

**Big Canoe, Thomas Beresford**  
**Private**  
**Royal Hamilton Light Infantry**  
**Royal Canadian Infantry Corps**  
**B – 162220**



Thomas Beresford Big Canoe was born on Georgina Island in Lake Simcoe in Ontario on October 13, 1925. His parents were Thomas Herbert Big Canoe and Hannah Porte. Thomas had one brother, Clifford, and four sisters, Olivia Edna, Margareth (or Marquerite) and Doris. His sister Winnifred Jane died at a very young age. The family frequented the United Church of Canada.

The family was part of the Chippewas community on Georgina Island. The Chippewas belong to the Aishinaabe people, one of the indigenous peoples of Canada, also called First Nations. The language they speak is Ojibwe. Like many other peoples, the Chippewas were placed in reservations by the government around 1800. Initially on Snake Island in Lake Simcoe, but after they had been forced to switch to agriculture, they moved to Georgina Island. They are still the proud inhabitants of the island and many activities are developed to maintain their culture and defend their rights.



As in the case of more First Nation soldiers who died during the Second World War, there was hardly anything to be found in Thomas' military data that pointed to his indigenous background. Only once a document states: '*Languages: English, Indian*'.

Thomas attended an Indian Reserve School on Georgina Island up to Grade 6. He left school at the age of sixteen in order to start working on the family farm. Two years later, on June 12, 1944, he signed up for active service in the Canadian army.

**ITEMS 17, 18 AND 19 WILL NOT BE COMPLETED UNLESS A MAN ENLISTS FOR GENERAL SERVICE ANYWHERE.**

**17. DECLARATION TO BE MADE BY MAN ON ATTESTATION**

I, ~~XXXXXXXX~~ Thomas Beresford, hereby engage to serve in any Active Formation or Unit of the Canadian Army so long as an emergency, i.e., war, invasion, riot or insurrection, real or apprehended, exists, and for the period of demobilization after said emergency ceases to exist, and in any event for a period of not less than one year, provided His Majesty should so require my services.

Date 12<sup>th</sup> June 44 Thomas Beresford  
(Signature of Recruit)

**18. OATH TO BE TAKEN BY MAN ON ATTESTATION**

I, ~~XXXXXXXX~~ Thomas Beresford, do sincerely promise and swear (or solemnly declare) that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to His Majesty.

Witness Ed. J. [unclear] Thomas Beresford  
(Name) (Rank) (Signature of Recruit)

**19. The above named recruit has made and signed the declaration and taken the oath before me.**

at 12<sup>th</sup> June 1944 this 12<sup>th</sup> day of June 1944  
[Signature] (Signature of Magistrate, Justice or Attesting Officer.)  
#2 DISTRICT DEPOT, C. [unclear] (Office or Rank and Unit or appointment)

When Thomas signed up, he was eighteen years old. Major Grass, who interviewed him after his registration, described him as a well-built, kind, cooperative young man, maybe a bit shy. In spite of the fact that he had had limited education, he seemed eager enough to take part in military training. Thomas was left-handed, which made it difficult to teach him how to shoot from his right shoulder. Thomas was single and at the time of his registration he lived with his parents on Georgina Island. His medical records showed that he was reasonably healthy. He had brown eyes and brown hair. He was 5 foot 8 inches tall and weighed 150 pounds.

