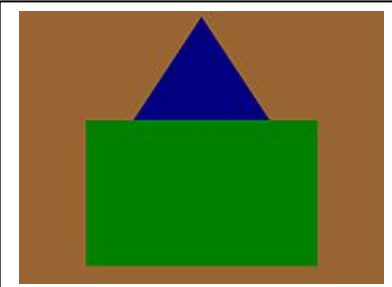




**Private Andrew Corbett (Number 878426) of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Villers Station Cemetery, Villers-au-Bois: Grave reference, IX. A. 9..**

***(Right: The image of the shoulder-patch of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion is from the Wikipedia web-site.)***

**(continued)**



His occupations prior to military service recorded as those of *miner* and *labourer*, Andrew Corbett apparently left the community of Little Bay in the Dominion of Newfoundland in the year 1893. He was presumably accompanied by his mother – a widow by this time – and his siblings as the family returned to Cape Breton, his mother's birthplace.

It was to the mining area of Glace Bay and Dominion that the family was finally attracted, Andrew finding work there and then marrying a Miss Christina May Nicholson, the couple subsequently parenting a daughter, Evangeline, on March 20, 1912. His sister, Mary Margaret, also then married, to a Mr. James Sloane, and the couple's home was at some time to become that of Mrs. Margaret Corbett (widow)\*.

*\*Much of the above information from the Caron/ Carruthers Family Tree web-site.*

According to his first pay records, it was on September 27 of 1916 that Andrew Corbett presented himself for enlistment in the community of Glace Bay where his address at the time was on Main Street. By September 30, just three days later, he had travelled to *Camp Aldershot*, the Canadian military complex in King's County, Nova Scotia, there to undergo a medical examination – which found him...*fit for the Canadian Over Seas Expeditionary Force* – and also attestation.

On that same day, the formalities of Private Corbett's enlistment were brought to a conclusion by the commanding officer of the Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Parker-Day, when he declared – on paper – that...*878426 Pte Andrew Corbett...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

Had he enlisted some several months earlier, before May of 1916, Private Corbett would have spent a number of weeks undergoing training in the town of Broughton\*, only some twenty kilometres distant, to the south of Sydney.

*\*Broughton had been a 'company town', developed towards the end on the nineteenth century by the Cape Breton Coal, Iron & Railway Company. Apparently too much money had been spent on it as the company went bankrupt in 1907 and the town was soon abandoned. At the outset of the Great War it was taken over by the Canadian Army and, more particularly, by the 185<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Cape Breton Highlanders).*

However, this posting of the 185<sup>th</sup> to Broughton was not to last long, only for the late winter and the early part of the spring: By that time, the authorities had decided to create a Nova Scotia Highland Brigade to comprise the 185<sup>th</sup>, the 85<sup>th</sup>, the 193<sup>rd</sup> and the 219<sup>th</sup> Battalions. On May 23 of 1915 these four formations were assembled to train together at Camp Aldershot, Nova Scotia, where the Brigade then spent all summer before receiving its colours on September 28, two weeks before its departure for *overseas service*.

Private Corbett, however, having been *taken on strength* by 'B' Company of the 185<sup>th</sup> Battalion as late as September 27 – and this at faraway Glace Bay – and then having arrived at Camp Aldershot at the very end of that month, was to undergo very little in the way of training.

(continued)

At seven o'clock in the evening of October 11, 1916, the one-thousand thirty-eight officers and *other ranks* of the 185<sup>th</sup> Overseas Battalion embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Olympic* in Halifax harbour. Earlier that day the 85<sup>th</sup> and the 188<sup>th</sup> Battalions had gone on board, to be followed on the morrow by the 219<sup>th</sup> and the 193<sup>rd</sup>.



