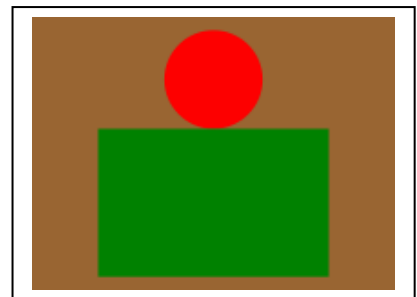




Private Herbert Harris (Number 3025004) of the 54th Battalion (Kootenay), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Le Quesnel Communal Cemetery Extension: Grave reference D 41.

(Right: *The shoulder-flash of the 54th Battalion (Kootenay) is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as being that of a *sailor*, the date of his departure from the Dominion of Newfoundland does not appear among his papers. The *ancestry.ca* website, however, documents a Herbert Harris as having entered Canada from the United States at the Port of Fort Erie with all of thirty dollars in cash and effects on May 22, 1917. The same document also confirms that *this* Herbert Harris was both an *able seaman* and a citizen of Newfoundland.

On that same May 22, Herbert Harris enlisted in the community of St. Catherine's, Ontario, underwent a medical examination and was also attested. The formalities of his enlistment were then brought to a conclusion when the commanding officer of the 19th (*Lincoln*) Regiment declared – on paper – that...*Herbert Harris...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

Just over two weeks later, on June 6, Private Harris was transferred from this formation to the 1st Depot Battalion of the 1st Central Ontario Regiment when it absorbed the 19th Regiment; from there, just less than four months later again, on October 1, he was apparently – suggested by pay records - attached to the 1st Depot Battalion of the 2nd Central Ontario Regiment*.

**The task of the Depot Battalions was to instil only a minimum of training and discipline in the incoming recruits before despatching them to the Canadian Reserve Battalions in the United Kingdom to complete the job.*

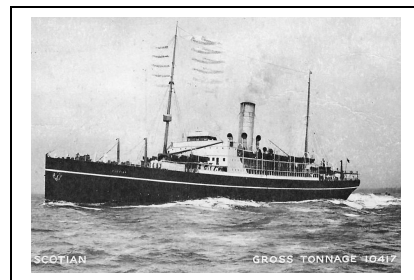
The only subsequent report of Private Harris during this period in Canada has him writing his will on October 26, a paper on which he bequeathed his everything, including his real estate – no further details – to his mother Elizabeth.

Private Harris' military record hereupon becomes somewhat confusing: apparently, for whatever the reason, when he sailed from Halifax to the United Kingdom he took passage as a soldier of, once again, the 1st Depot Battalion of the COR - *not* of the 2nd COR – then again, maybe they are one and the same as he is recorded, in England, as being of the 2nd COR.

It was on board the SS *Scotian*, chartered by the British Government for the occasion, that he departed from Halifax on November 26 of 1917, to disembark in an unidentified English port on December 7*.

(Right above: *The image of the Canadian Pacific Steamship Scotian is from the Old Ship Galleries web-site.*)

Once in the United Kingdom, Private Harris' unit was transported to the English county of Kent, to the large Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe* which by that time had been established down the Dover Straits in the vicinity of the English-Channel town of Folkestone.



(Preceding page: *Little remains of Shorncliffe Military Camp today apart from a barracks occupied by Gurkha troops. The Military Cemetery almost alone serves as a reminder of the events of a century ago. – photograph from 2016*)

On December 13, 1917*, perhaps after a short period of quarantine, Private Harris was... taken on strength from Canada by the 2nd Canadian (Reserve) Battalion at West Sandling, one of the components of the *Shorncliffe* establishment, for further training and preparation for service on the Continent.**

****Two other dates appear on Private Harris' files: November 17, 1917 and November 26, 1917, both of which seem impossible if the date and the ship of his passage to the United Kingdom are correct.***

