



Alexander Douglas Kirkpatrick

A story nearly lost
1891 - 1915

Tim Martin
February, 2020

Forward

As a member of the Rusholme branch of the Denison family, I have always been interested in the role the Denisons and Kirkpatricks played in early Canadian history. A focal point for the family history is St. John's Cemetery on the Humber located in Weston, Ontario.

Canada in the early twentieth century was a very different place in a different time. Ties to Britain and the empire were still very strong and our family was a leading proponent of service to the mother country.

The following story is about a very young man eager to serve king and country but quickly killed in the First World War. While the individuals and institutions acknowledged at the end of the story proved to be valuable sources of information, I found that no-one had a complete picture of my great uncle Alexander Douglas Kirkpatrick's life and experiences.

Lieutenant Kirkpatrick was not married and had no children. He died alone in the cold, muddy battle-scarred killing fields of St Julien, in the second battle of Ypres in Belgium on April 23rd, 1915. He is memorialized at Menin Gate, St. John's Cemetery, St James Cathedral and other locations including the Commonwealth War Graves Commission web site.

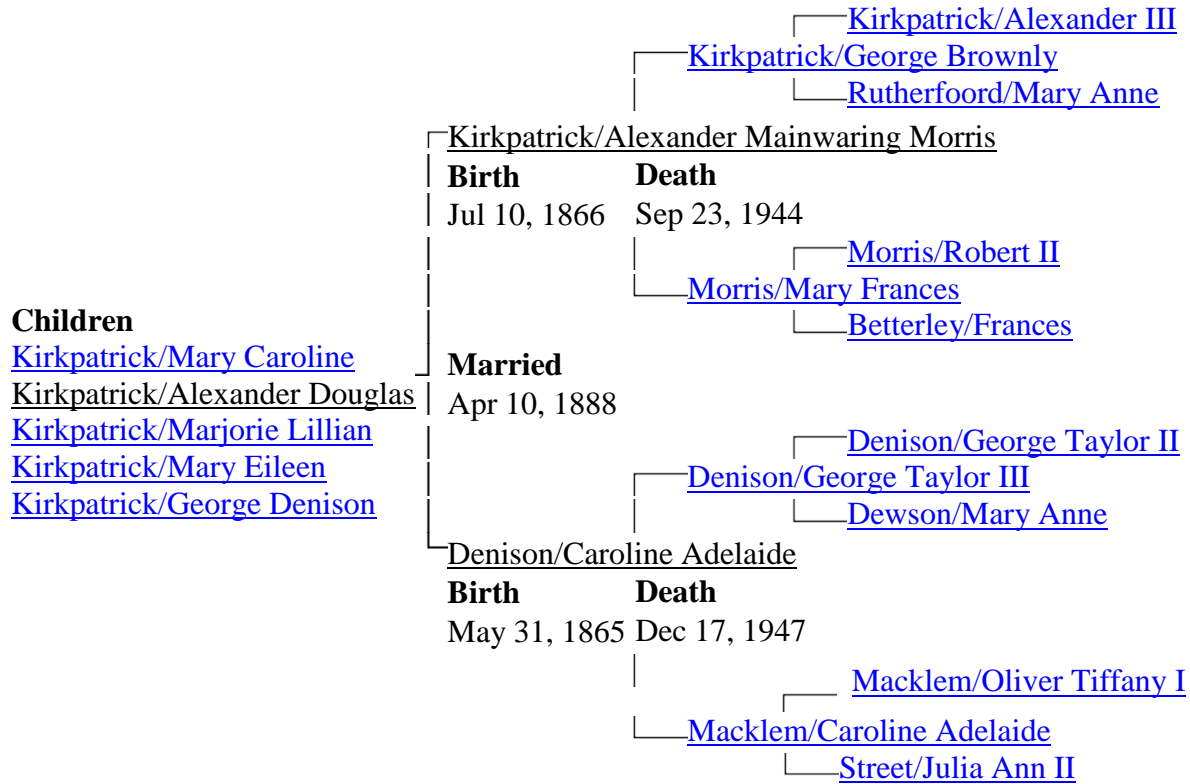
I cannot completely vouch for absolute accuracy of certain aspects of this story due to the march of time, fading memories and slight variations told over the last 105 years. However, I have tried to verify details where possible and hope that this story will prove interesting and be passed on to future generations of the Denison and Kirkpatrick families.

