

Mervin Cecil Simmons 1886-1964



Mervin Cecil Simmons was born 27 October 1886 in the Verschoyle, Dereham Centre area of Oxford County, about 10 km south of Ingersoll, to parents Albert Simmons (1851-1925) & Elizabeth Ellis (1855-1910). Two generations of the Simmons family farmed in the former Dereham Township, now South-West Oxford, on Concession 6, Lot 18.

Mervin's Grandfather, Orrin Simmons, emigrated from New York State in 1844 and settled in Dereham Township, building a farm for his family.



Albert Simmons & Elizabeth Ellis Simmons, parents of Mervin

Family

Parents



Albert C Simmons
1851-1925



Elizabeth "Lizzie" Ellis
1855-1910

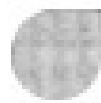
Siblings^



William George Flint Simmons
1881-1968



Verna Simmons
1883-1952



Katie Edith Simmons
1885-1970



Una Beatrice Simmons
1889-1974



Sydney Albert Simmons
1891-1989

Spouse and children



Catherine May Parker
1896-1949



Baby Boy Simmons
1928-1928



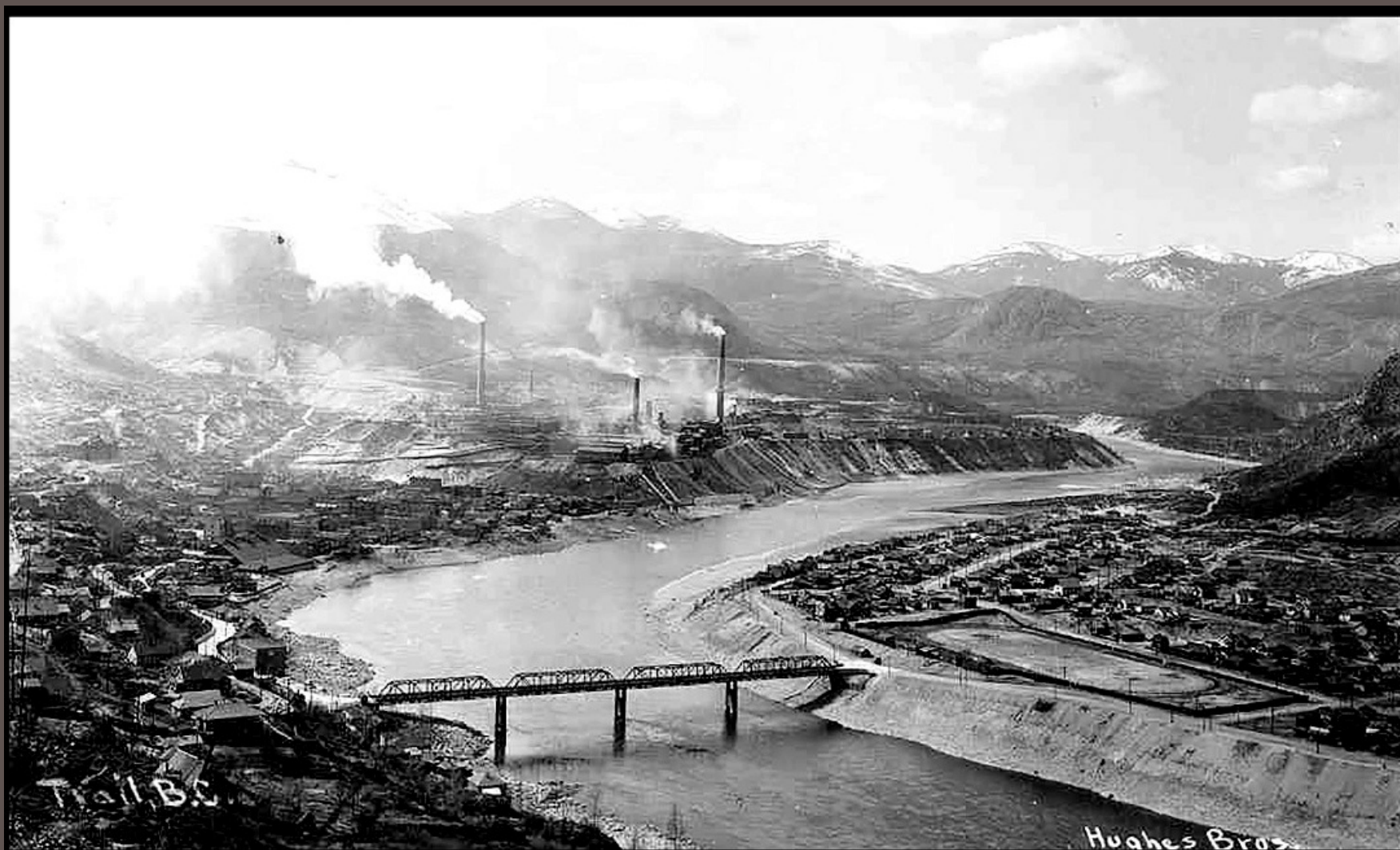
Private

Spouse



Honor Jessie Ellis
1908-1987

Two events occurring in 1910 brought change to the Simmons family. The death of Elizabeth, Mervin's mother, and the marriage of sister, Verna, to Ralph Brown in Manitoba, resulted in a shift westward. Albert, Mervin's father moved to live with his daughter in Buchanan, Saskatchewan for a time. Mervin felt the call of the west as well. Upon the announcement that Britain has declared war on Germany in August of 1914, he was working in Trail, British Columbia as a carpenter on a construction project on the Columbia River.



