, said he doesn't blame the government for accepting teens like Roy, but he feels for the boy who was so quickly forced to become a man.

And like many of those he fought alongside, Gaylen said it's clear Roy became disillusioned with a war that was nothing like the grand patriotic adventure hinted at in the recruiting pitches.

"When he got over there and saw what it was like, he came out loud and clear to one of his brothers that, holy, don't come over here and get involved in this war. It's a mess."

The stark reality is that soldiering, as Roy discovered, is "no job for a boy."

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## Credits

<b>Writer</b>	Amber Hildebrandt
<b>Editor</b>	Ian Johnson
<b>Developer</b>	Michael Pereira
<b>Video producer</b>	Janet Thomson
<b>Video editor</b>	Manmeet Ahluwalia

Roy Armstrong's story was pieced together from letters, military records, historical archives and family accounts. CBC would like to thank [Canadian War Museum](#) historian Nicholas Clarke, Daniel Black (author of *Old Enough* to



Fight), the [Town of Saltcoats](#) and the [Canadian Letters and Images Project](#) for their help.

To read Roy's letters, visit [this page](#) on the Canadian Letters and Images Project website.

































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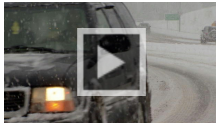
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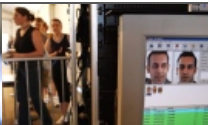

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