

REMEMBRANCE DAY

Retracing the war, one letter at a time

by Matthew Uhrig

Press staff

METCALFE – In this modern world, accessibility has, without question, increased exponentially through the years, from the advent of electronic mail to smartphone technology in the palm of one's hand.

Yet, the process wasn't always so simple.

One-hundred years ago, a century of significant importance, the most crucial pieces of hometown news took days, if not weeks, to reach those soldiers on the frontlines of battle.

The First World War broke out in July 1914; the beginning of what would be a long march toward global progress. A great many, however, responded quickly and eagerly to the call of king and country.

In this country, then under the rule of the British empire, 620,000 Canadians enlisted or were conscripted into the expeditionary force, about a third of all men aged 18 to 45. Of these, roughly 60,000 were dead by war's end in November 1918, while another 6,000 succumbed to injuries following the armistice signing.

The death toll so staggering, towns and villages throughout Canada were wiped from the map as their populations were reduced, and those remaining could not sustain the great many needs.

Yet, for those sent overseas, and for those fortunate enough to return home unharmed, the war was a nightmare they lived daily.

Metcalf's Elmo Sully was just 16 when the Great War, as it would become known, began.

By 1915, having been part of the village's brass band that performed at a number of rallies in support of the many local soldiers enlisted, Sully had made up his mind, he was going to leave school and join the fight.

Christmas of that year would come with disappointment for the young man, as it was discovered that like many recruits, Sully had lied about his age.

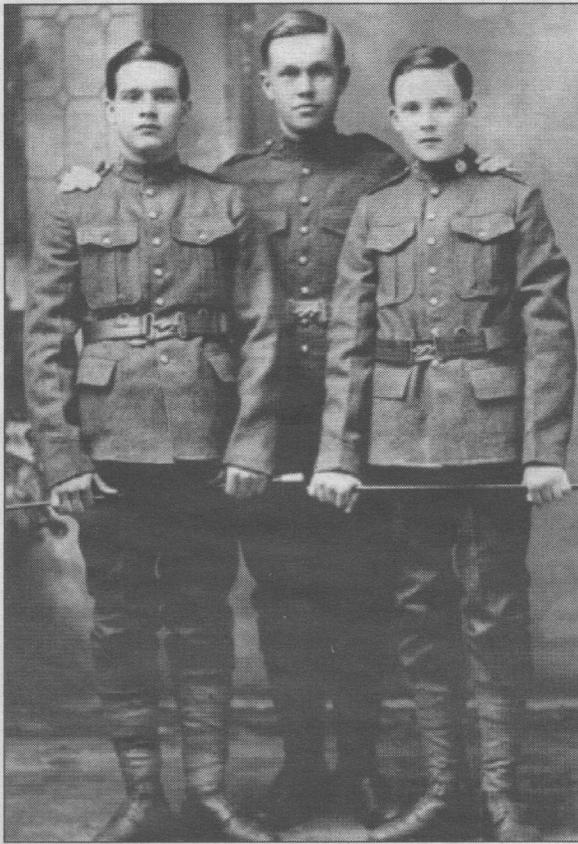
Sully's morose state continued throughout 1915 as more and more of his friends, those of legal age, were accepted into the service and sent to Europe to face off against the Germans in the trenches of the western front.

In April 1916, the now 18-year-old Sully wrote his final exams at the Metcalfe Continuation School before he and his two best schoolmates, Duff Crerar of Vernon and Ross Campbell from nearby Springhill, attended the Albert Street Barracks in Ottawa to enlist.

This is where the greatest journey of Sully's young life would begin. It was also at this time the young man, infatuated with a girl, as many of his friends were, began what would be constant correspondence.

The recipient? Frances "Fannie" Iveson, the youngest of eight children still living with her parents in their Victoria Street home. Her father, a harness maker, was also the township treasurer.

"Say Fannie; have you a snap-shot of yourself; if you have I should like very much to have one as it is about all I can carry with me as a remembrance in this business," Sully wrote in his first letter. "It is getting late and I am short of news so I must close for now. Write soon."



Private Sully Goes to War tells the story of Metcalfe soldier Elmo Sully (middle), and his part in the First World War. Sully is pictured with his friends Duff Crerar (left) and Ross Campbell, the trio posing in their new army uniforms after enlisting in April 1916.



Crerar (left), Sully, and Bert Campbell in their black watch kilts and balmoral hats, the uniform of the Royal Highlanders of Canada.

It is these now century old letters that make up much of the recently published book, *Private Sully Goes to War*. The print collection complements an interactive website (not yet online) that is meant to help modern-day students connect with, in some cases, their hometown history.

Project leader Jane Cooper first got hold of the letters in the mid-1990s, and saw the makings of a book. (It was 1991 when Iveson, then 91, donated the complete letters to the Osgoode Township Historical Society Museum in Vernon not long before her death.)

"[Sully] writes as he speaks... Short hand, with a youthful flair," she said. "I mean, he was just a high school student in Metcalfe and then he was off to war, and his writing is from teen to teen."

The letters reveal a love story of sorts; with Sully sharing his day-to-day experiences throughout the many weeks he was enlisted. How-

ever, Cooper noted, there is much censorship in his writing, as he keeps from Iveson the true horrors of war.

He forgoes discussing the Battle of the Somme or Passchendaele, and instead focuses on town gossip and events, including how he no doubt expected to miss the Central Canada (Ottawa) Exhibition.

Sully's storytelling ran the gamut from who was dating whom, who had gotten the top marks in school, and, most evidently, who from home had enlisted.

"The letters are so human; that is what brings it all into real focus," Cooper said.

She also mused how the letters are really no different than today's teenagers connecting through Facebook or other means. This is where the idea for an online portal came about, as classrooms are changing and textbooks are becoming an outdated resource. Students are demanding digital content, and that pattern is becoming most noticeable in the classroom.

Cooper partnered with David Way, a teacher at Osgoode Township High School, in order to help Grade 10 students connect with Sully and his friends, and bring the letters to life.

"It is a simple story of going to war, and writing to a girlfriend," Way said. "But that's what draws the students in – it's a love story connected to Metcalfe."

Ultimately, Sully returned home to Metcalfe in the spring of 1919, reeling from shell shock, crippled mentally by things he had seen. He and Iveson drifted apart, as the pair could not recapture their youthful pre-war ways. Sully went on to great fame with the Ford Motor Company, retiring in 1958, and settling in Renfrew where he died in 1971.

Copies of the book, Cooper said, are to be mailed to high schools throughout the area by Remembrance Day (Tues., Nov. 11), while the website (www.warletters-forteaching.ca) will be launched at a later date.