



# COMING TO CLOSURE 75 YEARS AFTER THE BATTLE

**SKELETAL REMAINS OF RHLI SGT. JOHN ALBERT COLLIS WERE FOUND IN NORTHERN FRANCE AND THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES HAS ARRANGED A SPECIAL GRAVESIDE CEREMONY AS PART OF THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF D-DAY**

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A Royal Hamilton Light Infantry soldier whose skeletal remains were recently identified through DNA analysis will be honoured at a special interment ceremony in France as part of the 75th anniversary of D-Day.

Sgt. John Albert Collis, 28, died on July 25, 1944 while taking part in the bloody post D-Day mission to take the German stronghold of Verrières Ridge in Normandy. According to his family, Collis - who was born in Lowville and grew up in Milton - was killed during a lull in the fighting when he triggered a mine while sitting down to rest and have something to eat.

His partial remains were buried the next day in a makeshift grave before being moved to Bretteville-sur-Laize Canadian War Cemetery in Normandy after the war ended.

Then in January 2017, a man and his son came upon an army helmet, canteen, a ring with the initials JAC and other armed forces items along with

skeletal remains while walking through a field near the village of Verrières.

The military articles were of a type used by Commonwealth forces and historical records showed Canadians had fought in the area.



With the strong likelihood the remains belonged to a Canadian soldier, forensic anthropologist Sarah Lockyer travelled to the site for further investigation.

Lockyer, who is Casualty Identification Co-ordinator with the Department of National Defence, conducted an "anthropological analysis" to "better understand what we had and figure out the age and height of the individual."

It was something she was able to calculate even though only about a quar-

ter of the total skeletal remains were at the site.

That information allowed her to eliminate 55 of 96 possible Canadian soldiers she had accumulated on a list. Next, the investigation was passed on to Canadian Forces Forensic Odontology Response Team to use dental records. That investigation took the list down to four, saying there was a strong probability it was Collis.

From there, they tracked down a nephew of the soldier, Stephen Collis, of Port Dover.

"They contacted us through Ancestor.ca," said Stephen's wife Dodie. "And the test came back 96 per cent positive."

"It's all been very emotional for Steve. It was kind of cool to see photos of the artifacts but it was very sad."

Lockyer says the Identification Program manages to identify about four unknown Canadian soldiers per year. Usually remains are discovered during construction projects or farming work.

Investigations almost always involve First World War troops because there are far more from that war with unknown graves - 20,000 compared to 7,000, she said.

The Collis case was also different from the norm, she said, in that part of his remains had already been interred with a Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone.

At the ceremony for Collis, the newly discov-

Courtesy of the Collis family

(Above) Sgt. John Albert Collis, 28, died on July 25, 1944, while taking part in a bloody military mission to take the community of Verrières Ridge in Normandy from the Germans. (Right) Signet ring of J.A. Collis, artifacts from Sergeant John Albert Collis that were recently discovered.