

## Lcp. Blair Wilfred Mills (1896-1916)

Blair Mills was born in Springhill, Nova Scotia, 2 September 1896, the youngest of six children, to parents Ezra and Emma Mills. Blair's father traveled west to British Columbia in 1899, leaving his family in Springhill. The 1901 census finds Ezra Mills residing alone, and farming, in Fairview, B.C., while Emma is with the six children back in Nova Scotia. Blair was four years old at the time.

We know Mrs. Mills passed away as a young woman and it must have been not long after the 1901 census was taken, for we also know the children (all except the eldest) lived with their father in British Columbia in the early 1900's.

Ezra Mills, with his five children, resided in various places in the Okanagan - where he was employed as a master carpenter - before coming to Hedley to live "up top" at the Nickel Plate town site where Ezra was again employed as a carpenter with the Hedley Gold Mining Co. Blair would have been somewhere between the ages of 6 and 8 at the time.

Ezra remarried sometime during the 1900's and the new family relocated to Keremeos where Ezra built the family home in 1907. Blair's little brother, Alfred, was born to this second marriage the same year. Blair was 11 years old. In 1913, Ezra retired from carpentry, due to his health, and opened a hardware store on Main St. in Keremeos.

In early 1915, at the age of 18, Blair returned to the Nickel Plate mine, this time living away from home for the first time, employed as a miner "up top." In August of 1915, a recruiter came to town for the 54<sup>th</sup> Kootenay Battalion and Blair, along with 15 other men, enlisted on the 24<sup>th</sup> of August in Penticton. (He had to get his parents' permission as he was one week shy of his 19<sup>th</sup> birthday.)

The 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion trained in Vernon for three months and then sailed for England. They continued their training in England, although the 54th's time schedule was too slow for Blair. He wanted to get to the action!

The main British area in France had been Flanders and the Ypres Salient, a piece of ground held by the British which was overlooked by the Germans on three sides. Both armies resorted to the old siege tactic of mining, as a way of overcoming the increasingly sophisticated defences. In February 1916, Blair Mills and another Hedley volunteer, Yorkie Meher, left the 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion and transferred to No. 1 Tunnelling Company, Canadian Engineers.

They had only been at the front for a matter of days when 19-year-old Lcp. Blair Mills was killed by enemy shellfire while stationed at a listening post in St. Eloi, France, 26 March 1916. Blair Mills was the youngest of the Hedley boys to die in service during the war. He is buried at Strand Military Cemetery, Hainult, Belgium.

As a footnote to this story, Blair's headstone has been incorrectly dated for the past almost-100 years. The correct month and day are engraved but the year reads 1917 – not 1916, as it should be. His age is also engraved wrong. It reads “age 20” where it should be age 19. Andy English discovered the errors and wrote to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, requesting the errors be rectified. He received an answer back just recently wherein the Commission agreed with Andy's findings and stated that Lcp. Blair Mills will be receiving a new headstone with his correct date of death and age engraved upon it.

Lcp. Mills is also commemorated on the Keremeos cenotaph.