

Ayer, Donald Holman (Military Cross)

Lieutenant

17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars

7th Reconnaissance Regiment

Royal Canadian Armoured Corps

D 3040



Donald (Don) Ayer was born on April 22, 1912 in Bangor, State of Maine, U.S.A. His father, Nathan Chase Ayer, was from Kittery Point, USA, and he married mother Katharine Holman. Father Nathan, together with Grandfather Fred, had owned a pulp and paper factory and a timber company, Eastern Manufacturing Co., since 1910. Nathan already died in 1915. Don had one brother, who was also called Nathan Chase. He became an engineer and then lived in Drevel Park, Pennsylvania, USA. The family was a member of the Unitarian Church, which was a movement within Christianity.

Bangor, the birthplace of Don, was located in the state of Maine, in the northeast of the USA. The later hometown of Don, Indianapolis in the state of Indiana, was located on the White River in the middle of eastern USA. This place had become especially big due to the discovery of natural gas and oil nearby.

Don was English speaking and studied until his twenty-first year. Until age 16, he attended Choate Rosemary Hall High School in Wallingford, Connecticut. This was a renowned school where John F. Kennedy and his brother also studied. Don also studied for a year at Harvard Business University. After graduating from the Royal Military Academy in 1934 as a Lieutenant, Don resigned there and went to work for Stephen Wheatland on the Pingree estate. He also worked as a mechanical engineer at Union Carbon and Carbide in Indianapolis.

At the age of twenty-eight, Don volunteered for the Canadian army in Montreal on July 16, 1940. There was an acute shortage of non-commissioned officers in England. Don arrived in Montreal on July 12 and temporarily resided at the YMCA on Drummond Street. There were three sergeants, including Don, who were undergoing such training outside of Canada. There were many American men who were heeding this call, because America itself was still on neutral ground regarding the war. Don was described as an academic and he liked dogs, playing chess and strawberry ice creams. He liked to read a good book and could often be found on the tennis and handball courts or wrestling. He was sharp-witted and liked good conversations, but did not reveal much of himself. Don was color blind, had a white complexion, gray eyes and blond hair. He was a well-developed young man of 5 ft 11 tall and weighed almost 125 lbs.

Modest as he was, Don was simply embarking on his military career as a Trooper with the 3rd Canadian Motorcycle Regiment. On January 15, 1941, Don A/Lance became Corporal, after a four-day leave of absence, he was transferred to the 17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars on February 7th. In the Military Camp in Debert, where he stayed from February 27, Don was promoted to A/Corporal on April 4, 1941. A few months later he was a Sergeant and on August 23 they embarked in Halifax to go overseas to the war in Europe. They arrived in Glasgow, United Kingdom on September 2. Settled in Aldershot, he was given five days leave from September 8, and Don was on leave again in November 1941. In April 1942, Americans in the Canadian ranks were allowed to join their own armed forces because their own country was now also at war. Of the more than fifty Americans in the 7th Reconnaissance Regiment, only six considered transferring, Don stayed with his unit. He continued to develop and followed training at Qualified Military Headquarters of the 1st Reconnaissance Regiment from 2 to 25 July 1942. He also successfully concluded this.

In November and December 1942 he was transferred to the 7th Regiment Canadian Armoured Corps Reinforcement Unit for training with the Officers Cordet Training Unit. Don was at the Canadian Medical Centre in early December and after a leave of absence at the end of that month, he was training as a Cadet at the Canadian Training School of the 1st CACRU. He also closed this well on February 12, 1943. He went to the US Naval Academy in Sandhurst, UK, and after four years of training he was a Lieutenant. After training at the Officers Cordet Training Unit, Don was transferred to the Royal Armoured Corps on September 18, 1943 and from October 7 to the 7th Reconnaissance Regiment 1 CACRU.

On January 15, 1944, Don received the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal with Clasp for his efforts. From March 24 to April 4 he was at Canadian

Military Headquarters and then was at the Gunnery Wing Armoured Fighting Vehicle School. In the meantime his mother moved to Brayhouse, Kittery Point, USA.

