



Remembering Alfred Cake

Rudy Norman, The Nor'wester - August 7, 2014

John Braye stands behind the gravesite of his cousin, Alfred Cakes, who was killed in WWI the day before his sixteenth birthday.

When John Braye's grandmother passed away, she willed him her house and everything in it.

Braye, who lives in Brighton, is a former member of the Canadian Armed Forces where he served as a

paratrooper for most of his career. He's seen overseas action in Cypress and spent the last few years of his storied service in Goose Bay working as a tech for the Dutch Air Force.



Braye has military running through his blood - a serviceman through and through. He says the discovery he made in his grandmother's house, though was one he longed to make.

"I was in a back room going through some old trucks, and I pulled out this photo," he said. Braye knew the photo existed, however, he wasn't sure where it was, or if it was still around.

On the rugged old piece of paper stood a man in what appeared to be a Scots formal uniform, obviously involved in some sort of military.

"They called a 'hero pose,'" he explained. "Basically, when soldiers went overseas they would go and get dressed up and pose for their photo all dressed in this gear, and send it back home for their family as a keepsake."

The photos of the young boys standing in the glory were sent back to Newfoundland and given to relatives as a badge of honour for what their family member was contributing to the war effort in Europe.

The picture Braye held in his hand had an inscription on the back.

"I turned it over, and my grandmother had written that it was her grandfather's nephew," he said. "His name was Alfred Cake."

Cake was the first cousin, three generations removed from Braye, yet the lifetime soldier says he instantly felt a connection to his ancestor.

"I started researching who he was and what he did," he said. "I spent a lot of time trying to track him down and get as much information on him as I could."

Braye invested time and resources into placing Alfred Cake in whatever history he could. He sought out history books and archives relating to WWI at the Provincial Archives in St. John's. He was able to track down Braye's service number, and a wealth of information relating to his service with the First Royal Newfoundland Regiment.

"He was just 14 years old when he went over," said Braye. "He wasn't old enough - but he probably did what most of them did. Took the paper his mother was supposed to sign, went outside and got one of his buddies to do it and passed it back in and went on."

Braye says his knowledge of his relative began to grow, as he gathered more information. However nothing could prepare him for the news he got in late June.

"I was down at the Legion and I got a call," he said. "The lady asked, 'Is this John Braye?' and I said 'yes,' and she said 'you're going to Beaumont Hamel.'"

Braye says he broke down in tears when he heard the news. He'd been selected as part of a contingent to visit Beaumont Hamel and other war sites in Europe through the annual Royal Canadian Legion pilgrimage.

For Braye, it was a dream come true - not only for the historical significance of the journey but also for the personal connection he now had.

"I wanted to find out as much about Alfred Cakes as I could while I was over there," he said. Little did Braye know just how much he would experience.

Alfred Cakes spent just under two years in France with the Royal Newfoundland Regiment. He arrived there at the tender age of 14, and celebrated his 15th birthday on the battlefield.

During the Battle of the Somme, on that fateful July 1 day, Alfred Cakes was one of the brave young men who went over the top into no-man's land. He was injured that day, but survived and went on to fight again.

Braye says walking through the trenches in France, his mind went back to his cousin, and what it must have been like for him.

"One of the people that worked at the cemetery came up to me and asked me if I had any relatives buried there," he said. "I told her yes, Alfred Cakes."

Braye says the woman's eyes lit up. She led him to the place where Cakes had been standing when a shell found its target, and brought the young man to his end, the day before his sixteenth birthday.

"He was the youngest person buried in that cemetery," explained Cakes. "He's a talking point for every tour

guide that leads a group through."

John Braye says his memories of visiting the site where he cousin was killed is something he'll never forget. As a former soldier himself, he said it all comes home perhaps even more than for most.

However, his emotions felt throughout his time there, came to a head one day, during a small remembrance ceremony.

"I remember we were standing there, and they were leading us into the Ode to Newfoundland," he said. "Finally, we got to that line - where once they stood we stand. Let me tell you, when you're standing at Beaumont Hamel, and you're singing those words, it doesn't matter how tough you are - something's got to give."