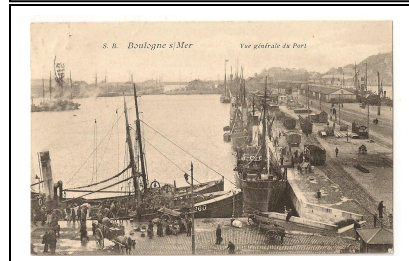
*****A second source appears to have this unit based at this time at Camp Bramshott in the county of Hampshire.***

Soon after his transfer to the 2nd Canadian (Reserve) Battalion, Private Harris signed a further document on which he allotted, as of December 1, a monthly fifteen dollars to his mother from his pay. Then, on February 15, he was transferred once more, this time to the 8th Canadian (Reserve) Battalion*, based at East Sandling, a neighbouring constituent of the *Shorncliffe* complex.

****On this date the 8th Reserve Battalion absorbed the entire 2nd Reserve Battalion.***

It was then on March 29, 1918, that Private Harris arrived in France – likely having travelled through the harbour at Folkestone and its French counterpart, Boulogne, on the coast opposite - and was taken on strength temporarily at the 4th Canadian Infantry Base Depot in the vicinity of the coastal town of Étapes, one of eleven-hundred fifty-three reinforcements to arrive there on that date. At that time he was also transferred – on paper - to the Canadian 54th Infantry Battalion (*Kootenay*).

(Right above: *A view of the coastal town of Folkestone almost a century later as seen from the white cliffs of nearby Dover – photograph from 2009*)



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

After having spent four days at Étapes serving at the 4th Infantry Base Depot, Private Harris was subsequently one of a draft of six-hundred seventy-four re-enforcements despatched to the nearby Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp. Leaving this Camp to join the parent unit of the 54th Battalion on April 16, he reported to duty with the unit in the *Acheville Sector* later on that same day.

* * * * *

The 54th Battalion (*Kootenay*) was a component of the 11th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the Canadian 4th Division which had been serving on the Western Front since August of 1916 when it had landed in France.

The baptism of fire on a large scale for the Canadian 4th Division came in the form of the *1st Battle of the Somme*. Fought from July 1 of 1916 until the middle of that November, it was not until the end of August and beginning of September that the Canadians had begun to play their part.

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



In the case of the 54th Battalion it was not to be until October 10 that the unit arrived, from training in the north of France, at the *Brickfields Camp (la Briqueterie)* in the vicinity of Albert, and four days later again before it found its way into the trenches at Courcellette.

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

There was little infantry action recorded during this last half of October; yet even so, during the thirteen days spent in the forward area the Battalion recorded thirty-two *killed in action* and one-hundred forty-eight *wounded*, due mostly to gun-fire.



(Right below: *Wounded at the Somme being transported in hand-carts from the forward area for further medical attention – from Le Miroir*)

The 54th Battalion remained at *the Somme* until November 25 when it turned its back on the place. At first westward, then north, passing to the western side of Arras and beyond to the north-west, on December 4 it reached the commune of Ourton. By then the unit had spent some ten days on foot to cover the eighty kilometre itinerary.



It was in this area, and in the forward sectors in the vicinity of the mining centre of Lens, some twenty or so kilometres to the east of Ourton, that the Battalion was to operate for the winter months, submitting to all those rigours and routines of life in the trenches*.

**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, perhaps a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest to the forward area, the latter the 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: 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)



During those final days of the autumn of 1916 and the winter months which followed, there was little if any concerted infantry activity apart from the constant patrolling and the occasional raids by both sides. This latter activity was encouraged by the High Command who felt it to be a morale booster which also kept the troops in the right offensive frame of mind: the troops who were ordered to carry them out, in general loathed these operations.

Casualties were, overall, light; even while posted in the forward areas the Canadian War Diarists were often able to record...*Casualties – nil*. During this entire period the medical services were much more occupied with cases of sickness and the need for dental work than they were with the victims of military activity.

