

IRVINE FAMILY OF GLETNESS



JAMES JOHN IRVINE,

William Irvine (known as Muckle Willie Irvine and reputed to have the strength of two men), Seaman, R.N.R. Shetland section. Patrol duty. Gletness, South Nesting. (Father of James and Frank) See story by George Gear on adjacent sheet.

James John Irvine (also known as Louis), Signaller, 8th Battalion, 90th Winnipeg Rifles, 1st Canadian Contingent. Son of William Irvine, Gletness. Killed in France April 25th 1915, aged 24. Buried: Ypres Memorial, West-Vlaanderen, Belgium

Francis (Frank) Pottinger Irvine, Private, 2nd Canadian Motor Machine-Gun Brigade. Gletness, South Nesting. William's wife was Vera Pottinger. They had nine daughters (although at least two died at a young age) and another son named William. William was a Christian Socialist and emigrated to Canada in 1907. Unlike his brothers he didn't volunteer for WWI service, believing that war led to profiteering. He was politically active, becoming a central figure in various left-wing groups. He was elected a member of the Canadian parliament for two terms, and was known as "the Prairie Radical".

Some history of the 90th Winnipeg Rifles:

By Tuesday night, 6 August 1914 the 90th was in camp at St. Charles, one of the first Canadian units to be under canvas and training for active service. The Regiment was designated in the CEF as the 8th Canadian Battalion, 90th Winnipeg Rifles, and was on its way to Camp Valcartier on 24 August, less than three weeks after the outbreak of war.

For the 8th, the days from the disembarkation at Plymouth on 17 October 1914, the training on Salisbury Plain over a wet winter, and the move, one platoon at a time, into quiet sectors of the western front to accustom them to trench routine, was a prelude to the 14 April 1915 entry into the Ypres salient where it formed a part of the 2nd Brigade. At 0400 hrs on the morning of Saturday, 24 April 1915, a blue-green-yellowish cloud was seen rolling over No Man's Land towards the battalion trenches. It was the second enemy gas attack. Half the battalion succumbed to the poisonous fumes. The battalion on the left was obliged to retire and Colonel Lipsett's 8th Battalion found itself in danger of being surrounded. But it held on. While supporting battalions were preparing new defences in the rear, the men of the Regiment kept up a withering fire on the enemy, drove off an attack on its front and withstood fearful enfilade fire from left and right, and this from an enemy force five times its size.

Thus began a tradition of never losing a trench to the enemy, a tradition never to be broken throughout the war's duration.

With the early morning of the 25th came relief troops from the Durham Light Infantry, but only for three companies of the battalion. Number 4 Company, on the right, under Captain George Northwood, saw its relief start forward and then turn back. As the day wore on and the battle's intensity did not relent, the Durhams were seen gradually falling back. By 1800 hrs there were no troops left on the front line except 4 Company and the machine gun section of the battalion. A letter from Major Munro at the time tells of the final act of that terrific engagement "George Northwood stuck it out at the trenches until the last and fought like a tiger, as did Owen, Bell and young Andrews, all of whom we believe are captured. Only the Colonel, McMeans, Morley, Scott, McLeod and myself were in the line-up with two hundred and thirty-one other ranks on Tuesday evening when we re-assembled at Wieltj. "

After the war David Lloyd George paid the battalion this tribute: "The 8th, by steadiness under strain, was the focal point of saving the channel ports and removing the danger to England of invasion. "

Such was the stirring baptism by fire of this battalion during the First World War. By the time it was over the 8th Battalion had won 20 battle honours for the Regiment and 431 decorations, including three Victoria Crosses (CSM F.W. Hall, Corporal A.P. Brereton and Corporal F.G. Coppins). Two former members of the 90th, Captain C.P.G. O'Kelly and Sergeant R. Spall, won Victoria Crosses while serving with other battalions. Action followed action: Festubert in May 1915; Givenchy in June; Mount Sorrel the following June; the Somme in September of 1916 with the 8th Battalion attacking on the Zollern Redoubt and Hessian and Regina Trenches. Then came the April 1917 attack on Vimy Ridge in a blinding snowstorm under withering fire, onward the capture of Arleux; then Fremoy, Lens, Hill 70, followed by the mud and death of Passchendaele in November. In 1918 came the return to the Somme to blunt a German attack on Amiens, and on to the Last Hundred Days – the battle of Arras to turn the flank of the Hindenburg Line, Drocourt-Queant in order to cross the fire swept Canal du Nord, the Battle of Cambrai which pierced the Hindenburg Line which allowed the Pursuit to Mons.

From the Royal Winnipeg Rifles Abridged Regimental History