

Birks, Robert Henry
Lieutenant
Lincoln and Welland Regiment
D Company
Royal Canadian Infantry Corps
M15890



Non nobis sed patriæ – Not for us but for the country

Robert 'Robbie' Henry Birks was born in Croydon, situated in the Greater London region, England on Sunday October 5, 1919. He was the son of William Miller Birks and Anna Marie Laing-Birks. They emigrated from England to Canada. Mother Ana Marie died in 1935. The family also consisted of sister Joan and a brother, John, who was the youngest of the family. They belonged to the Church of England. The family lived on 9942-106 Street in Edmonton, Alberta. Edmonton is the capital of the Canadian Province of Alberta and the fifth city in Canada, after Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and Calgary.

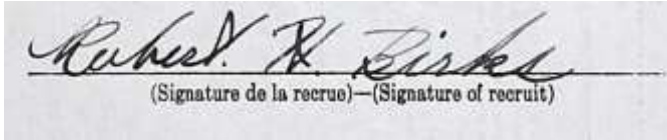


Source: <https://archive.org>

After his primary education and two years of High School, Robert Henry left school at the age of 16. He started working as a sailor with J & Harrison in London, England, a firm founded by the brothers John and Charles.

Robert had a ruddy complexion, brown hair and dark-brown eyes. He was 5 ft 7 tall and weighed 136.6 pounds. His hobbies were skiing, swimming and skating.

Robert 'Robbie' Henry Birks signed up for the Canadian army in Edmonton on September 19, 1939 at the age of 19. He was assigned to The Loyal Edmonton Regiment (4th Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry)



His basic training took until December 15, 1939. During this training he learned how to bathe, shave, polish his boots, polish his buttons, maintain his uniforms and behave in the otherwise required manner. Every day there was two hours of physical education and they had marching instruction, gun practise, practised saluting and other routines. On December 19, 1939 he went to Halifax, from where he left overseas to England by RMS Empress of Canada the following day. He set foot ashore in Glasgow, Scotland on December 30, 1940. Robert 'Robbie' Henry Birks was given a training to become Instructor Drill in Caterham, in the English County of Surrey.



RMS Empress Source: Wikipedia

On January 15, he was promoted to Lance Corporal. He successfully concluded the Instructor Drill course on January 21. When enlisting he indicated that this is what he wanted to become. On April 20, 1940 he was promoted to Corporal.

From August 17 until September 8, 1941 he took part in Operation Gauntlet in Spitsbergen, Norway. Their aim was to disembark on Spitsbergen, the largest island of the Norwegian archipelago, in order to evacuate a few thousand Soviet men, women and children. Time was of the essence, as Nazi troops could arrive any moment. He stayed in England and on December 30, 1942 he was promoted to Sergeant. On June 11, 1943 he was assigned to No 1 Canadian Infantry Reinforcement Unit via the Non-Effective Transit Depot.

Robert Henry Birks returned to Canada, where he arrived on June 24, 1943. He started taking a training to become a Lieutenant in Calgary, Alberta, with No 13 District Depot.

On July 23 he went to the Officers Training Centre in Gordon, New Brunswick, Canada. He successfully concluded this training and Robert was promoted to 2nd Lieutenant on October 16, 1943. Two months later, on December 19, he was promoted to Lieutenant and was assigned to the Prince Edward Island Highlanders, in Prince George, British Columbia. He was given Christmas leave on December 23, 1943 for a five day period.



Unfortunately, the new year did not start well for Robert 'Robbie' Henry Birks. He was admitted to military hospital on January 13, 1944 and stayed there for thirteen days. After his discharge from hospital he continued his military training and on March 27, 1944 he married his great love Gladys Joy Elisabeth Mackenzie. They went to live on 405 7A Street in the north-east of Calgary, where Gladys was born.



