



Major Alexander McLean Jackson of the 4th Field Company, Royal Engineers, British Expeditionary Force, is buried in Bethune Town Cemetery: Grave reference III.J.5.

Born in St. John's, Newfoundland, in or about 1892, Alexander McLean Jackson underwent much of his early education at St. Paul's School in London, England*. There he apparently excelled in sports, particularly rugby, which he also later practiced at Woolwich Arsenal where, having passed his entrance exams in 1911, he had gone to train as a Royal Engineer. He subsequently received the King's Commission as a second lieutenant. After Woolwich he reportedly joined the military establishment at Chatham.



(Right above: one of the remaining original buildings in the Arsenal at Woolwich – photograph from 2011)

****The 1898 Business Directory for St. John's, Newfoundland, records the family address as being 235, Gower Street. Three years later, the 1901 Census for England shows mother Marion-Charlotte and son Alexander living at 21, Western Parade in St. Thomas', Portsmouth. The subsequent Census of 1911 has them both boarding at 66, Barons' Court Road in Fulham, London - and living on 'private means'. Meanwhile, by 1904, father John Jackson had taken up residence in the Crosbie Hotel back home in St. John's: he was still there in 1913. Alexander's education was apparently a priority.***

When Alexander McLean Jackman began his military studies is not clear, but the Forces War Records web-site shows a Second Lieutenant A.M. Jackman already serving with the Royal Engineers as early as December 20, 1912, perhaps both working and residing at the Brompton Barracks in the military town of Chatham.

Second Lieutenant Jackson is recorded in a single and final source as having been attached to the 4th Field Company of the Royal Engineers; however, a field company of that number appears nowhere else in available documentation, and so it is perhaps more likely that the other records which have him posted to the 12th Field Company are correct.

(What follows hereafter is a summary of the progress of that particular unit, unfortunately without much personal information pertaining to Alexander Mclean Jackson to accompany it.)

(Right above: The image of the Royal Engineers cap badge dating from the period of the Great War is from the Long, Long Trail website.)



The 12th Field Company, Royal Engineers, was attached to the British Army's 6th Division at Cambridge on August 22, 1914. Exactly when Second Lieutenant Jackson may have reported to duty with this unit appears not to be recorded, but one well-documented source has him disembarking in France with it in September.

The 6th Division landed in the French port of St. Nazaire on September 10 before being despatched north via Paris as a part of the fledgling British Expeditionary Force to meet the German onslaught which by that time had marched through Belgium in its attempt to encircle Paris.

It was the ensuing 1st Battle of the Aisne* that began on September 13 – involving most of that British Expeditionary Force - which marked the end of the German advance and the subsequent race to the sea which was to result in four years of trench warfare.

****French history remembers the event as the '1ere Bataille de la Marne'.***



(Right above, the caption reads: An English convoy crossing a river by means of a bridge of boats: it is from an early period of the Great War as there are no steel helmets to be seen. – from a vintage post-card)

In mid-October the 6th Division was transported by train to the northern town of St. Omer. It then subsequently marched to Hazebrouck, before being posted to the area of the Franco-Belgian border between Lille and Armentières. There, from the time of its arrival until the end of October, it was embroiled in what came to be known as the *1st Battle of Ypres*.

From that moment until the end of the following May, the 6th Division remained in the area of Armentières – still in British hands by then whereas Lille had been occupied by the Germans. During this period this was apparently... *a quiet but extended front*... even while, at the end of April, 1915, the *Second Battle of Ypres* was raging only scant kilometres to the north. The term *quiet*, of course, by that time took for granted the daily trickle of casualties due to the incessant artillery and sniper fire.



(Right above: *The city of Ypres towards the end of 1915 – some six months after the 6th Division arrived on the scene: It was already looking much like this by the end of May, 1915. – from a vintage post-card*)

The 6th Division was moved into the *Ypres Salient* at the time when *2nd Ypres* was drawing to a conclusion, at the end of May, 1915. While not involved immediately in any major action, it would seem that the Division's casualty rate immediately doubled.

