

Charles William Boyd

Charles William Boyd was born 4 April 1894 in Coles Island, Queens County, NB, to William A. and Malinda P. Boyd. Though the Boyd family must have often travelled to Coles Island for work and basic provisions, the family more accurately lived several kilometres southeast of there, in a settlement once known as Sheba, in Johnston Parish—deep in the thick woodlands that defines the topography of central New Brunswick. As such, Charles was raised in considerable isolation and, like so many other New Brunswickers did and continue to do today, eventually became employed as a mill man. Even given his relative separation from world affairs, it seems that when word of the advent of the FWW (First World War) reached his community, Charles was made the decision not too long after to volunteer to join with Canadian Expeditionary Forces and fight for king and country.

What reasons Charles had for enlisting are likely to forever be his own; however, what is known is that on 20 October 1915, at the age of 21, Charles joined 3rd Field Artillery Regiment of the RCA (Royal Canadian Artillery) in Saint John, NB. Charles' attestation papers note that he was a very tall, fit young man of dark complexion, brown hair and hazel eyes; and with no prior medical issues, he was evidently a robust soldier to be. Following initial military training, No. 4 Canadian Siege Battery, to which Gunner Boyd was now attached, embarked for Britain abroad the RMS *Olympic* and arrived 11 April 1916. There, 4th Siege Battery was redesignated 131st Siege Battery and incorporated into the Canadian Corps. Following further training at Camp Horsham near Sussex, England, the whole of 3rd Field disembarked in Boulogne, France on 31 July 1916. On 7 August, under command of Major Louis Barker, 131st Siege Battery fired its first rounds of the war near Beaumont-Hamel in concert with the opening phase of Britain's ill-fated yet strictly necessary Somme Offensive. Barker's battery, including Gunner Boyd and the men of his gun crew, manned brand-new breech-loading Mark VI 8-inch howitzers—siege artillery capable of causing massive destruction to fortified German trenches and gun emplacements.

In early 1917, the RCA drifted into the Vimy sector as part of the massive British effort behind the Arras offensive. As such, Gunner Boyd took part in the events of the Battle of Arras, which is often remembered in Canada for the Canadian Corps' internationally recognized success at the Battle of Vimy Ridge. However, in the weeks following the capture of the ridge, the New Brunswick gunners sustained its heaviest casualties. As is mentioned in Loyal Gunners; 3rd Field Artillery Regiment (the Loyal Company) and the History of New Brunswick's Artillery, 1893 to 2012 by Lee Windsor (among others),

Apart from its commanding height, Vimy was important because it lay opposite an important junction between German positions protecting Lens and Lille to the north and the Hindenburg Line extending southward. The German army, especially its artillery units, spared no effort to reinforce the sector and contain the Canadian penetration. Of course, drawing German strength northward had been one of the intended goals of the Canadian operation. The price for this successful diversion was that Vimy Ridge remained a dangerous place during the spring and summer of 1917. (Windsor et al., pp. 119-120).

On 23 May, during a brief spell of retaliatory shelling, Gunner Boyd's gun emplacement was sighted and hit directly by enemy fire, totally destroying it and instantly killing him and three others:

The 4th Siege Battery's [counter-battery experimental shoots] invited retaliation, and two days later German guns found the battery's billet in the Souchez Valley. One massive shell killed four men instantly: Gunners Cyrus Gaskin, C.W. Boyd, Vernon McClaskey, and Leigh Northrup, all original members of the unit. It was the single worst day of the war so far for Major Barker's Battery. Barker held a formal funeral for them at what is now Caberet-Rouge Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery on the Souchez-Arras road so the survivors could grieve. The steady artillery duelling continued for the rest of spring as the ground dried, the countryside behind the front blossomed, and the skies cleared. (*Ibid.*, p. 121).

Gunner Boyd is still buried at Caberet-Rouge, next to his three brothers in arms whom died at his side. He was survived only by his parents back in Queens County and his medals, decorations, and remaining pay were sent to them following his death. Though Charles William Boyd may not have fully grasped the implications of joining up to fight in the world's first industrialized total war, it is without question that he took it on the chin—acting courageously in the face of accurate enemy fire and enduring the misery of trench warfare. From one ex-sapper to a loyal gunner and hero, I thank you Charles, and will always remember you and your most honourable of sacrifices, even if time has not. UBIQUE!