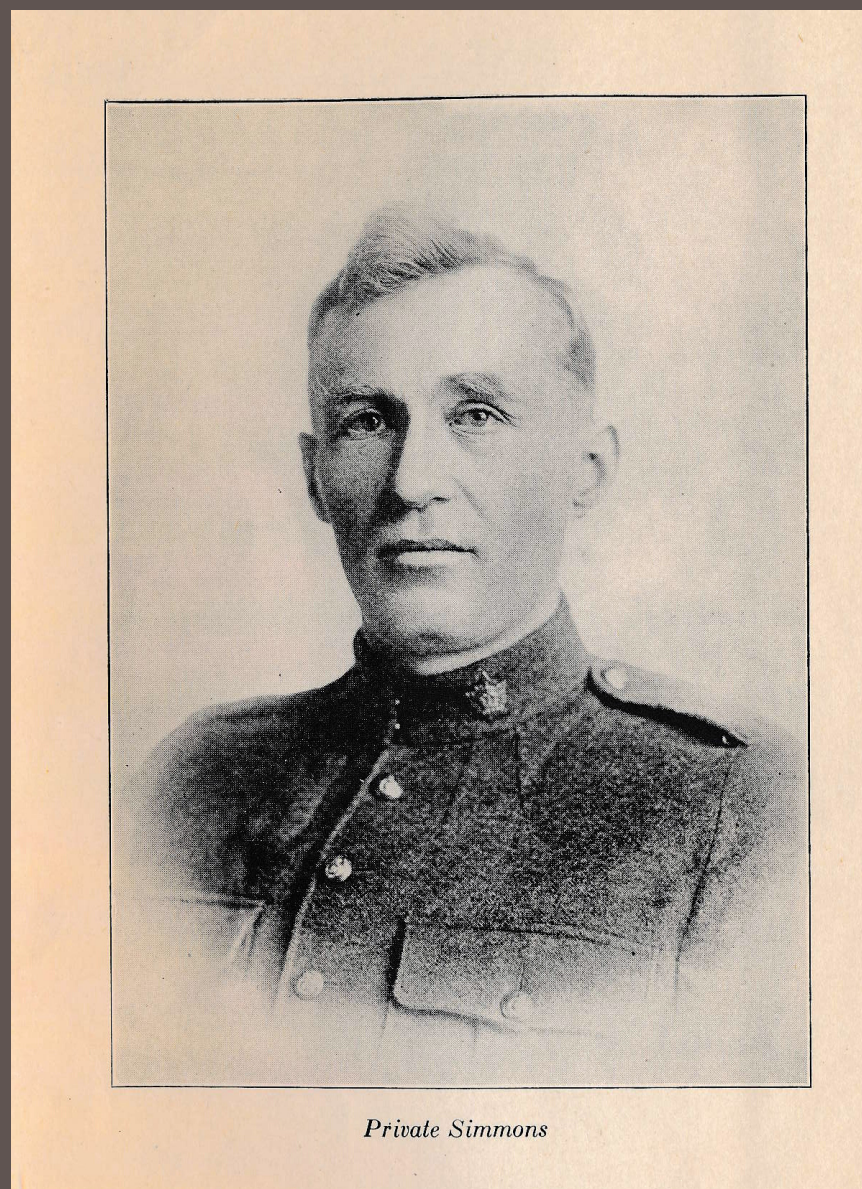
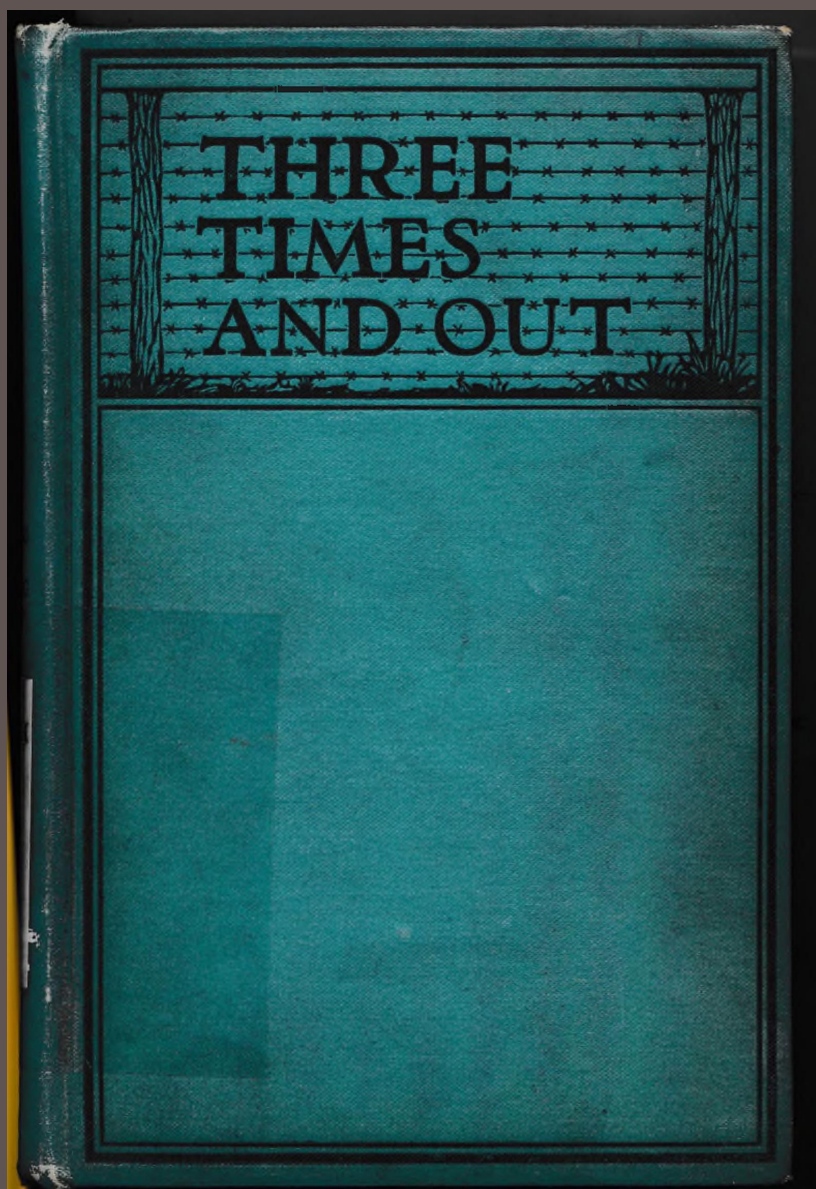
Trail, British Columbia, circa 1914, smelter and Columbia river.

