

# The Fighting Ballendines

June 25, 2014

<http://elinorflorence.com/blog/aboriginal-servicemen>

This band of EIGHT Ballendine brothers served in the Canadian Army during World War Two, following the path laid down by their father John Ballendine and his brother James, both crack snipers in the Great War.

Pictured here are James on the left and his younger brother John on the right. They are wearing pre-war militia uniforms belonging to the 22nd Light Horse, a cavalry regiment. Later both belonged to the 90th Winnipeg Rifles.



Doreen Ballendine Gilles of Battleford, Saskatchewan was just four years old when World War Two began, and ten when it ended.

But she clearly remembers waving goodbye to her eight older brothers at the train station as, one by one, they left home to join the army.

I visited Doreen recently, and she told me about her family's proud heritage. Sadly, there is little recorded history of this remarkable family, although the local Fred Light Museum in Battleford features an attractive display.

Here is Doreen at the museum with her family photos.

(Photo Credit: John Niddrie, [www.johnniddrie.com](http://www.johnniddrie.com).)



The family's impressive service record begins with her father, John Ballendine, and his older brother James. Both earned fame as crack snipers in the Great War.

The boys were of mixed white and aboriginal heritage. When I think about them, I'm reminded of the Cree snipers in Joseph Boyden's well-known novel called *Three Day Road*.

Their original name wasn't Ballendine. Their father was Frederick Ermineskin of Hobbema, Alberta. But Frederick chose the surname of his adoptive father Peter Ballendine, because he admired the Scottish fur trader.

Frederick moved to Saskatchewan and married a local Metis girl named Sophie Gardiner Cardinal. They had two sons: James, born in 1882; and John, born on August 9, 1883. John, shown here on the right with an unknown friend, was a handsome lad, and looked very dapper in this early photograph.



On November 20, 1906 John married a beautiful young girl named Marie Adelaide Oullette, born in Duck Lake, Saskatchewan on November 24, 1891. John was twenty-three years old, and Marie was just four days shy of her fifteenth birthday. This photograph appeared in the local newspaper, the Saskatchewan Herald.

**MR. AND MRS. JOHN BALLENDINE, SR.**



**Mr. and Mrs. John Ballendine on their wedding day, 1906.**

The young couple spent three years farming before moving back to Battleford where John worked for a federal survey crew. Marie bore five sons, one of whom died in childhood. The surviving boys were Thomas, born in 1907, followed by John, Frank and Wilfred. They were adorable little boys, healthy and active.

In 1914, John bid his young family farewell and headed overseas to fight in the Great War, along with his brother James. Here's a photo of the family he left behind: (from left to right) Frank, Marie, Wilfred, John and Thomas.



John enlisted in the 32nd Battalion and transferred to the 8th Battalion of the 90th Winnipeg Rifles. He was sent to France and established a record as a sniper, received several medals, and was mentioned in dispatches.

He is credited with killing thirty-six Germans. "He had thirty-six notches on his belt," Doreen said.

Wounded in 1916, John spent six months recovering in Scotland before being invalided home. After recuperating, he rejoined the Canadian Engineers but before he got back to France, the war ended.

His brother James joined the 22nd Saskatchewan Light Horse in 1911, and left with the first contingent in August 1914. He also transferred to the 8th Battalion, 90th Winnipeg Rifles, where he became a top battalion sniper. He was also severely wounded on April 13, 1916 during the second battle of Ypres, and after a long convalescence was invalided home.

(James became the town shoemaker, and spent the rest of his working life in Battleford known as "Shoemaker Jimmy." He married Annie Clara Sauve and had five daughters and one son.)

During the long years that John was away, Marie worked hard to raise her four little sons, all of whom became very independent and self-reliant.

When her husband finally came home, he returned to survey work and family life. The couple had another five sons, but sadly, one died in childhood.

Here's a delightful photo of the "second family" of four younger sons, looking very timid and camera-shy!



After a long wait, the family was finally blessed by a little girl in 1935, named Doreen. Her eldest brother Thomas was twenty-eight years older than her, and there was a ten-year gap between her and the youngest son Walter. Needless to say, her parents and brothers doted on her!

Here's a photo of John and Marie, looking very distinguished, with their two youngest children, Doreen and Walter. Doreen thinks she was about nine in this photograph, and Walter would have been nineteen.



The Ballendine brothers were handsome, strong, athletic boys, and six of them played on the Battleford Sunrise Millers hockey team. John Junior even travelled to Japan with the team in 1936 – the first Canadian hockey team to play in Japan. Wearing red and gold jerseys, the team played twenty exhibition games to much fanfare from the Japanese.

Three years later, World War Two was declared. The brothers were determined to carry on the family tradition, and join the Canadian Army.

“They all decided they were going, and that was it,” Doreen said. “Nobody could stop them.”

Over the next few years the boys enlisted and left home from the North Battleford train station. “We all went down to the station and saw them off, one by one. They hung their heads out of the windows and waved.” Here’s a photo of Edward leaving home.



Several books and movies have been made about family members who served together. *The Fighting Sullivans* is the true story of five brothers from Iowa who drowned when their ship was sunk. *Saving Private Ryan* is a fictional story about three American brothers who died, and the fourth, Private Ryan, is rescued by the army for the sake of his poor mother.

All the Ballendine brothers wanted to go overseas, but only five of them were successful. Happily, all of them survived.

