

**Birchall, William Harold**

**Gunner**

**15<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment**

**Royal Canadian Artillery**

**M34943**



William Harold Birchall was born on 16 October 1917 in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, to Heywood and Maud Birchall.

William had two brothers, the eldest Norman Clair and the youngest John Wesley who also served in the Canadian army. The family lived in Cochrane, Alberta, Canada and attended the United Church of Canada.

William left High School after two years and started working at the farm of Walter Hotchkinson in Cochrane.

He served under the 'National Resources Mobilization Act of 1940' with the Calgary Highlanders and on 7 June 1941 he enlisted in the 95<sup>th</sup> Field Battery of Royal Canadian Artillery in Calgary as a Gunner.

In his medical report was written:

*'5feet 8 inches, grey eyes, dark brown hair'.*

On 1 July 1941 he went to the School of Instruction 4<sup>th</sup> Division in Shilo and a month later he was posted to the 15<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment in Debert. In

april 1942 he was transferred to Sussex.



In the 1940s, a reorganization took place in the Canadian Army, and the 15<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment came under command of the 4th Canadian Division. A few years later, after consultation with the

British, it was decided that more armour divisions had to be formed and the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division was transformed into the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Division.

Thus the 15<sup>th</sup> Field regiment came under the command of the Artillery unit of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Division.

The Division was deployed to the UK in the late summer and fall of 1942 and despite the number of reorganisations, the availability of Canadian armoured vehicles ensured that the unit arrived at an advanced stage of training.

Gunner Birchall was posted to that division in the UK at the end of August 1942, he stayed here for almost two years and attended several courses and training. A month after his arrival he was promoted to Lance Bombardier and in February 1943 to A Bombardier.

Half a year later he was a Qualified Bombardier in the 15<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment. On 26 September 1944 he reverted to the rank of Gunner at his own request.

In July 1944 his regiment made the crossing to France and took part in the Battle of Normandy at a later stage than D-Day: at the Battle of the Falaise Pocket. They advanced through Normandy and took part in several major battles, including the Battle of the Seine (August 1944), the liberation of South Beveland (October 1944) and the Battle of the Scheldt (October - November 1944).



Canadian Forces move towards Falaise as part of Operation Tractable - 1944

Gunner Birchall hibernated with his regiment in the Netherlands for a few months before the start of the Rhineland Offensive, which had to be the final battle in Germany.

The offensive started with Operation Veritable on 8 February 1945, which later turned into Operation Blockbuster (26 February – 7 March).

The first phase of the Operation had to be carried out by infantry divisions, including Birchall's regiment. His regiment came under command of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Division.

The day after the start of Operation Veritable Day, the Germans opened the largest dam in the river Ruhr, causing water to flow through the valley and blocked the locks beyond repair. Thus, a constant stream of water flowed for many days. The next day the Germans increased this problem by doing the same with dams further upstream on the Ruhr and Urft. The river was rising at 0.6ft per hour and the valley downstream to the Maas remained under water for about two weeks.