It is at this point in Mervin's story that it is best told in his own words. After his service in World War I, Mervin felt the need to document his experiences. Finding himself in Edmonton, Alberta in 1918, he began the search for a ghost writer to tell his story. Mervin pitched his story to national best-selling author, Nellie McClung. She immediately recognized Mervin as an accurate observer, who told a 'straightforward and unadorned tale' of brave deeds and daring escapes. She felt that Canadians of the time all knew local boys who had been captured as prisoners of war and incarcerated in the Stalags of Germany. Readers would be eager to read a first hand account of the perils they endured.



Author, Nellie McClung, (1873-1951)

Mervin & McClung's collaboration resulted in the publication of *'Three Times and Out'*, in 1918.



Private Simmons

Mervin was influenced by his work colleagues at Trail, BC, who were immediately determined to defend Canada & Britain in the war effort and that very evening they began military drilling in the town skating rink.

I worked on for about a week, but from the first I determined to go if any one went from Canada. I don't suppose it was all patriotism. Part of it was the love of adventure, and a desire to see the world; for though I was a steady-going carpenter chap, I had many dreams as I worked with hammer and saw, and one of them was that I would travel far and see how people lived in other countries. The thought of war had al-

excerpt from "Three Times and Out" by Nellie McClung & Mervin Simmons

Mervin's shooting marksmanship was recognized by enlistment recruiters and he was declared to be a sniper. Private Mervin C. Simmons' journey to the battlefields of Europe began and culminated on 24 April 1915, a beautiful spring day at Ypres, Belgium.

The 7th Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Forces dug muddy trenches at Ypres and settled in for battle. The German forces soon broke through the line nearby and began swarming the trenches near the Canadians. It was at this point that things reached a critical point, as artillery support was withdrawn in order to avoid it falling in the hands of the enemy. The order to retreat was soon given, as Mervin's unit was under heavy attack.

Mervin and his unit were captured by German forces and so began an arduous transport to Giessen Prison Camp, near Frankfurt, Germany.

