

Private William Sanford Speight®

Regimental number: 3035590

75th Battalion, Canadian Infantry

born: 1899–died: 1918

Private William Speight, the son of John Dickie Speight (b. 1878)¹ and Isabella (b. 1876),² née MacKinnon, was born on 3 October 1899 in St. John, New Brunswick.³ He was one of a large number of offspring, of whom only a few lived past infancy. In addition to William, those who survived were Althea Pearl (b. 1901),⁴ Lillian Millicent (b. 5 August 1905),⁵ John Daniel (b. 14 February 1910),⁶ and Mary, the last-born child (b. 1916).⁷ Mary's birth certificate indicates that she was the eleventh child born, of whom three were still alive. The names above suggest that the number of children living in 1916 should be four. Two of the above, our soldier and Lillian, did not live to the age of 20 (see below).

John Dickie was a unilingual anglophone who worked as a labourer in a rolling mill.⁸ He married Isabella on 3 September 1898.⁹ Then, on 28 March 1918, at the age of almost 40, he enlisted in St. John in the 1st Depot Battalion of the New Brunswick Regiment. According to his attestation form, he had previously served with No. 3 Company, 3rd Regular Artillery, which was based in St. John.¹⁰

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Private John Speight went overseas with his battalion to England on 1 August 1918, disembarking on 16 August. He did not see action and returned to Canada in June 1919 on demobilization. He returned to his job as a labourer in a rolling mill¹² for a short while but soon became a switchman for the New Brunswick Power Company. John held this job for his last 23 years, according to his obituary,¹³ and worked up to the last day of his life. He died on 5 November 1943.¹⁴ Isabella died in St. John in 1956.¹⁵

William enlisted a month after his father, on 26 April 1918, in Toronto. His occupation was given as labourer, and his address as Bangor, Maine, with his mother; his father was living in St. John at the same time.¹⁶ His cited date of birth was a year earlier than the actual one, possibly so he could be sent overseas to fight, for which you had to be 19.¹⁷

William also had some prior military experience: 12 months with the 14th Prince of Wales Own Rifles (officially the 14th Regiment, Princess of Wales Own Rifles, based in Kingston, Ontario¹⁸). This time he was assigned to the 1st Depot Battalion of the 1st Central Ontario Regiment. This depot battalion was located in Toronto and provided reinforcements to the 3rd Reserve Battalion in England and other units.¹⁹ Private William Speight embarked on the SS *Cassandra* on 3 June 1918 and disembarked in England on 21 June. He was taken on strength by the 12th Reserve Battalion in Witley, Surrey, where he underwent further training.

Private William Speight was transferred to the 75th Battalion on 20 October 1918 and shipped to France, where he joined his unit on 28 October. Within a week he was dead.

The 75th Battalion was stationed at Beauvrages, just outside the city of Valenciennes, the last major French city still in German hands.²⁰ The war diary noted on 31 October that 80% of the men were practically untrained. On 3 November the battalion went into battle in support of the attack on Valenciennes. Good progress was made, but at the cost of 40 Other Rank casualties.²¹ One of those was Private William Speight, who received shrapnel wounds to his back and chest. He was taken to

No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station, where he died the same day of his wounds received in action.

He was buried that day in the Auberchicourt British Military Cemetery (Grave 1, Plot 1, Row B).²² The inscription on his grave reads:

WE LOVE HIM BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US

Auberchicourt, a village about 12 km to the east of Douai, was occupied by Commonwealth troops in October 1918. The Auberchicourt British Cemetery, which is just west of the village, was set up at the end of October and was used until February 1919, while the 6th, 23rd and 1st Canadian casualty clearing stations were located nearby. A casualty clearing station (CCS) was a military medical unit behind the front lines, usually located near transportation.²³ Casualties who did not return to their unit, die or could not be adequately treated in the CCS were stabilized before being transported to a field or military hospital.