(Right: Canadian troops moving to the forward area during the winter of 1916-1917 – from Illustration)



The month of March had begun with a Divisional raid in which the Battalion lost heavily: eighty-three dead and one-hundred thirty-three wounded. Much of the remainder of the month was dedicated to rest and training until the 25th when the Battalion moved forward again. It was then to spend the next ten days in trenches in front of German positions on a long crest of land dominating the surrounding area: *Vimy Ridge*.



(Right above: From the summit of Hill 145 where stands the Canadian National Memorial on Vimy Ridge,, a grieving Canada overlooks the Douai Plain – photograph from 1915)

During that time of rest and training – with little of the former in evidence – the Battalion was to be busy. 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 until March 25.

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.

On that March 25 the unit had then been withdrawn once again, on April 4, for final preparation and organization, before having been ordered up into assembly trenches on the evening of April 8.

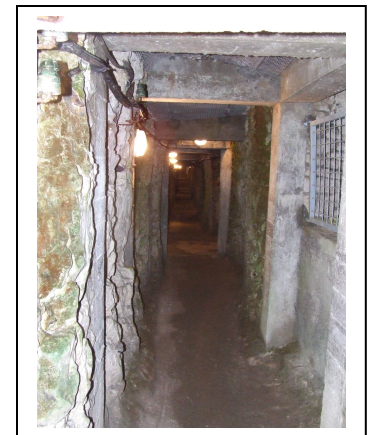
On April 9 of 1917 the British Army had launched an offensive in the area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields; this was the so-called *Battle of Arras*, intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the daily count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive operation of the 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.



While the British-led campaign proved to be an overall disappointment, the French offensive was to be another disaster.

(Right above: *The Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, has stood on Vimy Ridge – photograph from 2010*)

On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity – there was even a British brigade operating under 1st Canadian Division command - had stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants* and had begun to consolidate the area in anticipation of the habitual German counter-attacks.



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

(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division, burdened 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*)



**It was the battalions of the Canadian 3rd and 4th Divisions which were to attack the Ridge itself; the Canadian 1st and 2nd Divisions had the responsibility of clearing the slope to the south, including the village of Thélus. One Canadian and two British brigades – also under Canadian command - were held in reserve.*

On that April 9 the 54th Battalion had incurred totals of about twenty-four *killed in action*, one-hundred five *wounded in action* and one-hundred *missing in action*.

(continued)

There had been, on those two days, the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted breakthrough – but such a follow-up on the previous day's success proved logistically impossible. Thus the Germans had closed the breach and the conflict once more reverted to one of inertia.



(Right: *German prisoners being escorted to the rear by Canadian troops during the attack on Vimy Ridge – from Illustration*)

The remainder of the relatively short, five-week long, *Battle of Arras* was not to be fought in the manner of the first two days; by the *end* of those five weeks little else had changed and the Germans had recovered from the initial Canadian success. Once more the war drifted into stalemate.

The British High Command had by this time decided to undertake a summer offensive in the *Ypres Salient*, Belgium. Thus, in order to divert German attention – and his reserves - from this area, it had also ordered operations to take place in the sectors of the front running north-south from B ethune to Lens.



The Canadians were to be major contributors to this effort.

(Right above: *An example of the conditions under which the troops were ordered to fight in the area of Lens during the summer of 1917 – from Miroir*)



One of the primary objectives was to be *Hill 70* in the outskirts of the mining centre of Lens. The operation originally set for July, it had been postponed until mid-August.

(Right above: *Canadian troops advancing across No-Man's Land in the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)

Objectives were limited and had for the most part been achieved by the end of August 15. Due to the dominance of *Hill 70* over the entire area, it was expected that the Germans would endeavour to retrieve it and so it proved; on the 16th several strong counter-attacks were launched against the Canadian positions, positions that by this time had been transformed into defensive strong-points.