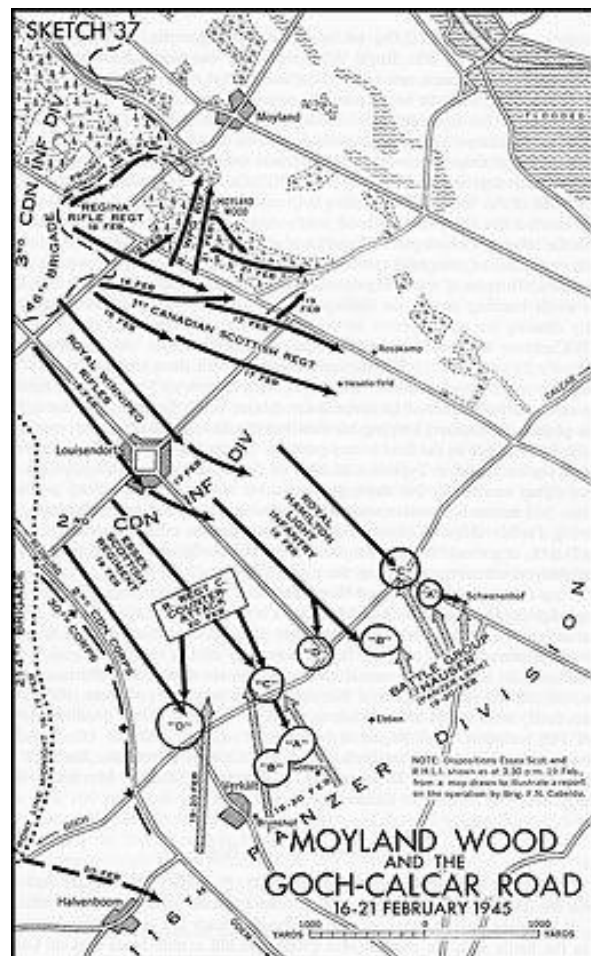
After his registration at #2 District Depot in Toronto, Ontario, Thomas started his infantry training in the #26 Canadian Army (Basic) Training Centre in Orillia, Ontario on July 6. In reports written by his superiors he was then described as a quiet young man who didn't cause any trouble. There were, however, doubts about his qualities as a soldier. The Captain in Orillia described him as a 'slow stolid Indian', but this should be fine after some extra training. The reports on Thomas of September 1944 were already more positive. Thomas had adjusted well and the weeks of extra training had served him in good stead. He had learned to drive a car, so the advice was to train him to become a driver. For this purpose he was transferred to Camp Borden, Ontario. In this camp he not only took a training to become a driver, but also an intensive infantry training. In November 1944 Captain Browning described Thomas as a sturdy, healthy nineteen year old, ready for overseas infantry service.

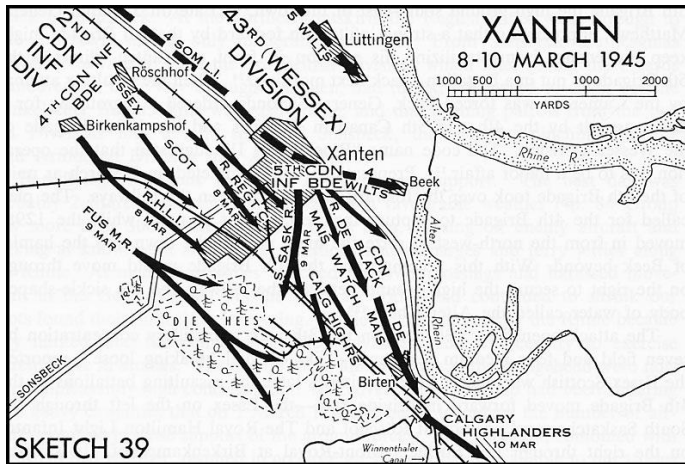
On December 22, 1944, after ten days of leave to say goodbye to his family, Thomas arrived in Camp Debort, Nova Scotia. The following day he embarked on a ship that took him to the United Kingdom. Here he only stayed for a relatively short period of time. On February 9, 1945 he made the crossing to mainland Europe.

The day before Thomas crossed to the mainland was the day that Operation Veritable, the Reichswald Battle, started. Operation Veritable was part of a bigger plan, the Rhineland offensive, to conquer the left bank of the river Rhine in order to be able to free the east of the Netherlands from there and to advance further into Germany. For the Canadian troops Operation Veritable started on February 8 with among other things enormous artillery fire south-east of Nijmegen, the Netherlands.