THREE TIMES AND OUT

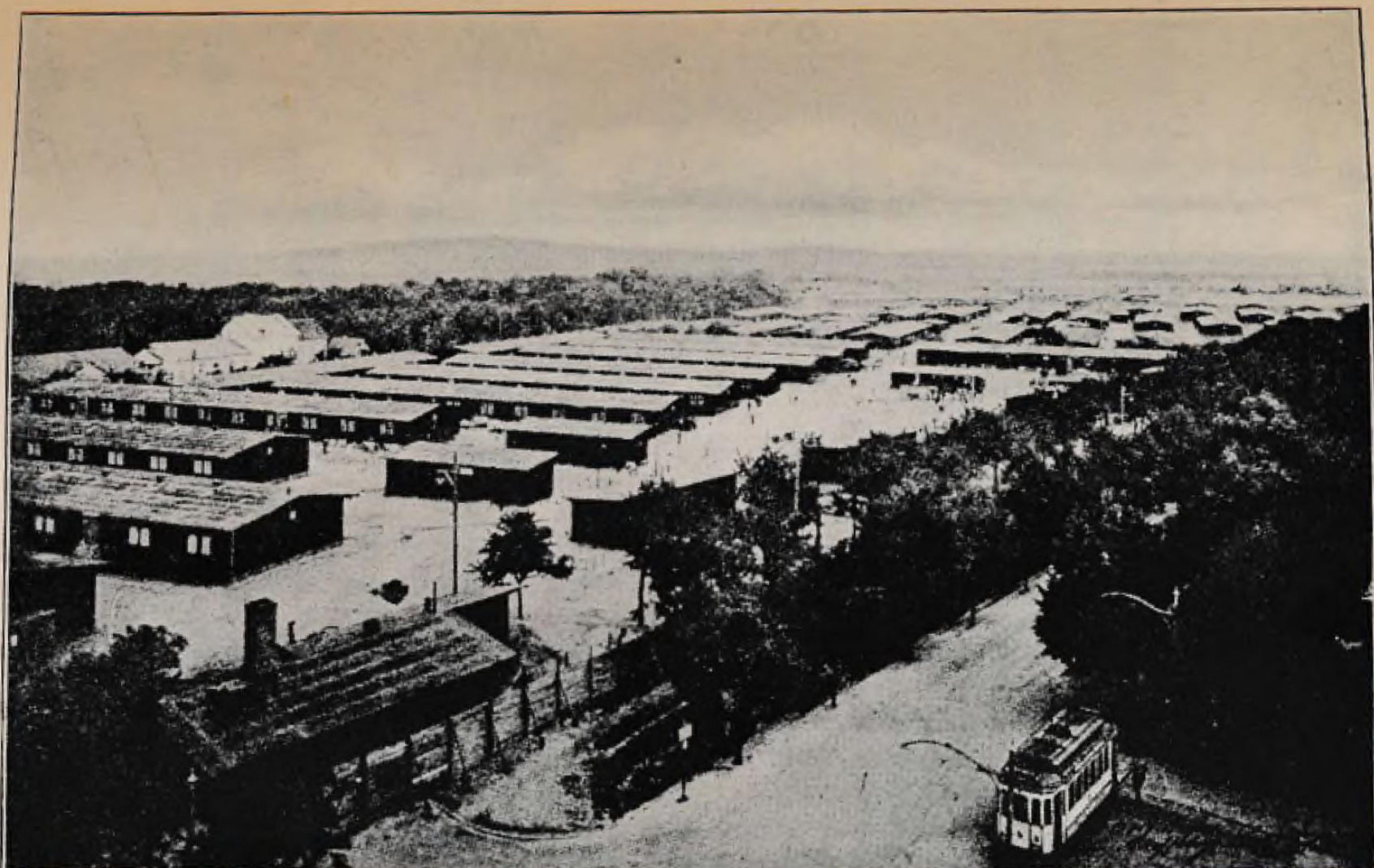
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I kept on going, but in a few seconds I got a bullet right through my shoulder. It entered below my arm at the back, and came out just below the shoulder-bone, making a clean hole right through.

I fell into a shallow shell-hole, which was just the size to take me in, and as I lay there, the possibility of capture first came to me. Up to that time I had never thought of it as a possible contingency; but now, as I lay wounded, the grave likelihood came home to me.

The new prisoners of war were deprived of food, water & sleep, this was to become a constant state of reality for Mervin. He spent a couple of months in a hospital camp to recover from his shoulder wound.

At Giessen Prison Camp, Mervin reunited with many Canadian he had encountered at Ypres. He states that as camps go, Giessen was better than most, poor quality food and limited rations were supplemented by Red Cross packages and parcels from home. Treatment by some of the German guards was fair and respectful, others took delight in meting out various tortures and punishments.



Giessen Prison-Camp

Mervin had not been at Giessen long before he began to entertain the idea of an escape. Previous escape attempts were talked of, with tales of guards shooting prisoners through both legs to deter any future forays.

The matter of escaping was in my mind all the time, but I was careful to whom I spoke, for some fellows' plans had been frustrated by their unwise confidences.

The possession of a compass is an indication that the subject of "escaping" has been thought of, and the question, "Have you a compass?" is the prison-camp way of saying, "What do you think of making a try?"

One day Mervin was approached by a Canadian chap from Toronto, who asked if "He had a compass". Mervin liked Tom Bromley immediately and they began to lay plans for an escape.

Barb wire fences, sentry towers and constant head counts, as well as spies within the ranks, were just some of the challenges the two faced. They realized that forced farm labour could be a way to get outside the prison gates - this was to be the strategy that would eventually pay off in all of Mervin's escape attempts.

The pair were permitted to go on a farm work detail about 18 miles outside the camp where they would board with a German farm family.



