

Faces of Yesterday:

Dominick Pelusio

By Robert Fridlington

[Re-printed from Yesterday 8/1/1997]



One need only look at the monument in Memorial Park on Springfield Avenue to gain some appreciation of the tremendous contribution and sacrifice made by Cranford residents in World War I. The weathered bronze plaque carries the names of 320 men from the township who served in the armed forces during that conflict. The lengthy honor roll comprises a cross-section of Cranford's population and includes such surnames as Bargas, Chamberlain, DeChemin, DiFabio, Droescher, Fiske, Goldberg, Mahoney, Spurlock, Warsinski and Zemick.

At the top of the monument in a place of honor stand the names of fifteen men who made the supreme sacrifice, giving their lives while in military service. One of the names in this gold-star section is that of Dominick Pelusio, a Cranford man who served in the Canadian Army. Unfortunately, almost nothing is known about Pelusio's early life. Born in Italy, he was one of eight children of Catherine (Mrs. Dominick) Pelusio, a widow. Just when the Pelusio family emigrated from Italy and settled in Cranford is not known, but by the eve of World War I they were living at 26 Burnside Avenue, in a traditionally German neighborhood that became home to several immigrant Italian families in the early years of this century.

Dominick enlisted in the Canadian Army on July 20, 1915. Canada, by this time, was already in the war. At home pressure was mounting for American involvement, but it would be more than eighteen months before the United States entered the conflict.

Pelusio's reasons for enlisting can only be guessed at. Perhaps he was seeking adventure. More likely, he succumbed to the tug of ancestral loyalties. Italy had declared war against Austria-Hungary only two months earlier, and many Italian immigrants in the United States returned to their native land to enlist in the army. Perhaps Pelusio simply took a shorter route and enlisted in Canada as Canada was allied with Italy. Whatever his reason, he appears to have been a good soldier. While still in Canada, he was promoted to the rank of sergeant.

On April 16, 1916, Pelusio sailed for France where he served in the 14th Foresters Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. He received a minor wound but managed to survive eight months of mud and slaughter during the bloodbath known as the Battles of the Somme.

Then, on January 2, 1917, during a German attack against his detachment, Pelusio was felled by one of the most terrible innovations of modern warfare—poison gas. He was evacuated to a hospital in England and was later returned to Ottawa, Canada, for further treatment. In late April or early May, immediately after America's entry into the war, he received a furlough, which allowed him to return to Cranford to visit his mother. While home, he made appearances for the Red Cross and spoke of his experiences to school classes, giving graphic account of life in the trenches and the horror of the war.

Returning to Canada, Pelusio received further treatment for his scarred and damaged lungs, but over the next several months his condition grew progressively worse. Like other victims of the Germans' poison gas, he suffered an agonizing, lingering death.

Dominick Pelusio died in January, 1918, in Ottawa, Canada. Curiously, his obituaries gave neither his age nor the date of his death. He was buried with full military honors. His coffin, draped with the flag under which he had fought, was borne on a gun carriage and escorted by an honor guard to Beechwood Military Cemetery in Ottawa. Wounded members of his regiment carried floral tributes.

Pelusio was survived by his mother and his seven sisters and brothers. One of his brothers, Antonio, was serving in the U.S. Army. Dominick was also survived by his young widow and an infant son Albert.

Serving in a foreign army and under a foreign flag, Sgt. Dominick Pelusio was the first Cranford soldier to die of battlefield wounds in World War.