

Cockburn, Alexander. Corporal.

12-D-14



On September 14, 1914, Alexander Cockburn is born in Lochee, now a district of Dundee in Scotland. His father, James Cockburn, a veteran of the First World War; served in the Royal Garrison Artillery. His mother is Agnes Cockburn, née Thorburn.

Alexander is the youngest of six children. He has three older sisters and two older brothers.

The English-speaking family attends the Church of England.

From Greenock in Scotland, mother Agnes departs for Canada with her daughter Ruby and Alexander. On November 17, 1928, they arrive in Quebec aboard the ship 'Laurentic'. They will travel on to Toronto where a brother-in-law of Agnes lives.

The eldest children, are already in Canada on their own initiative. They made the voyage respectively in 1924 and 1926.

It is unclear whether father James remains in Scotland, but it is certain that he dies in Lochee, Scotland, on May 13, 1934.

(Alexander's older brother James was killed in action in July 1943 in Sicily, leaving behind his wife and three children).

Alexander left school at age 14 to join his mother and sister travelling to Canada. In Canada, he has various jobs.

Among other things, he works for Bell Telephone for several months in 1935.

Alexander enlists on June 21, 1940. He states that he has worked as a driver for Canada Coal Co. in Toronto for five years. He has driving experience with various types of trucks. His last earnings were \$25/week.

He can return to Canada Coal again upon his return from the army.

Alexander is a member of the drivers' union. Furthermore, he states that he prefers to serve as a carrier driver/mechanic.

Alexander also sees the medical examination. Only the standard records were made for him. Blue eyes, light brown hair, 5'7" tall and weighed 141 lbs.

He is declared fit for all services.

Alexander is assigned to the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada (QOR) and departs for Camp Borden for basic infantry training.

After about 6 weeks, on August 10, 1940, he leaves for Newfoundland with the so-called 'W-force'.

"W" Force was a Canadian army unit established in 1940-1941 to defend Newfoundland against potential enemy attacks during World War II. The unit consisted of Canadian troops and was responsible for protecting vital infrastructure and coastal defense. This led to a significant militarization of the region until the end of the war.

Alexander is on leave during Christmas 1940 and the turn of the year 1940/41. After this, he has to report in Sussex, New Brunswick.

Here, he continues his training as a driver/mechanic for tracked vehicles. He qualifies in June 1941.

Without granted embarkation leave, Alexander, and many others, boards a troop ship in Halifax on July 20, 1941, which will take him to the United Kingdom (UK). He arrives in Gourock, Scotland, on July 29 and is on leave until August 11, 1941.

Subsequently, Alexander stays for an extended period in Aldershot (UK), where many Canadian troops are stationed.

In 1941, Aldershot served as an important reception and training center for thousands of Canadian troops in the United Kingdom, and was often referred to as the "home of the Canadian Army" during the Second World War.



It is striking that Alexander's file for 1942 and 1943 mentions barely anything more than the periods during which he is allowed 'private leave'.

A note is included in June 1942 stating that his mother has moved to another address and that Alexander is briefly posted to the C.T.C. in late December 1942/early 1943. This is an abbreviation with multiple meanings; in this case, given his training, it likely refers to the Canadian Tank Corps. After that, he is again taken on strength by the QOR.

In September 1943, he is allowed to attach the Good Conduct Badge to his uniform. Alexander's file then jumps to January 1944, when he is awarded the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal with Clasp.

Subsequently, Alexander allows himself 'personal leave'. First in February 1944, when he is 'Absent without Leave' (AWL) for two days, and then in mid-May 1944, when he is AWL for six days. The usual withholding of pay is the consequence. The additional punishment of "Confined to Barracks" (CB) is not recorded. Probably because, from mid-May onwards, everyone is CB, prior to the planned landing in France.

On June 6, 1944, Alexander with the QOR lands on Juno Beach in Normandy. He will experience the harsh reality of World War II.

From the landing onwards, only a few notes can be found in his file until April 16, 1945, when he met his tragic end in the north of the Netherlands. On January 2, 1945, he is promoted to corporal; in early March 1945, he is allowed nine days personal leave in the UK.

For his time on the Western European mainland, the QOR War Diaries give a good idea of what Alexander went through.

The regiment's routes:

From Normandy, through Northern France to Belgium and the Netherlands.

France July 1944: deployment at the Carpiquet airfield.

Subsequently, many "smaller" skirmishes.

A note in the QOR War Diary regarding casualties within the regiment in July 1944.

VICTIMS SINCE "D-DAY".

