John Bernard Croak

My name is John Bernard Croak. I was born on May 18th,1892 in Little Bay, in the Dominion of Newfoundland. My parents James and Ceceila are Irish immigrants. I moved to New Aberdeen, Cape Breton when I was 4. My father was offered a job in the Mines. It was too good to pass up. He was offered free passage over and a company house. We arrived in New Aberdeen in 1900, right in the middle of the Industrial boom in Cape Breton. Our house has a beautiful view near West Street of green field and we could see the sun dance on the Atlantic Ocean for miles. That’s only if the fog didn’t roll in. My father spent most of his time under the ocean. He was a hard working coal miner. The promise of an easier life was soon forgotten when he witnessed the harsh mining conditions. He’d only see the sun on Sunday's, his day off. Mom was always busy around the house taking care of my brothers and sisters, Pat, Maggie, Josephine, myself, Mary and James. I went to New Aberdeen School and St. John’s School growing up. I was an impulsive child but was one of the lucky ones to stay in school until I was fourteen. Many of my friends had to help their fathers support their family at the age of 8, 9, and 10 yrs. Old. They were Trapper Boys in the mines. Dad worked 15 hour days in those mines and wouldn't get paid unless he brought up 15 tones of coal a day. I entered the mines at 14. I’d hear the whistle blow before sunrise and run to the Number 2 Colliery Mines. I remember how proud my father was and he taught me most of what I know about mining. It was dark, wet and dangerous down there. We never knew if there might be an explosion or a fire. I enjoyed lunch the most but had to eat it quickly or the rats would steal it. But us miners would stick together, and look out for each other. We needed to depend on our buddies to get us out if there was a fire. They treated the pit ponies better than they treated us!

I finally got a chance to go to British Columbia when I was 19. I was always up for a new adventure and thought it was a good chance to see the country. I was a wheat farmer out there for awhile. But, I decided to make my way back home after a few years. It’s on my way back home in August of 1915 that I enlisted in Sussex, New Brunswick with the 55th Battalion.when mom found out she was devastated. She didn’t want her boy going off to war. I was 23 years old, single, and I had fire in my soul to see the world.

After 3 months of basic training in Valcartier, Quebec we were told we were heading for England. Some of the boys were nervous, but me, I was all fired up! It was October 30th, 1915 that we boarded the S.S Corsican all 1099 of us and 42 officers. We left the port of Montreal the next day, for England. It was cramped but the cheers from the people waving and crying at the port fed my desire for something new. We sailed across the same ocean I would stare at and swim on as a boy. We arrived in Davenport, England on November 9th. Happy to put my feet on solid ground, we soon boarded a train to Bramshott. Blame it on my Irish roots but it was only 3 days later that I got myself in trouble!, ,Yes I’m impulsive but I got my hands on some whiskey and landed myself one week detention for drunkenness. It was my first infraction but it wouldn't be my last. A model soldier, I am not. They had trouble keeping me away from a good time. I wasn’t one for rules, and when I saw the chance to break camp I did I was feisty, fearless, blue eyed and fair haired. I lost a lot of my pay to fines. I saw more of that countryside than most!

We were transferred 6 months later after basic training to the 13th Battalion in France. A French Unit that was part of the Royal Highlanders of Canada. The Blackwatch. We arrived April 16th, 1916 at the Canadian Base Depot. It was just last week they asked me to draw up my will. The whole of my property and effects to my mother.

We entered into the field the next month on May 7th, 1916. The unit was encamped in a positions known as the Dominion Lines. We were busy doing route marches, gas-helmet drills, company training and sports. We spent most of our time in the front and support trenches. I spent 2 years as a Private in those trenches, damp, cold, wet and tired. I was pretty excited when I was given 10 days leave to England leave to England. I bet they were sick of me not following the commands and indulging in alcohol.

My most defining day wasn’t until August 8th, 1918 in Hangard Wood. It was an hour before dawn and it was rainy, foggy and cloud covered the battlefield. We began our advance, the artillery started and we couldn't see a thing through the thick smoke. The tanks were stopped in fear of running over the infantry ahead. The troops behind were forced to stop and wait.

I continued on and turned around to notice I was not with my platoon. There I stood, east of Amiens, alone. It was there I unexpectedly found myself faced with a German machine-gun nest. I started throwing grenades into it and without thinking attacked at bayonet point. I put their weapons out of action and took them prisoner. The shock on their faces showed why we were called the shock troops. Adrenaline was pumping through my veins when I felt a bullet rip through my right arm. I was stunned briefly but managed to meet up with my unit ahead.

The boys wanted me to get my wound dressed but I was stubborn and continued on. All of a sudden, we ran into another stronghold. I charged forward without hesitating and was the first to land on the German Trench Line. After seeing my fearlessness, the rest of my u it followed. We fired bullets and hand grenades onto the German machine gun positions. I grabbed my bayonet and routed out the enemy. I killed many of them. The ones I didn't kill, I captured.

I was shot in the knee, the pain was immense. I knew I didn't have much time. The sun began to set and I turned to my comrade and said, “ Do you wish to show your gratitude? Kneel down and pray for my soul.”

These actions led to the breaching of the German lines. The German General Ludendorff described the day as a “ black day” for the German Army. The Canadians advanced 8 miles by nightfall, captured 8000 prisoners, 161 guns and countless ammunition. The cost was 4000 casualties. It was the beginning of “Canada's 100 Days.”

I was awarded the Victoria Cross- the highest medal awarded while in His Majesty’s service.

Shortly after my death, my mother received a letter from my Battalion Chaplain. It read:

He was a splendid soldier, had done more than one brave deed in clearing out enemy machine gun nests, he could not have done more gallantly, and I am stating the truth when I tell you that the battalion could not honor his actions more highly than is done. Death came to him quite instantly and he is buried with his comrades near the place that he fell.

So, I ask you all to share drink to celebrate John Bernard Croak’s feisty and fearless spirit!