

Conn Alexander: A Man of Mystery

Wars are times of conflict and tumult, and they often produce strange stories and unexplained happenings. The Great War of 1914-1918 — the First World War, as it is generally known today — has left us with many of these. But none is stranger or more mysterious than the story of Capt. Conn Alexander, late of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment. Alexander was a man of mystery. The official records reveal only a sketch of his life and career. On Sept. 8, 1914, he came to Government House in St. John's to see the governor, Sir Walter Davidson. That was a fortnight after the first of the Blue Puttees signed up. He wanted to join the newly-raised Newfoundland Regiment. He told Davidson he had just arrived in St. John's, in the company of Adolph Bernard and Arthur Raley, all three of whom, in Davidson's words, "have come out [from England] to join the corps." (Bernard and Raley were Englishmen living in St. John's, where they taught at Bishop Feild College; they had been on holiday in England.) Alexander told Davidson that he was 31 and he was living near Halifax, Nova Scotia. He had been at Harrow, one of the elite English public schools. (We call them "private" schools in Canada.) He had served with the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers during the South African (Boer) War and subsequently with the Grenadier Guards. Davidson promptly offered Alexander an appointment as a lieutenant in the regiment. Alexander, just as promptly, declined the appointment.

Experienced officer

The next day, Davidson reported, two prominent citizens of St. John's told him that Alexander refused the lieutenancy because he had no other income, and needed "sufficient pay to cover his expenses." Davidson then wrote to W.H. Franklin, the camp commandant at Pleasantville, where the Blue Puttees were training.

"Captain Alexander," he said, "is experienced both as a regular officer on war service and as an instructor of musketry and will, I have no doubt, be of value to the Newfoundland Regiment." He was to receive a captain's salary, with a daily allowance of \$2.50 "to cover his incidental expenses." On Sept. 21, Alexander was duly appointed a captain, one of the first 12 commissioned officers when the first Newfoundlanders sailed for England; he had become commanding officer of "B Company". Companies A and B, numbering 525 soldiers, sail on H. M. Transport Florizel, on October 4th, 1914 joining the Canadian transports and convoys with Capt. Conn Alexander in command. Sydney Frost, then a private in the Blue Puttees and one of the regiment's acknowledged heroes, wrote in later years that Alexander was better informed regarding military affairs than any other First Five Hundred Officer and very soon won the admiration of everyone in the battalion. His military bearing, dress, commands, etiquette and concepts of discipline would do credit to any officer of the [Brigade of] Guards. He continued: "On route marches in England and Scotland of as long as 25 miles, Alexander's groom rode his company commander's mount while the latter marched with the troops, and if a private soldier showed signs of fatigue and inability to carry on, Alexander would bear his rifle and equipment for a spell ..."

Relinquished commission

Alexander was with the Newfoundlanders when they landed in Gallipoli in September. Again Frost praised his conduct. "During the violent storm and flood followed by heavy frosts on the Gallipoli Peninsula in November, 1915, which inflicted 5,000 casualties at Suvla Bay alone, mostly frozen feet, he proved a tower of strength in constantly circulating among the men, encouraging, exhorting and assisting them in measures to prevent trench feet and frostbite and in severe cases, ordering them transferred to the beaches for evacuation." He served throughout the Gallipoli campaign, and returned to Egypt and then to France with the regiment. But then, suddenly and without apparent cause, Alexander's career ended on June 20, 1916, 10 days before Beaumont Hamel. Many years later, Frost asked rhetorically: "How did it happen that an officer of this caliber was suddenly removed from our midst shortly before the Beaumont Hamel tragedy of July 1st, 1916? ... It forever remained a mystery, as far as the troops were concerned." The First Five Hundred, the Newfoundland government's official record of the Blue Puttees, recorded only that Alexander had "Relinquished [his]

commission, June 20, 1916." "Conn Alexander, granted Commission, Captain, Sept. 21, 1914. British Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, Aug. 20, 1915; British Expeditionary Force, March 14, 1916; Relinquished Commission, June 20, 1916. "

Frost, by then a captain, records that he subsequently encountered Alexander, in a bar in London in March 1918, among a group of Canadian soldiers. Frost exclaimed, "'I'll be damned, Capt. Alexander.' With his usual composure and correct military bearing and discipline, he sprang promptly to attention, saluted and said: 'No, Trooper Alexander presents his compliments to Capt. Frost.' At once, I had the feeling he had no desire to enter into conversation ..."