Officers / Other ranks:

Killed in action & died from wounds: 7/162

Wounded: 17/278

Combat exhaustion: 0/39

In La Capell – France, the regiment is granted a rest period for some days.

Next, they move north: Boulogne – Calais, with various actions.

On October 4, 1944, the France-Belgian border is crossed.

The regiment then prepares for actions to liberate the port of Antwerp, the so-called 'Operation Switchback'.

This was a personal order from General Eisenhower to Field Marshal Montgomery following the partial failure of Operation Market-Garden.

On October 10, 1944, the regiment moves again. It starts an advance towards Sluiskil in Zeelandic-Flanders.

Alexander's file still does not contain notes in this period, although the QOR pay a heavy price in the Southwest of the Netherlands.

On November 3, 1944, Westkapelle is liberated and the QOR are given a brief rest; they transfer to Ledeborg, a district of Ghent. They remain there until November 8, 1944.

In mid-November 1944, they are on the move to the Nijmegen area.

The diary reads almost every day: cloudy-cold-foggy-night frost.

The winter months are often described as relatively quiet; the Canadians guard the so-called 'river Maas front' on the Dutch side.

Nevertheless, patrols are conducted daily and there is enemy contact. The Canadians count more than 50 victims between mid-November 1944 and February 1945 (the start of the Rhineland Offensive).

Following the partial failure of Operation Market Garden, a massive Canadian/British force was assembled in the Nijmegen region during the winter of 1944/1945. Approximately 400,000 men and nearly 35,000 vehicles.

A similar American force gathered near Roermond. The goal was to push the German units back behind the Rhine.



Properly dressed for the occasion, the Queen's Own Rifles move out on patrol from the Nijmegen salient, January 22, 1945. (B.J. Gloster, National Archives of Canada, PA-114073)

On February 8, 1945, the Canadians and British launched their attack with Operation "Veritable." They encountered fierce resistance in the Reichswald. It became the bloodiest battle ever fought on German territory. By March 10, the western bank of the Rhine had been virtually cleared of German troops.

After the start of Operation Veritable, the QOR took up defensive positions in and around Millingen aan den Rijn on February 9, 1945. Rhine.

They remain there until the end of March, when the crossing of the Rhine has been achieved by the Allies.

Alexander Cockburn must have endured these actions without major problems. In any case, there is no note regarding this in his file.

Then that final entry for him: Killed in Action April 16, 1945.

Where were the QOR in April '45?

After the crossing of the German-Dutch border they advanced to the city of Doetinchem.

They saw action at Laagkeppel from April 3 to 5, '45; at Deventer from April 9 to 11, '45; and from April 16 to 18, '45, at Wons and Witmarsum in Friesland.

The Canadians wanted to prevent the Germans from further reinforcing themselves in North Holland via the Afsluitdijk. Therefore, starting on April 16, '45, they launched an attack on the end of the Afsluitdijk.

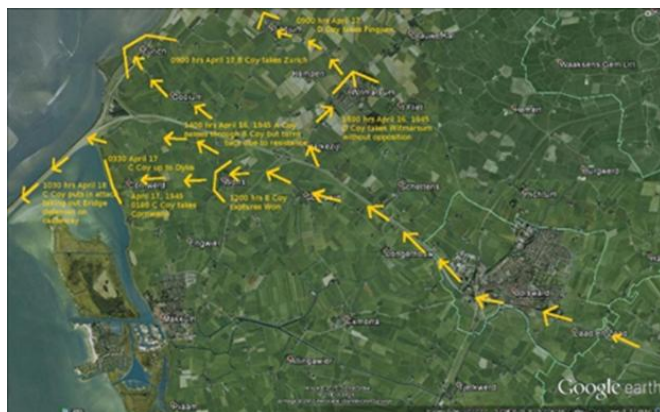
The infantry of the QOR was one of the units involved in this.

They departed from Bolsward towards the Afsluitdijk.

As is customary during an advance, the Bren carriers took the lead.

The Germans had set up heavy artillery and allowed the Canadians to get quite close before opening fire.

The leading carrier was hit immediately, and all five occupants were killed instantly. One of them was Corporal Alexander Cockburn.



He was given a temporary grave at the General Cemetery in Sneek.

On March 26, 1946, he was finally laid to rest at the CWGC Canadian War Cemetery in Holten. The grave reference is: plot 12, row D, grave 14.

He was awarded:

1939-1945 Star; France-Germany Star; Defence Medal; War Medal 1939-1945 and the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal with Clasp.

Sources:

www.cwgc.org; www.ancestry.com; www.canada.ca/library-archives; wikipedia, project '44, War Diaries of The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada

