

Bithrey, Reginald Charles
Private
1st Canadian Parachute Battalion
Royal Canadian Infantry Corps
H/9778



Reg was born in Fort William ON on July 10, 1924. His parents were Percy and Florence Bithrey. Reg lived with his parents at 127 Dease Street in Fort William, Ontario. He was the youngest of four children with a brother Walter, and two sisters, Rhoda (McLauchlin) and Violet (Laakso).

Reg's early life before he joined the military isn't well documented, but the family does treasure some stories and memorabilia to this day. Reg left school at age 16, with a Grade VIII education, and went to work at the Capitol Theatre in downtown Fort William, first as a ticket taker, then as head usher.



Note the photo of the splendid uniform worn by a proud young usher, ready to guide patrons to their seats.

photo courtesy of Susan Bithrey



We know that when Reg was just 14 years old, he joined the 4th Field Ambulance Reserve as a drummer boy, and continued with the unit until he left for Manitoba, where he enlisted in the Army on May 9, 1943, and completed his paratrooper training on Jan. 12, 1944.



*Reg proudly showing his parachute wing
- photo Twitter 6th Airborne*

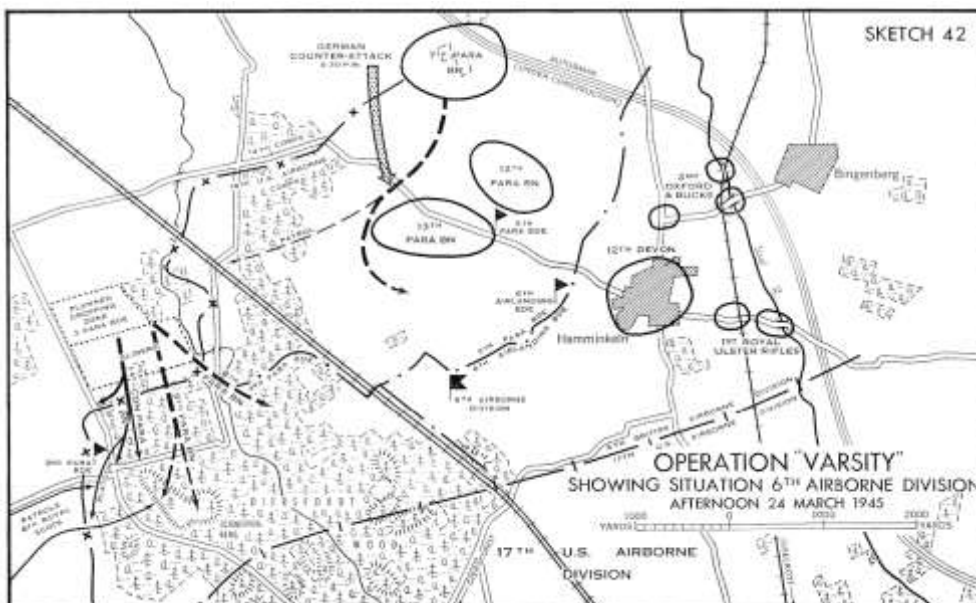


He was deployed overseas in April 1944, where he served in the U.K. and later in North-West Europe.

Reg's service records reveal that he was originally considered not a good candidate for the paratroopers, because he had a stammer, a facial tic, a perforated ear drum, was shy and small of stature (only five foot eight), with "possible" high blood pressure. Interesting to consider that if only they'd stuck by that decision, Reg might have had a much longer life. But then, they might have sent him to the infantry, where he'd have fought in combat on the ground, and could just as easily been killed there. Still - roads not taken, right?

The family always spoke of how his mother Florence never got over her grief at losing her youngest child.

Private Bithrey disembarked in England on 12 April 1944. He carried on training as a paratrooper up to December of that year while the remainder of the First Canadian Parachute Battalion parachuted into Caen in support of the D-Day landings on the 6th of June. On the 26th of December, Private Bithrey now a member of the First Canadian Parachute Battalion deployed as a part of the British 6th Airborne Division to Belgium to help slow the German counter-offensive through the Ardennes Forest, also known as The Battle of the Bulge. While the battalion did not see any action, they aggressively patrolled in the area of Rochefort until 22 February when they returned to England.



Map from the book *The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945* by Colonel C.P. Stacey.

One month later, on the 24th of March 1945 the First Canadian Parachute Battalion participated in their last parachute operation of the war - Operation Varsity. The battalion along with other units of the 3rd British parachute Brigade, parachuted into drop zones East of the Rhine River near the village of Hamminkeln. During this operation 1,589 aircraft and 1,337 gliders inserted paratroopers behind enemy lines to capture key objectives in support of major operations to cross the Rhine River. Their task was to seize and hold the ground thereby preventing the Germans the opportunity to reinforce and counterattack the key allied crossing sites.