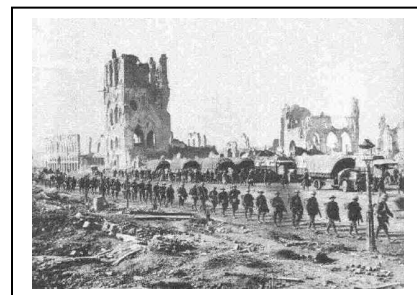
These defences held and the Canadian artillery, which was employing newly-developed procedures, inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. *Hill 70* remained in Canadian hands.

(Preceding page: *A Canadian 220 mm siege gun, here under camouflage nets in the Lens Sector, being prepared for action by its crew – from Le Miroir*)

However, the attack on *Hill 70* had been the responsibility of the Canadian 1st and 2nd Divisions and, as it was a unit of the 4th Canadian Division, the 54th Battalion had been involved only in a peripheral way.

The Canadians had apparently hoped to build on this success but, by that time, the British offensive further to the north was proceeding less well than intended and the Canadians were soon to be needed there. Concerted offensive activities in the *Lens Sector* were suspended as of early September.

It was not until the final weeks of October that the Canadians became embroiled in the campaign to the north-east of Ypres. Officially named the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the offensive came to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that was – ostensibly - one of the British Army's objectives.



(Right: *Troops file through the rubble of the medieval city of Ypres on their way to the front in the late summer of 1917. – from Illustration*)

From the time that the Canadians entered the fray, it was they who were to shoulder a great deal of the burden. From the week of October 26 until November 3 it would be the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions which spearheaded the assault, with the 1st and 2nd Divisions in reserve. Then, from November 5 until the official end of the affair, the reverse was true with troops of the 2nd Division finally entering the remnants of *Passchendaele* itself.



(Right above: *an unidentified – perhaps unidentifiable – part of the Passchendaele battlefield in the autumn of 1917 – from Illustration*)

The 54th Battalion had begun to move north to Belgium on October 11 but it was not until the 21st that it crossed the Franco-Belgian frontier to encamp at *Brandhoek* to the west of Ypres. On October 27 it had moved forward and, on November 2, it was on its way *back* to *Brandhoek*.

By the following evening the unit had returned to France. Its casualties during the *Passchendaele* campaign had amounted to just five *killed in action* and thirty-six *wounded*.



(Right: *In the stone of the Menin Gate at Ypres (today Ieper) there are carved the names of British and Empire (Commonwealth) troops who fell in the Ypres Salient during the Great War and who have no known last resting-place.*

(continued)

There are almost fifty-five thousand remembered there; nevertheless, so great was the final number, that it was to be necessary to commemorate those who died after August 16 of 1917, just fewer than thirty-five thousand, on the Tyne Cot Memorial. – photograph from 2010)



(Right: The Canadian Memorial which today stands on Passchendaele Ridge and in the south-western outskirts of the village itself – photograph from 2015)

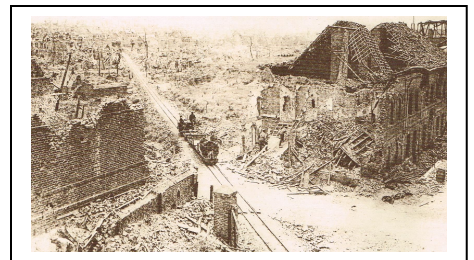
The 54th Battalion was to spend the upcoming winter of 1917-1918 in the sectors in which it had served upon having returned from *the Somme* in the late autumn of 1916. The period during the first days of that December was to prove relatively peaceful, certainly calm enough to allow for the organization of the troops so that voting could take place in the Canadian national election.

It was also tranquil to the point where it was proposed by some of the upper echelons to give battalions a five-acre piece of land on which to conduct farming.

Whether this agricultural scheme ever fully came to fruition is not clear – but likely not, given the events of March. The 54th Battalion was in Lievin, a western suburb of Lens when the news came through of the German attack on the first day of spring.