Don wanted to go to the war and actively participate in it, a few days after D-Day he left for France on June 12, 1944, where he arrived on June 14 with the 7th Reconnaissance Regiment.

Don was awarded the Military Cross for his gallant actions on July 9 at Gruchy and on August 14. Quote about this action: *"On August 14, 1944, during the attack on the River Liaison, under direct enemy fire, he recaptured a crossing of the river at Montboint for his entire squadron during an attack on the river Liaison under direct enemy fire, and pushes on with his section of six carriers to higher ground. And although he was seriously wounded in the chest by MG fire at the time, he refused to leave the ground until his small force was organized to maintain this vital point. This action freed the entire crossing from perceived fire and directly affected the successful crossing by the entire regiment."*

Also on July 9, Don acted valiantly in the assault on Gruchy: the infantry was held back by heavy enemy machine gun fire, but Don gathered his men from B Squadron and stormed through it. With grenades and Bren cannons they drove the enemy from their hiding places, there were dozens of dead and wounded and they took twenty-five to thirty men captive. This brave action by all ranks allowed a complete battalion of infantry to advance towards Gruchy. This action cost B Squadron two dead and two wounded, including Don Ayer. This action by Don was later described as "a somewhat unorthodox attack... in a cavalry fashion".

Don was transferred from the 14 Field Ambulance to the 24 General Hospital in England and stayed there for a few weeks. After his recovery, Don returned to France to his regiment in the front line on 25 August.

| DECORATIONS—C. A. S. F. | | | | |
|--|----------------|----------|--------|--|
| SURNAME (IN BLOCK LETTERS) CHRISTIAN NAMES | | REG. NO. | RANK | C.A.S.F. UNIT |
| AYER, Donald Holman | | | Lieut. | |
| DECEASED 2-3-45 | | | 01 | 1102 17th Hussars |
| AWARD | L.G. AUTHORITY | DATE | PAGE | DEED OF ACTION OR CITATION (USE REVERSE SIDE) |
| THE MILITARY CROSS | C.G.50 | 9/12/44 | 5202 | The KING has been graciously pleased to approve the following awards for gallant and distinguished conduct in the field: |
| 42 MC | | | | |

25M-5-10 (5078)
H.Q. 1372-45-8

FILE No. 338-A-28
7 Recon Regt
C.A.C.
1102 17 Hussars



For these valiant actions, he was, together with Lt. Terrence Brunstrom, awarded the Military Cross on November 5, 1944. During an investiture ceremony that day, presided over by Field Marshal Montgomery, who pinned this honorable decoration on them.

The Military Cross is an award given to gallant officers and non-commissioned officers and for important services in action. It is made of silver and a text can be engraved on the back. A total of 3,727 are awarded.



The regiment's losses were relatively light, with five fatalities from Operation Veritable to the end of March. But there was one that was very much felt within the unit. In the afternoon of March 4, 1945, Lieutenant Don Ayer was ordered to advance from Uedem, Germany, through the Reichswald. The roads were muddy and bad and the combat vehicles could hardly be used because they got stuck everywhere. So Ayer lead a foot patrol along the road to Sonsbeck on the west bank of the river Rhine and was covered by a carrier section and two Daimlers which managed to break free from the group. When the patrol reached a point just south of the Hochwald, they were fired upon by a 20mm. cannon and multiple machine guns. Corporal Johnson was hit by a grenade and Don went to help him. Before arriving at Johnson, he himself was hit by another grenade and killed. He had a wound in his chest and right lung, which was causing heavy bleeding. Don was transferred to 179 Field Ambulance, but he had already died of his injuries.

Donald Holman Ayer was mourned by all, a great and brave soldier who was much loved and everyone sees his death as a great loss.

