

# *Lorne Armstrong*

## **A Goshen Line Military Hero 1916-1919**

By Gwen Patterson



*Lorne Armstrong*

**1892-1963**



Armstrong farm in the 1940's

Lorne Armstrong was the youngest child of George and Jane (Weston) Armstrong. He grew up and lived his life on the Armstrong homestead farm, Lot 13, Con 11, "The Goshen Line", Stanley Township, Huron County, Ontario.

**Lorne Armstrong** had been following the newspaper stories about the war in Europe and about the Canadian participation on the Western Front since 1915. The dawning awareness that whole battalions had been wiped out in the Somme when the enemy introduced chlorine gas warfare, combined with the sinking of the torpedoed Lusitania off the coast of Ireland; killing 1200 people including women and children, alongside accounts of further losses in the fighting in the Ypres salient, transformed the war from a great adventure to a great crusade. Soldiers from Canada were needed and a Battalion from Huron County was being mobilized. Lorne decided to be a part of it. And so, on May 9, 1916, Lorne, age 23, enlisted with the **161<sup>st</sup> Huron Battalion** in London. His Regimental Number: **654780**.

He would return home, and with his father, sign appropriate papers putting his affairs in order, and return to Basic Training Camp 'Carling Heights' on Dundas Street W., London, ON. He was assigned to 'C' Company and training began in earnest and continued over the following months in London, then in Camp Borden where they trained for trench warfare. His pay would be \$15.00 a month.



Lorne in his 161<sup>st</sup> Huron Battalion photo

Near the end of Oct. the 161<sup>st</sup> Battalion, comprised of 28 Officers, and 749 NCOs and Enlisted men boarded the train in Toronto and were transported to Halifax, N.S. On Oct 30<sup>th</sup> the unit boarded the **S.S. Lapland**, a large passenger ship which had been converted to a troop-ship outfitted with barrack style bunks. They sailed out on Nov. 1, for England. Lorne's pay would now include an additional ten cents a day field allowance!

And so it was, sixty four years after Rainey and Rosey Armstrong, with their five sons and baby daughter, boarded a sailing vessel, and sailed west across the Atlantic, enduring six weeks of misery and the loss of their baby girl, to start a new life in Canada; that their grandson Lorne found himself on a troop ship steaming back eastward in an eleven day crossing of the Atlantic to join, with the soldiers from the nation that his grandparents left, in the fighting of one of the world's worst conflicts!

In all probability, Lorne's trip was not every comfortable. This troop ship was large and capable of carrying well over 2500 men. Most of the men would be sea sick. The food, if one could keep it down, was not great, and sleep, if possible, would be done in shifts on the cots. There would be little for the men to do except play cards. They shared the ship with a cargo of ammunition, guns, artillery, supplies and horses. They arrived in England on Nov.11, 1916, docking at Liverpool. From there they would make their way by a series of trains and marches to Dibatgate Camp, Shorncliffe. On Nov 30<sup>th</sup>, about two hundred of them (Lorne included) were TOS (taken on strength) to the 58<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. The remainder would be sent to various units of the Canadian Corp.

The 58<sup>th</sup> had been in France since Feb.20, 1916. It was part of the 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division. It had participated in the horrific trench warfare of the Battle for Mount Sorrel and Sanctuary Wood in the Ypres Salient in the spring and summer of 1916. By September 1916, the 58<sup>th</sup> was in action on the Somme Front where it had

suffered heavy losses. In less than a year, the 58<sup>th</sup> had suffered more casualties (576 men) than the number of men it had originally brought to France!

By mid November, the 58<sup>th</sup>, along with most of the Canadian Corp. withdrew from the Somme front and began preparations for the major assault planned for Vimy Ridge in April 1917. Thus, on December 4, 1916, Lorne, with the 161st Huron Battalion, arrived as reinforcements and were TOS into the 58<sup>th</sup> Battalion in France at Maison Blanche, a ruin from the fighting of 1915 on the road from Arras to Souchez.

It is highly probable that the very first offensive action that Lorne participated in was with the 58<sup>th</sup> relief of the 43<sup>rd</sup> on Dec 6<sup>th</sup> when the Battalion returned to the front line trenches partway up **Vimy Ridge**, almost due east of Neuville-St.Vaast. Its orders were to carry out a raid on Dec 10<sup>th</sup>, on a section of the enemy front line known as **Balloon Trench**.

