

Private William Gerald Arthrell©

Regimental number: 68287

25th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles), Canadian Expeditionary Force

born: 24 November 1896–died: 26 March 1916

For the most part, Private William Gerald Arthrell's story is like that of many Canadian soldiers who died in the Great War. However, a little-known fact distinguishes his death from that of so many others. His involvement in a little-known aspect of the war even inspired a literary reference to the event.

On his Canadian Expeditionary Force attestation form, William is recorded as having been born in Staffordshire, England, on 24 November 1897.¹ However, he was actually born on 24 November 1896,² making him 19 years old when he enlisted. Since there appears to be no reason that he would want to report his birth as occurring a year later, this discrepancy is likely simply a mistake.

William was the eldest child of William Sr. and Alice (née Guy) Arthrell, who had married in Lichfield, Staffordshire, in 1895.³ His father was born on 22 September 1871⁴ in Burntwood, Staffordshire,⁵ and his mother in July 1872,⁶ also in Burntwood.⁷

They had two more children before leaving England for Canada—both registered in Lichfield:

- John George (born on 21 June 1900)⁸
- Jessie (born on 30 July 1902)⁹

In 1901, the family was living on Ironstone Road in Burntwood, about eight kilometres from Lichfield, where William Sr. was a coal miner. Over the next few years, the extended Arthrell family immigrated to Canada. Census records reflect that William Sr., Alice and their three children came to Canada at some point in 1902 or 1903.¹⁰ The only passenger list record located, however, was for William Sr., who came with his younger brother, John, in 1903.¹¹ All William Sr.'s surviving family members came to Canada about the same time—a second brother, Henry, and their father, George, came in 1905,¹² and their mother, Emma, came with the remaining siblings, Emma and Herbert, in 1906.¹³ They all settled in Nova Scotia.¹⁴

William Sr. and Alice had two more children. Charlotte Emma (cited alternately as Charlotte and Emma), was born in Stellarton, Nova Scotia, on 11 October 1904.¹⁵ However, their last child, Julia Arlien, was born on 25 July 1915 in Staffordshire, when the family returned to England during the war.

In 1911, the family was still living in Stellarton, where William Sr. was a mine manager and William Jr., at the age of 14, was a machinist. When, four years later, he enlisted on 31 March 1915 in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, to serve in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, William Jr. was at least half a foot taller than the average soldier: 6' 2½".¹⁶ He had a fair complexion, brown eyes and fair hair and was working as a miner.

On 20 May 1915, he sailed to England on the SS *Saxonia* with the 25th Battalion of the Canadian Infantry. After their arrival on 29 May, he remained in England, spending at least some time in the Canadian military camp at East Sandling¹⁷ until he left with his battalion for France, arriving on 15 September. At the end of November, he went to the brigade grenade school.

His time on the Front was probably not much longer than three months. At the beginning of 1916, the 25th Battalion was positioned near Ypres, Belgium, and was in and out of the front line—exchanging positions with the 24th Battalion. The role of the Canadians was to wear down the

enemy by constant sniping, raiding and artillery attacks. In early January, the 25th Battalion distinguished itself by adopting a new device in trench warfare.

To achieve surprise, the raiding party cut the enemy's wire by hand rather than with the artillery. Ironically enough, the experiment proved too successful. The wire-cutting group completed its task before the assault group was ready to enter the gap; and in the meantime a German wiring party discovered and repaired the damage, making the obstacle much stronger than before. The approach of daylight obliged the raiders to withdraw. Not long after this the enemy introduced tempered steel wire, and hand-cutting became a very slow and difficult process.¹⁸

The battalion was preparing for its first major engagement: the Actions of St Eloi Craters in the Ypres Salient.¹⁹ In the days leading up to 26 March, the battalion exchanged heavy artillery fire and grenades with the enemy,²⁰ and it was during one of these attacks that William was injured. He sustained shrapnel wounds to his head and a fractured skull on 24 March²¹ and was taken to No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station,²² where he died at 1:20 a.m. on 26 March 1916, at the age of 19. The likelihood of his receiving a head injury was perhaps increased by his height—he was probably significantly taller than many soldiers around him.

This is where William's war experience differs so much from others. Military historian Tim Cook, in his book, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers: Medical Care and the Struggle for Survival in the Great War*,²³ reveals that autopsies were carried out on some Canadian soldiers during the Great War as part of a program that removed soldiers' organs for medical research purposes. William was one of these soldiers.

