

Private William Henry Brett MSM©
Regimental number: 110055
5th Battalion, Canadian Mounted Rifles

born: 23 January 1898 – died: 24 April 1918

Private William Henry Brett was a home child.¹ He was one of over 100,000 children sent to Canada from Britain between 1869 and the late 1930s. Over that period hundreds of thousands of children in Britain were living in terrible conditions—abandoned, orphaned, penniless or simply in families that could not care for them. Many were sent to Canada in an emigration movement that was motivated by the belief that these children would have a better life there. The outcomes for the children varied; some of the children were “were poorly treated and abused, others experienced a better life and job opportunities here than if they had remained in the urban slums of England.”² Many served with the Canadian and British Forces in the First World War. William was one of them.³

William enlisted on 27 April 1915 in Sherbrooke, Quebec; he was 5' 5" tall and had a fair complexion, grey eyes and fair hair.⁴ He had arrived in Canada on 7 May 1913⁵ with a group of children sent to Sherbrooke, under the auspices of the Church of England Waifs and Strays Society. Before leaving for Canada, he had been at the Industrial Training Home for Boys on Copenhagen Street in Islington North, London, and was considered to be in good health, free from disease and mentally and physically fitted for emigration to Canada.⁶ On arrival in Sherbrooke, he went to the Gibbs' Home for Boys. William was a farmer when he enlisted two years later. At the time, he did not report a next of kin.

William had a rocky relationship with the army. Even before leaving for Europe, he had committed disciplinary offences. He forfeited one day's pay in May 1915 for being absent without leave in Sherbrooke, just a month after enlisting. Then in July he forfeited 14 days pay for being absent from the camp in Valcartier, Quebec.

He went to England a few months later, arriving at the Canadian camp in Shorncliffe on 24 October 1915, and the disciplinary offences continued. In January 1916, he was given 42 days detention for “using insubordinate language and threatening language to his superior officer.”⁷ In the same month, he received a second punishment (Field Punishment No. 2, in which the soldier was shackled in irons but, unlike Field Punishment No. 1, was able to move around) for a second offence involving insubordinate language. He also had three more absences without leave while at Shorncliffe, resulting in the forfeiture of between 1 and 14 days of pay and, in the last case, another 5 days of Field Punishment No. 2.

He eventually went to the Front. He transferred to the 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles on 27 September 1916 and went to France the following day. Only a few months later he was admitted to No. 26 General Hospital in Etaples with inflammation of the connective tissue in his left arm. At the end of December 1916, he transferred to No. 25 General Hospital in Hardelot, just south of Boulogne-sur-Mer. He developed scabies before being transferred to No. 7 Convalescent Depot. He returned to his unit in March 1917. Just before returning to his unit, he was awarded 14 days Field Punishment No. 1 for “wilfully making an alteration in his pay book.”⁸ In November 1917, he was granted 14 days leave to the UK.

Five months later, he was fatally wounded. He was admitted to No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station on 21 April 1918 with shrapnel wounds to his back and his right hand, which had to be amputated. He died on 24 April and was buried the next day in Pernes Military Cemetery (Plot 2, Row A, Grave 1) with the Canadian chaplain G. C. d'Easum presiding.⁹

Pernes British Military Cemetery was only set up in April 1918 when No. 1 and No. 4 CCCSs came to Pernes, driven back by the German advance. William was one of 88 soldiers admitted on 21 April and one of 46 soldiers to die at the station that month.¹⁰

In spite of his rocky relationship with the army, William was awarded posthumously the Meritorious Service Medal on 17 June 1918.¹¹ The MSM was awarded for gallantry "in the performance of military duty otherwise in action against the enemy, or in saving, or attempting to save the life of an officer or soldier, or for devotion to duty in a theatre of war."¹² Like other CEF soldiers, he was awarded posthumously the British War Medal (for service overseas between 1914 and 1918) and the Victory Medal (for service in an operational theatre).

So, who was William's family? He was born on 23 January 1898 and baptized on 14 March 1898 in Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire, just about 20 miles north of the centre of London.¹³ His CEF service file indicates that he was born on 1 January 1895 in London. This would have made him 20 when he enlisted, not 17. Had he declared his actual date of birth he would have been ineligible to enlist.