The official records offer no explanation of Alexander's sudden decision to leave the regiment. Indeed, they deepen the mystery. But it is clear that whatever caused Alexander to do so was serious and came to pass quickly. On June 7, 1916, a coded telegram from the War Office in London to Davidson asked for approval of Alexander's decision to resign his commission.

On June 12, permission having been received, the Military Secretary of the War Office so informed the Newfoundland Regiment's paymaster, in three short sentences: "Capt. Alexander has been reported on by his superior officers as being unfitted to command troops either in the field or at home. He was accordingly ordered to proceed to England [and has done so] ... I am to add that Capt. Alexander has been informed of the above decision."

Official notice of his resignation was published in the London newspapers for June 20. On Aug. 12, Alexander, still in England, joined Lord Strathcona's Horse, a Canadian Regiment, in France.

Conn Alexander — captain become private — survived the war. He lived near Halifax, but nothing more is known about him. There's a story there, but what is it? And will we ever know it?

Edward Roberts has had a lifelong interest in the history of Newfoundland and Labrador. He was an MHA for 23 years, and served as the province's lieutenant-governor from 2002 to 2008.

Kate Stayner¹

F, #199216, d. 4 February 1946

Kate **Stayner** was the daughter of [Charles Stayner](#) of Halifax, Nova Scotia.² She married [Major Hon. Charles Alexander](#) and Hon. LCOL of 3rd Batt. Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers b. 26 Jan 1854 d. 27 Oct 1909 son of [James Du Pre Alexander, 3rd Earl of Caledon](#) b. 27 Jul 1812 d. 30 Jun 1855 and [Lady Jane Frederica Harriot Mary Grimston](#), b. 17 Jan 1825 d. 30 Mar 1888. in 1880.¹ Kate Stayner died on 4 February 1946.¹

From 1880, her married name became Alexander. The Alexander home was Dogworth Farm (later Dogworth Manor), Polmarsh Essex.

Children of Kate Stayner and [Major Hon. Charles Alexander](#)

1. [Ughna Alexander](#)² d. 18 May 1893
2. [Sheelagh Jane Alexander](#)²
3. [Cethlyn Sarah Mohred Alexander](#)²
4. [Captain Conn Alexander](#)⁺² b. 2 Jan 1883, d. 1970

Citations

1. [\[S37\]](#) Charles Mosley, editor, *Burke's Peerage, Baronetage & Knight age, 107th edition, 3 volumes* (Wilmington, Delaware, U.S.A.: Burke's Peerage (Genealogical Books) Ltd, 2003), volume 1, page 649. Hereinafter cited as *Burke's Peerage and Baronetage, 107th edition*.
2. [\[S37\]](#) Charles Mosley, *Burke's Peerage and Baronetage, 107th edition*.

Captain Conn Alexander¹

M, #199217, b. 2 January 1883, d. 1970

Captain Conn **Alexander** was born on 2 January 1883.¹ He was the son of [Major Hon. Charles Alexander](#) and [Kate Stayner](#).² He married, firstly, [Gladys Constance Grimshaw](#), daughter of [Thomas Wrigley Grimshaw](#), on 26 March 1906.¹ Constance Gladys Grimshaw married Col. Conn Alexander, the third son of the Earl of Caledon, Castle Caledon, Co. Tyrone. She was the daughter of Thomas Wrigley Grimshaw C.B. M.D. Col. Conn Alexander's eldest brother was the fourth Earl of Caledon and father of Viscount Alexander of Tunis, Col. Harold (Alix) Alexander. He married, secondly, [Doris Minnie Pacey](#), daughter of [Robert Pacey](#), on 9 December 1944.¹ He died in 1970.¹

He was educated at [Harrow School, Harrow on the Hill, London, England](#).¹ He gained the rank of Lieutenant in the service of the Grenadier Guards.¹ He gained the rank of Captain in the service of the 3rd Battalion, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers for 6 years including fighting in the Boer War between 1900 and 1902 with the Inniskilling Fusiliers.¹ He fought in the First World War with the Royal Newfoundland Regiment as a Captain from 1914 until 1916 and the Lord Strathcona's Horse as a Trooper from 1916 until 1918.¹ He fought in the Second World War, with the Pioneer Corps and CMP as a LCOL and Colonel.¹ He lived at [Apple Grove, Bognor Regis, Sussex, England](#).³

Children of Captain Conn Alexander and [Gladys Constance Grimshaw](#)

1. [Mona Alexander](#)⁺²
2. [James Conn Alexander](#)² b. 11 Jun 1907
3. [Marjorie Alexander](#)⁺² b. 30 Jan 1912

Citations

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2. [\[S37\]](#) Charles Mosley, *Burke's Peerage and Baronetage, 107th edition*.
3. [\[S47\]](#) Hugh Montgomery-Massingberd, editor, *Burke's Irish Family Records* (London, U.K.: Burkes Peerage Ltd, 1976), Aylmer, page 42. Hereinafter cited as *Burke's Irish Family Records*.

