

Corporal Robert Richard Johnson[©]

Regimental number: 408472

27th Battalion, Canadian Infantry

born: 27 February 1896–died: 6 October 1918

Corporal Robert Richard Johnson was awarded the Military Medal for bravery in the field just over six months before his death in a fatal accident.¹ He was one of two soldiers to die at No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station who had been injured in an accidental explosion earlier in the day.

In early October 1918, Robert was returning from a Lewis Gun course in Le Tourquet, in northern France, when he stopped overnight at a Canadian staging camp in Wancourt. After a trip of over 100 kilometres, he was just 20 kilometres away from rejoining his battalion near Sains-lès-Marquion when the accident occurred. When Robert and six comrades lit a fire to heat water for washing the next morning, there was a massive explosion. In the words of one of Robert's comrades, Private B. Beyette:

On Sunday morning October 6, 1918, I was coming out of "funk hole" in the sunken road about 50 yards from scene of an accident, when I heard an explosion. I rushed up and found a soldier dressing a Corporal of the 27th Battalion who had evidently been wounded by the explosion. There were several wounded man lying around in the shell hole. There had been a fire in the hole but this had been blown out by the explosion. I did not notice any cause for this explosion. I think it was about 20 minutes before the 27th Bn Corporal was taken away. The Corporal's face was so blackened by the explosion that I could not recognize him as Cpl. Johnson.²

Robert had "a big wound in his stomach, [and] his left arm and right leg were broken."³ In less than an hour, he was taken to No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station with multiple shell wounds.

The cause of the explosion was a German fish tail bomb buried under a layer of dirt in the shell hole and the heat from the fire caused the bomb to explode. An inquest into the accident that killed two Other Ranks (non-officers)—the other being Sapper James Feathers (regimental number 681430) of the 10th Battalion of the Canadian Engineers—and injured five others found that "no blame can be attached to any person for this accident."⁴

Robert was buried in Duisans British Military Cemetery (Plot 7, Row B, Grave 26) with the Canadian chaplain W. Fisher presiding.⁵ This cemetery is located in Étrun, near Arras, France, and the first burials in the cemetery took place in March 1917.⁶ No. 1 CCCS arrived at the beginning of September 1918 and was stationed near Duisans for two months. As a result of the serious and urgent nature of the cases admitted to the station, the death rate was high in October—a total of 83 deaths occurred during the month.⁷

Robert had been with the 27th Battalion since first going to the Front on 1 April 1916. When he enlisted at Camp Niagara in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, on 7 June 1915, he was a mechanic living at 569 Jones Avenue in Toronto. He was 5'4½" tall and had a ruddy complexion, brown eyes and reddish hair. He left Canada on 27 November 1915 and, when he arrived in England, spent some time in the Canadian military camp at Shorncliffe, Kent, before going to France.

The injuries he sustained in the explosion were not the first of his military service. Less than five months after arriving at the Front, Robert had received gunshot wounds to his leg; he was evacuated to England and admitted to the Frensham Military Hospital in Farnham, Surrey, on 18 September 1916. He was discharged on 30 October to the Canadian convalescent hospital in Bear Wood, Wokingham, Berkshire. When he was discharged from convalescence at the end of December, he was sent to a Canadian reserve battalion in Hastings, East Sussex, and then returned to the 27th Battalion on 18 April 1917.

A couple of months later, he was awarded a Good Conduct Badge, just before a stay at the 4th Canadian Field Ambulance with an unknown fever (probably trench fever). He was only away from duty for four days before rejoining his unit on 12 June. He was again in a field ambulance at the beginning of August for another four days with inflammation of the connective tissue in his right foot.

SUPPLEMENT TO THE LONDON GAZETTE, 13 MARCH, 1918.

His Majesty the KING has been graciously pleased to approve of the award of the Military Medal for bravery in the Field to the undermentioned Non-commissioned Officers and Men :—

CANADIAN FORCE.

428647 Pte. (Cpl.) J. H. Johnson, Inf.

Source: London Gazette, 13 March 1918

At the beginning of September 1917, he was promoted to lance corporal and, on 16 November, the day he was promoted to corporal, he was sent to a Lewis Gun course. Shortly after his return to his unit, Robert earned the Military Medal, which was announced in the *London Gazette* in March 1918.

The inflammation in Robert's right foot recurred in April 1918 and he was treated at a field ambulance and then at the 1st Australian General hospital. A week later he was back with his unit. Five months later, Robert was sent on another Lewis Gun course; it was on his way home that the accident occurred.