Less than a week after arrival on the continent, Thomas was assigned to The Royal Hamilton Light Infantry (RHLI). Two days earlier the regiment had reached Nijmegen and was ordered to cross the border into the direction of Kalkar and Xanten, Germany. Straight away Thomas went to the front and within the regiment he was assigned to the Scout Platoon, whose aim was to collect information on German troop movements. They did so by frequently patrolling, often behind enemy lines. Due to the fact that German troops did not easily surrender and large pieces of land were flooded as a result of dike breaches, the regiment slowly advanced along the road between Goch and Kalkar. The road ran along the Hochwald, where heavy fighting was also taking place. On February 19, however, the regiment succeeded in conquering a high point along the road in the vicinity of Louisendorf. During the night the regiment managed to repel eight attacks by German troops. The next morning the situation was critical due to a new counter attack. But, together with the Fort Garry Horse tanks, the RHLI men launched the counter attack. All day there was fighting. It was only the next day that the situation seemed to stabilise. The RHLI suffered 125 losses. The regiment advanced further into the direction of Xanten.

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On March 8 the regiment launched the attack on Xanten from Birkenkampshof. The A and D Companies formed the front lines, ten minutes later followed by the B and C Companies. However, the Germans used a clever tactic. Two German companies fought their way through the A and D Companies and the B

and C Companies, which gave them the opportunity to attack from various sides. The Canadian lines were cut off, which resulted in lots of casualties on the Canadian side. One of the fallen soldiers was Private Thomas Beresford Big Canoe, nineteen years old. He never returned to his family on Georgina Island.

On March 10, Thomas was buried in Xanten. In a letter to the National Defence Headquarters on April 17, his mother, Hannah, wrote the following: *'... Will you please kindly Sir, let me know how he is Buried on the Battlefield of German soil. I am so broken-hearted not knowing any details of his or in the hour of his last in the field of action...'*

On August 20, 1945, he was reburied at the Canadian War Cemetery in Groesbeek, grave reference **VII.C.4**.

On his headstone the following words were inscribed:

HE DIED  
THAT OTHERS MIGHT LIVE



Thomas was awarded the following medals:

- 1939 – 1945 Star
- France & Germany Star
- War Medal 1939 – 1945
- Canadian Volunteer Service Medal with Clasp



## FACES TO GRAVES

Stichting Faces to Canadian  
War Graves Groesbeek

Life story by Sigrid Norde: Research Team Faces To Graves.

\* Do you have a photo of this soldier or additional information please contact [info@facestograves.nl](mailto:info@facestograves.nl)

After the war Thomas' grave was adopted by Bill and Ellie Gertzen from Nijmegen. Bill was born in 1925 and when the Allied Forces were in Nijmegen, he signed up as an interpreter with the American 82nd Airborne Division. He spoke English, German and Dutch. He fought along with the division in Germany and got wounded during the Battle of Bastogne. When he returned to Nijmegen after his recovery, he did not find any Americans in the city, only Canadians. He joined Le Régiment de la Chaudière and fought along as far as Arnhem. When, after the war, he visited the Groesbeek cemetery, Thomas' grave caught his eye. They never met, but Bill decided to take care of the grave and he started looking for Thomas' relatives. In 1998 Bill, Ellie and their son Klaus visited the family on Georgina Island. The most recent visit of the Big Canoe family to Groesbeek was in 2019.



*From left to right: Hugh 'Buzzy' Big Canoe, Bill Gertzen, Klaus Gertzen, Ellie Gertzen. Front: Sandra Big Canoe*



On behalf of the family a sacred medicine bag containing sage and sweet grass was placed near Thomas' grave.

Sources:

Commonwealth War Graves Commission

National Library and Archives Canada

Lest we forget – Thomas Big Canoe died for our country – Pat Stewart

On the war memorial trail – Pieter and Daria Valkenburg

[http://www.guidosiebers.nl/ww2/wd/Regimental\\_History\\_RHLI\\_12\\_1944\\_to\\_03\\_1945.pdf](http://www.guidosiebers.nl/ww2/wd/Regimental_History_RHLI_12_1944_to_03_1945.pdf)

<https://ancestors.familysearch.org/en/LTV8-QQF/thomas-beresford-bigcanoe-1926-1945>

<https://www.georginaisland.com/>

[https://nl.findagrave.com/memorial/194648409/winnifred-june-big\\_canoe](https://nl.findagrave.com/memorial/194648409/winnifred-june-big_canoe)

<https://nl.pinterest.com/pin/535083999474144148/>