Gladys Constance Grimshaw¹

F, #199218, d. 31 January 1944

Gladys Constance **Grimshaw** was the daughter of [Thomas Wrigley Grimshaw](#).¹ She married [Captain Conn Alexander](#), son of [Major Hon. Charles Alexander](#) and [Kate Stayner](#), on 26 March 1906.¹ She died on 31 January 1944.¹

From 26 March 1906, her married name became Alexander.¹

Children of Gladys Constance Grimshaw and [Captain Conn Alexander](#)

1. [Mona Alexander](#)⁺²
2. [James Conn Alexander](#)² b. 11 Jun 1907
3. [Marjorie Alexander](#)⁺² b. 30 Jan 1912

Citations

1. [S37] Charles Mosley, editor, *Burke's Peerage, Baronetage & Knightage, 107th edition, 3 volumes* (Wilmington, Delaware, U.S.A.: Burke's Peerage (Genealogical Books) Ltd, 2003), volume 1, page 649. Hereinafter cited as *Burke's Peerage and Baronetage, 107th edition*.
2. [S37] Charles Mosley, *Burke's Peerage and Baronetage, 107th edition*.

James Conn Alexander¹

M, #199219, b. 11 June 1907

James Conn **Alexander** was born on 11 June 1907.¹ He is the son of [Captain Conn Alexander](#) and [Gladys Constance Grimshaw](#).² He married [Beatrice Mary Stringer](#), daughter of [George Herbert Stringer](#), on 27 February 1939.¹

Citations

1. [S37] Charles Mosley, editor, *Burke's Peerage, Baronetage & Knightage, 107th edition, 3 volumes* (Wilmington, Delaware, U.S.A.: Burke's Peerage (Genealogical Books) Ltd, 2003), volume 1, page 649. Hereinafter cited as *Burke's Peerage and Baronetage, 107th edition*.
2. [S37] Charles Mosley, *Burke's Peerage and Baronetage, 107th edition*.

Name: ALEXANDER, CONN
Regimental number(s): 15651
Reference: RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 77 - 41
Date of Birth: 02/01/1883

cord
7th 8/19/16

Duplicate

New Enlistment

UNIT L (R) RR

Regimental No. 19651

ATTESTATION PAPER.

CANADIAN OVER-SEAS EXPEDITIONARY FORCE.

QUESTIONS TO BE PUT BEFORE ATTESTATION. (ANSWERS).

1. What is your name? Conn Alexander
2. In what Town, Township or Parish, and in what Country were you born? London, England
3. What is the name of your next-of-kin? Mrs. G.C. Alexander (Wife)
4. What is the address of your next-of-kin? Twinstead, Sudbury, Suffolk, Eng.
5. What is the date of your birth? January 2nd 1883
6. What is your Trade or Calling? Farmer
7. Are you married? Yes
8. Are you willing to be vaccinated or re-vaccinated and innoculated? Yes
9. Do you now belong to the Active Militia? No
10. Have you ever served in any Military Force?
If so, state particulars of former Service. 6 years Inniskilling Fusiliers
2 years Newfoundland Exped. Forces.
11. Do you understand the nature and terms of your engagement? Yes
12. Are you willing to be attested to serve in the }
CANADIAN OVER-SEAS EXPEDITIONARY FORCE? } Yes

Conn Alexander (Signature of Man).
J. W. Montgomery (Signature of Witness).

DECLARATION TO BE MADE BY MAN ON ATTESTATION.

I, Conn Alexander, do solemnly declare that the above answers made by me to the above questions are true, and that I am willing to fulfil the engagements by me now made, and I hereby engage and agree to serve in the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force, and to be attached to any arm of the service therein, for the term of one year, or during the war now existing between Great Britain and Germany should that war last longer than one year, and for six months after the termination of that war provided His Majesty should so long require my services, or until legally discharged.

Conn Alexander (Signature of Recruit).
Date August 14th 1916 DK J. W. Montgomery (Signature of Witness).

OATH TO BE TAKEN BY MAN ON ATTESTATION.