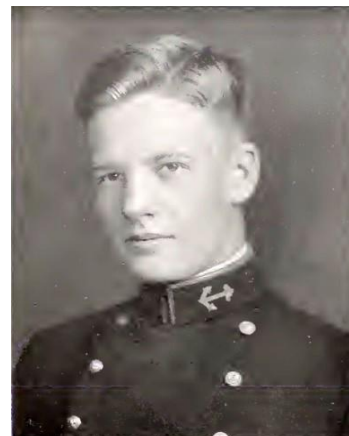


Photo: ancestry.ca



He was temporarily buried near Bedburg at the cemetery in Kalkar, plot 1, row 24, grave 14. On September 4, 1945 Don was reburied at the Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery, grave reference **VII. E. 3**.

The text on his tombstone:
BORN, BANGOR, MAINE, U.S.A.
22ND APRIL 1912

Photo: Else Schaberg, Faces To Graves

In addition to the Military Cross, Lieutenant Donald Holman Ayer received the following:

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

The Memorial Cross was sent to his mother Katharina in Kittery Point.

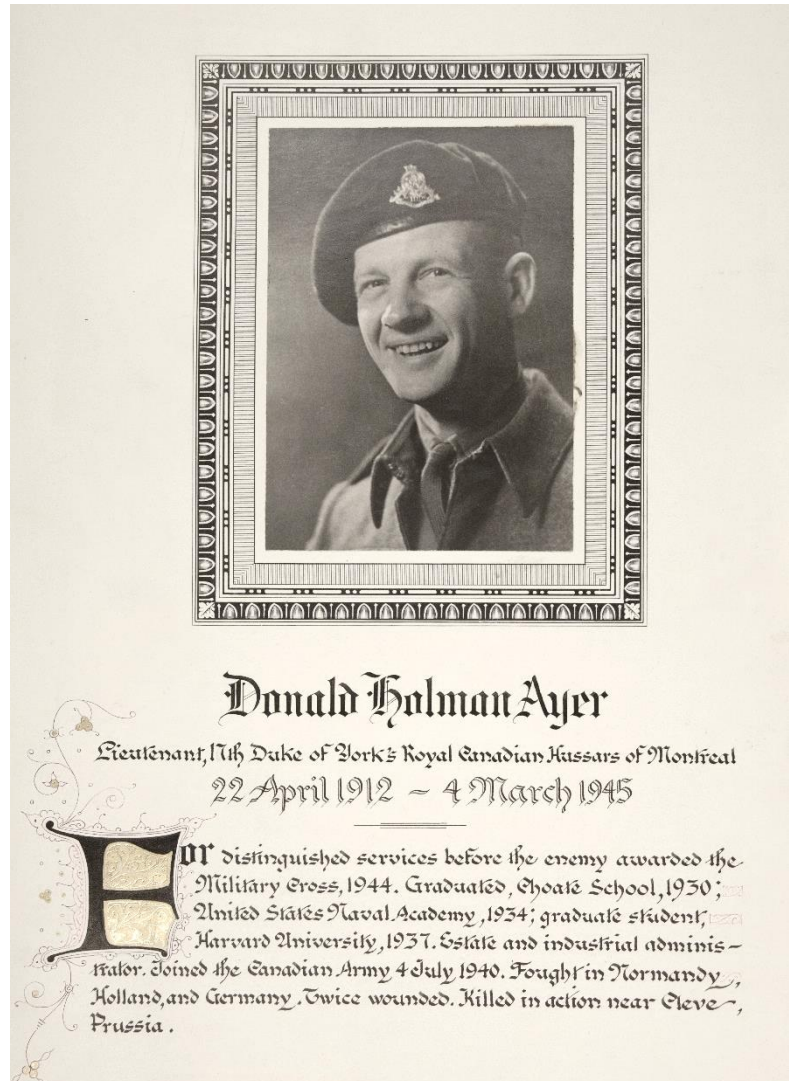


Biography by Liesbeth Huisman-Arts, Research Team Faces to Graves.