Already by this time having received promotion, Lieutenant Jackson's comportment during this period in Belgium apparently came to the attention of his superior officers as evidenced below:

*War Office,
22 June, 1915*

The following despatch has been received by the Secretary of State for War from the Field-Marshal Commanding-in-Chief, British Forces in the Field:-

31st May, 1915

MY LORD, -

In accordance with the last paragraph of my despatch of the 5th April, 1915, I have the honour to bring to notice names of those whom I recommend for gallant and distinguished service in the field.

*I have the honour to be,
Your Lordship's most obedient Servant,
J.P.D. FRENCH
Field-Marshal, Commanding-in-Chief,
The British Army in the Field.*

ROYAL ENGINEERS Jackson, Lieutenant A.M*.



(Right above: *The oak-leaf spray, symbolic of the lowest award for gallantry – 'Mentioned in Despatches' - granted by the British Army, did not come into use until after the Great War. Here it is mounted on the ribbon of the inter-Allied Victory Medal.*)

****The above information is to be found in the London Gazette Supplement, Number 29200, of June 1, 1915, page 5987.***

Later that same summer there was to be an engagement with the enemy at *Hooge* – a village just to the south-east of Ypres (today *Ieper*) - in August of that year when a German attack was eventually repulsed and small gains – measured in yards – were made – at a cost of approximately eighteen-hundred casualties.

After that, minor operations continued and the succeeding ten months were, once again, to be relatively *quiet*: total casualties during that entire time about eleven thousand.

(Right: *Hooge Crater Cemetery is the site of a large mine which was detonated by the British in July of 1915, the crater captured by the Germans at the end of the month. It was re-taken from them by the British 6th Division on August 9 (see above).*)



The 6th Division was to spend thirteen months in all in the *Ypres Salient*. The Divisional History reports only a few minor skirmishes during this entire period, including a German gas attack on December 19, and a four-day action during which the Division repulsed a German attack and delivered a reportedly-successful counter-attack of its own from April 19 to 22 (inclusive) in the spring of 1916.

During this period of course, there were to be suffered the daily routines and rigours of life in the trenches, positions that were – as were the majority of British positions in the Salient – overlooked by their German adversaries. The lot of the soldier in the trenches was no fun as...*the general state of the trenches, commanded as they were by the enemy positions, in the water-logged Ypres Salient during the winter of 1915-1916 defies description...* (from *A Short History of the 6th Division: 1914-1919*)



(Right above: *These are Canadian troops in support positions, behind the front lines, on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, these trenches perhaps a bit drier than those described above. The troops were by then equipped with steel helmets – distributed in only the spring and summer of 1916. – from Illustration*)

It would appear that during this period, perhaps during that action of mid-April, 1916, that Lieutenant Jackson was Mentioned in Despatches for a second time. The despatch itself, submitted on this occasion by Sir Douglas Haig who had replaced Sir John French as Commander-in-Chief of British Forces in Western Europe, is dated April 30, 1916 and is to be found in the London Gazette Supplement of June 13, 1916, Number 29623, page 5931.

However, as is also the case with his earlier decoration, there appears to be no citation in the London Gazette, although there may be some among any personal papers which, to date, appear to be unavailable.

(Right: Even though Mentioned in Despatches more than once, the recipient of the decoration was entitled to wear only a single Oak-Leaf Spray.)



It was to be the end of July of 1916 before the 6th Division, and with it the 12th Field Company of the Royal Engineers, was transferred to another theatre of operations: *the Somme*. During its posting to the Ypres Salient it had incurred some eleven-thousand casualties.

In the meantime, some hundred kilometres to the south, on July 1 of 1916, the British and French had launched their summer offensive, *1st Somme*. It was on that first day that the British Army was to incur fifty-seven thousand casualties - of which nineteen-thousand dead – and of those casualties, some seven-hundred personnel of the Newfoundland Regiment at Beaumont-Hamel. The *1st Battle of the Somme* – and the losses – were to continue until mid-November.



(Right above: A grim, grainy image purporting to be Newfoundland dead awaiting burial after July 1 at Beaumont-Hamel – from ...)

