

Belsey, Frederick Charles
Trooper
South Alberta Regiment
29th Armoured Reconnaissance
Regiment
Royal Canadian Armoured Corps
K/50705



SOUTH ALBERTA REGIMENT
(29th Cdn Arm'd Recce Regt.)



Frederick Charles Belsey was born 30 April 1919 in Oyama, British Columbia. He was the youngest of five children to George Belsey and Mary Ann Phillips. His Anglican parents had their first two sons in the U.K. before emigrating to Canada 1908, where George established a store in the Okanagan Valley village of Oyama. They added two daughters plus George to their family before selling their store in 1921 and buying an orchard property. George earned a living thereafter as a fruit farmer.

Frederick (who went by Fred) attended public school in Oyama and competed as an amateur boxer around the region, including bouts at the nearby town of Vernon. His family's home in the idyllic lake country region provided fishing and other recreational opportunities. Fred worked at his father's orchard as a labourer and then became a truck driver after completing school. Fred married Edith Margaret Downer 30 March 1940 and continued to live close to home. They had their first child, George Frederick Belsey, in early 1941.



Edith and Fred Belsey with wedding attendants, March 1940

Fred joined the local Militia, 2nd Battalion, Rocky Mountain Rangers, July 1940 and served with them until December 1941. He then attested with the Canadian Active Service Force in Vernon, British Columbia on 12 March 1943, answering the call for reinforcements. Fred's medical examination recorded him as 5'9" tall, 146 lbs and in good health. His wife Edith was six months pregnant with their second child at that time.

Fred went through basic training at Camp Vernon and was allocated to the



Canadian Armoured Corps 1 June 1943. He was stationed in Dundurn, Saskatchewan, when his daughter Gail Patricia Belsey was born 11 June 1943.

Vernon Training Camp photo courtesy Vernon Cadet Camp Museum

Fred Belsey with his son while home on leave



Fred adapted well from the infantry to armoured corps, qualifying on wheeled operations 23 July 43 and tracked 6 August 1943. He then qualified as a driver mechanic at Camp Dundurn 18 October 43 and finally received two weeks leave in November, meeting his daughter at last.



Trooper Fred Belsey in a tracked training vehicle, Dundurn, SK 1943

Fred was shipped overseas and disembarked in the U.K. 26 February 1944. He was taken on strength with the Canadian Armoured Corps Reserve Unit and received further training there. There were apparently problems developing on the home front, as Fred changed his next of kin from his wife Edith to his mother Mary Ann in June 1944, plus updated his will to exclude his wife while ensuring his two children would receive benefits should something happen to him in the fighting to come.

Fred disembarked from the U.K. 24 August 1944 and arrived in Normandy, France the next day, where he was taken on strength with the 9th Battalion in reserve. Trooper Fred Belsey joined the 29th Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment, South Alberta Regiment (SAR), part of 10 Brigade, on 15 September 1944 in Belgium. That Regiment had already established a reputation for toughness and determination at St. Lambert-sur-Dives, France during the Battle of Falaise Gap, and again in the opening round in the Battle of the Scheldt at Moerbrugge, Belgium 8-12 September. Casualties had been heavy, and Fred was a welcome reinforcement as a qualified driver mechanic, part of a five man Sherman tank crew in A Squadron.

Fred got his first taste of battle during a clearing action up to the south coast of the Scheldt, where the SAR provided ongoing recce patrols with the help of Belgian and Dutch resistance groups. Their next significant engagement was the Battle for Bergen op Zoom 25-27 Oct.



South Alberta Regiment tanks at Bergen op Zoom October 1944

The SAR again experienced substantial losses coming up the dirt road they called 'Hulk Alley' which was heavily mined. They occupied Bergen op Zoom, Netherlands with the Germans blowing bridges as they withdrew.

The retreating Germans had stripped that part of Holland, leaving the Dutch with little food and no fuel. The winter of 1944-45 became known as the 'Hunger Winter'. SAR soldiers shared their rations with their hosts.

In mid-January 1945 the SAR did some shooting over the Maas River, focusing on the island of Kapelsche Veer near Capelle. The Regiment played a key role in Operation ELEPHANT later that month 26-30 Jan in assaulting a German outpost there, supporting the Lincolns and Argylls. That bitter action cost the SAR another 4 killed and 5 wounded.