* Have you got a picture of this soldier or additional information please contact info@facestograves.nl

Sources:

Commonwealth War
Graves Commission
Library and Archives
Canada
Veterans.gc.ca
Tracesofwar.com
Ancestry.ca



Indiana World War Memorial

Photo: Tracesofwar.com

Donald's first cousin, John (Jack) Butler Ayer, and the son of his uncle Fred Rollins, were born on September 21, 1912, in Bangor. His father Fred was born in 1880 and also worked in the factory of his father and brother. John had two brothers and two sisters and came from a wealthy family. They lived in luxury and could use their grandfather's yacht. After the divorce of the parents, mother Frances left for Milwaukee with her children. John attended the Milton Academy, Northwestern Military Academy and Columbia University. He then joined the Army Air Corps as a Cadet Pilot. In December 1935, John became engaged to Marguerite LeCron, but they did not marry. He later met his future wife, Polly Smiley, whom he married on July 27, 1940, in Chicago.

England was short of planes and pilots and John signed up as a pilot. On August 8 he was in the service of the Royal Air Force and on August 9 he called his mother and said he would leave for Britain in forty-eight hours. He left for England with Polly, John went into training and Polly was a member of the Women's Auxiliary to the R.A.F. John was an aviator and part of a 1st Eagle Sqdn crew, which consisted of

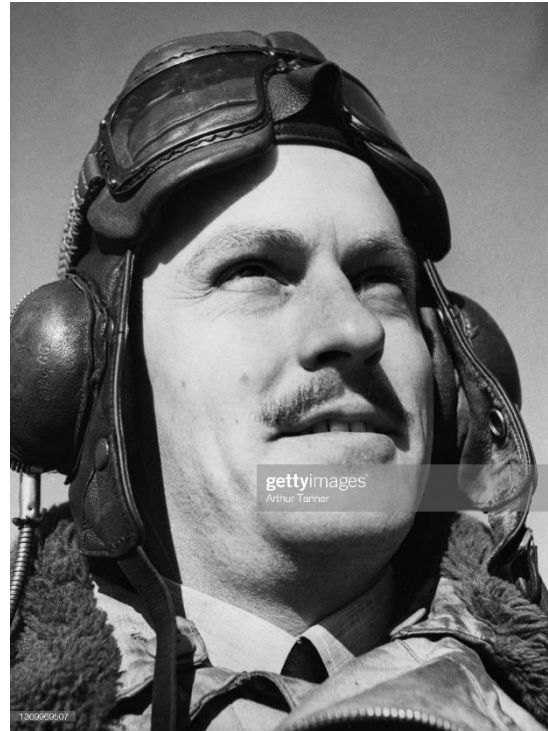
American men. Since the USA was not yet participating in the war in Europe, hundreds of American men left for Canada to join the Canadian army. They were seen as criminals by the US government, but were described as heroes in the various newspapers: *"Okay, Let's Go! Eagle was flying for England"*. John was mentioned as one of the first of the eleven members of the 71 Eagle Squadron, later another Squadron was added. They first had to take an oath and have at least five hundred flight hours, although this was still sometimes smuggled. They learned to fly in Two-seater Miles Masters advanced Training Planes, then the Hawker Hurricanes, which John flew for nine months, after which they switched to the Supermarine Spitfire II. John had also flown bombs, the Squadron's first mission was on 2 July 1941. The RAF lost 790 Fighters and 449 pilots in this war, the enemy many more. Only after the attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, did the USA get involved in the war in Europe. John's brother, Winslow, was also following in his footsteps with the Royal Canadian Air Force.



John flew in a Spitfire and was on a photo reconnaissance flight over the French coast on April 10, 1942. Flying Officer John Ayer was never found again and was officially pronounced dead on 17 April 1942. His name was honorably placed on Panel 66 in Surrey England in 1945. His name was also on the Eagle Squadron Memorial in London. He was 29 years old.



*John (Jack)
Ayer*



Info John: American Air Museum in Britain.

Part of the text by Charles Francis from: Maine Aviation Historical Society, in Bangor, date September 9, 1998.

Picture: Andrew Behan and Arthur Tanner.