It is not my intention here to give a complete description of all the battles, raids, offensives etc. that constitutes the participation of the 58<sup>th</sup> in the rest of the War. Much has been written and can be accessed for further reading. Please see my bibliography at the end of the article. Rather, I will list some of those very well known battles in which Lorne surely participated. I acknowledge that the mere listing of these battles cannot in any way begin to describe or express the horrors and trauma that Lorne and his fellow soldiers experienced: The death, the mud, the cold, the lice, the noise, the gas, the loss, the cries, the terror, the smell, and disease, and the MUD!

And so, some of the 'big-name' Theatres of War that Lorne endured: **Vimy Ridge' April 1917**, defined as the 'coming of age' of the Canadian's; **Hill 70 and Lens, August 1917**, known as the 'mustard gas war'; **Passchendaele, (The Third Battle of Ypres) Oct. 1917**, the horrific debacle in mud, called by Churchill as "a forlorn expenditure of valour and life without equal in futility" where, in 12 days, the Canadians Corp suffered 16,000 casualties for a contemptible gain of 4 1/2 miles. The 58<sup>th</sup> Battalion lost over 300 of their men for a capture of half a farm field! **Lens, Dec 1917; Amiens, Aug 1918; and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battle of Cambrai & Canal du Nord, Sept. and Oct. 1918**. There were many lesser-known, but no less fierce battles throughout this period in which Lorne would have fought, and during this time he experienced two bouts of severe impetigo infections which sent him on Dec. 30, 1917 to the #9 Canadian Field Ambulance for a week, and on Jan. 2, 1918 to the #6 CFA for a two week recovery period.

Lorne's courage, actions and experience were not going un-noticed. On Feb. 2, 1918, he was promoted to **Lance Corporal** and he received a monthly raise of pay to \$34.50. On Feb. 17, 1918 his position was promoted to that of **Corporal**, with an increase to \$36.00. His leadership abilities and experience, of course combined with casualties of officers about him, saw him promoted to the rank of **L. Sergeant** on Mar. 25, 1918 with pay of \$40.30 per month. Lorne's leadership would come to fruition in August during the Battle of Amiens.

**The Battle of Amiens, August 8-11, 1918**, was a defining moment for Lorne. It was here, during the attack, Aug. 8<sup>th</sup> on the village of **Demuin**, that Lorne earned his

**Distinguished Conduct Medal!** (See notes at end of article). In that same battle, another soldier from the 161st, Harry Miner, though mortally wounded, earned the Victoria Cross. The next day, on Aug 9<sup>th</sup>, Lorne was promoted to **Sergeant**, with a pay-raise to \$45.00 per month! That's \$1.50 a DAY! NOT per hour, not per shift, but PER 24 HOURS! What makes men endure being shot at, bombed, gassed, standing in water-filled trenches for days, slogging through knee deep mud, marching, sleeping outside, cold, wet, and terror filled days and nights for \$1.50 a day! On Remembrance Day, when we hear about sacrifice, let's think about that!

Fifty-one days after earning the **DCM** (Lorne would also earn the **Military Medal**) Lorne's participation in the war would come to a terrible end! On Sept. 29, 1918, during the **Battle of Canal du Nord and Cambrai**, Lorne was wounded in the back left shoulder from either a gunshot or shrapnel in the fighting near St. Olle. This battle which raged from Sept 27<sup>th</sup> to Oct 1<sup>st</sup> endured severe casualties for the 58<sup>th</sup>. From a Battalion that normally comprised about 50 Officers plus about 300 regular soldiers, 333 casualties were recorded! The 58<sup>th</sup> was almost wiped out! The Battle continued until Oct 11<sup>th</sup> and it would comprise one of the closing battles in the war, for on that same day, Sept. 29<sup>th</sup>, Ludendorff and Hindenburg met with the Kaiser and the Foreign Secretary, who had come to German Headquarters and insisted on an immediate request for an armistice. The war would end on **Nov. 11, 1918**.

Lorne's ordeal would not be over. Although he must have rejoiced to know that hostilities had ended and he had survived, he would miss out on all the wonderful celebrations that followed the Armistice! On **Oct. 1, 1918** he was taken to a Field Hospital. From there, he was admitted on Oct. 8<sup>th</sup> to 2nd Canadian General Hospital at La Treport, France. By **Oct. 15<sup>th</sup>** he was listed as "seriously ill". Conflicting paperwork occurs here. One report says he was reprimanded for being AWL on Oct. 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> and forfeited three days pay! Another show he was admitted on Oct 17th to 2<sup>nd</sup> General Hospital in Havre, France. Removed from the 'seriously ill' list and sent back to England "invalided and posted" to 2dn CORD, Whitby, where he was admitted on **Oct 19<sup>th</sup>** to 2dn Southern General (South Mains) Hospital in Bristol, England. There he remained for almost three months. Eventually the reports began to read "healing well".