Here, listed from oldest to youngest, are the eight brothers and their service numbers. (The "L" means they were from Saskatchewan.)

#### **THOMAS BALLENDINE**

Sergeant Tom Ballendine (L27241) enlisted in June 1940 with the Regina Rifles and was discharged in Debert, Nova Scotia, when the regiment went overseas. He served two years.





**JOHN BALLENDINE**

Private John F. Ballendine (L108791) enlisted in Regina in May 1943 and went overseas with the Canadian Infantry in 1944.



**FRANK BALLENDINE**

Rifleman Frank S. Ballendine (L27232) enlisted in the Regina Rifles in June 1940 and was honourably discharged after six months.



**WILFRED BALLENDINE**

Private Wilfred Ballendine (L 106779) enlisted in the Royal Canadian Medical Corps in 1943, and went overseas in February 1944.



**EDWARD BALLENDINE**

Company Sergeant Major Edward C. Ballendine (L 27152) enlisted in June 1940 with the Regina Rifles. He went overseas as a sergeant and was promoted to company sergeant major in England. In June 1943 he volunteered to go to Italy, and transferred into the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry.



**PAUL BALLENDINE**

Corporal Paul Ballendine (L 27152), after several attempts to join his brothers overseas, enlisted in February 1942. He was posted to Guelph and Listowel, Ontario, as an instructing corporal in infantry tactics and was honourably discharged in 1943.



**BENJAMIN BALLENDINE**

Lance Corporal Benjamin R. Ballendine (L 27264) enlisted in June 1940 and went overseas with the Regina Rifles. With his brother Edward, he went to Italy in June 1943 and was attached to the Loyal Edmonton Regiment. He was a well-known sniper during the war.



Ben also married an English girl. Here is his wedding photo, with his brother Wilfred as best man. The couple had one son named Colin.



**WALTER BALLENDINE**

Private Walter E. Ballendine (S.L. 110301), the youngest son, joined the army at age seventeen. He was made an instructing corporal and was stationed at Prince Albert for two years. When he was old enough to go overseas, he gave up his stripes and joined the Royal Canadian Medical Corps in May 1943. He finished serving in Holland.





The boys, when they were away from home, always mentioned their little sister. Here's a brief letter from second-eldest son John, just before he shipped out.

*Debert, Nova Scotia*

*November 4, 1944*

*Dear Mother, father, bros and Sis:*

*Just a few lines to let you know that I am fine, hoping you folks are the same. We had our final medical today, so folks I guess it is within a day or so that we move from here. Maybe by the time you get this I'll be there, so mother, keep your chins up, as it will not be long now that will all be marching back home for good. I haven't much to say. I am sending you a picture I took last night. So long for now, folks, hope to be hearing from you soon.*

*Your loving Son and brother, Johnny*

## *X Kiss for sis*

It is frightening enough to have one son in uniform – John and Marie had eight of them, five of whom were far across the ocean!

John knew very well what combat conditions were like, and the loving parents had already suffered the loss of two sons. Their anxiety must have been tremendous.

Yet Doreen remembers that their strong faith was a comfort. Her parents were devoted members of St. Vital's Roman Catholic Church in Battleford all their lives.

Among Doreen's most prized possessions are a tiny ivory crucifix in a cloth pouch that her father carried throughout World War One, and a larger crucifix that he wore around his neck. The Madonna pendant on a chain was a gift that one of the boys brought home for his mother.



All the Ballendine boys finally “came marching back home for good,” as Johnny predicted in his letter, although Doreen said that her brother Benjamin suffered badly from what was then called shell-shock (probably post-traumatic stress disorder) and was never the same carefree boy again.

In later years, her parents John and Marie worked as caretakers at the Roman Catholic Convent in Battleford, caring for the building as if it were their own. “I remember my mother scrubbing those long hallways on her hands and knees,” Doreen said.

John and Marie celebrated their sixtieth wedding anniversary in 1966. Her father was a proud member of the Royal Canadian Legion until he died in 1970 at the age of 87, and is buried in the Battleford Cemetery, along with his brother James.

All eight Ballendine boys married and had children. Doreen, now aged seventy-nine, is the last surviving member of her immediate family. She married Clem Gilles and has nine children of her own.

One of Doreen’s fondest memories of her brothers is this act of kindness.

“While the boys were away from home, they decided I should learn to play the piano, so they all sent money from their soldier’s pay and told Mother to buy me a piano, and have me take lessons. They told me that when they got back, they wanted to hear me play ‘Life in the Finland Woods’.” (The piece is also known as Mocking Bird Hill.)

Doreen didn’t disappoint them. Her mother bought the piano, and Doreen practiced so hard that she even won the Amateur Hour talent competition, held at the Battleford Town Hall.

And when the boys came home, their little sister proudly performed ‘Life in the Finland Woods’ for them.

It was one of her happiest moments.

To hear the forty-second piano solo, and imagine those brave brothers in uniform listening to their little sister, click here: [Life in the Finland Woods](#).

**UPDATE:** *Since writing this blog post, I was contacted by Ben Ballendine’s son Colin Ballendine Payne in the United Kingdom. After his parents divorced, his mother remarried and Colin didn’t know anything about his father until he tracked down his Canadian family in 2008. Amazingly, both Colin and his son Ian served in the British Army, unwittingly following in the footsteps of The Fighting Ballendines. To read the whole story, click: [Colin Ballendine](#).*