First Canadian Army launched Operation VERITABLE 8 February 1945. By 21 Feb they had closed in on Hochwald Layback and planned a new operation to take it. Operation BLOCKBUSTER was to be carried out by

2nd Canadian Corps, including 4th Canadian Armoured Division, and was scheduled to commence 26 February 1945.

The SAR mobilized 22 Feb from Nijmegen, Holland to Germany, travelling through two inches of mud along the road. At an Orders Group meeting, Major Bert Coffin, in temporary command, learned that his Armoured Regiment along with the Algonquin Infantry Battalion were assigned to seize Hochwald Gap. They would have to fight through successive German defence lines and cross a valley floor that was almost impassable for tanks, while exposed to enemy artillery.

BLOCKBUSTER kicked off 0430 hours, 26 Feb 1945. The first two phases of the attack were completed by 2nd and 3rd Infantry Divisions plus 4th Armoured Division, including the capture of the high ground above Uedem in the face of stubborn German opposition. The way was clear for the third phase of the operation – the attack on the Gap by the SAR and Algonquins, and the ridge to the south by 11th British Armoured Division.

With the Algonquins on their back decks, the South Albertas moved out of Hau at 0800 hours 26 February to be in position for the attack scheduled for that night. Recce parties had marked the route but progress became difficult as the tanks and wheeled vehicles tried to get through thick mud with the consistency of prairie gumbo. It was churned up to a depth three feet by the traffic of three divisions.

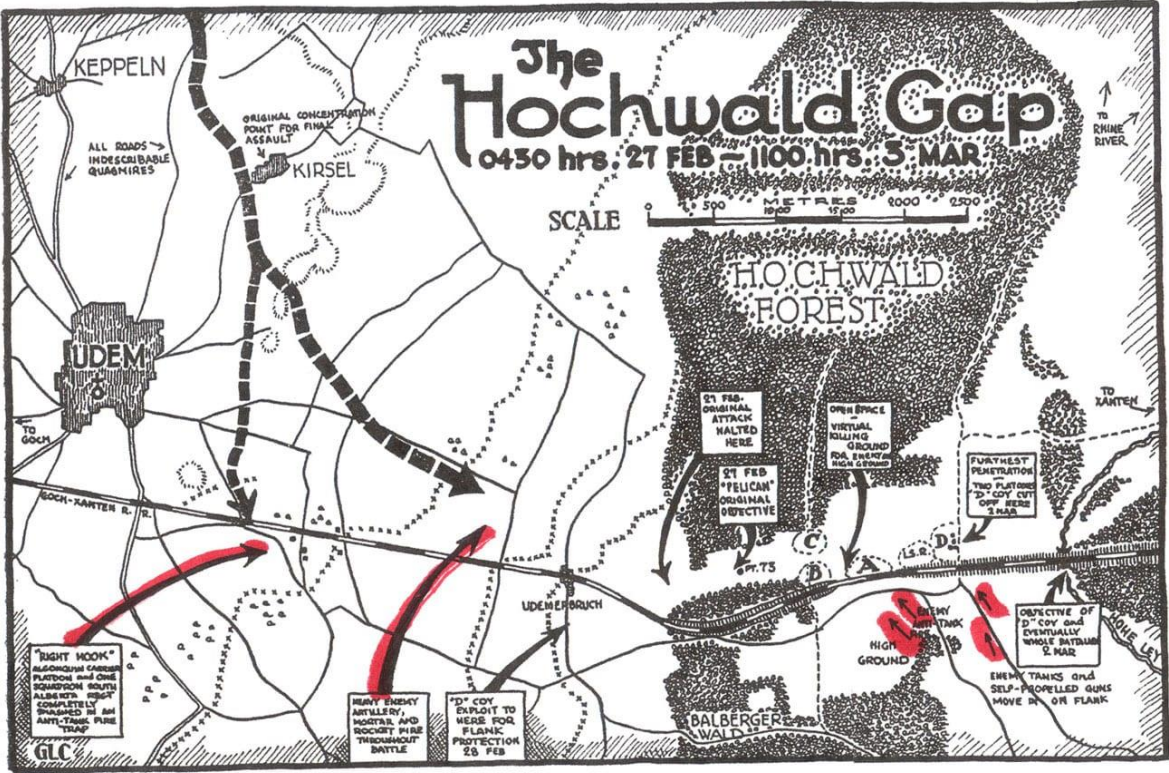


South Alberta Regiment tanks with Algonquin infantrymen on their decks 26 Feb 1945