(Right above: *HMT Olympic on the right lies at anchor along with HMHS Aquitania, centre, at Mudros Bay in the autumn of 1915. Olympic was sister-ship to Britannic, to be sunk by a mine in the eastern Mediterranean only a month later, in November of 1916, and also to the ill-starred Titanic.* – from a photograph from the Imperial War Museum, London)

On October 13<sup>th</sup> - at about eleven o'clock in the morning - it was the turn of the half-battalion of the 166<sup>th</sup> – five-hundred three *all ranks* - the final unit, to march up the gangways before *Olympic* cast her lines and sailed towards the open sea. For the trans-Atlantic passage she was carrying some six-thousand five-hundred military personnel.

The ship docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on October 18, almost six days later, and the troops disembarked on either that same day or the next. The 185<sup>th</sup> Battalion was thereupon transported south-eastwards to Witley Camp in the county of Surrey.

The 185<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Cape Breton Highlanders*) is documented as then having provided reinforcements for Canadian forces on the Continent. This role was to last until February of 1918 when the unit was definitively absorbed into the newly-organized Canadian 17<sup>th</sup> (*Reserve*) Battalion; it was then to be *officially* disbanded in November of the same 1918.

The Battalion's organizers had originally expected that it would be sent – with the other three units of the Nova Scotia Highland Brigade – into *active service* on the Continent, but this was not to be.

By the time of Private Moriarty's arrival in England, the Canadian Corps had been involved in the *First Battle of the Somme* for two months during which time it had suffered terrible losses. It was to fill the depleted ranks of those battered units that the majority of the newly-arrived Nova Scotia Highland Brigade was to be deployed.



(Right: *Dead of the Somme awaiting burial* – an unidentified photograph)

The 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to be the exception to this rule as it *alone* of the Highland Brigade was to be despatched to France - in February of 1917. Serving with the 11<sup>th</sup> and then the 12<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigades of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division, it was to distinguish itself at first at *Vimy Ridge* and then during the remainder of the conflict.

Private Corbett was to spend but seven weeks less a day in the United Kingdom. On December 5 he was *struck off strength* by the 185<sup>th</sup> Battalion in England to be *taken on strength* on the morrow, December 6, in France by the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) which was already serving on the Continent.



On the night of December 5-6 he had made the crossing of the English Channel. Through which ports Private Corbett travelled appears not to be recorded among his papers although many troops from Witley embarked in Folkestone and landed in Boulogne, some two hours' sailing-time distant. Whichever the case, on December 6 he was reported as being at the large Canadian Base Depot in the area of the French port-city of Le Havre on the estuary of the River Seine.



(Right above: *The French port-city of Le Havre at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

On December 7 a re-enforcement draft was despatched from Le Havre to seek out the parent unit of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion. Among the draft was Private Corbett whose papers document him as having reported *to duty* on the following day again. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion War Diary records the occasion as being on December 9: *A draft of 150 other ranks received from 185<sup>th</sup> Highland Battalion from Nova Scotia. Men were all of good physique, intelligent and had a smart appearance...*

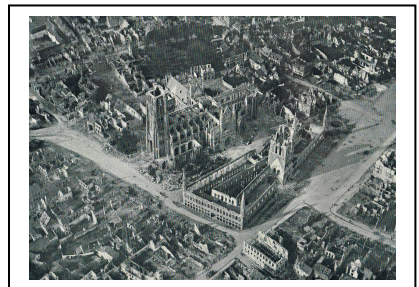
At the time the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion was billeted some eight kilometres to the south-west of the larger centre of Béthune, in the community of Ruitz, there to rest, to reorganize and to re-enforce. Only a single week previously it had been... *the last Battalion in the last Brigade of Canadians to leave the SOMME.* (Excerpt from 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion War Diary).

\* \* \* \* \*

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) was an element of the 12<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division. The Division had been transferred from England to the Continent in August of 1916, the majority of its units passing through, as Private Corbett was to do, the Canadian Base Depot close to Le Havre. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion had then spent two days at the same Depot before travelling northward on two trains.

Having journeyed through the larger northern French centres of Arras and Amiens, Boulogne and then Saint-Omer, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion had eventually de-trained on Belgian soil in the town of Poperinghe.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion had arrived in the rear area of the *Ypres Salient*, one of the most lethal theatres of the *Great War*, and where the by-now veteran Canadian 1<sup>st</sup> Division, which was based in the same area, was to play a role in the formation of the new-comers.