His parents were George Brett and the former Caroline Gaylor; they married in Ware in 1896.¹⁴ William was probably their only child and Caroline died in 1903.¹⁵ It is not clear what happened to George or how William came to be in the Industrial Training Home for Boys in 1913. But he did have family in England. His service file identifies Abel Brett as his uncle, living at 1 Rose Cottage, Vicarage Road in Stanstead Abbots. However, the No. 1 CCCS chaplain indicated that his cousin was Mrs. A. J. Brett at the same address. This was likely an error and Mrs. Brett was probably the wife of Abel, who may have been George's brother, but the evidence is not clear.

While in the army, William signed a will (undated) leaving all his effects to Miss Cisse Townsend, in care of the Newmans at 28 Jersey Street in Brighton.¹⁶ It is not clear who Cisse Townsend was, but the Newmans may have been Edward John and Daisy Emily Newman, living at 9 Jersey Street in 1911. Edward was a fishmonger.¹⁷ Given that William had family and yet left his effects to somebody else, suggests that Cisse may have been a fiancée.

William's short life—he died at the age of 20—was an eventful one. He immigrated to Canada at the age of 15, returned to the UK less than three years later to fight in the Great War, and after a rocky period in the army, ended his military service with the award of a medal for gallantry.

© 2019 BIFHSGO

¹ "Home Children 1869–1932," *Library and Archives Canada* (<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/>: accessed 17 December 2019), entry for William Brett

² "Home Children 1869–1932"

³ "Immigration Program : Headquarters central registry files : C-4746," *Heritage* (<http://heritage.canadiana.ca>: accessed 24 December 2019), entry of Wm. H. Brett, Image 414

⁴ "Personnel Records of the First World War," *Library and Archives Canada* (<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/>: accessed 29 September 2019) entry for Brett, William H., Reference: RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 1047 – 46, Item number: 63047, Digitized service file - PDF format: B1047-S046. Unless otherwise specified, all information about William's military career comes from this source.

-
- ⁵ "Canadian Passenger Lists, 1865–1935," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 29 September 2019), entry for Wm Brett
- ⁶ "Immigration Program: Headquarters central registry files : C-4746," *Heritage*, entry of William Henry Brett, Image 233
- ⁷ "Personnel Records of the First World War," *Library and Archives Canada*, entry for Brett, William H.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ "No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca: accessed 5 July 2019), entry for Brett, W. H.
- ¹⁰ "War Diaries of the First World War: 1st Canadian Casualty Clearing Station 1914/08/13-1919/03/31," *Library and Archives Canada* http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/lac-bac/results/images?module=images&SortSpec=score+desc&Language=eng&ShowForm=hide&SearchIn_1=mikanNumber&SearchInText_1=2005082&Operator_1=AND&SearchIn_2=&SearchInText_2=&Operator_2=AND&SearchIn_3=&SearchInText_3=&Level=&MaterialDateOperator=after&MaterialDate=&DigitalImages=1&Source=&ResultCount=10: accessed 28 March 2018)
- ¹¹ *The London Gazette*, entry for Pte W. Brett, Publication date: 14 June 1918, Supplement: 30750, Page: 7176
- ¹² Blatherwick, F. J., *Canadian Orders, Decorations, and Medals* (1994)
- ¹³ "England & Wales Christening Records, 1530–1980," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 December 2019), entry for William Henry Brett
- ¹⁴ "England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 26 November 2019), entry for George Brett, Registration district: Ware, Inferred county: Herefordshire, Volume: 3a, Page: 774
- ¹⁵ "England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 21 January 2019), entry for Caroline Brett, Registration district: Ware, Inferred county: Herefordshire, Volume: 3a, Page: 285
- ¹⁶ "Personnel Records of the First World War," *Library and Archives Canada*, entry for Brett, William H.
- ¹⁷ "1911 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 December 2019), entry for Edward John Newman, Registration district: Brighton, Registration district number: 79, Sub-registration district: East Brighton, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 14, Household schedule number: 23, Piece: 5102