*Tom Bromley
In Red Cross overcoat with prison number and marked
sleeve*

That time decided what they
were going to do.
That night Germans attacked,
Aberdeen row 4 guns were captured.
Although there was tons of ammunition
handy these would not fire a
shot in taking up their position
and before they were captured
Lunnah. Corbin took strikers
out of 2 guns but other guns
were not put out of action to
Major Brown was in command
of battery but has since
been sent back to England.
At this time this battery was
attached to the Canadian
Division & presumably are
the 4 heavy Canadian
guns which the Germans
claimed to have captured
at that time

Attempt to Escape.

Came down from Giessen
Sat. Sept. 25th to work on
farm at Roebach in order
to have better chance
of escape.

Thought of many plans
but concluded going through
window at night the best
on account of being able
to take grub with us.

Sun - Oct 3rd. - After all in bed
told Bheral we were going to
beat it and cautioned him
to keep quiet about it.
About 11 p.m. we got up and
dressed, all but our shoes.
Bromley pulled staples away
and bent barbed wire back.
He crawled out of window, I
passed out to him our overcoats,
packs of grub, and shoes, and
crawled out myself.
Tried to close windows to
prevent them slamming
in the wind but

Two Pages from Private Simmons's Diary

Mervin & Bromley ran away from the German farm in October 1915. They diligently tried to avoid any towns & villages, using a hand drawn map that Mervin prepared based on knowledge of the geography gained by talking to other prisoners. They hoped to travel east of Frankfurt and south through the Black Forest, eventually crossing the Rhine into France. By sleeping under bushes and only travelling at night, the pair hoped to avoid contact with any humans. This strategy only held out for so long, when they were spotted after spending a rainy, cold night in a potato cellar.

CAUGHT!

At first it seemed as if there were a platoon of soldiers: they were everywhere I looked, and there were more coming! They were, for the most part, young fellows from the training camp at Aschaffenburg, and it was not every day they got a chance to catch a couple of prisoners. So it was done with a flourish!

The Captain instructed us to put up our hands, and two of the soldiers searched us. They were welcome to my map, because already I was thinking of making another, but I did not like to see my compass go — I kept wondering how I would ever get another.

Mervin & Bromley were put on a train back to Giessen Prison Camp, where they were segregated into 'The Cells' where escapees were punished by solitary confinement, no heat and poor rations for period of time.

After their time in 'The Cells' was at an end, returning to the regular population of the camp with all of the other Canadians, according to Mervin was, 'something like getting home for Christmas'. Mervin caught up with mail and parcels from family in Oxford County. Bromley & Mervin immediately began discussing another escape attempt, but a compass would have to be procured.

One of my great desires at this time was to have a compass, for Bromley and I were determined to make another attempt at escape, just as soon as we could, and many an hour I spent trying to find a way to get the information out to my friends that I wanted a compass. At last, after considerable thinking, I sent the following card to a friend of mine with whom I had often worked out puzzles, and who I felt would be as likely to see through this as any one I could think of.

This was the message:

DEAR JIM: — I send you this card along with another to come later, which please pass on to Fred. In next parcel, send cheese, please.

Yours as ever

M. C. SIMMONS

Unsure if his friend would understand what was needed, Mervin sent a similar letter to his brother Flint, at Tillsonburg.



Christmas 1916 at Giessen, marked the end of Mervin & Bromley's time there. They were transported to another camp with 400 other men, called Vehnemoor. This camp, near Oldenburg, Germany, housed agitators, troublemakers, and escapees.

An encounter with a Canadian of the Princess Patricia's, Corporal Edward Edwards, who was also moved to Vehnemoor, was to prove a catalyst to another escape attempt.



CORPORAL (NOW SERGEANT) EDWARD EDWARDS, PRINCESS PATRICIA'S CANADIAN LIGHT INFANTRY.

Edwards was one of the few members of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry to survive the fighting at Frezenberg Ridge east of Ypres, Belgium, on May 8, 1915, part of the Second Battle of Ypres. When their trench was overrun, the Canadians were shot, bludgeoned and bayoneted by Prussian troops; Edwards survived only because an officer arrived to stop the massacre.

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THREE TIMES AND OUT

gether next time. He was at Vehnemoor, too, and Bromley and I, in talking it over, decided to ask Edwards and his friend to join us. Then the four of us got together and held many conferences. Edwards had a watch and a compass; I had maps, and Edwards bought another one. We talked over many plans, and to Edwards belongs the honor of suggesting the plan which we did try.

In January 1916, Mervin, Bromley & Edwards used wire cutters to break through the barbed wire surrounding the camp. Edwards' friend lost his nerve and refused to part of the escape. Bromley turned back and surrendered when his legs gave out after traversing a bog over many hours - he was tortured for information about the escape. Edwards and Simmons were captured nine days later, close to the Dutch border, with no way to cross the flooded fast-moving spring River Em.