(Right above: *An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915, which shows the shell of the medieval city of Ypres, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was little left standing. – from Illustration*)

(continued)



The 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion had subsequently – and briefly – experienced the daily routines, rigours and perils of life in the trenches of the Western Front. After a final tour in the forward area, it had been relieved on September 23 and the unit's short experience of the *Ypres Salient* had thus drawn to a close. The Battalion's casualties for the month had been three killed and twenty-three wounded – extremely light for *the Salient*.

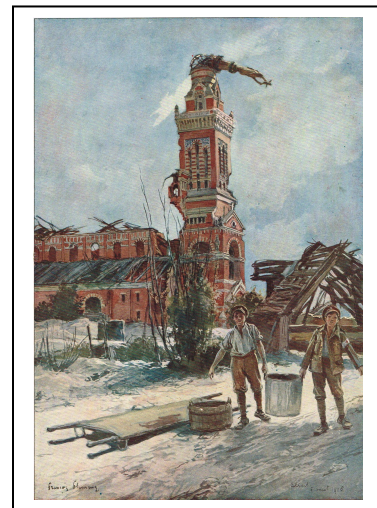
The troops which arrived to take the place of the Canadians at that time had been Irish; they had only recently been withdrawn from the area of *the Somme* where they had, for the previous two months, been fighting, in the first battle to be designated by that name.

After several days of changing billets, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion had spent a week at Hellebroucq in training for upcoming operations in the cauldron from which its Irish acquaintances had just retired.

On October 3 the Battalion had marched to nearby Arques where it had entrained. On the following day, having arrived in the rear area of *the Somme*, at Candas, from there it had marched in pouring rain to Beauval to billets prepared to receive it.

On successive days the unit had marched again: to Bonneville, to Toutencourt, to Warloy-Baillon where it had undergone a period of training, then on the 13<sup>th</sup> through the provincial town of Albert to the camp at *Tara Hill* where it had... *Bivouaced* (sic) *in a muddy field* (War Diary)... and provided various working-parties for the next dozen or so days.

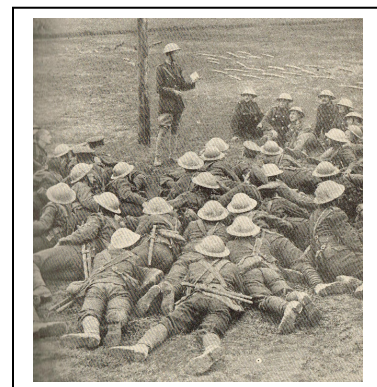
(Right: *Canadian soldiers at work carrying water in Albert, the already-damaged basilica in the background – from Illustration*)



By October of 1916, the *First Battle of the Somme* had been ongoing for some three months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault which had cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short space of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

On that first day all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been from the British Isles, the exceptions having been the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which was to lose so heavily on that July 1.

(Right: *An image purporting to be that of a Canadian officer giving instructions to those under his command prior to the attack at Flers-Courcelette, in September 1916 – from The War Illustrated*)



(continued)

As the battle had progressed, other troops from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), then the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first major collective contribution had been in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcellette.

(Right: *The Canadian Memorial which stands to the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the village of Courcellette – photograph from 2015*)



The 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion had arrived in the area of *the Somme* at a later stage of the offensive than had many other Canadian units; indeed, by the middle of October, many of those first on the scene were already being withdrawn, in several cases necessitated by the high incidence of casualties.

On October 26, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, by now ready to fill the void, had moved forward to an area between the once-villages – now mounds of debris - of Pozières and Contalmaison.

(Right and right below: *The remnants of Pozières just after the conflict, with the Australian Memorial in the gloom - and also as it is almost a century later – from a vintage post-card and from 2016*)



There it had remained in Brigade Reserve until October 30 when it moved forward once more, 'A' Company being *in support* at a junction of two trench systems. This was to prove to be a short tour which terminated on the night of November 2-3; there had been no infantry action to report, although the enemy artillery was apparently active at times.