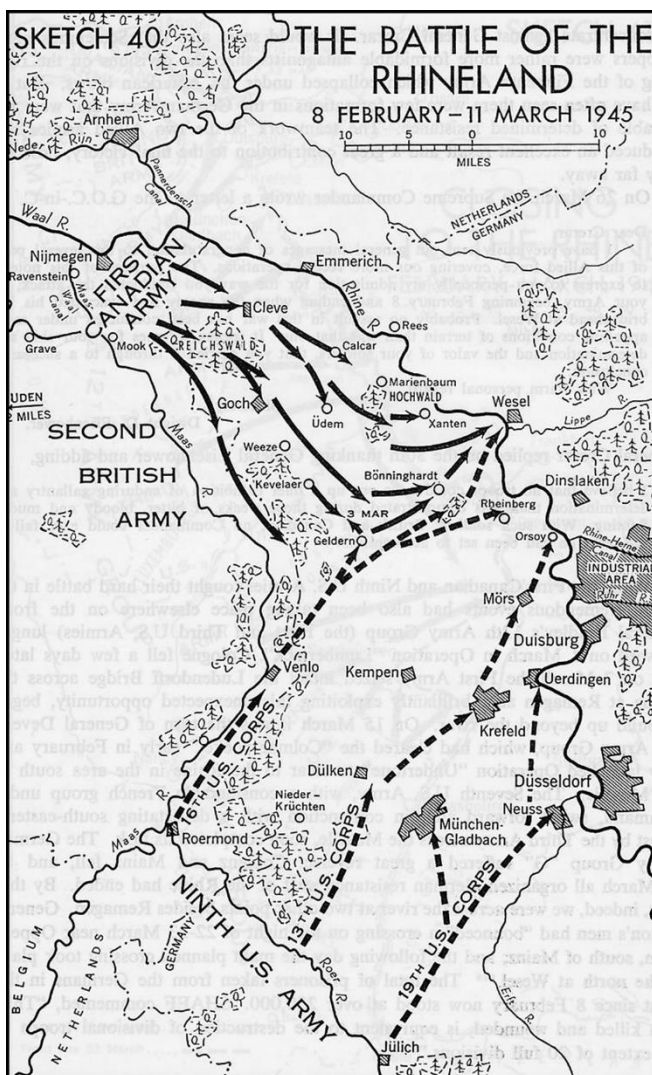
Initially the divisions made rapid progress but after the first day German reinforcements appeared and heavy fighting ensued. Birchall's regiment was ordered to advance past Cleves to the German rear. Due to the flooding only one road was available and this resulted in a gigantic traffic jam, the biggest in the history of modern warfare. The intention was to have cleared Cleves on 9 February but due to the traffic jam, they didn't reach Cleve before 11 February.

Birchall and his regiment were now ordered to advance southeast on the line from Cleve to Udem to the Moyland forest.

For a week there was fierce fighting and eventually the Moyland forest was conquered. The aim was to advance from Calcar to Xanten via the valley between the Hochwald and the Balberg Wald. The Allies hoped by starting the attack in the north, the Germans would withdraw their attention from the more southern attack line via Udem.

At 04.30 a.m. on 26 February 1945 the attack started and unfortunately on that first day William Harold Birchall was killed in action south of Louisondorf when a German King Tiger Tank hit their gun position.

His personal belongings which he carried with him: sheep skin jacket, wallet, correspondence, address book, personal papers, New Testament, 2 pen knives, 6 souvenir coins.



He was buried in Calcar and later reburied at the Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery, grave reference **XX. D. 16.**

The inscription on his gravestone:

LOVED BY ALL WHO KNEW HIM  
HE LIVES WITH US  
IN MEMORY  
AND WILL FOR EVERMORE



Awards:

1939-1945 Star

France & Germany Star

Defence Medal

War Medal 1939-1945

Canadian Volunteer Service Medal with Clasp

The name of William Harold Birchall is written on the cenotaph in Cochrane.



Life Story Else Schaberg, Research Team Faces to Graves.

References:

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission
- Library and Archives Canada
- Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, Vol III The Victory Campaign: The Operations in Northwest Europe, 1944-45, Publisher Queen's Printer, Ottawa, Author: Stacey, C.P.
- Picture: Imperial War Museum

H.O. 405-B-37041  
R. 4 (B)

CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

THIS IS TO CERTIFY that according to information received at the Department of National Defence from the overseas authorities, No. M.34943, Gunner William Harold BIRCHALL, of the Royal Canadian Artillery, Canadian Army, was killed in action on the 26th of February, 1945.

(H.M. Jackson) Lt.-Col.,  
Director of Records.

Officer authorized to sign certificates of death and/or presumption of death for the Canadian Army.

*738R*

Department of National Defence,  
OTTAWA, Canada.  
5th June, 1947.



Cenotaph in Cochrane