

Metcalfe soldier's letters make way to digital world

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Emma Jackson
emma.jackson@metroland.com

News - In this modern age, no good piece of gossip takes very long to make its way across social media.

One hundred years ago, the best bits of hometown news could take days to reach the front line, where thousands of young Canadians were living a daily nightmare in the trenches of World War I.

Like many soldiers, Metcalfe's own Private Elmo Sully kept up a steady stream of letter writing to his girl back home, Fannie Iveson, a fellow student at Metcalfe Continuation School.

Those 100-year-old letters have now been collected into an interactive website and print collection, called Private Sully Goes to War, in an effort to help modern-day students connect with their hometown history.

Project lead Jane Cooper said the letters are surprisingly accessible. "It's a high school boy writing to his girl," said Cooper. "They're written in a very young voice."

They're also fascinating for the details they reveal and conceal about his experience.

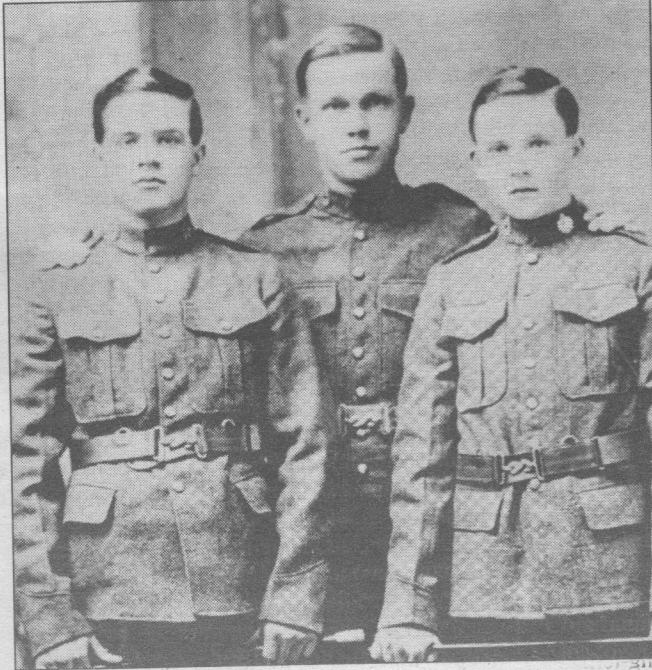
"You can sense a lot of self-censorship," Cooper said.

"He didn't want to tell Fannie the nasty stuff."

That 'stuff' includes some of the bloodiest battles of the war: the Battle of the Somme and Passchendaele.

Instead, many of Sully's letters focus on town gossip and events, including how much he'll miss the now-defunct Ottawa Exhibition.

"Do you remember a cer-



SUBMITTED

Duff Crerar, Elmo Sully and Ross Campbell proudly pose in their new army uniforms after enlisting together in the spring of 1916.

tain day of the Ottawa ex. last year; my suggestion, that I might be in kharki by exhibition time this year came quite true. ... I hope you are able to 'take it in' this year," he wrote

to Fannie on Sept. 16, 1916.

Gossip ran rampant through his letters: who was dating who, who had gotten top marks in Latin, and, perhaps most importantly, who had enlisted.

In many ways, this front line postal system wasn't so different than Facebook or Twitter today, Cooper said.

"I was fascinated at how often they wrote to each

other, and how quickly the letters got to each other," Cooper said. "They're social networking.

It's just the technology that's changed." It's changing in the schools, too; textbooks are becoming an outdated resource, and students are demanding digital media in the classroom.

To this end, Cooper has partnered with Osgoode

Township High School teacher David Way to develop an interactive website that will help Grade 10 history students connect with Sully and his friends Duff Crerar and Ross Campbell, who lived in their own village 100 years ago.

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Soldier's life was a hard one

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Several media and design students at Algonquin College helped the pair design a tablet-friendly website complete with scans of the original letters, typed transcripts, photos of Sully and his friends and even a map and timeline of Sully's whereabouts during the war.

"The website is all about

being able to be very interactive," Way said. "It becomes less abstract, and it goes beyond the textbook."

Cooper said the book has been in progress since she found the letters in the Osgoode Township Museum nearly 20 years ago. She thought then that she would turn them into a book, but it was only at the end of 2013 when Metcalfe resident Mar-

garet Rivard had transcribed the letters that Cooper decided it was time.

She did hours of research into Sully's regiments so she could fill in the gaps of his whereabouts and experiences to create the book.

But it was clear that to become a success it would need to be a digital creation first and foremost.

"The book becomes a teaser



EMMA JACKSON/METROLAND

Algonquin College media and design students Sundesh Singh, Jill McArthur and Victoria Caughey helped Osgoode Township High School teacher David Way and Metcalfe researcher Jane Cooper create an interactive website of a Metcalfe soldier's World War I letters.