Casualties for that period had been eight killed, forty-three wounded with twenty-six others evacuated to hospital for divers reasons.

(Right below: *Wounded soldiers at the Somme being evacuated to the rear area in hand-carts – from Le Miroir*)

During the following week while behind the lines... *Special training carried on in conjunction with the rest of the Brigade, in practising for a general attack with the whole Brigade involved, 72<sup>nd</sup> and 73<sup>rd</sup> to lead in this attack...*



On the late evening of November 11 the... *Regiment proceeded into the trenches...*

(continued)

In fact, according to the Battalion War Diary, the attack by the Canadians was not to be delivered as planned. Instead, the various units had been ordered to dig new trenches and to consolidate older positions in expectation of an enemy counter-attack, a fear reinforced by information elicited from German prisoners.

It would appear that neither side had moved, and thus the Canadians were to spend two days preparing for something that never came about. Maybe the extremely heavy artillery-fire delivered by both sides had influenced somewhat the decision not to attack.

On the night of November 13-14, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion had been withdrawn, its place to be thereupon taken in the line by the 47<sup>th</sup> Battalion. The numbers of casualties incurred during this two-day period had been, all told, fourteen *killed in action* and thirty-eight *wounded*.



(Right above: *Burying Canadian dead on the Somme, likely at a casualty clearing station or a field ambulance – from Illustration or Le Miroir*)

Two more weeks were to pass before the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion then left behind it the *First Battle of the Somme* and a casualty count to which had been added at least a further sixty during those final days. The withdrawal itself had been made on foot, having commenced November 29 with the unit marching to the west before turning northwards to pass behind the battered city of Arras. The trek had continued beyond Arras, to Ruitz, which was arrived at on December 5.



There the Battalion was to remain for the next seventeen days, in billets which were reportedly – at least at the outset – ...*in poor condition* – this the opinion of the Battalion War Diarist.

This then, was when and where Private Corbett reported *to duty*.

(Right above: *A detachment from a Canadian-Scottish regiment, proceeded by its pipe band, marches toward the front. – from Le Miroir*)

\* \* \* \* \*

It was likely not to be until Christmas Eve that Private Corbett received his first taste of life in the front-line trenches\* – or in the support trenches a few hundred metres to the rear - as it was on that day that the 73<sup>rd</sup> relieved the 46<sup>th</sup> Canadian Battalion in the area of Souchez.



(Right above: *The village of Souchez in 1915, before the arrival of the British and Canadians in the sector – from Le Miroir*)

(continued)



***\*During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less equally divided into three postings: in theory a week was to be spent in the front lines, at times little more than a few metres separating them from the enemy forward positions; a second week was then served in support positions, a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest the forward area, the latter furthest away.***



***Of course, things were never as neat and tidy as set out in the preceding format and troops could find themselves in a certain position at times for weeks on end.***

***(Right above: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration)***

**The occasions spent in reserve were opportunities for training, lectures, inspections by the upper echelons – usually the further away from the front, the more important was the visitor – route marches, sports, with perhaps the odd concert or other entertainment being brought in to support the morale of the troops.**

***(Right: Canadian soldiers perusing the upcoming program at a make-shift theatre in a camp somewhere behind the lines – from Le Miroir)***



**In the forward areas life was both hard and monotonous, if also inevitably at times dangerous: there were parties of the construction, wiring and carrying variety; and patrolling and raiding on a local scale were often the norm, as were rat-catching and lice hunts.**

**Most casualties were caused by enemy artillery - and occasionally one's own – although snipers were also a constant peril. However, during the winter, the majority of admissions into the various medical facilities were of those who were sick and particularly – perhaps a little surprisingly – of those in need of dental care.**