Their maps and compass were again confiscated by German soldiers. When asked why they had tried to escape by the camp Commandant, Edwards said, "we feared to tell the truth, that we had been forced to it by ill-treatment; so merely stated that we were tired of Germany and wanted to go home." Edwards and Simmons were transferred to 'The Cells' at Oldenburg again, where they spent two weeks in solitary confinement, no heat in January and almost nothing to eat.

I kept track of the days by marking on the wall each day with my finger-nail, and so I knew when the two weeks were drawing to a close. The expectation of getting out began to cheer me — and the last night I was not able to sleep much, for I thought when the key turned next time I should be free! I wondered if we could by any chance hear what had happened on the battle-front. Right away I began to feel that I was part of the world again — and a sort of exultation came to me . . .

They — had — not — broken me!

After this dark time, Mervin & Edwards were transferred to Parniewinkel punishment camp near Hanover. They were the only Canadians. "This one was the worst of all those we were to know," wrote Edwards. They were determined to escape. Only one critical missing element foiled this plan: a compass.

It was about May, I think, that a letter came from my brother Flint, telling me he was sending me some of the "cream cheese I was so fond of" — and I knew my compass was on the way.

In about three weeks the parcel came, and I was careful to open the cheese when alone. The lead foil had every appearance of being undisturbed, but in the middle of it I found the compass!

Help arrived in May of 1916, several months after Mervin's initial plea for a compass from his brother, Flint. A wheel of Oxford County cheese provided to be the vehicle necessary to conceal the compass from German censors. "It was one of the cream cheeses, so popular in Canada, no bigger than my closed hand," Lance-Corporal Edward Edwards wrote in his 1918 memoir, *The Escape of a Princess Pat*. The food was welcome, but the real treasure was the compass concealed inside, no small contribution to the happy end of his third wet and miserable cross-country escape attempt in the summer of 1916.

Mervin & Edwards volunteered for a work party, weeding a turnip field about four miles from the camp. When the farmer's wife was preparing dinner, the pair simply walked away. They encountered cold, damp weather and difficult travelling in a countryside filled with bogs and marshes, with nothing to eat and only the clothes on their backs. The pair survived by surreptitiously milking cows standing in pastures, and drinking all of the milk that they could hold.

That day was September 9th, and although we thought we were in Holland, we were not sure enough to come out and show ourselves. So we lay low, and ate the green apples that we had found on a tree between the river and the canal the night before. We slept a little, though too excited to sleep much.

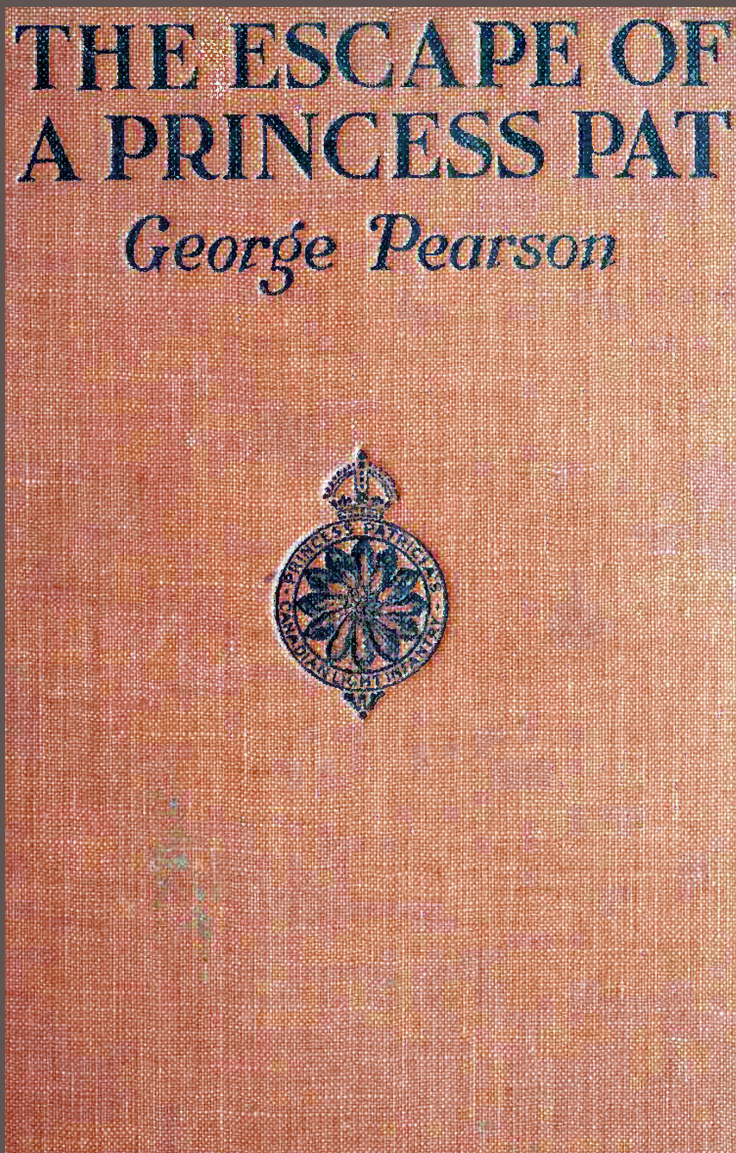
Mervin & Edwards had reached Holland and after some debriefing were sent to Rotterdam, where they sailed for England.