The next of kin receiving notification of Robert's death was his father, Francis James Johnson, who was living at 3 Skipper Avenue in Toronto.⁸ The Johnson family had emigrated from England to Canada in 1911. Robert's father, known as both Francis and James, was born on 15 December 1866⁹ in Wednesbury, Staffordshire,¹⁰ and his mother, the former Annie Evans, was born in about 1869 in Walsall, Staffordshire.¹¹ They married in 1890 in Walsall¹² and the following year were living at 18 Midland Road in Walsall, where James was a wheel turner.¹³ They subsequently had eight children:¹⁴

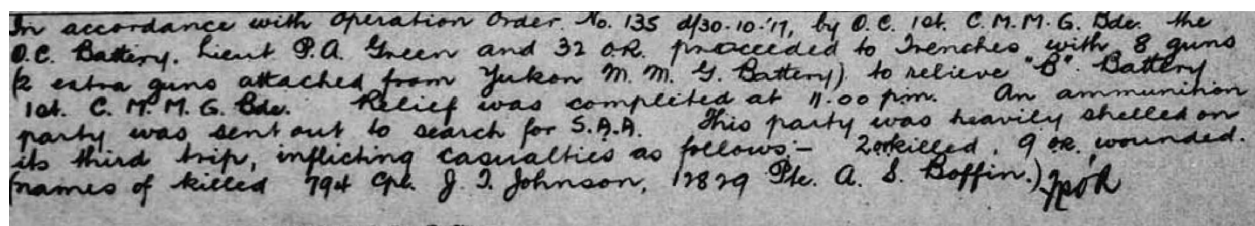
- Richard William (born in 1892, but died early the following year)¹⁵
- John Thomas Johnson (born in 1894)¹⁶
- Robert Richard Johnson (born on 27 February 1896)¹⁷
- Francis Joseph James Johnson (born in 1897)¹⁸
- Ethel Lilian (born in 1903, but died at the age of two months)¹⁹
- Harold Bailey (born in 1907 and died at three months)²⁰
- Beatrice Lily Johnson (born on 9 April 1908)²¹

The identity of the eighth child, who may have died in very early infancy, was not found.

By 1901, the family had moved to Flintshire, Wales, and was living at 5 Ryelands Terrace in Shotton, a few miles from Hawarden. James was now an iron works fitter.²² Ten years later they were still living on Ryeland Terrace and Robert, at the age of 15, was an office boy.²³ Just months after the

census was taken in the spring of 1911, the family immigrated to Canada. James and Annie and their four children arrived in Quebec City on 23 June 1911.²⁴ Sadly, just two years after their arrival, Annie died of breast cancer at the age of 44.²⁵ She died in Toronto on 19 February 1913 and was buried on 22 February in Necropolis Cemetery, Toronto.²⁶

Annie was not alive to see the deaths of two sons in the Great War. Her eldest living son, **John**, was a gas fitter when he enlisted in Toronto on 30 January 1915 (regimental number 794).²⁷ He went to England with the Eaton Motor Machine Gun Battery in June 1915 and to France on 22 February 1916. He was promoted to corporal and then to acting sergeant, but in August 1917 reverted to corporal for failing to comply with an order to report to an officer. He was killed in action on 30 October 1917, after his battery went into the trenches to relieve "B" Battery of the 1st Canadian Motor Machine Gun Battery. John went with a small party to search for small arms ammunition that came under heavy shelling and was killed—just a year before his brother.²⁸



In accordance with Operation Order No. 135 of 30.10.17, by O.C. 1st C.M.M.G. Bde. the O.C. Battery, Lieut P.A. Green and 32 OR. proceeded to trenches with 8 guns (2 extra guns attached from Yukon M.M. G. Battery) to relieve "B" Battery 1st C.M.M.G. Bde. Relief was completed at 11.00 pm. An ammunition party was sent out to search for S.A.A. This party was heavily shelled on its third trip, inflicting casualties as follows:— 2 killed, 9 OR. wounded. (names of killed 794 Cpl. J. J. Johnson, 1829 Pte. A. S. Boffin.) J.P.H.

Eaton Motor Machine Gun Battery War Diary, 30 October 1917

Source: "War diaries – Eaton Machine Gun Battery," *Library and Archives Canada*

In addition to Robert's Military Medal, both brothers were awarded the British War Medal (for service overseas between 1914 and 1918) and the Victory Medal (for service in an operational theatre). John's medals were sent to his father, but Robert's were sent to a family friend, Mrs. Mae Oldham, who was also notified of John's death.

Sometime around the beginning of the Great War, Robert's father had made a trip back to England and married Maude Ethel Rushton, 15 years his junior, in Bradford, Yorkshire. They married in St. Clement parish church on 27 December 1915²⁹ and travelled back to Canada, arriving in Quebec City on 20 May 1916.³⁰ Francis and Maude made a couple of trips back to England in the following two decades.³¹

Robert's sister **Beatrice**, at the age of 19, married William James Bush in Toronto on 27 July 1927. At the time, Beatrice was a packer and William a photographer.³²

Nothing is known of what became of Robert's brother **Francis** after their arrival in Canada in 1911. He does not appear to have served with the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

Robert's father died of myocarditis on 21 June 1937 in Toronto.³³

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¹ "Personnel Records of the First World War," *Library and Archives Canada* (<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/>: accessed 21 April 2021), entry for Johnson, Robert Richard, Reference: RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 4898 - 2, Item number: 336333, Digitized service file - PDF format: B4898-S002. Unless otherwise specified, all information about Robert's military service comes from this source.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca: accessed 21 April 2021), entry for Johnston, [sic] R.R.