**During that winter of 1917, there was little concerted infantry activity undertaken by either side; nevertheless, in the case of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, a major enemy raid was repulsed on January 7<sup>th</sup>, and the unit undertook a costly large-scale operation of its own on March 1.**



***(Right: A detachment of Canadian troops going forward during the winter of 1916-1917 – from Illustration)***

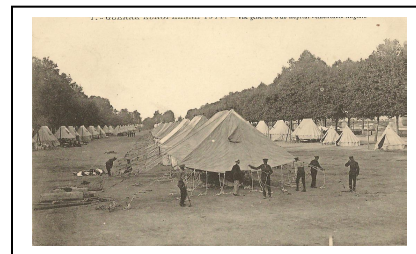
**(continued)**

Excerpt from the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for the above-mentioned March 1, 1917: At five minutes past mid-night...code message was received from the 12<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade to the effect that the Gas Attack and consequent Infantry Attack, which had been postponed for several days, would take place that morning.

Excerpt from the 12<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary entry for March 1, 1917: A Gas Raid was carried out by 15 Officers and 300 Other Ranks of 72<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Bn. and 18 Officers and 460 Other Ranks of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Bn. with the co-operation of the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Cd. Inf. Bdes. A large enemy bomb dump was blown up and part of his F.L.T. (front-line trench) systematically destroyed. Several Machine Guns were destroyed and approximately 22 dugouts were bombed or treated with mobile charges. A large number of the enemy were killed.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion War Diary recorded the unit's casualties as – all ranks - twenty-seven killed in action or died of wounds, one-hundred three wounded and thirty-one missing in action. More were later to die of wounds.

(Right: A British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and when the necessity arose – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War: Other such medical establishments were of a much more permanent nature. - from a vintage post-card)



After that latter exercise, Private Corbett's Battalion was withdrawn into reserve from March 4 to 16; then it was back in the line for three days before retiring into support positions at Cabaret Rouge\*.

\*The British Cemetery of the same name, Cabaret Rouge, is the one from which the body of the Canadian Unknown Soldier was exhumed on May 16 of the year 2000, to lie in Ottawa, in front of the National War Memorial.



(Above right: Some of the more than three-thousand dead of Cabaret Rouge British Cemetery, Souchez – photograph from 2010)

Parades, inspections, training – bayonet-fighting, bombing, musketry – sports (particularly football), lectures, route marches, medal presentations – with the occasional bath and concert added to the mix on occasion: this was the syllabus offered to the Battalion during those twelve days of training in March.

To these preparations were to be added some novel developments: use of enemy weapons; the familiarization of each unit and of each man with his role during the upcoming battle; the construction of ground layouts built, thanks to aerial reconnaissance, to show the terrain and positions to be attacked; the introduction of the machine-gun barrage; and the excavation of kilometres of approach tunnels, not only for the safety of the attacking troops but also to ensure the element of surprise.

It was not until March 30 that the Battalion was then ordered into Brigade Reserve at Chateau de la Haie. There it began – as did many other Canadian units – a further week of intensive exercises and preparation. The *Battle of Arras* was in the offing.

On April 9 the British Army launched an offensive in the area to the north of the Somme battlefields; this was the so-called *Battle of Arras* intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the daily count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive operation of the *Great War* for the British, one of the few positive episodes being the Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.



The British campaign proved to be an overall disappointment: the French offensive was to be yet a further disaster.

(Above right: *The Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, has stood atop Vimy Ridge – photograph from 2010*)



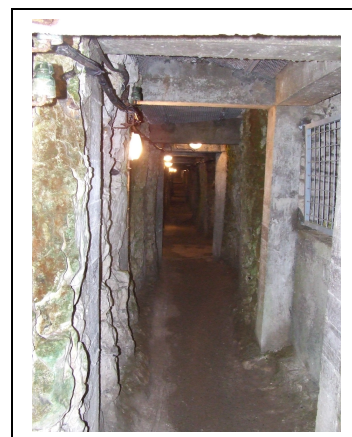
(Right above: *Canadian troops of the 4<sup>th</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Division equipped with all the paraphernalia of war on the advance across No-Man's-Land during the attack at Vimy Ridge on either April 9 or 10 of 1917 - from Illustration*)