CONCLUSION

I HAVE been at home for more than a year now, and cannot return to the front. Apparently the British Government have given their word to the neutral countries that prisoners who escape from Germany, and are assisted by the neutral countries, will not be allowed to return to the fighting line. So even if my shoulder were well again, I could not go back to fight.

Ted and I parted in London, for I came back to Canada before he did. He has since rejoined his family in Toronto. I have heard from a number of the boys in Germany. Bromley tried to escape again, but was captured, and is now at a camp called Soltau. John

Edwards wrote his own account of his adventures with Mervin Simmons in his memoir, as told to author, George Pearson: *The Escape of a Princess Pat*.



THE ESCAPE OF A PRINCESS PAT

Extract from Montreal Gazette, Sept. 21, 1916.

EDWARD EDWARDS ESCAPES FROM FOE

**TORONTO SOLDIER WITH TWO OTHERS MAKE GET-AWAY.
WANDER FOR THREE WEEKS.
BRASS BAND ESCORTS THEM TO MAYOR OF TOWN IN
HOLLAND.**

London, Sept. 21.—Registered as dead by the Canadian Pay and Record office, which was about to authorise distribution of their effects, Lance-Corp. Edward Edwards of the Princess Patricias, 70 Standish Avenue; Pte. James Jerry Burke (1216) Eighth Battalion, Winnipeg and Pte. M. C. Simmons (23445) of Seventh Battalion, Port Arthur, have arrived in London after having escaped from a German prison camp. They experienced some strenuous adventures. For three weeks they were at large; slowly and cautiously wending their way to the Holland frontier, they covered the distance of 150 miles. In Holland the fugitives to their surprise, found a warm welcome. In fact, a local band headed them in procession to the Mayor, who in turn communicated with the British Consul, with the result that they were shipped to England.

THE ESCAPE OF A PRINCESS PAT

Extract from Toronto Daily Star, December, 1916.

HOME ON LEAVE AFTER ESCAPE FROM THE HUNS

**SGT. EDWARD EDWARDS TELLS GRAPHIC STORY OF 100
MILE FLIGHT.**

**WIFE HAD TO PROVE HUSBAND WAS ALIVE.
SENT HIS PHOTO AND LETTERS BEFORE WAR OFFICE
WOULD BELIEVE IT.**

No bands played and no Reception Committee extended the welcome hand to Sergt. Edward Edwards when he stepped off the train at the Union Station and walked to the home of his wife and family one day last week, after two years and seven months' absence at the front with a storehouse of thrilling experiences that rival even the exploits of the Three Musketeers. That he was one of only 49 left of the crack Princess Patricias who were mown down at the Ypres Salient on May 8, 1915, was wounded twice, missing and officially declared dead and escaped twice from German prison camps in company with two companions are only incidents in a long chapter of events which surpass in thrilling interest Dumas' most daring fiction. Tom Brumley, another member of a Toronto regiment, and Mervin Simmons, a Canadian from Trail, B.C., were the two friends of the modern D'Artagan, but unfortu-

Private Mervin Simmons was discharged on 6 January 1917 at Victoria, British Columbia. It is believed he travelled to Edmonton, Alberta, where at some point, he certainly connected with Nellie McClung, engaging her to tell his story to the world.

In 1918, Mervin also started the process of obtaining a Soldier Land Grant, which assisted veterans in obtaining farms and establishing a livelihood. He wished to secure a farm in the Peace River area on the border of Alberta & British Columbia, between Grande Prairie and Dawson Creek. In 1924, this grant was approved and Mervin was given title to the land that he had spent the interim years clearing and preparing for farming.

DOMINION LANDS ALBERTA				HOMESTEAD GRANT				REGISTER											
No.	Date of Application	Date of Fiat	Fiat No.	PATENT RECORD		NAME	Section	Part of Section	Township	Range	Meridian	Acres	Application No.	District No.	List No.	Home-stand Fee	Inter-change Fee	Value of Improvements	
				Folio.	Liber.														
567643	1917 May 23					Hans A. Pastie	34	N 6	77	16	6	180	4836	58	282	10			
567644	23					Halfdon Weckhorst	15	N 6	78	16	6		7	-	-	10			
567645	23					Chester A. Hagen	26	S 6	78	16	6		8	-	-	10			
567646	23	MAR 1 1924				Mervin C. Simmons	28	N W	78	13	6		9	-	-	10			

Having secured his farm, in 1927 Mervin married Catherine May Parker (1896-1949) at Grande Prairie, Alberta. After the death of his first wife, Catherine, Mervin married Honor Jessie Ellis in 1949. Mervin farmed for 40 years in the Dawson Creek area and passed away on 19 June 1964. He is interred at Dawson Creek Cemetery.