The Regiment spent nearly an entire day trying to move a distance of less than five miles. It took almost 12 hours to get within a mile of the start line. Coffin and Bradburn (Algonquin commander) asked Jefferson (10 Brigade General) if their attack could be delayed until the next night. Jefferson agreed and sent the request up the line to Major-General Vokes (new 4th Armoured Division commander). Vokes refused and ordered them to push on that night and cross the valley at first light. The SAR tank crews were already exhausted and falling asleep on duty, but orders were orders so the attack had to go in as directed.

The South Albertas, with A Squadron leading and carrying Algonquins on their decks, moved out at 0130 hours 27 Feb. They had to detour around a Brigadier vehicle from 2nd Division that was stuck on the road, and the light Stuart tanks all got bogged down. Some Shermans also got stuck and it was finally every tank for itself. As a result, only about half of the tanks and infantry made it to the starting point in time for the attack.

Coffin and Bradburn would have to attack the Hochwald Gap with only three weak infantry companies supported by B Squadron. At the same time A Squadron was dispatched to undertake the "right hook" and C Squadron was sent to the high ground north of Uedem to render fire support.



Map courtesy Civilian Military Intelligence Group

The attack went in at 0600 hours just as dawn was breaking. The shallow valley was a giant bog which B Squadron had difficulty traversing, making them sitting ducks for German artillery. B-3 Troop tanks became pinned down but the two surviving tanks of B-1 moved forward with the Algonquin C Company and helped them take their objective.

Major Glen McDougall's A Squadron and the Algonquins carrier platoon had started out about 0600 hours and quickly encountered problems with the going. Lieutenant Tiger Bowick's tank bogged and Lt. Bobby Crawford took the lead but, in the dark, failed to see one of the anti-tank ditches which encircled Uedem and slid into it. Crawford then took over Corporal Dizzy Risdale's tank but the advance was halted until a way was found around the maze of ditches and trenches surrounding Uedem. It was 0900 and broad daylight when McDougall's force began to skirt the town and move south to reach the railway where their attack was to begin. There were determined pockets of Germans holding out in Uedem.

Due to problems with the mud the combined force was down to ten tanks and four carriers. McDougall left two tanks to guard his rear and pushed on for the railway with his eight remaining vehicles and carriers. Crawford had the lead, Glen as the fourth tank in the column with his rear link, Captain Ken Perrin, immediately behind him. Corporal Joe McGivern was the tail-end.

Glen looked back in his turret to see "a *panzerfaust* (bazooka) grenade lobbing in behind me from the basement of a house". It missed and McDougall ordered the last two tanks to "put some HE (High Explosive shells) into the house and there was no more response from the Germans". By then the head of the column had crossed the railway and was about 100 yards beyond.

A Squadron took out a German Tiger plus an anti-tank gun before the enemy found their range and knocked out the first three Shermans in the column. All of their crews managed to bail out.

The tail-end tank and the one in front commanded by Corporal Herbie Watkins were also hit. The turret crew in Watkins' tank got clear as did one of the Troopers. The driver, Trooper Harvey Amey, remained in the burning tank and died there.