After reading this story, I would encourage you to reflect on his life and times and proudly share it with children, grand-children and others who may be interested.

Tim Martin

About Alexander Douglas Kirkpatrick

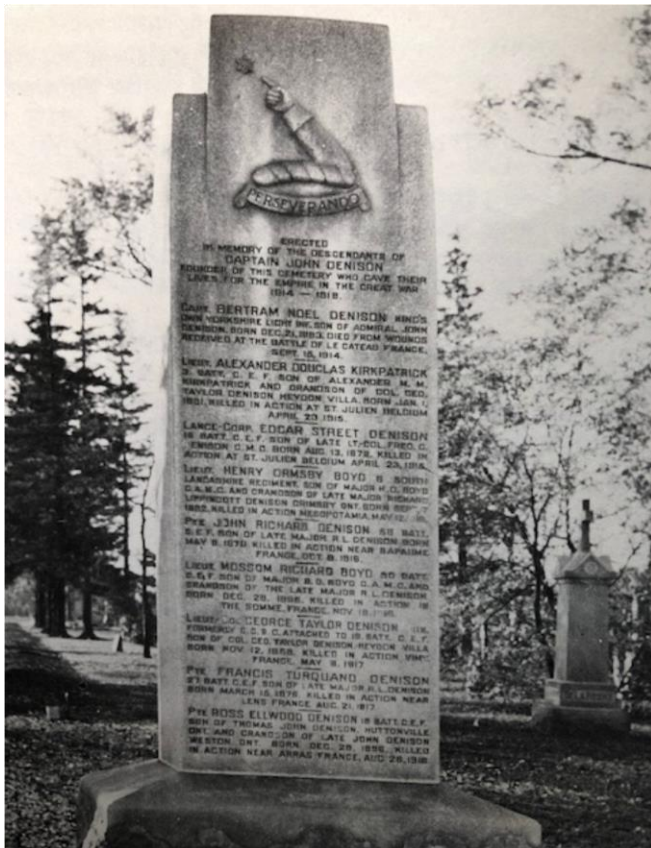
Born on June 1, 1891, Alexander Douglas Kirkpatrick (ADK) was the son of Alexander Mainwaring Morris Kirkpatrick, a grandson on his mother's side of Col. George Taylor Denison III, and great grandson of the first Col. George Taylor Denison. His mother was Caroline Adelaide Denison. The Denisons and Kirkpatricks were prominent families in early Toronto and many are buried in St John's Cemetery in Weston – an early village, now part of Toronto.



As I was growing up, my grandmother Mary Eileen Macklem (nee Kirkpatrick) – and ADK's sister – would attend various family functions. His name was never brought up and as children and young adults we were oblivious to his existence. With the advent of computerized record keeping and renewed interest in family ancestries, I have re-discovered an interesting story about this young man in our family and his short, but honourable life.

Born into an influential and prominent family, ADK attended the private boys school Upper Canada College (UCC) in 1902, when the Preparatory School was opened. After three years, he continued into the Upper School, where he presumably participated in the Cadet Corps. According to UCC archives, ADK was a *“most attractive boy, fair in complexion, shy and aloof in manner. Quite early in life he took to horseback riding, and on Saturdays he often enjoyed the excitement of a run with the hounds”*.

Upon leaving the college in 1908, ADK entered an insurance office to learn the business, and after a couple of years of this apprenticeship he obtained a position as a fire inspector with Wood & Kirkpatrick, an insurance brokerage firm owned by his father and still in existence today. About this time, in accordance with the traditions of the Denison family, ADK became an officer in the Governor General’s Bodyguard. When the Great War began, he was anxious to get to “the front,” and as there was not much call for cavalry he applied for a transfer to an infantry regiment, and with the help of his father and uncle was commissioned into the 3rd Battalion, Queen’s Own Rifles (QOR).



