

## Sergeant John Percy Hampton Bole — WW 1 Veteran of Vimy Ridge

By Catherine Elson, Belcarra, March 2017.



**J.P.H. Bole, 1958**

April 9<sup>th</sup> will mark the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the *Battle of Vimy Ridge* and it is worth noting that a long-time Belcarra resident was one of the 97,000 Canadians who fought in this pivotal battle of World War 1.

John “Percy” Hampton Bole, the son of Judge Norman Bole who named Belcarra, was well known in his own right as the owner of the “Bole Estate”, a 143-acre property that stretched south along the shoreline from the picnic grounds to the Admiralty Point Military Reserve and across to Bedwell Bay.

Sergeant John Percy H. Bole enlisted into the Canadian Infantry and the 121<sup>st</sup> Battalion — the *Duke of Connaught’s Own* (Irish) in New Westminster on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1916. He was 34 years old at the time and had recently left his work as a practicing lawyer in Vancouver. By all accounts he was married with two young daughters although that marriage did not last.

On August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1916 — two years to the day since WW 1 had been declared — Sergeant Bole left Halifax with the 121<sup>st</sup> Battalion on the *Empress of Britain*, landing in England ten days later. In December of that year, he was transferred to the 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion already in France for the lead up to the British-led “Arras Offensive” in which Canadian Corps were to play a major role. In January 1917, preparations began for an attack on German held *Vimy Ridge*.

The *Battle of Vimy Ridge* commenced on Easter Monday, April 9<sup>th</sup>, at 5:30 a.m. It opened with a phenomenal burst of artillery fire that provided a curtain of smoke and flames for the first wave of 15,000 to 20,000 soldiers leading the advance up the western side of the escarpment. The 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion, in coordination with three other battalions in the 4<sup>th</sup> Division, ascended the northern flank through heavy machine gun fire, mortar rounds, cratered earth and barbed wire toward the fortifications above. They were met with fierce resistance and at one point had to fall back but by the end of the second day they had achieved their objective — Hill 145.

In all, it took three days of continuous fighting for the Allies to force the German Army from their stronghold on *Vimy Ridge* and into retreat. Many prisoners were taken and many lives were lost, on both sides. Canadian Forces alone suffered 10,602 casualties — 3,598 soldiers were killed, and another 7,004 were left wounded.

After Vimy, the 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion continued to fight on in France until *Armistice Day*, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1918. Percy returned to Canada with his battalion in June 1919.

People who knew Percy said he was somewhat of a character and spoke of his having suffered “shell shock” — post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by our understanding today. It is thought that this condition may eventually have led to his early retirement and a move to his Belcarra property in 1932 after which he proceeded to build his permanent residence — the Bole House — a one lane supply road through the bush to Bedwell Bay, and a number of cottages along the shoreline.

J. Percy Hampton Bole died in 1966 at the age of 84. That he and many other soldiers had to risk or lose their lives in brutal combat one hundred years ago may be difficult for us to comprehend today. Nevertheless, the *Battle of Vimy Ridge* is widely recognized as a defining moment in Canadian history where Canadian soldiers not only proved their mettle but helped to establish the identity of a fledgling nation.

In 1922, in gratitude, France ceded 179 hectares of *Vimy Ridge* to Canada to commemorate its sacrifices in the First World War. The *Canadian National Vimy Memorial* sits atop Hill 145.



**Canadian National Vimy Ridge Memorial atop Hill 145 in France**

#### **References / Source Websites:**

Canadian Great War Project — War Diaries, CEF Soldier Detail #760779

Canadian War Museum

*Forest and Fjord* (2013), Ralph Drew

Library and Archives Canada — Vimy Ridge, War Diaries

*Royal Military College Yearbook, 1966* — contains an obituary for J.P.H. Bole that states, “he attended RMC from 1897–1899... He served overseas in the First World War with the 121<sup>st</sup> Battalion and in France with the 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion.”

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