Perhaps not many people realize how close the Germans came to victory in the spring of 1918. Having transferred the divisions no longer necessary on the *Eastern Front* because of the Russian withdrawal from the War, they delivered a massive attack, Operation ‘*Michael*’, launched on March 21.

The main blow fell at *the Somme* in the area of, and also just to the south of, the battlefields of 1916, and it fell for the most part on British and Commonwealth troops there.



(Right: While the Germans did not attack Lens in the spring of 1918, they did bombard it heavily during the time of their offensive in order to keep the British uncertain about their intentions and to oblige them to retain troops in the area. – from Le Miroir)

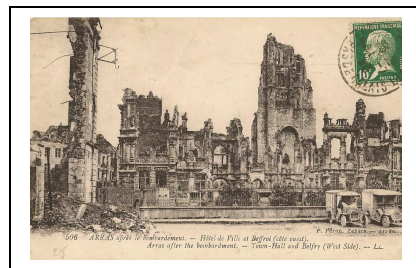
The German advance continued for a month before petering out just in front of the city of Amiens*. The ultimate failure of the offensive was a result of a combination of factors: British and Commonwealth resistance, fatigue, logistical problems and French co-operation with the British were the most significant.



****A second but lesser such offensive, ‘Georgette’, fell in northern France and in Belgium on April 9, in Flanders, the area where the by-then Royal Newfoundland Regiment was serving with the British 29th Division. It too was successful for a while, but petered out at the end of the month.***

(Preceding page: *British troops on the retreat in Belgian Flanders during 'Georgette' in mid-April of 1918 – from Illustration*)

The Battalion War Diary suggests, however, that the 54th Battalion was not involved in any infantry action during this, the *2nd Battle of the Somme*. The unit, posted mostly in the trenches close to Acheville and to Oppy – both communities to the north-east of Arras – was effected noticeably only by increased enemy artillery activity in support of the German offensive further to the south.



(Right above: *The City Hall of Arras and its bell-tower looked like this by the spring of 1918 after nearly four years of bombardment by German artillery. – from a vintage post-card*)

It was, of course, during this period, on a reportedly-quiet day – April 16 – while his new unit was in the front line at Acheville, that Private Harris arrived and reported *to duty*. It is unlikely that he was sent on the day of his arrival immediately into the trenches, but he surely did not have too long to wait.

* * * * *

Towards the end of that April a relative calm descended on the front lines as the German threat faded – the offensive had won for the enemy a great deal of ground, but nothing of any real military significance in either of the two theatres of operation. Nor was the calm particularly surprising: both sides had been exhausted and needed time to once more reorganize and – less and less feasible in these later years of the war – to re-enforce.

The Allies, from the point of view of available re-enforcements, were even so by now a lot better off than their German adversaries – they had two empires to draw from and the Americans were now belatedly arriving on the scene. An overall Commander-in-Chief had been appointed, Foch, and he was setting about organizing a counter-offensive.



Thus the front was to remain quiet – until the second week in August.

(Right above: *Le Maréchal Ferdinand Jean-Marie Foch, this photograph from 1921, became Generalissimo of the Allied Armies on March 26, 1918. – photograph from the Wikipedia web-site*)

Private Harris' military career by that time had become a little bit chequered. For an undocumented reason he was returned to the Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp on May 25 where he distinguished himself in the eyes of the authorities on at least two occasions: on June 19 he was charged fourpence-halfpenny to replace a knife, fourpence-three-farthing to make good a fork *lost by neglect*, and forfeited sufficient pay to replace a table; and five days later, on July 24, he was to forfeit a further shilling* to replace... *1 mess tin cover lost*.