The 24th of March was an early day for the Battalion with reveille at 0200 hours, breakfast at 0445 hours, followed by a 90 minutes ride to the airhead, the dawning of parachutes, and liftoff at 0730 hours. The flight to Germany took 2 hours and 10 minutes and the first paratroopers began their assault at 0955 hours. There was considerable anti-aircraft flak around the drop zone and the aircraft did not slow over the target, resulting in the jumpers being spread out over the drop zone. Upon landing, there was heavy machine gun and sniper fire blanketing the drop zone. By 1130 hours the Canadians had seized their objectives around the Schneppenberg hill feature, capturing many enemy prisoners almost equalling their own strength. Notwithstanding, the Canadians lost 28 killed, 4 missing and 35 wounded in the operation.

Private Reg Bithrey was one of the young paratroopers lost that day. He was age 20.

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Reg was awarded medals for his military service, and we are still in possession of those medals, proudly displaying them with a poppy every year on Remembrance Day, November 11th.



PTE. REGINALD C. BITHREY

“Reg” Bithrey, Paratrooper, Killed Overseas

Private Reginald Charles Bithrey, son of Mr. and Mrs. Percy C. Bithrey, 127 Dease street, was killed in action on March 14 overseas, according to a telegram received yesterday by the parents from Ottawa. A paratrooper, Pte. Reg. Bithrey was 19½ years old.

Pte. Bithrey was born in Fort William on July 10, 1925. After graduation from Central public school, he was an usher and doorman at the Capitol Theatre here, and was well-known to, and popular with a host of theatregoers at the head of the lakes.

When only 14 years of age he joined the 4th Field Ambulance Reserve as a drummer boy, and continued with the unit until he went active in 1942 when 17 years of age.

For a period Pte. Reg Bithrey was with the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders of Canada, later transferring to the paratroops.

He went overseas in March, 1944, and had seen considerable action with the paratroops on the European continent.

Surviving, besides his parents, are his brother, Walter Bithrey; and two sisters, Rhoda, Mrs. O. S. McLauchlin; and Violet, Mrs. A. O. Laakso.

Awards:

- 1939-45 Star
- War Medal 1939-45
- Canadian Volunteer Service Medal
- Defence Medal

Reg was interred temporarily in Wesel, Germany, before his remains were moved to the Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery, grave reference **XXII. C. 15.**

From the Daily Times Journal, April 18, 1945 announcing R.C. Bithrey's death



The grave as it looked in those first days, in 1954 the crosses are replaced by tombstones. The family can then add a text.



The inscription on his tombstone reads:

GREATER LOVE
HATH NO MAN THAN THIS.
THAT A MAN LAY DOWN
HIS LIFE FOR HIS FRIENDS.

Groesbeek grave - photo Alice van Bekkum

His death was reported in the Fort William Times Journal on April 18th, 1945.

There is also a memorial stone marker located in Mountainview Cemetery in Thunder Bay, ON.

Alfred Scavarelli, a boyhood friend and fellow paratrooper, was quoted in our local newspaper in a 1983 Remembrance day feature: "Reg was a gentleman, one hell of a gentleman. I saw him buried and I brought his watch and ring home to his parents."

Another close friend, Bobby Tindall, published an In Memoriam to Reg every year for over forty years on the anniversary of his death. Friendship really is forever.

Reginald Charles Bithrey
Buried in Groesbeek Cemetery
Grave # 15, Row C, Plot 22
RIP Reginald Charles Bithrey



Biography by Susan Bithrey and Brenda Bithrey Wright, for Faces to Graves, with input and additional information from Colonel Timothy R. Young (Retired) Counsellor/ Canadian Military Advisor Faces to Graves.

Sources:

Commonwealth War Graves Commission

Library and Archives Canada

Information and photos courtesy of Brenda Bithrey Wright, niece, Thunder Bay ON and Susan Bithrey, Thunder Bay ON, widow of the late Reginald John Bithrey (1944-2015), the nephew who was named after his Uncle Reg, to his uncle's great delight. The two never met, but young Reg, along with other family members, honoured his uncle every year at the Fort William cenotaph on Nov. 11th.

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



May 2021 - photo project 'The Faces of Groesbeek' - photo Faces to Graves

PARATROOPER
REG. C. BITHREY
Reg. No. H-9778
Born July 10th, 1925



Killed
In Action
East of the Rhine
March 24th, 1945

We cannot say, you must not say
That he is dead. He is just away!
With a cheery smile,
and a wave of the hand
He has wandered into an unknown land
And left us dreaming how very fair
It needs must be, since he lingers there;
So think of him faring on, as dear
In the love of There as the love of Here,
Think of him still as the same, and say
He is not dead, he is just away!

James Whitcomb Riley

*Mr. and Mrs. P. C. Bithrey
and family
127 Deane Street
Fort William, Ontario*