⁶ "Duisans British Cemetery, Etrun," *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (www.cwgc.org: accessed 7 October 2015)

⁷ "War Diaries of the First World War: 1st Canadian Casualty Clearing Station 1914/08/13–1919/03/31," *Library and Archives Canada* (<http://data4.collectionscanada.gc.ca/>: accessed 17 June 2015)

⁸ "No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa*, entry for Johnston, [sic] R.R.

⁹ "Ontario, Canada, Deaths and Deaths Overseas, 1869–1948," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 25 April 2021), entry for Iramis [sic] James Johnson

¹⁰ "1891 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 21 April 2021), entry for James Johnson, Registration district: Rotherham, Sub-registration district: Kimberworth, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 11, Piece: 3850, Folio: 55

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1916–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 25 April 2021), entry for James Johnson, Registration district: Walsall, Inferred county: Staffordshire, Volume: 6b, Page: 1133

¹³ "1891 England Census," *Ancestry*, entry for James Johnson

¹⁴ "1911 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 21 April 2021), entry for Robert Johnson, Registration district: Hawarden, Registration district number: 620, Sub-registration district: Hawarden, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 03, Household schedule number: 207, Piece: 33966

¹⁵ "GRO online index (birth)," *General Register Office* (<http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/>: accessed 26 April 2021), entry for Johnson, Richard William, Registration district: Walsall, Volume 06B, Page 702; "England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 26 April 2021), entry for Richard William Johnson, Registration district: Walsall, Inferred county: Staffordshire, Volume: 6b, Page: 432

¹⁶ "Personnel Records of the First World War," *Library and Archives Canada* (<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/>: accessed 21 April 2021), entry for Johnson, John Thomas, Reference: RG 150, Accession 1992–93/166, Box 4886 - 28, Item number: 336236 Digitized service file - PDF format: B4886-S028

¹⁷ "Personnel Records of the First World War," *Library and Archives Canada*, entry for Johnson, Robert Richard

¹⁸ "GRO online index (birth)," *General Register Office* (<http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/>: accessed 26 April 2021), entry for Johnson, Francis Joseph James, Registration district: Walsall, Volume 06B, Page 717

¹⁹ "GRO online index (birth)," *General Register Office* (<http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/>: accessed 26 April 2021), entry for Johnson, Ethel Lilian, Registration district: Hawarden, Volume 11B, Page 225; "Flintshire, Wales, Anglican Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1538–1994," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 26 April 2021), entry for Ethel Lilian Johnson, Page number: 251

²⁰ "GRO online index (birth)," *General Register Office* (<http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/>: accessed 10 November 2021), entry for Johnson, Harold Bailey, Registration district: Hawarden, Volume 11B, Page 199; "Flintshire, Wales, Anglican Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1538–1994," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 26 April 2021), entry for Harold Bailey Johnson, Page number: 295

²¹ "Flintshire, Wales, Anglican Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1538–1994," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 26 April 2021), entry for Beatrice Lily Johnson, Page number: 49

²² "1901 Wales Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 21 April 2021), entry for Robert R Johnson, Registration district: Chester, Sub-registration district: Hawarden, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 3, Household schedule number: 82, Piece: 3377, Folio: 41, Page: 15

²³ "1911 England Census," *Ancestry*, entry for Robert Johnson

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- ²⁴ "Canada, Arriving Passengers Lists, 1865–1935," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 25 April 2021), entry for Robert R Johnson
- ²⁵ "Ontario, Canada, Deaths and Deaths Overseas, 1869–1948," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 25 April 2021), entry for Annie Johnson
- ²⁶ "Ontario, Canada, Toronto Trust Cemeteries, 1826–1989," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 25 April 2021), entry for Annie Johnson
- ²⁷ "Personnel Records of the First World War," *Library and Archives Canada* (<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/>: accessed 21 April 2021), entry for Johnson, John Thomas. Unless otherwise specified, all information about John's military service comes from this source.
- ²⁸ "War diaries – Eaton Machine Gun Battery," *Library and Archives Canada* (<https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/>: accessed 26 April 2021, Reference: RG9-III-D-3. Volume/box number: 4988. File number: 631
- ²⁹ "England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1916–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 25 April 2021), entry for Francis J. Johnson, Registration district: Brandford, Inferred county: Yorkshire West Riding, Volume: 9b, Page: 302
- ³⁰ "Passenger Lists Leaving UK 1890–1960," *Findmypast* (www.findmypast.co.uk: accessed 27 April November 2021), entry for F J Johnson
- ³¹ "UK, Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878–1960," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 27 April 2021), entry for Maude Johnson; "Canada, Ocean Arrivals (Form 30A), 1919–1924," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 27 April 2021), entry for Francis James Johnson; "UK, Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878–1960," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 27 April 2021), entry for Maude E. Johnson; "Canada, Arriving Passengers Lists, 1865–1935," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 27 April 2021), entry for Maude Johnson
- ³² "Ontario, Canada, Marriages, 1826–1938," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 26 April 2021), entry for Beatrice Lily Johnson
- ³³ "Ontario, Canada, Deaths and Deaths Overseas, 1869–1948," *Ancestry*, entry for Iramis [*sic*] James Johnson