On **Jan. 16, 1919**, Lorne was sent to the Canadian General Hospital in Basingstoke where he continued to be treated for "frustration of movement of left scapula (shoulder blade), 75 degrees of normal. Left elbow, 45 degrees of normal. Discharging from lower back. Fracture of 8<sup>th</sup> rib and left scapula, some retraction of L base of L.lung." He would remain there until May 9, 1919.

On **May 10, 1919**, Lorne was admitted to No. 5 Canadian General Hospital, Kirkdale. Here his wound was declared 'healed', and he was "invalided to leave."

On **June 10, 1919** he shipped out of Liverpool aboard the **H.S.Essequibo**, arriving in Portland, Maine on June 21, 1919. From there he was sent (probably by train) to London, Ontario, Canada. He was admitted to WOMH in London, ON. **June 23,1919**. Here he remained, receiving treatment and having x-rays. On July 29, 1919 an "operation was done to remove callous from the 8<sup>th</sup> rib behind." By Nov. reports read "in hospital with recurrent attacks of fever, probably the result of a foreign body in the lung at the left

base which ultimately resulted in an abscess. The abscess opened spontaneously on Nov. 5<sup>th</sup>. 1919 and discharged a considerable quantity of foul bloody pus. This drained in 10 days, wound now closed. The arm has remained the same since the wound occurred.”

By December the Medical Officer was “of the opinion that the patient will do well at home on the farm.” With a shaky hand, Lorne signed his ‘Statement of the Invalid’ paper agreeing with his disabilities, and on **Dec.4, 1919** he was discharged as “Medically unfit.” It was approved the next day. Lorne went home to the farm with \$420.00 dollars and memories and pain that he would endure for the rest of his life.

- Sources:**
1. Attestation papers from Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.
  2. History of the Canadian Expeditionary Force by G.L.W. Nicholson (PDF format)
  3. The Great War. Canadian Expeditionary Force. 1914-1919 by G.W.L. Nicholson.
  4. Second to None. The Fighting 58<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the CEF. By Kevin R. Shackleton
  5. A Long Long Way. By Sabastian Barry
  6. Legion Magazine. Articles by Arthur Bishop and Terry Copp: various issues.
  7. The War Diary for the 58<sup>th</sup> Battalion (PDF format)
  8. Lest We Forget. 161<sup>st</sup> Battalion of Huron. 1916-1996. Booklet.
  9. Huron Overseas. A. (Sandy) McDonald. Unpublished manuscript.

Researched and written by Grandniece Gwen (Storey) Patterson

## Medals Awarded to Lorne Wilson Armstrong

*War Office,*

*3rd September, 1919.*

With reference to the announcement of the undermentioned awards which appeared in the London Gazette of the 1st January, 1919, the following are the acts of gallantry for which the awards were made:—

### **DISTINGUISHED CONDUCT MEDAL.**

**654780 Sjt. L. W. Armstrong, 58th Bn.,  
Can. Infy.**

**For gallantry and devotion to duty during the attack on the village of Demuin on 8th August, 1918. He was one of a party that worked round a fortified house and bombed the enemy out, during the fighting in Demuin. His daring and skilled bombing materially assisted in the clearing of this position. He afterwards led his platoon through to the final objective, at all times showing coolness and good leadership.**

**Source:** 31537 Second Supplement to The London Gazette of Tuesday, the 2 of September, 1919; Page 84; # 11174 supplement of the London Gazette for 3 September, 1919

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His Majesty the KING has been graciously pleased to approve of the award of the **Military Medal for bravery in the Field** to the undermentioned Warrant Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers and Men: —

**654780 Sjt. Armstrong, L. W., 58th Bn., 2nd  
C. Ontario R.**

**Source:** 31430 Third Supplement to The London Gazette of Tuesday, 1 July, 1919; Page 4, #8336 Supplement to the London Gazette of 3 July, 1919

**Additional notes:**

Besides Lorne, only *one* other soldier in the 161<sup>st</sup> was awarded *two* medals: Harry Miner; Victoria Cross and the Croix de Guerre. He was killed in the battle at Demuin, east of Amiens, Aug 8, 1918.

Medals awarded in the 161<sup>st</sup> were:

Military Cross:	5
Military Medals:	26, 4 with Bar
Distinguish Conduct Medal:	3

The 161<sup>st</sup> was comprised of 777men. 117 were killed in action, 15 more died of wounds in France or England. Countless more were wounded, but survived to come home. A number died as a result of their wounds after returning home. Many of the rest were permanently scarred physically and psychologically by what they had endured.