On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, acting as a single, autonomous entity, stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

Several kilometres of tunnel had been hewn out of the chalk under the approaches to the front lines of *Vimy Ridge*, underground accesses which afforded physical safety and also the element of surprise during the hours – and in some cases, days – leading up to the attack.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion War Diary records that the unit had already been in the area of the front line for three days when 'A' and 'C' Companies entered *Coburg Subway (Tunnel)* at eleven o'clock in the morning of April 8. They were to remain there during the remainder of the time preceding the moment of the early-morning attack some eighteen-and-a-half hours later.

'B' Company was moved into trenches and was kept in Brigade Reserve. Later in the day it was to support the 78<sup>th</sup> Battalion whereas 'D' Company was to re-enforce the 72<sup>nd</sup> Battalion. There appears, unfortunately, to be no indication as to the Company in which Private Corbett served at *Vimy Ridge*.





*(Preceding page: One of the few remaining galleries – Grange Tunnel - still open to the public at Vimy Ridge one hundred years later – photograph from 2008(?))*

As related above, this was the first occasion on which the Canadian Divisions were to act in concert as the Canadian Army Corps rather than as an addendum to a larger British force. In fact, a British brigade, was now fighting under its command at *Vimy Ridge* with others being held in reserve.

At five-thirty on the morning of April 9, mines were detonated under the German lines and the creeping barrage commenced, followed immediately by the infantry close behind.

The Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Divisions had been given the responsibility for the capture of the *Ridge* itself and, while in places the enemy resistance had posed problems, for the most part the operation had been – perhaps unexpectedly – successful. The War Diary reported that the first objectives of the day had been in the hands of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion only ten minutes after zero hour, at five-forty, and also that the first prisoners were being sent back at the same time.



*(Right above: German prisoners being sent on their way back under escort through the Canadian lines – from Illustration)*

For the remainder of that day and the next, Private Corbett's unit consolidated its gains against the expected enemy counter-attacks. Surprisingly, they never came to pass, and on the few occasions where an assault seemed likely, the enemy had been countered by the Canadian artillery.



*(Right above: The battle-field of Vimy Ridge on April 10, two unidentified fallen in the foreground – from Illustration)*

Excerpts from the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for April 10 of 1918: *During the morning posts were pushed out...and finally CLUTCH TRENCH was occupied making it one front line, and turning the enemy front line into our support. In the meantime additional attacks had been carried out on these parts of the line on the right front of this Brigade and on the front of the 11<sup>th</sup> Brigade, so that most of the objectives were gained and consolidation carried out...*

*...By night it was possible to report casualties as follows: Major...and Lieut...slightly wounded but remaining on duty. 7 OR killed. 2 OR died of wounds, 1 OR missing , and 75 OR wounded...*

(continued)

The son of William ‘John’ Corbett (deceased 1889) and of Margaret Corbett (née Jesso or, as it was originally, *Jesseaul/ Gesseau*) of Little Bay, Newfoundland\*, and later – as seen above – of Dominion 1, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, he was also brother to Mary Margaret and likely to James and William\*\*.

*\*He originally from England, she – as seen above – from Cape Breton.*

*\*\*\*Much of the above information from the Caron/ Carruthers Family Tree web-site.*

As well, Private Corbett was husband to Christina and father to Evangeline – also see above. To his wife he had bequeathed his everything in a will dated November 28, 1916, and had allocated a monthly fifteen dollars to her as of October 1, 1916, two weeks before departing from Canada.

Private Corbett was reported as having been *killed in action* on April 10 of 1917 during the fighting for Vimy Ridge.

Andrew Corbett had enlisted at the age of twenty-nine years: date of birth at Little Bay, Newfoundland, June 20, 1887 (from attestation papers and from above-cited source).

Private Andrew Corbett was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).



The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to [criceadam@yahoo.ca](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 25, 2023.