The “Fighting Denisons” have a rich military history and various generations saw service in the Northwest Rebellion, the Fenian Raids, the Boer War, and the First and Second World Wars.

A cenotaph (monument to recognize a person/group whose remains are elsewhere) honouring the contributions of the Denisons and Kirkpatricks to the war effort in 1914-1918 and 1939-1945 is located at the family cemetery in Weston, Toronto and ADK’s name can be found on the north face.

There is no tombstone at the cemetery for ADK as his body was never found. In point of fact, because there were so many deaths in the war, the decision was made by the Canadian government to not transport remains back to Canada even if their bodies had been found.

ADK and the war

On August 4th, 1914 Britain declared war on Germany. At the time, Canada was obligated to also declare war. Canada quickly responded with the formation of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF). The Queen's Own Rifles was one of the local militia units which made up the CEF and ADK had recently been commissioned as a Lieutenant in the C Company, 3rd Battalion.

Men from all classes and ages naively rushed to enlist at armories and militia bases across the country. ADK and the QOR marched to Toronto's Union Station and traveled by rail to the hastily prepared camp at Valcartier, Quebec for equipment and training in preparation for combat. Eventually, the camp held over 35,000 volunteer troops.

The first Canadian contingent sailed for England on October 3, 1914 – an extraordinary achievement in such a short time. We know that ADK was part of this contingent aboard the *SS Tunisian* for its two-week long journey which ended on the rain-soaked Salisbury Plains in Britain, where the eager men reported for further training. Early Canadian weapons and uniforms proved inadequate and were subsequently replaced with standard British military weapons and “Kit.”

In mid-February 1915, ADK and C Company landed in France and in mid-April were rushed up to the Ypres Salient on the western front in Belgium to support the French forces. The village of Saint-Julien, and a section of forested land called Saint-Julien Wood, was at a pronounced bend in the northeast sector of the Ypres Salient prior to the Second Battle of Ypres.



The Canadians, who had been moved into their positions only a few days earlier, were manning the lines for several hundred metres along a front to the southwest of Saint-Julien when the German army unleashed the first chlorine gas attack on the Western Front on April 22, 1915. Chlorine is a powerful, toxic irritant that can inflict damage to the eyes, nose, throat and lungs. At high concentrations and prolonged exposure it can cause death by asphyxiation.

In the 48 crucial hours that they held the line, 6,035 Canadians – or one man in every three who went into battle – became casualties. Of that number, approximately 2,000 (or one man in every nine) were killed.

ADK, who was paid \$20 a month for service to King and Country, died between the opposing lines on April 23, 1915 at the age of 24. He was killed by machine-gun fire leading his platoon in a diversionary attack.



The **St. Julien Memorial** (left) is a Canadian war memorial and small commemorative park located in the village of Saint-Julien, Langemark, Belgium. Frederick Chapman Clemesha's sculpture, *the Brooding Soldier*, is the central feature of the monument. It won second place in a design competition held by the Canadian government after the war.

The winning design – and Canada's most impressive tribute overseas to its fallen heroes in WWI – is the **Canadian National Vimy Memorial** (below). It overlooks the Douai Plain from the highest point of Vimy Ridge, about 10 kilometres north of Arras, France.



The mystery

Now for the intriguing part of this story! I said earlier that ADK's body was never found. Well - that is not entirely true. On April 24, Col. Arthur James Ernest Kirkpatrick, commanding officer of the battalion was captured and at the same time came across ADK's corpse. The German captors, respecting his rank, agreed to let Col. Kirkpatrick retrieve certain personal items from ADK's body for shipment back home to his mother. The Colonel's diary indicates that ADK's body was removed back to the Canadian lines for burial preparations. Unfortunately, due to on-going German bombardment, his body was lost in the confusion.