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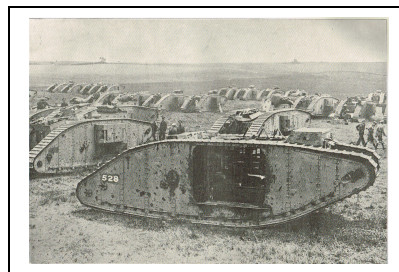
**Although a shilling – twelve pence (pennies) – was not a great amount of money by Canadian standards – Canadians at one dollar and ten cents per day were the best paid of all the Commonwealth private soldiers – it was the daily pay of the British ‘Tommy’.*

All in all Private Harris spent just over two months at the Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp before he was despatched back to his unit on July 26 and re-joined it on the following day in Divisional Reserve.

July 29 and 30 were spent relatively uneventfully by Private Harris’ Battalion in the front line of the *Gavrelle-Oppy Sector* north of Arras before it was ordered to withdraw to *Bivouac Camp* on the final day of that month. The next seven days, apart from August 3 when it was transported by bus, were spent on the march.

Apparently, according to the 54th Battalion War Diarist, it had not been revealed to the troops until August 7 that on the morrow, August 8, they – in conjunction with air and tank operations - were to be part of a full-scale Allied offensive attacking the German forces to the east of the city of Amiens. Thus...*During the night the Battalion moved into assembly positions by the BOIS DE GENTELLES* (Excerpt from War Diary entry of that day).

By the first day of August, not only the 54th Battalion but a large number of other Canadian units - almost the entire Canadian Corps* - had been moving in a circular itinerary to the west of, then south of, then to the east of the city of Amiens, advancing to face the positions which the Germans had been occupying since their offensive of March and April four months earlier.



**A small number of Canadian units had in fact been despatched northwards towards and into Belgium. There they had been ordered to make themselves conspicuous so as to give the impression that the Corps was preparing to mount an offensive in that particular area.*

What was more, while, at the outset, this huge transfer of the Canadian Corps had been under-taken for the most part by train and motor transport, the latter stages had been accomplished on foot, in marches during the hours of darkness so as to conceal any movement from the eyes of the enemy.

The strategy had worked: the attack of August 8 apparently took the Germans completely by surprise.

(Right above: *In 1917 the British formed the Tank Corps, a force which became ever stronger in 1918 as evidenced by this photograph of a tank park, once again ‘somewhere in France’, just before the onslaught of August 1918 was launched. – from Illustration)*

(Right above: *The venerable – and repaired - gothic cathedral in the city of Amiens which the leading German troops had been able to see on the western skyline in the spring of 1918 – photograph from 2007(?)*)



The 54th Battalion War Diary entry for that August 8 of 1918 reads partially as follows:

At dawn the attack was commenced and at that time (4:30 a.m.) the battalion began to advance, following up the attack. From the signs and reports it seemed that our attack had been successful, many prisoners passing.

As the battalion reached the AMIENS-ROYE road the enemy began shelling the road and two shells dropped amongst the troops, killing one other rank, wounding one officer... and twenty-eight other ranks. From here on occasional shells fell close to the battalion but no further casualties occurred. After strenuous fighting... all objectives were gained, battalion headquarters being established in the captured village of BEAUCOURT.



(Right above: A group of German prisoners, some seen serving here as stretcher-bearers, being escorted to the rear after their capture by Canadian troops: a tank may be seen in the background. – from *Le Miroir*)

The son of Mrs. Elizabeth Harris – to whom her son’s estate was granted in December of 1921 - of Winter Brook, Bonavista Bay, Newfoundland, he appears to have left behind him no other trace of a family history.

Private Harris was reported as having been *killed in action* on August 8 of 1918.



(Right above: *The sacrifice of Herbert Harris is honoured on the War Memorial which stands in Summerville, Bonavista Bay.* – phoyograph from 2010)

Herbert Harris had enlisted at the *apparent* age of nineteen years and six months: date of birth (from attestation papers) in Newfoundland, November 30, 1897.

Private Herbert Harris 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. Last updated – January 26, 2023.