No. 1 CCCS, originally designated as No. 2 Clearing Hospital, was organized at Liverpool, Nova Scotia, and at Valcartier, Quebec, in August and September 1914. It was part of the first contingent of the Canadian Expeditionary Force sent to Europe, arriving in England in October 1914. Casualty clearing stations were not stationary: after being first established at Aire, France, in March 1915, No. 1 CCCS moved 12 times to various locations in France, Belgium and finally, Germany. It ceased operations in February 1919.²⁴

The unit was shelled at least three times in 1916 and 1917. At the conclusion of the war, it was one of the foremost medical units on the advance into Germany. An incomplete record of the unit's operations underestimates a total of 42,489 admissions to the unit, of which 37,546 were transferred to other hospitals, to base, or returned to the field. At least 879 servicemen died at No. 1 CCCS.²⁵

Private William Sanford Speight received posthumously the Victory Medal (for service in an operational theatre) and the British War Medal (for service overseas between 1914 and 1918).

William's sister **Althea Pearl** (known both as Althea and Pearl) was married young, at age 15 (though the marriage record says age 17), to Elmer Daniel Robinson in 1917;²⁶ he was an American with Canadian parents who worked as a labourer in a saw mill.²⁷ By 1930 they had seven children aged 10 or under and were living in Danforth, Maine. By 1940 they had had one more child, with all eight still living at home.²⁸ Althea died in 1994 at the age of 92,²⁹ 24 years after her husband.³⁰

Lillian, as mentioned above, did not live to adulthood. She passed away at home in St John in November 1918, aged 13. No cause of death was given in the newspaper article reporting her death.³¹

John Daniel was employed as a baker in St. John in 1931³² and married Louise Irene Miller the next year.³³ According to his obituary,³⁴ he worked for many years with the Saint John Milling Company, and he also served in the Royal Canadian Navy in the Atlantic during WW II. His tombstone reads "John D Speight Cook RCNVR" (Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve).³⁵ John Daniel died in 1974.

At age 18 (in 1934), **Mary Isabel** married William Arthur Sellen, a labourer.³⁶ By 1949 she was living with Olaf Olsen, another labourer.³⁷ She was listed as a widow, though no death notice for her

husband has been found in that timeframe. She died in 1960, leaving behind four sons and two daughters from the two men.³⁸

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¹ “Canada, Find a Grave Index, 1600’s–Current,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 10 January 2026), entry for John Dickie Speight

² “Canada, Find a Grave Index, 1600’s–Current,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 10 January 2026), entry for Isabella Speight

³ “New Brunswick, Canada, Births and Late Registrations, 1810–1906,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 9 January 2026), entry for William Sanford Speight

⁴ “1911 Census of Canada,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 9 January 2026), entry for Alpha [sic] Speight. Althea’s middle name comes from her marriage record.

⁵ “Vital Statistics from Government Records—Birth,” *Provincial Archives of New Brunswick* (<https://archives2.gnb.ca/Search/VISSE/Default.aspx?culture=en-CA>; accessed 28 January 2026), entry for Speight, Lillian Millicent

⁶ “Vital Statistics from Government Records—Birth,” *Provincial Archives of New Brunswick* (<https://archives2.gnb.ca/Search/VISSE/Default.aspx?culture=en-CA>; accessed 28 January 2026), entry for Speight, John Daniel

⁷ “Maine, U.S., Birth Records, 1715–1922,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 9 January 2026), entry for Mary Isabel Speight. Mary’s mother, Isabelle, spent some time in the States, but no clear explanation for the family moves was found.

⁸ “1911 Census of Canada,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 9 January 2026), entry for John Speight

⁹ “New Brunswick, Canada, Marriages, 1789–1950,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 9 January 2026), entry for John Speight [sic]

¹⁰ “Canada, World War I CEF Personnel Files, 1914–1918,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 9 January 2026), entry for John Dickey Speight. Unless otherwise specified, all information about his military service comes from this source.

¹¹ “3rd Field Artillery Regiment (Canada),” *Wikipedia* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/3rd_Field_Artillery_Regiment_\(Canada\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/3rd_Field_Artillery_Regiment_(Canada)): accessed 9 January 2026), search for No. 3 Company, 3rd Regular Artillery

¹² “1921 Census of Canada,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 9 January 2026), entry for John Speight

¹³ “John D. Speight Passes Suddenly,” *Saint John Times Globe*, 6 November 1943, page 8, *Newspapers.com* (<https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/1113762363/>: accessed 9 November 2026), search for John Dickie Speight

¹⁴ “Canada, Find a Grave Index, 1600’s–Current,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 10 January 2026), entry for John Dickie Speight

¹⁵ “Canada, Find a Grave Index, 1600’s–Current,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 10 January 2026), entry for Isabella Speight

¹⁶ “Canada, World War I CEF Personnel Files, 1914–1918,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 10 January 2026), entry for William Sanford Speight. Unless otherwise specified, all information about his military service comes from this source.