The 6th Division was transferred from the *Ypres Salient* to *the Somme* at the end of July. *The greater part of August was spent on the Ancre, on the front opposite Beaumont-Hamel**, there making preparations for an attack which was eventually to be abandoned for a time. (From *A Short History of the 6th Division: 1914-1919*)

**In fact, Beaumont-Hamel was – and is – a commune. At the time of the Great War it comprised two communities, Beaumont and Hamel, perhaps two kilometres apart: Beaumont was behind the German lines - until November of 1916 - and Hamel was in fact behind the British lines. On July 1 the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment fought on ground between the two villages.*



On or about September 6, the 6th Division was transferred to join XIV Corps.

Perhaps it suffices to say that for the next two months the British constantly attacked the German positions in the area of Guinchy and Combles, and later Gueudecourt* – here were again the Newfoundlanders, on October 12 - Flers, LesBoeufs and Morval. Some ground was won but at the usual high price.

**Recorded as Le Transloy among its Regimental Battle Honours*

(continued)

By the time that the 6th Division was eventually withdrawn on November 9, it had incurred a total of six-thousand, nine-hundred seventeen casualties during that preceding three-month period.

It was then transferred to two northern sectors – *La Bassée* and *Cambrin Hohenzollern Quarries* - where it remained for some four months, until the last day of February: *All this front had a most evil repute, but so exhausted was the enemy by the Somme fighting that this four months' trench sojourn proved the quietest the Division ever experienced... and the casualties would have been far fewer had it not been for several raids carried out by us.* (From *A Short History of the 6th Division: 1914-1919*)

It was on January 1, New Year's Day, of 1917 that Lieutenant Jackson was decorated with the Military Cross. There is no citation for this medal, thus suggesting that it was awarded for continuous service – inclusive of those for which he was *mentioned in despatches* - rather than for a single specific incident. It was also among the many names included on the list of His Majesty's New Year's Awards for 1917.



(Right: *The Military Cross is granted in recognition of... an act or acts of exemplary gallantry during active operations against the enemy on land... and was awarded to junior officers of the rank of captain or below. It was authorized on December 28, 1914.*)

March was notable for raids, counter-raids and enemy artillery and mortar fire, particularly as it was the period preceding the opening day of the *Battle of Arras* on April 9.

For Lieutenant Jackson it was also a period notable for two promotions: on March 9, apparently already a temporary captain, he was confirmed in this rank; at the same time, the London Gazette reads: *Lt. A.M. Jackson to be acting major while Com'd a Field Co. 30/11/16 (Substituted for the notification in the Gazette of 19th Mar. 1917)**

**In fact, a further single source (Forces War Records) also cites him as a temporary lieutenant-colonel.*

It was perceived on April 13, four days after the first British attacks, that the Germans were withdrawing in certain sectors: the decision was thus taken by the High Command that the enemy should be followed closely wherever he fell back.

(Right: *The traffic round-about behind the memorial to the Canadians is the summit of the so-called Hill 70 (see below). – photograph from 2014*)



On April 16, at a small rise flatteringly designated as *Hill 70*, the Germans made known that they were being followed *too* closely and launched a successful counter-attack. A succession of such actions – by both sides - followed but *Hill 70* remained in German hands until a Canadian operation was undertaken later that summer.

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The son of John Jackson, Commission Merchant of *Jackson & Co., Drapers and General Dry Goods of 359, Water Street*, and of Marion Charlotte Jackson (née *Simms*) of St. John's, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Arthur.

Major Jackson was reported as having *died of wounds* on April 27 1917.

Major Jackson MC died at the age of twenty-four years: date of birth, June 10, 1891 (from Presbyterian Parish Records).

(The photograph of Second Lieutenant(?) Jackson is from a *Wikitree* site edited by Faye Whitfield)



Major Alexander McLean Jackson MC was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).

Note: No citation for the awarding of the Military Cross has as yet been found, but it was likely earned while he was a lieutenant or captain.



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 – February 17, 2023.