I, Conn Alexander, do make Oath, that I will be faithful and bear true Allegiance to His Majesty King George the Fifth, His Heirs and Successors, and that I will as in duty bound honestly and faithfully defend His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, in Person, Crown and Dignity, against all enemies, and will observe and obey all orders of His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, and of all the Generals and Officers set over me. So help me God.

Conn Alexander (Signature of Recruit).
Date August 14th 1916 DK J. W. Montgomery (Signature of Witness).

CERTIFICATE OF MAGISTRATE.

The Recruit above-named was cautioned by me that if he made any false answer to any of the above questions he would be liable to be punished as provided in the Army Act.

The above questions were then read to the Recruit in my presence.
I have taken care that he understands each question, and that his answer to each question has been duly entered as replied to, and the said Recruit has made and signed the Declaration and taken the oath before me, at
Sharncliffe this 14th day of August 1916
[Signature] (Signature of Justice).

I certify that the above is a true copy of the Attestation of the above-named Recruit.
[Signature] (Approving Officer).
COMMO. CANADIAN CAVALRY DET.

Description of Born Alexander on Enlistment.

Apparent Age years months.
(To be determined according to the instructions given in the Regulations for Army Medical Services.)

Height ft. ins.

Chest measurement { Girth when fully expanded ins.
 Range of expansion ins.

Complexion

Eyes

Hair

Religious denominations. { Church of England
 Presbyterian
 Wesleyan
 Baptist or Congregationalist
 Other Protestants
(Denomination to be stated.)
 Roman Catholic
 Jewish

Distinctive marks, and marks indicating congenital peculiarities or previous disease.
(Should the Medical Officer be of opinion that the recruit has served before, he will, unless the man acknowledges to any previous service, attach a slip to that effect, for the information of the Approving Officer.)

CERTIFICATE OF MEDICAL EXAMINATION.

I have examined the above-named Recruit and find that he does not present any of the causes of rejection specified in the Regulations for Army Medical Services.

He can see at the required distance with either eye; his heart and lungs are healthy; he has the free use of his joints and limbs, and he declares that he is not subject to fits of any description.

I consider him Fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force.

Date Aug 14th 1916 W. B. Blair
 Place 6th St. St. Louis Cap. Blair
* Insert here "fit" or "unfit." Medical Officer.

NOTE.—Should the Medical Officer consider the Recruit unfit, he will fill in the foregoing Certificate only in the case of those who have been attested, and will briefly state below the cause of unfitness:—

CERTIFICATE OF OFFICER COMMANDING UNIT.

Born Alexander having been finally approved and inspected by me this day, and his Name, Age, Date of Attestation, and every prescribed particular having been recorded, I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.

W. B. Blair (Signature of Officer.)
 Date Aug 14 1916

CONN ALEXANDER

Conn Alexander was born in London England on January 2nd 1883.

4th Battalion, The Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers the under mentioned Gentleman to be Second Lieutenants:-Conn Alexander, dated 25th April, 1900.

Lieutenant Conn Alexander, from 4th Battalion, The Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, in succession to Lieutenant of Grenadier Guards on May 9th 1905, Sir M. R. A. Cholmeley, Barr, promoted.

3rd Battalion, The Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, Lieutenant Conn Alexander, 4th Battalion, The Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, after serving in South African War 1900 -02 to be Captain dated 12th July, 1911.

3rd Battalion, The Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, Captain Conn Alexander resigns his commission, dated 24th April, 1912.

Royal Newfoundland Regiment granted Commission to Conn Alexander, rank Captain, dated Sept. 21, 1914. Service with British Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, Aug. 20, 1915; service with British Expeditionary Force, March 14, 1916; Conn Alexander relinquished Commission, dated June 20, 1916.



15651 Conn Alexander became a Trooper in Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians) on 14 August 1916 and served until 1919.

Captain Conn Alexander of the 3rd Battalion. Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers and a Lieutenant Grenadier Guards, served in South African War 1900 02, in World War 1 1914 19, and in World War 2 1939 45 (Pioneer Corps and CMP~ (19, Normandy Lane, East Preston, Sussex).

CHARLES SYDNEY FROST Reg. No. 58 .Enlisted, Sept. 7, 1914; Lance Corporal, July 14, 1915; British Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, Aug. 20, 1915; 2nd Lieutenant, April 15, 1916; British Expeditionary Force, June 5, 1916; Wounded, Gueudecourt, Oct. 12, 1916; Invalided to England; Lieutenant, May 15, 1917; Returned to B. E. F., Nov. 10, 1917; Captain, March 18, 1918; Awarded Military Cross, Sept. 28, 1918; Retired and placed on reserve of Officers, St. John's, June 2, 1919.