

Pte. Ebenezer William Vans (1885-1916)

Ebenezer was referred to as “Vans” by his comrades in the 54th Kootenay Battalion and he himself refers to himself as “Willie.” “Ebenezer” doesn't seem to have been a name he was commonly called by. So, in following his friends' example, we will call him “Vans” here... Vans was born in Glasgow, Scotland, 25 April 1885.

Nothing is known of Vans' life before he makes his first appearance in the *Hedley Gazette* in January of 1911, at the age of 25, when he is elected as an “auditor” for the Loyal Orange Lodge, the protestant fraternal organization. He was employed as an engineer at the Nickel Plate mine “for some time,” although we do not know the exact years.

In January of both 1914 and 1915, Vans attended the Hedley Hospital benefit masquerade ball. His masked attire was described as “nondescript” in 1914, but in 1915 he was clearly identified as an “Indian.” After the outbreak of the war in August 1914, Vans donated to the Hedley Patriotic Fund, first \$5 and then \$10 the following year – an amount which translates to about \$235 today.

In August of 1915, shortly before he enlisted with 16 other men into the 54th Kootenay Battalion, Vans put his “Morris” chair up for raffle to raise funds for the Red Cross (and himself). A Morris chair of the time was an early type of reclining chair. The chair was valued at \$35 which is about \$825 by today's accounting. The raffle raised a total of \$56.50 and half of that was donated to the Red Cross. Vans did a good deed and pocketed himself a nice pocket of change in the meantime as well.

When the 54th Battalion went into training at Vernon Camp, B.C., it is probable Vans visited with his next-of-kin relative (from his attestation paper), Robert G. Vans, whom resided in Coldstream, a community just outside of Vernon. Robert Vans was a Presbyterian clergyman, age 64 at the time. He had immigrated to Canada in 1879, six years before Vans was born. Perhaps he was an uncle to Vans...

The 54th sailed for England in mid-November 1915. Vans wrote back to a friend in Hedley in early December just to say they had arrived safely and had an uneventful calm passage, though he was poorly bothered by the great deal of rain in England.

Just a short two months later, sometime in February 1915, Vans was hospitalized for an unknown illness. Pte. Bert Schubert wrote home, “The Hedley boys have had rather hard luck since coming over here, so far as sickness was concerned... The last I saw of Vans he showed me a very bad hand and shortly afterward was sent to hospital. The doctors

did not seem to know what was the matter. I think it was a form of tubercular trouble.” And Pte. Bobby Robertson wrote home that the boys “just came out of quarantine” on 20 March 1915. He said “it was some time.” Whatever the illness was, Vans succumbed quickly, within a matter of days, and died in hospital 3 March 1915.

His Hedley comrades in “C” Company of the 54th Battalion took it hard, this their first loss from the ranks. They got him a wreath of flowers and their Sgt. Alec Jack, of Hedley, was around taking up a collection for a tombstone. Pte. Doc Martin wrote home to Hedley, “All the Hedley boys that were able attended the funeral of Vans, which, of course, was a military one. Military funerals certainly are impressive. The Dead March, which is so mournfully pretty, would stir the heart of a wooden man. We have a nice stone for Vans' grave awaiting permission of the cemetery officer for its erection. On it is inscribed Vans' full name, age, 54th Battalion, and a maple leaf, all done in hammered lead. It looks fine. I am hoping to be able to go out to Borden whenever we get the stone erected.”

When word reached Hedley of Pte. Ebenezer Wm. Vans' passing, the town flew their flags at half mast in memorial to him.

Pte. Vans is buried at Bordon Military Cemetery, Hampshire, England. He was 30 years of age.

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Letter from Pte. Ebenezer Vans

The following letter from Ebenezer Vans was kindly loaned us by Mr. S.L. Smith for publication.

December 7th, 1915

Mr. S.L. Smith, Hedley, B.C.

Dear Mr. Smith,

Just a line to say that we arrived in England OK. The sea was level all the way, which was a great blessing.

This camp is about 45 miles from London and most of the boys are going there for their vacation, but I am going up to Glasgow for mine.

I saw three bi-planes passing overhead today, but they were very high.

This is the first day we have had. I thought it knew how to rain in Vancouver, but Vancouver rain is only a mist here.

I can't say that I'm altogether in love with this country, for the West looks good to Willie, and just as soon as my work is finished I'll be back again.

Yours truly,

Ebenezer W. Vans

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