Col. Kirkpatrick happened to be ADK's uncle! He knew that many mothers sent their sons to war with money sewn into their khaki tunics. He proceeded to cut the money out of ADK's tunic and also removed his trench watch. Col. Kirkpatrick was then presumably escorted to a POW holding area. Battles around St Julien and the Ypres Salient continued on for years and ADK's body was never found again.

So what happened to the money and watch and how much money was there?

ADK's Uncle Arthur and commanding officer



“Hang-on Kirkpatrick” held his position at Saint-Julien until the battalion was entirely surrounded by the Germans. He was taken prisoner with what were left of his men. After 22 months as a prisoner of war in Bischofswerda, Saxony (Germany), he was transferred in December 1916 to Mürren, Switzerland. Due to bad health, he was then repatriated to England in October 1917. Col. Kirkpatrick returned to Canada in January 1918 and lived a full life for another 38 years, dying in 1955.

It is not clear if Col. Kirkpatrick sent ADK's money and trench watch back to Canada after being captured or he had it with him when he returned to Canada in 1918. It seems likely that the former was the case, as surely he would have had the money confiscated while he was a prisoner of war.

More about the money and watch later ...

Canada lost over 66,000 casualties in the Great War. Cemeteries and monuments are scattered all over northern France and Belgium. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission is charged with the responsibility of maintaining these sites in over 120 countries. Each site is dominated by the Cross of Sacrifice and protocol demands that accurate records be kept as to the location and details of all the war dead. When a body is recovered, a headstone is erected nearby in one of the allied cemeteries. Each headstone is made out of limestone from Arras, France and features the Canadian maple leaf. If, however, no remains are found, the name of the soldier is engraved on a memorial wall such as at the Menin Gate Memorial (right) in Ypres (Leper) Belgium.



Because ADK's body was never recovered, he does not have a headstone.



Over 54,000 names of missing servicemen are inscribed on the walls at Menin Gate Memorial and ADK's name can be found on panel 29.

The memorial was built between 1923 and 1927. Every evening since then, traffic is halted and the Last Post Association band performs a short emotional service of thanks to the 300,000 Commonwealth soldiers who died at the five battles of Ypres. Over 100,000 of these soldiers marched out of town on this site, many to nearby certain death.

As one stops and listens to this tribute echoing throughout the magnificent arches, one cannot help but reflect on the obscenity and waste of this terrible war inflicted on all combatant nations and their sons.

The service ends with the "Last Post" and "God Save the Queen." There was a break in this tradition during the Nazi occupation in WW2 when the service was moved to Surrey, England.

Back to the money!



For years I had heard about a gold sovereign rescued from the body of a fallen ancestor, but the full story had been lost over time.

In fact, there were **four** gold sovereigns retrieved and sent back to ADK's parents. This one (left) had been passed down through the generations and now resides with my sister, Shelagh Kirkpatrick Bowden. It's dated 1887 and depicts Queen Victoria on the obverse and Saint George slaying the dragon on the reverse.

Two other coins are with Michael and Anne Macklem in Ottawa and the fourth is held by Douglas Kirkpatrick, living in Kingston, Ontario.

Back to the watch!



Prior to the war, men did not normally wear wrist-watches, but the demands of modern warfare in the trenches required sturdy construction with accurate timekeeping and easy access in order to co-ordinate artillery barrages and infantry charges.

Prior to the war, pocket watches were the norm for men whereas wrist-watches had been worn by women for hundreds of years.

This may be ADK's trench watch possibly left by his parents to Mary Eileen Macklem (nee Kirkpatrick and sister of ADK) who then left it to her son, John Hamilton Martin (my father) and subsequently left to me. It has sat peacefully in my jewellery box for over 25 years without my knowledge as to its age or significance.

This Lepine trench watch was not standard British Army issue but was made around 1911 for Henry Birks and Sons of Montreal. It has a sterling silver (.935) case and Swiss movement by Longines. The identifying number on the movement (2510611) matches that on the inside of the back cover. In addition, there is another identifying number (R4725B). The wire lugs for the small straps, old fashioned numeric font and red "12" are further indicators of its authenticity for the period.