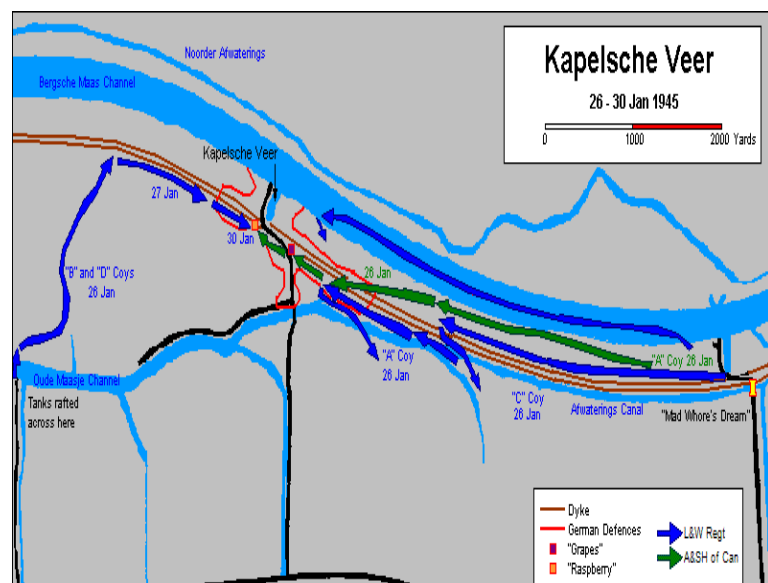
On April 18, 1944 Robert was stationed with the Rocky Mountain Rangers in Vernon, British Columbia, which is the area between three big lakes: Wood Lake, Kalamalka Lake and Okanagan Lake, the biggest lake.

Kloshe nanitch ('Keep a good lookout')

On May 15, 1944 he was again sent overseas to England. Robert was waved goodbye by his wife Gladys Joy Elisabeth Mackenzie when he got onto the train. At that moment Gladys was pregnant with their first child.

On November 20, 1944 Robert went to north-west Europe and was assigned to the Lincoln and Welland Regiment on December 4, 1944.

On January 8, 1945 the regiment was located in the Netherlands, in the vicinity of Loon op Zand. It was a wet and bleak winter with rain, snow and cold. They followed a training programme and practised with flame throwers on the dykes in the area.



They followed a training programme and practised with flame throwers on the dykes in the area. Various regiments were added to the Lincoln and Welland Regiment on January 21st in order to continue to fight together. They practised with boats on the water and with on land transport. On January 26, 1945 they sailed across the Oude Maas near Waspik, but they came under heavy fire and enemy snipers managed to get behind their lines.

The men knew that Operation Elephant was going to be a tough battle, but at the same time it was also the only way to capture the enemy stronghold. Heavy fighting ensued, which resulted in lots of casualties on both sides. It was so cold that some weapons froze and could therefore not be used anymore. After the battle it was necessary to reorganise the troops. During a final attack, German boats were pushed back further. The Lincoln and Welland Regiment suffered one hundred and eighty-three casualties, fifty of whom lost their lives.

One of them was Robert 'Robbie' Henry Birks. He died on Tuesday January 30, 1945 at the age of 25.

He was temporarily buried, together with many of his comrades, on a field north of Groenendaal (now Orthen) Cemetery, in 's-Hertogenbosch.



Temporary war cemetery Groenendaal in 's-Hertogenbosch – photo Bob van Boekel

He was reburied at Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery on October 19, 1945, grave reference **XIV. B. 12.**



<http://lestweforget1945.org/>

On his headstone the following words are inscribed:

REST IN PEACE
LOVINGLY REMEMBERED
BY HIS WIFE JOY
AND SON ROBBIE

Robert Henry Birks was awarded the following medals:

- 1939 - 1945 Star
- War Medal 1939-1945
- Canadian Volunteer Service Medal with Clasp

On March 28, 1945 son Ian Robert Birks was born in Calgary. Unfortunately, Robert Henry Birks was never to see his son.



Life story: Gijs Krist, Research Team Faces To Graves.

Sources:

Commonwealth War Graves

Library and Archives Canada

Donna Maxwell

Bob van Boekel



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