With the tanks at both head and tail of the column knocked out, the ones in the middle were trapped. Kenny Perrin tried to extricate his tank and bring it alongside Glen McDougall's but it was hit in the turret ring by an AP (Armour Piercing) shot that cut through the gunner's leg and killed the loader-operator Lance Sergeant Harold "Jake" Jacobsen. Perrin and the gunner, Trooper John Bell, exited through the turret hatch but Kenny apparently returned to the tank to see if he could help Jacobsen. Bell's

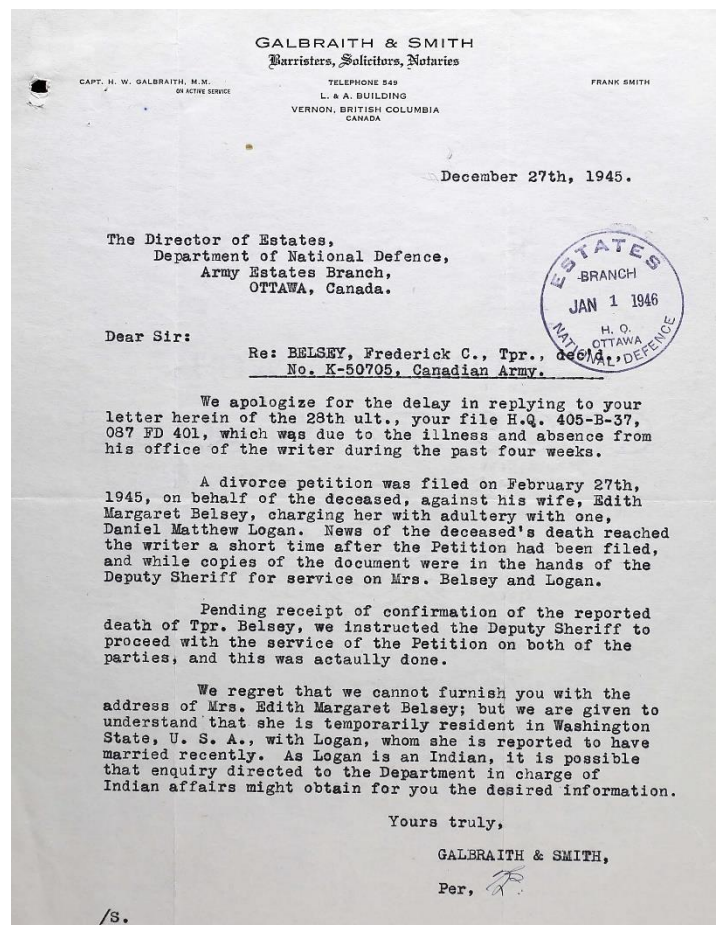
leg was hanging on by a thread of muscle and skin and Glen, seeing him emerge, grabbed his morphine syrettes and jumped down from his turret to help. McDougall gave Bell an injection and watched him hauled away by an Algonquin carrier.

The crews of the remaining tanks trapped in the centre of the column fired off as much ammunition as they could and then bailed out in anticipation that their vehicles would shortly be hit. By then there were about forty South Albertas on the ground under enemy fire and Trooper Fred Belsey was killed by a mortar bomb, two months before his 26th birthday.

Fortunately, one of the brewed-up (burnt) Algonquin carriers was a Wasp (flame-thrower) and its burning tank of flammable mixture provided a heavy smokescreen for the survivors. Some made it out on the remaining carriers, others led by McDougall moved back to safety through the elaborate trench system around Uedem, and some were captured by the enemy, including a group with Lieutenant Bob Crawford.

Bert Coffin learned of the disastrous result of A Squadron's "right hook" (which he had unfortunately predicted) late in the morning. With the exception of Amey and Belsey, who were known to be dead, there was hope at first that the rest of the men had escaped and would eventually work their way back to safety. However, it was later determined that Jacobsen and Perrin (who may have been overcome by fumes when he re-entered his tank) were both incinerated.

On the day of his death, 27 February 1945, Fred Belsey's solicitor was filing a divorce petition on his behalf back in Vernon, British Columbia. His widow Edith remarried Daniel Matthew Logan later that year, and they raised Fred's two children as part of their blended family.





Trooper F.C. Belsey was temporarily buried near Uedem, Germany, then relocated to Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery near Nijmegen, Netherlands, grave reference **XXI. B. 6.**

Photo courtesy Frans van Cappellen



Biography by Jim Little, Research Team Faces to Graves.

* Do you have a photo of this soldier or additional information please contact info@facestograves.nl

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Civilian Military Intelligence Group – Hochwald Gap map

<https://civilianmilitaryintelligencegroup.com/10742/the-battle-of-hochwald-gap-one-of-the-largest-armor-engagements-you-probably-have-never-heard-of>