So is this the watch retrieved from ADK's body in 1915? Did Colonel Kirkpatrick send it home when captured or later? We are just not sure – it's another mystery!

So ends the story of our brave and valiant ancestor Alexander Douglas Kirkpatrick and his service to King, Country and the British Empire. Hopefully, the coins and watch will continue to be passed on to future generations of our family and his story of sacrifice told and retold.



CROSS OF SACRIFICE.
Erected by the Imperial War Graves Commission at St. Jude's
Cemetery, Englefield Green, Egham, Surrey.

Acknowledgements

- The Commonwealth War Graves Commission
- The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada Regimental Museum and Archives
- Upper Canada College
- Canadian National Archives – A.J.E. Kirkpatrick diary
- St. John's Cemetery on the Humber
- Groupe Birks Inc. Watchmaking Division, Montreal
- Mr. Tom Martin
- Mr. Ned Martin
- Mr. Nick Macklem
- Mr. & Mrs. Michael Macklem
- Mr. Douglas Kirkpatrick
- Mrs. Shelagh Kirkpatrick Bowden
- Ms. Tricia Friel

Epilogue

In September 2019, my wife Karen and I travelled to France and Belgium with Trafalgar Tours to visit WW1 and WW2 battle sites and memorials. It was an emotional tour which I had always wanted to do.

I made it a personal mission to visit the place of my great uncle Alexander Douglas Kirkpatrick's death and witness his name inscribed on the walls of the Menin Gate Memorial. An added bonus was locating the headstone of John Jackson - ADK's nephew, first cousin and boyhood friend of my father at Bernieres-sur-Mer cemetery in Normandy. Jackson (known as JayJay) died in 1944 near Caen shortly after D-Day in WW2.

Seeing thousands of names of young Allied soldiers on the walls of Menin Gate, Tyne Cot, Vimy Ridge and other locations, as well as thousands of headstones, is a very sobering experience. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission and local authorities do an excellent job of preserving sites and ensuring these young men are memorialized.

Passchendaele, St Julien, Vimy Ridge, Beaumont Hamel and other memorials are silent reminders of the sacrifices of an entire generation of young men from a young country of 8 million at the outbreak of the war.

Approximately seven percent of the total Canadian population was in uniform in WWI, in addition to the thousands working on the home-front in support of the war effort. To provide perspective, seven percent of today's Canadian population would see over 2.2 million in uniform!

This story is only one of thousands - many forgotten and lost over the last 105 years and in the near future, we will temporarily re-unite the four war-torn sovereigns and watch for the first time since the passing of ADK's parents.

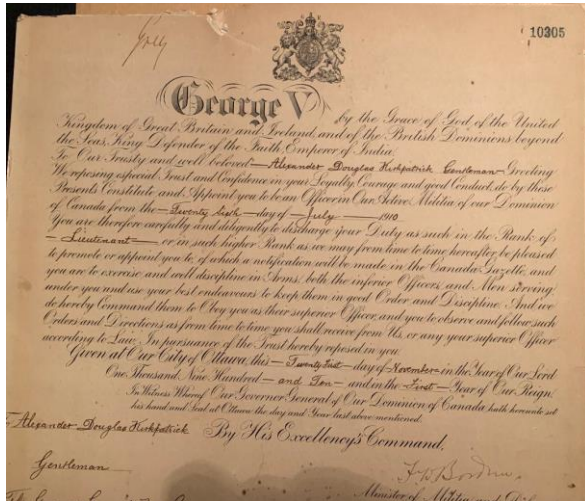
*Tim Martin (Great nephew of ADK)
404 Glenbrook Drive
Midland, Ontario, Canada
L4R 5G5
Email: catchacoma74@yahoo.com
Mobile: 647-232-5338*



ADK in uniform, 1914



ADK's Medals



ADK's commission as an officer

The bronze memorial disk (above) was produced in 1919 and distributed to the next of kin or all the fallen commonwealth servicemen. Known as the "Death Penny", they were financed by German reparation money.