

## TEENAGE BUGLER LIED AND PLAYED HIS WAY ONTO BATTLEFIELDS

Grandson carries on musical tradition of veteran who enlisted at about 16 and took years to recover from his shell shock.



David Cunningham can not only tell the story of his grandfather's service in the First World War, he can provide the soundtrack.

The tunes would be mostly stark and mournful, just as they would be for numerous wartime teenagers, many of whom lied about their age in search of adventure only to find death and terror on the battlefield.



Cunningham's grandfather, George William Shaw, was a bugler with the 3rd Battalion (Toronto Regiment), Canadian Expeditionary Force. He claimed to be 19 years, four months on his attestation papers but, says his grandson, he was "wildly lying" and was more likely 16 when he signed on in August of 1915. He was so young that when the soldiers lined up to shave in the morning, Shaw would take out his metal mirror, lather up and mimic them. He'd just never put a blade in his razor.

Along with the war stories, Cunningham also has his grandpa's Hawkes and Son solid brass bugle and is "fairly convinced it was played at some major places including Vimy Ridge."

It would be little more than a cherished family heirloom except that Cunningham, 61, a retired school principal in London, Ont., has music in his blood too. He majored in it at university, playing the trumpet, and it became an annual tradition for him to play his granddad's bugle during Remembrance Day assemblies at London's Princess Elizabeth Public School.

"It's hard not to get emotional and think about the circumstances under which it was played," he says. "It's hard not to think of the significance of that particular bugle and its direct connection to what must have been a very difficult and raw experience for an awful lot of people.

"It makes remembering an easier task for me."

Beyond giving signals in battle, a bugler usually sounded out the day's routine from "Reveille" — typically at 6 a.m. in the summer, 6:30 in the winter — to the call for meals, parading, mail distribution and other communication until "The Last Post," usually at 10 p.m.

Now the bugle signals remembrance.

Cunningham believes telling students the story of his grandfather and the standard issue, English-made instrument helps them connect to the significance of the day.

And the story of Pte. George Shaw is probably not atypical. Though baby-faced, slight and under five foot five, such was the demand for new men, there was probably little questioning when he appeared at a Toronto recruiting office during what was likely his high school summer break.

His unit soon found itself in the historic Battle of the Somme.

Shortly after Shaw joined the 3rd Battalion in France on Oct. 4, 1916, diaries describe how soldiers from that unit moved into an area of the Somme nicknamed Death Valley. Cunningham is unsure if his father participated in the assault that followed, but if he did, it would help explain why he was so scarred by his war experience.

After 3rd Battalion platoons attacked and captured some land, the Germans launched a counterstrike. The Canadian troops started falling back and with their own bombs and ammunition depleted, the outnumbered infantrymen relied on bayonet charges and fighting with their fists. Of the 14 officers and 481 soldiers who participated in the offensive, only one officer and 85 of the men returned.

“No ground was taken,” says Cunningham. “It’s hard to imagine the sheer horror of it.”

The records show Shaw was wounded the next year. The family story is that he was trying to escape an artillery barrage at a quarry near Flanders Fields, jumped in a crater and was impaled by his own bayonet.

“It was quite a process he had to go through to prove it was not a selfwound,” Cunningham says.

Shaw struggled to relate his experiences to his family.

“The war wasn’t a happy subject for him,” says his daughter, 83-year-old Audrey Cunningham, who also lives in London now. “He used to say, (the Germans) were people just like me. I used to ask him, ‘Did you shoot anybody?’ And he never answered. Then one time he did say, ‘You know, if you’re looking someone in the face, it’s very easy to raise your rifle and shoot over their heads.’”

Shaw brought the horror of what he endured home in 1919 and his daughter says the damaged soldier couldn’t initially cope.

“They called it shell-shocked in those days,” says Audrey Cunningham. “My mother said that when she first met him, he looked like a ghost: very thin and very small, very, very nervous. He was always looking over his shoulder. He kept hearing noises behind him.”

Shaw may have also felt guilt that about his older brother — who felt badly that his sibling had signed up — later volunteered for service and was killed by a sniper late in the war.

Shaw, unable to function in public, retreated into his parents' home, refusing to leave for four years, according to family lore. So confused was he by his circumstances, he once attacked a boarding elderly aunt who awoke in the night to use the washroom. Shaw tried to strangle her, thinking her a German soldier. He had to be pulled off the woman.

Cunningham says the details aren't clear — no one was even certain how old his grandfather was when he died in 1976 — but at some point, Shaw engaged again with the outside world. He married, had two children and got a job working on transformers for Toronto Hydro until retirement.

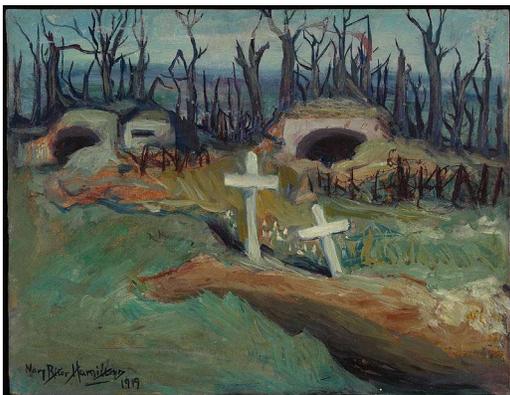
When Shaw died, the bugle was passed on to Cunningham and he is now trying to establish that it was played during the battle at Vimy Ridge in April 1917. If he can, he says he'd like to send it back to France so it can be played at any 100th anniversary commemorations.

## George William Shaw Part 2

David Cunningham obtained Grandfather Shaw's service record. Bugler Shaw was the bugler in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in the Great War. It confirmed that he served at the Battle of Vimy Ridge.

We obtained the war diaries for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion and were able to trace his movements at the battle of Vimy Ridge.

On April 7, 1917 the battalion stayed overnight in the caves at Maison Blanche.  
*Our member Zenon Andrusyszyn has been and is exploring and documenting with Canadigm (<http://www.canadigm.ca/index.html>) those very same caves.*



Farbus Wood

On April 8, they spent the night in tents at Ecurie.

On April 9 they attacked Vimy Ridge and occupied Farbus Wood (the farthest objective of the attack, 3 miles from the start line!)

Our other bugler, Fred Anderson in the 1<sup>st</sup> Hussars (Canadian Light Horse), in contact with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, passed by Farbus Wood with the cavalry. They attacked down Vimy Ridge to the village of Willerval where they suffered heavy losses and withdrew. Both buglers survived the war.

David Cunningham will play Grandfather Shaw's bugle in our Vimy Orchestra and perhaps return the bugle once again to Vimy Ridge.

Fred Anderson's bugle is on display at the 1<sup>st</sup> Hussars Museum.