¹⁷ “Enlisting into the army,” *The Long Long Trail* (<https://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/soldiers/a-soldiers-life-1914-1918/enlisting-into-the-army/>: accessed 10 January 2026), search for minimum age for enlisting

¹⁸ “Princess of Wales Own Regiment,” *Wikipedia* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Princess_of_Wales%27_Own_Regiment: accessed 10 January 2026), search for 14th Prince of Wales Own Rifles

¹⁹ “Part 10: Territorial Regiments,” *Canadian Soldiers* (<chrome-extension://efaidnbmnmmnibpccajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.canadiansoldiers.com/insignia/brookerpdfs/>

[Part%2010%20Canadian%20Garrison%20&%20Reserve.pdf](#): accessed 10 January 2026), search for 1st Depot Battalion of the 1st Central Ontario Regiment

²⁰ "Battle of Valenciennes (1918)," *Wikipedia* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Valenciennes_\(1918\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Valenciennes_(1918))): accessed 3 January 2026), search for Battle of Valenciennes

²¹ "War diaries - 75th Canadian Infantry Battalion," *Library and Archives Canada* (<https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/home/record?idnumber=2006069&app=fonandcol&ecopy=e001120851>): accessed 10 January 2026), search for war diary 75th battalion

²² *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (www.cwgc.org: accessed 10 January 2026), entry for William Sanford Speight, Service No. 3035590

²³ "Casualty Clearing Station," *Wikipedia* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casualty_Clearing_Station: accessed 2 May 2020)

²⁴ "War diaries - 1st Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *Library and Archives Canada* (<https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/Home/Record?app=fonandcol&IdNumber=2005082&new=-8585804116857646704&ecopy=e001509146>: accessed 26 January 2026), search for No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station War Diary

²⁵ "Record of service - Overseas Military Forces of Canada medical units," *Government of Canada* (www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/military-history/history-heritage/officialmilitary-history-lineages/ledgers/ww1-medical-units.html: accessed 17 June 2018), entry for 1st Canadian Casualty Clearing Station

²⁶ "New Brunswick, Canada, Marriages, 1789–1950," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 11 January 2026), entry for Althea Pearl Speight

²⁷ "1930 United States Federal Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 11 January 2026), entry for Pearl Robinson

²⁸ "1940 United States Federal Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 11 January 2026), entry for Pearl Robinson

²⁹ "Maine, U.S. Death Index, 1960–1997," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 11 January 2026), entry for Althea Pearl Robinson

³⁰ "U.S., Find a Grave Index, 1600's–Current," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 11 January 2026), entry for Elmer Daniel Robinson

³¹ "Lillian M. Speight," *Telegraph-Journal*, 23 November 1918, page 5 in *Newspapers.com* (<https://www.newspapers.com/image/1108932773/?article=1c6ca8f4-88be-49b8-8e22-837e75611a40&terms=Lillian%20M.%20Speight>: accessed 27 January 2026), search for Lillian M. Speight

³² "1931 Census of Canada," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 11 January 2026), entry for John Speight

³³ "New Brunswick, Canada, Marriages, 1789–1950," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 11 January 2026), entry for John Daniel Speight

³⁴ "Obituary," *Saint John Times Globe*, 4 July, 1974, page 2, *Newspapers.com* (<https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/1113982353/>: accessed 11 January 2026), search for John D. Speight

³⁵ "Canada, Find a Grave Index, 1600's–Current," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 10 January 2026), entry for Cook John D Speight

³⁶ "New Brunswick, Canada, Marriages, 1789–1950," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 11 January 2026), entry for Mary Isabel Speight

³⁷ "Canada, Voters Lists, 1935–1980," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 12 January 2026), entry for Olaf Olsen, 1949

³⁸ "Deaths," *Telegraph Journal*, 16 August 1960, page 14, *Newspapers.com* (<https://www.newspapers.com/image/1109922202/?match=1&terms=%22Mary%20Olsen%22>: accessed 12 January 2026), search for Mary Olsen