By August 1919, 799 body parts had been extracted, without the explicit consent of the soldiers, under the provisions of the attestation paper that they had signed at enlistment.²⁴

William's autopsy may have been related to the nature of his injuries. In his book, Cook reflects on William's death and is under the impression that he did not have a steel helmet, saying:

Like his fellow soldiers on the Western Front, Arthrell had not yet been equipped with a steel helmet, an important protection that might have deflected the bullet that smashed his skull. Despite the shattered cranium and exposed brain matter, Arthrell clung to life for thirteen hours but died the next day at No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station.²⁵

However, William probably *did* have a steel helmet when he died. When steel helmets were first available, there were only sufficient supplies to equip one in five soldiers.²⁶ The 25th Battalion, part of the 5th Canadian Brigade, had received 450 helmets on 20 February 1916,²⁷ before some other CEF units. Cook's source of information refers to soldiers of the 6th Brigade wearing their helmets for the first time on 4 April 1916. This may explain the contradiction.²⁸

The steel helmet offered important protection from projectiles; however, it did not work for William. The military's record of his death indicates that he

... was in the front line trench preparing to stand to when a high explosive shell exploded above the trench, a piece of shell going through his steel helmet, into his head. He was evacuated to No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station where he succumbed to his wounds.²⁹

The 25th Battalion's medical officer also kept reports on incidents involving battalion soldiers. His account of William's injury says that he was

... sent to amb[ulance] with fractured frontal bone with hernia of brain through [...] opening which is about 3" long. The shrapnel [...] pierced the steel helmet he had on

making a hole about 1" square. His pulse was good and he could grip with his hand but was not conscious. He is still alive.³⁰

He also reported on an earlier incident involving a soldier's helmet, with a different outcome:

During the heavy bombardment this morning about 5 a.m. when the British to our left took the [...] one of our men #68100 Sgt Williams, was rather severely wounded by shrapnel. A piece pierced the steel helmet [...] a scalp wound only, the helmet undoubtedly saving his life.³¹

Sadly, it did not save William's life. Would it be too speculative to think that this was why his body was chosen for autopsy? Helmets, new equipment for soldiers, were expected to save lives. Perhaps an autopsy was an opportunity to address the question of why a helmet had failed to protect William.

William's family would not have known anything about this. A letter was sent to William's father in Nova Scotia just to notify him of his son's death. William's mother had returned to England in 1915 and remained there until after his death.³² The rest of the family had joined her at some point, because all family members (William Sr., Alice, John, Jessie, Emma and Arlien) sailed back to Canada in April 1916.³³

William's father had the following inscription included on his gravestone:

JOHN 15.13³⁴

[Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.³⁵]

In 1921, the family, without either of its sons, was living on Bridge Street in Stellarton, where William Sr. was now a superintendent in a coal mine.³⁶ Both William Jr.'s parents died in Nova Scotia—William in 1941³⁷ and Alice in 1956³⁸—and are buried in Brookside Cemetery, Stellarton. All but one of their remaining children moved to Ontario.

William Jr.'s brother, **John George**, died soon after the Great War of pyrexia—a fever that could have come from a number of sources. He died on 16 October 1923 in Stellarton, where he had been a coal miner.³⁹ He was survived by his wife, Minnie Gertrude Walsh, whom he had married on 13 February 1920,⁴⁰ and his son, William Hillard (born on 29 September 1920).⁴¹ When his son was born, John was living in Kirkland Lake, Ontario, working in the mines,⁴² but he returned to Nova Scotia before his death.

William Jr.'s sister **Jessie** married Warren Irwin MacDonald on 5 August 1925 in Stellarton⁴³ but moved to Ontario before her death at the age of 86. She died in 1988 in Paris, Brant County, Ontario.⁴⁴

The Arthrell's only surviving Canadian-born child, **Charlotte Emma**, remained in Nova Scotia. She was living with her parents and her sister Julia in Stellarton in 1940⁴⁵ and married there on 29 April 1942.⁴⁶ She died in Stellarton on 15 June 1966 and was also buried in Brookside Cemetery.⁴⁷

The Arthrell's last child, **Julia Arlien**, first came to Canada at the age of 1, a month after her brother's death. She grew up in Nova Scotia and married John Dan MacDonald in Glace Bay on 31



Gravestone for Private W. G. Arthrell

Source: John D. Reid

December 1941.⁴⁸ John served with the Royal Canadian Navy⁴⁹ and Julia was a corporal in the Canadian Women's Army Corps⁵⁰ during the Second World War. Although they married in Nova Scotia, they were living in southern Ontario later in their lives. Julia died in Paris, Ontario, on 30 December 1973⁵¹ and her husband five years later.⁵²

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¹ "Service Files of the First World War, 1914–1918–CEF," *Library and Archives Canada* (<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/first-world-war-1914-1918-cef/Pages/search.aspx>; accessed 6 June 2022), entry for William Gerald Arthrell, Reference: RG 150, Accession 1992–93/166, Box 255–48, Item Number: 14538. Unless otherwise noted, all information about his service comes from this source.