64-09-008390

PROVINCE OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES AND HOSPITAL INSURANCE
DIVISION OF VITAL STATISTICS

REGISTRATION OF DEATH

1. PLACE OF DEATH

Name of city or place Dawson Creek, B.C. (Rural) Name of Municipality (if any)
(If outside city or municipal limits add "Rural")
Street or road House No.
(If death occurred in a hospital or institution, give the name instead of street and number)

2. LENGTH OF STAY

(in years, months and days) In Municipality where death occurred 40 years In Province 52 years In Canada (if immigrant) Life

3. PRINT FULL NAME OF DECEASED

SIMMONS Mervin Cecil
(Surname or family name) (All given or Christian names in full)

4. PERMANENT RESIDENCE OF DECEASED:

Name of city or place Dawson Creek, B.C. (Rural) Name of Municipality (if any)
(If outside city or municipal limits add "Rural")
Street or road House No.

5. SEX

Male

6. CITIZENSHIP

Canadian

7. RACIAL GROUP

White

8. Single, Married, Widowed or Divorced

Married

9. BIRTHPLACE:

Verschoile, Ontario.

10. Date of Birth

October 27 1886
(Month by name) (Date) (Year)

11. AGE (Last Birthday)

77
YEARS MONTHS DAYS HOURS MIN.

OCCUPATION

12. (a) Trade, profession or kind of work as logger, fisherman, office clerk, etc. Farmer
(b) Kind of industry or business, as logging, fishing, bank, etc. Agriculture
(If labourer specify kind of work above) (If Housewife in own home answer "At Home")

13. Date deceased last worked at this occupation

June 10, 1964

14. Total years spent in this occupation

40 years

15. If married, widowed or divorced give name of husband or maiden name of wife of deceased

Honor Jessie Ellis

16. Name of father

Simmons

Albert

17. Maiden name of mother

Ellis

Elizabeth

18. Birthplace -

Ontario

Ontario

19. I certify the foregoing to be true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Given under my hand at Dawson Creek, B.C. this 19 day of June 19 64

Signature of informant [Signature] Relationship to deceased Wife
(Married woman not to use Husband's initials or given names)

Address of informant Dawson Creek, B.C.
(House No.) (Name of Street) (Name of City, Municipality or Place) (Province or State)

20. Burial, Cremation or Removal

Burial

Date June 23 19 64
(Month by name) (Date) (Year)

Place of Burial or Cremation Dawson Creek, B.C.
(Municipality, etc., where Cemetery located)

Name of Cemetery City Cemetery

21. Undertaker: Reynar's Funeral Home Ltd.

Address Dawson Creek, B.C.
(Name of City, Municipality or Place) (Province or State)

MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

22. DATE OF DEATH

June 19th 19 64
(Month by name) (Date) (Year)

23. I HEREBY CERTIFY that I attended deceased from June 29 19 64 to June 9 19 64, and last saw him alive on June 9 19 64

CAUSE OF DEATH		Approximate interval between onset and death
I Disease or condition directly leading to death (This does not mean the mode of dying, e.g., heart failure, asthenia, etc. It means the disease, injury, or complication which caused death.)	<u>420 Coronary Arteriosclerosis</u> (a) due to (or as a consequence of)	<u>8 years</u>
Antecedent causes Morbid conditions, if any, giving rise to the above cause, stating the underlying condition last.	(b) due to (or as a consequence of)	
II Other significant conditions contributing to the death, but not related to the disease or condition causing it.	(c) due to (or as a consequence of)	

24. If a woman, did the death occur either during pregnancy or within 90 days following pregnancy? Yes or No

25. (a) Was there a recent surgical operation? NO (b) Date of operation 19
(c) State findings of operation (d) Was there an autopsy? NO

26. If a violent death, fill in also: (a) Accident ; Suicide ; Homicide (b) Date of injury 19
(c) How did injury occur?
(d) Injuries sustained?
(e) Where did injury occur? (home, farm, industrial place, highway, etc.)

27. Signed by [Signature] Designation M.D. M.D., Coroner, etc.
Address Dawson Creek, B.C. Date June 19th 19 64

28. Print name of M.D., Coroner, etc., whose signature appears above H.J. O'Brien M.D.

29. Notations

30. I hereby certify that the above return was made to me at Dawson Creek

Dated June 23/64 19

District Registration No. 61164 (Signature of District Registrar)

(SEE REVERSE SIDE FOR INSTRUCTIONS)

MARGIN RESERVED FOR BINDING. WRITE PLAINLY, WITH UNFADING INK. THIS IS A PERMANENT RECORD.

CITIZENSHIP (NATIONALITY) is defined in terms of the country to which the person owes allegiance. The term "Canadian" should be used as descriptive of a person who was born in Canada or who has rights of Citizenship in Canada, unless he or she has subsequently become the citizen of another country.

RACIAL GROUP: For purposes of this registration it is necessary to specify only to which of the following broad racial groups the person belongs, as traced through the father: - White, native Indian, Negro, Chinese, Japanese, or other.

DO NOT WRITE BELOW THIS LINE OFFICE USE ONLY