

Cpl. Usher E.



USHER, ERNEST - CPL. Regimental No. 6096
August 7, 1920 - Bellevue, Alberta Age: 25

The Hold-up of Train No. 63

Shortly before 5:00 pm on Monday, August 2, three men held up CPR train No. 63 as it chugged its way to Crow's Nest in the extreme southwest corner of Alberta. The three bandits, who had boarded the train at Lethbridge, herded the conductor, Samuel Jones, and the rest of the passengers into the day-coach and searched them all. They relieved them of a total of \$300.00 in cash and their valuables, which included conductor Jones new \$96.00 Elgin, 23 jewel gold watch and chain.

When the train made an unscheduled stop at Sentinel, Alberta, the crooks jumped off and disappeared into the wilderness. Once the train reached Crow's Nest, the police were notified and the man-hunt for the three robbers began. Both the Alberta Provincial Police and the RCMP were joined by a number of Special Constables and trackers in the search. Within hours, the authorities knew that they were looking for three Russians who had recently come into Lethbridge from Great Falls, Montana and had been staying at the Paris Hotel. An acquaintance at the hotel supplied their names: George Akoff, Alex Auloff and Tom Basoff..

On August 6, the three fugitives were reported to be still in the area. They attempted to cash a cheque at a bank in nearby Coleman, Alberta. The posse concentrated here. By now the police had a description of one of the train robbers. Tom Basoff had a glass eye that gave him the appearance of having a cast in that eye.

On Saturday, August 7, Joseph Robertson, the Justice of the Peace in the small mining settlement of Bellevue, Alberta, saw two men looking at a notice that had been posted on the outside of his office window. He recognized the man with the bad eye as Basoff and suspected it was George Akoff who was with him. When they left his office, Robertson grabbed his revolver and watched as they walked down the street and went into a restaurant.

Almost simultaneously, Robertson ran into three police officers coming down the street. They had just received a tip that the bank robbers were in Bellevue. Csts. James Frewin and F.W. Bailey, of the Alberta Provincial Police, and Cpl. Ernest Usher, of the RCMP, were following up a lead that two of the three robbers were in the restaurant. When Robertson told them what he'd seen, they devised a plan to arrest the two. Frewin, in plain clothes, and Usher, in uniform, would enter the restaurant through the front door; Bailey through the back door.

When the police got to the robbers' table, Cst. Frewin pointed his pistol at them and said, "Put up your hands, we are police officers, and we want you." Neither of the two men put

their hands up. Instead, they pushed them straight down by their sides. Frewin warned them, "Put your hands up or I'll bore a hole through you!" Akoff began to pull a Luger out of a coat at his side; Frewin shot him in the neck at close quarters. As Akoff collapsed against the corner of the booth, he kept reaching for his gun, so Frewin emptied his revolver into him. Meanwhile, Basoff had pulled out a gun and Cpl. Usher began to wrestle with him, attempting to take it away. Basoff broke clear and began shooting; the police were forced to retreat while they fired back. George Akoff recovered sufficiently to start firing too and the restaurant was filled with a fusillade of gunfire. Frewin, seeing that his gunshots had no appreciable effect on Akoff, backed out the door of the restaurant. He was followed closely by Bailey and Usher, who fired as they backed out. Cpl. Usher was hit badly and fell out the door. Seconds later, Bailey tumbled out over Usher and fell to the sidewalk. Akoff came staggering out. He was so weak from his wounds that he could only fire into the ground. Basoff was the last to come through the door - with a pistol in both hands. When he saw Cst. Bailey trying to get up, he shot him through the head at point-blank range. As Cpl. Usher tried to get to his feet, Basoff fired at him repeatedly until the officer fell back dead.

Justice of the Peace Robertson exchanged some shots with Basoff from behind a telephone pole, but the killer managed to get away. Before he did, one of the newspapers reported that Basoff shot Akoff in the head to put him out of his misery.

Shortly after Basoff's escape, a massive posse of sworn-in civilian deputies joined with Civic and Provincial Police and the RCMP to track down the fugitive police killer. Tom Basoff was crafty enough to elude the man-hunt for several days but, in the end, he was arrested rather quietly on August 11 by CPR detectives near the village of Pincher Creek, Alberta. He was subsequently tried and convicted of murder and hanged in the Lethbridge jail on December 22, 1920. It was learned that Alex Auloff had quarrelled with Basoff and fled west before the shoot-out at Bellevue. He succeeded in staying clear of the law for over three and a half years. But on January 18, 1924, the Canadian authorities received a cable from the police in Portland, Oregon advising them that train conductor Jones' gold watch had shown up in a pawn shop there. The Mounties responded immediately and followed this lead along a circuitous route that led to the mining town of Butte, Montana. Here they arrested Alex Auloff and extradited him to Canada. The last of the three train robbers was convicted of armed robbery and sentenced to seven years in the Prince Albert penitentiary. Auloff died in prison in April 1926 from a miner's disease known as phthisis. With his death, the last chapter of the hold-up of Train No. 63 was closed.

As for Cpl. Usher, he was a single man whose only known relative was a sister, Maud, in London, England. She was advised in writing of her brother's death at the hands of "armed desperadoes" in a far-off mining camp in Canada. She was also told of his joint military funeral with Cst. Bailey in Macleod, Alberta, and of his burial in the Protestant cemetery there.