² "Copy of an entry of a birth," *General Register Office* (<http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/>; accessed 10 January 2024) entry for Arthrell, William Gerald; "GRO online index (birth)," *General Register Office* (<http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/>; accessed 15 November 2022), entry for Arthrell, William Gerald, Registration district: Lichfield, Volume: 06B, Page: 501

³ "England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk; accessed 4 November 2022), entry for William Arthrell, Registration district: Lichfield, Inferred county: Staffordshire, Volume: 6b, Page: 853

⁴ "Canada, Find a Grave Index, 1600s–Current," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk; accessed 5 November 2022), entry for William Arthrell

⁵ "1901 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk; accessed 5 November 2022), entry for William Gerald Arthrell, Registration district: Lichfield, Sub-registration district: Lichfield, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 13, Piece: 2655, Folio: 72, Page: 32, Household schedule number: 178

⁶ "1911 Census of Canada," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk; accessed 4 November 2022), entry for William Arthrew [sic], Province: Nova Scotia, District: Pictou, District number: 50, Sub-district: 33 – Stellarton, Sub-district number: 33

⁷ "1901 England Census," *Ancestry*, entry for William Gerald Arthrell

⁸ "Canada, Find a Grave Index, 1600s–Current," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk; accessed 4 November 2022), entry for John George Arthrell

⁹ "Canada, Find a Grave Index, 1600s–Current," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk; accessed 24 November 2022), entry for Jessie MacDonald

¹⁰ "1911 Census of Canada," *Ancestry*, entry for William Arthrew [sic]; "1921 Census of Canada," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk; accessed 12 March 2022), entry for Wm Bothwell [sic], Province or territory: Nova Scotia, District: Pictou, City, town or village: Stellarton Ward 2

¹¹ "Canada, Incoming Passenger Lists, 1865–1935," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk; accessed 14 November 2022), entry for Wm Arthrell

¹² "UK, Outward Passenger Lists, 1890–1960," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk; accessed 14 November 2022), entry for Hy Arthrell

¹³ "Canada, Incoming Passenger Lists, 1865–1935," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk; accessed 11 November 2022), entry for Herbert Arthrell

¹⁴ "1911 Census of Canada," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk; accessed 4 November 2022), entry for William Arthrew [sic]; "1911 Census of Canada," *Ancestry*, entry for William Arthrew [sic]; "1921 Census of Canada," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk; accessed 12 March 2022), entry for Herbert Arthrell, Province or territory: Nova Scotia, District: Pictou, District number: 50, Sub-district: 33 – Stellarton, Sub-district number: 33

¹⁵ "Nova Scotia Births, Marriages, and Deaths," *Nova Scotia Archives* (<https://archives.novascotia.ca/vital-statistics/>; accessed 4 November 2022), entry for Charlotte Emma Ferguson, Death registration: Year: 1966, Number: 4045

¹⁶ The Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR) reports that, based on a sample of servicemen born in the 1890s, the average British soldier was 5'6". ("Short poppies: The height of World War I servicemen,"

CEPR (<https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/short-poppies-height-world-war-i-servicemen>: accessed 23 January 2024)

¹⁷ “War Diaries - 25th Battalion, Canadian Infantry,” *Library and Archives Canada* (<https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca>: accessed 15 November 2022), Reference: RG9-III-D-3, Volume number: 4933, Microfilm reel number: T-10735, File number: 417

¹⁸ *The Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War: Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914–1919* (Colonel G. W. L. Nicholson, C.D.), *Government of Canada Publications* (https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2009/forces/DA3-4462E.pdf: accessed 14 November 2023), page 135

¹⁹ “25th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles), CEF,” *Wikipedia* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Actions_of_St_Eloi_Craters: accessed 13 November 2023)

²⁰ “War Diaries - 25th Battalion, Canadian Infantry,” *Library and Archives Canada* (<https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca>: accessed 15 November 2022), Reference: RG9-III-D-3, Volume number: 4933, Microfilm reel number: T-10735, File number: 417

²¹ “War diaries - Medical Officer, 25th Canadian Infantry Battalion,” *Library and Archives Canada* (<https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/>: accessed 14 November 2023), RG9-III-D-3, Volume number: 5039, Microfilm reel number: T-10930, File number: 872, File part: 6

²² A casualty clearing station was a military medical unit behind the front lines, usually located near transportation. Casualties who did not soon die or could not be adequately treated in the clearing station were stabilized before being transported to a field or military hospital. “Casualty Clearing Station,” *Wikipedia* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casualty_Clearing_Station: accessed 4 July 2022). A very comprehensive description of the casualty clearing stations is presented in the blog “Casualty Clearing Stations During WW1,” *Chiddicks Family Tree* (<https://chiddicksfamilytree.com/2021/05/09/casualty-clearing-stations-during-ww1/>: accessed 4 July 2022)

²³ Tim Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers: Medical Care and the Struggle for Survival in the Great War*, New York: Penguin Random House, 2022, pages 287–288

²⁴ The tone of Cook’s book is very critical of this practice, particularly because it was done without the soldiers’ consent and, in part, included encouraging the building of medical museums to display body parts publicly.

²⁵ Tim Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers: Medical Care and the Struggle for Survival in the Great War*

²⁶ “Artifact Backgrounder: Mark I Helmet,” *Canadian War Museum* (https://www.warmuseum.ca/s3/supplyline/assets/teacherresources/CWM_SupplyLine_MarkIHelmet_EN_FINAL_20140922.pdf: accessed 13 November 2023)

²⁷ “War Diaries - 25th Battalion, Canadian Infantry,” *Library and Archives Canada*

²⁸ *The Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War: Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914–1919* (Colonel G. W. L. Nicholson, C.D.) indicates that “At three in the morning of 4 April the 6th Canadian Brigade . . . wearing steel helmets for the first time (only 50 per company were available), took over from the British 76th Brigade . . .” The 25th Battalion was part of the 5th Brigade, rather than the 6th.

²⁹ “Canada, War Graves Registers (Circumstances of Casualty), 1914–1948,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 4 November 2022), entry for William Gerald Arthrell

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ “War diaries - Medical Officer, 25th Canadian Infantry Battalion,” *Library and Archives Canada*

³² “Service Files of the First World War, 1914–1918 – CEF,” *Library and Archives Canada*, entry for William Gerald Arthrell

³³ “Canada, Incoming Passenger Lists, 1865–1935,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 11 November 2022), entry for Jessie Arthrell

³⁴ *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (www.cwgc.org: accessed 8 December 2022), entry for Arthrell, W.J. [sic]

³⁵ *King James Bible Online* (<https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org>: accessed 8 December 2022)

³⁶ “1921 Census of Canada,” *Ancestry*, entry for Wm Bothwell [sic]

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- ³⁷ “Canada, Find a Grave Index, 1600s–Current,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 10 October 2022), entry for William Arthrell
- ³⁸ “Canada, Find a Grave Index, 1600s–Current,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 5 November 2022), entry for Alice Arthrell
- ³⁹ “Nova Scotia Births, Marriages, and Deaths,” *Nova Scotia Archives* (<https://archives.novascotia.ca/vital-statistics/>: accessed 4 November 2022), entry for John George Arthrell, Death registration: Year: 1923, File: 99, Number: 644
- ⁴⁰ “Nova Scotia Births, Marriages, and Deaths,” *Nova Scotia Archives* (<https://archives.novascotia.ca/vital-statistics/>: accessed 4 November 2022), entry for John George Arthrell, Marriage registration: Year: 1920, Number: 41784
- ⁴¹ “Nova Scotia Births, Marriages, and Deaths,” *Nova Scotia Archives* (<https://archives.novascotia.ca/vital-statistics/>: accessed 23 November 2022), entry for William Hillard Arthrell, Male birth registration: Year: 1920, Number: 99000918
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ “Nova Scotia Births, Marriages, and Deaths,” *Nova Scotia Archives* (<https://archives.novascotia.ca/vital-statistics/>: accessed 4 November 2022), entry for Jessie Arthrell, Marriage registration: Year: 1925, Number: 43485
- ⁴⁴ “Canada, Find a Grave Index, 1600s–Current,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 24 November 2022), entry for Jessie MacDonald
- ⁴⁵ “Canada, Voters Lists, 1935–1980,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 24 November 2022), entry for Charlotte Arthrell in 1940, Location: Pictou, Nova Scotia, Canada, Electoral district: Pictou
- ⁴⁶ “Nova Scotia Births, Marriages, and Deaths,” *Nova Scotia Archives* (<https://archives.novascotia.ca/vital-statistics/>: accessed 4 November 2022), entry for Charlotte Emma Arthrell, Marriage registration: Year: 1942, Number: 112306
- ⁴⁷ “Nova Scotia Births, Marriages, and Deaths,” *Nova Scotia Archives*, entry for Charlotte Emma Ferguson, Death registration: Year: 1966, Number: 4045
- ⁴⁸ “Nova Scotia Births, Marriages, and Deaths,” *Nova Scotia Archives* (<https://archives.novascotia.ca/vital-statistics/>: accessed 4 November 2022), entry for Julia Arleen [sic] Arthrell, Marriage registration: Year: 1942, Number: 117362
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ *The Expositor*, Friday, 31 December 1993, *Newspapers.com* (www.newspapers.com: accessed 25 November 2022), entry for MacDonald, Arleen [sic], Brantford, Ontario
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² “Canada, Find a Grave Index, 1600s–Current,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 25 November 2022), entry for John Dan MacDonald