

## **BRYKSA, STEVE**

**Rifleman**

**L601925**

**Regina Rifle Regiment**



Steve Bryksa's mother and father came with their parents as children to Canada in 1904 from Laszki Jaraslow, situated in western Ukraine at that time. The family were of the Roman Catholic faith and lived in the newly established settlement of West Bend in the prairie province, Saskatchewan. This was a mainly farming community made up of Polish and Ukrainian immigrants. West Bend flourished for more than fifty years, then gradually declined to become a ghost town by the end of the century.

Joseph and Katherine (Kathy) Bryksa, both born in 1892, were to have nine children together of whom Steve was the third, born 5 January, 1920. In due course he completed the eighth grades at Horse Lake school where he would certainly have had to concentrate on the English language; in West Bend Polish and Ukrainian was spoken at home and Steve was familiar with the latter. He went on to grade IX in the rural secondary school for six months and then left school at age 14.



*Old School, West Bend.*

Steve's father was a farmer and grain buyer and before he enlisted in the army he worked on the family 165 acre farm for seven years as a tractor driver and trucker, helping with repair work. He was enthusiastic about farming and planned to take over the farm on returning after the war was over. Steve enjoyed family life and his friends and was said to be full of fun, a mild mannered and gentle person. He liked card games, especially bridge.

His family were very much involved in the developing of the Model Farm project near West Bend in which a large Ukrainian church with a graveyard was completed in 1933. It is still kept in immaculate condition today despite the derelict village nearby.



*Model Farm project.*

## **In the Military**

Steve Bryska went for his army medical examination in June 1941 prior to enlisting. He was found to be in good health generally, with excellent eyesight but his hearing in one ear had been damaged due to a childhood infection. He was accepted for the army and joined 28 August 1941. He

was described as being 5ft 5ins tall, weighing 126lbs, with blue eyes, blond hair and a fair complexion. (His two year older brother Harry also enlisted around the same time and became a signaller.)

After a two month basic training in Regina, Saskatchewan, Steve, having expressed a preference for the infantry, spent the next two years in the CA(B)TC stationed in Camrose and Calgary, Alberta. some seven to eight hundred kilometers from home. In autumn 1943 he was given leave to help with the harvest on the family farm in West Bend; he also received a medal for good conduct at this time. At the end of the year he was attached to the Dufferin and Haldimand Rifle Regiment which served as a Canadian home defence force, based in Ontario. During 1944 he received more infantry training in Stratford, Ontario, Sussex, New Brunswick and Halifax, Nova Scotia where there was an advanced anti-aircraft artillery course. In July he had become a qualified driver

In August 1944 Steve applied again for leave to go home and help with the harvest; this was eventually granted but not before his mother had to write several letters to the army authorities, telling of her difficulties getting in the harvest. Steve's father was working in a munitions factory in Toronto, his brother Harry was in the army in Manitoba; and his mother was alone with small children; it was impossible to hire any help locally.

At the end of the year 1944 Steve Bryksa was found suitable for operational service. A later report described him as a good soldier who shows interest and trains hard; he is well disciplined and has a pleasant manner. In December he visited his father in Toronto and also made his will. Early in 1945 he set sail for the United Kingdom and arrived 10 January attached to the Canadian Infantry Training Regiment. Six weeks later, he arrived in Belgium on his way to the war zone in Germany near the Dutch border.

On 21 March 1945, Steve joined the Regina Rifle Regiment as Rifleman. At this point the regiment was enjoying a rest period in the extensive forest of the Reichswald which lies between Kleve and Goch. They had taken part in Operation Veritable in which the enemy had been cleared from the forest and had ended 11 March. As it turned out, Steve was to be in camp there for the last six days of their stay, taking part in training and some recreational activities; the training included practice in street fighting and clearing buildings.

In the night of 23-24 March Operation Plunder began on a front stretching from Rees to Xanten; its aim was to cross the Rhein river and drive the enemy eastwards. British, Americans and Canadians took part in the initial assault, some thirty divisions in all, and a bridgehead was quickly established. The Regina Rifles were to join in a day or so later, moving northwest towards Emmerich after crossing the river. On the morning of 27 March, the regiment left the Reichswald, some marching, others in vehicles travelling to the marshalling area in Hanselaar, south of Kalkar, a distance of some twenty kilometres; they encountered no aircraft or shelling. By 18.00 they had crossed the Rhine near Rees and were moving north, through the night, to Esserden, Vrasselt and Dornich which they reached at 9.30 the next morning. There was still no enemy opposition. In the afternoon of 28 March, the weary troops got some rest in a farmhouse and the cooker and blanket trucks arrived. Here they experienced scattered shelling.

The next day, 29 March, the Regina Rifle Regiment was ordered to approach Emmerich from the east side and entered the town around 8am. The night had been quiet but now there was shelling and sniping; an additional hazard was the mines including schu-mines and these caused some casualties. Steve Bryksa was killed 'in the field' on this day but no further details are known. He was 25 years old.

Steve was buried temporarily in the Canadian military cemetery at Wardhausen, near Kleve; his body was then transferred for permanent internment to the Canadian Military Cemetery, Groesbeek by August 1946 grave reference plot **XX. G. 4.**

## **AWARDS**

1939-45 Star

France and Germany Star

War Medal

Defense Medal

Memorial Cross and Bar

A lake has been named in Steve's memory; Lake Bryksa lies in the far north of Saskatchewan at 59°27' N 106°06' W.

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Sample copy only



59°27' N, 106°06' W,

**Bryksa Lake**  
Named in Memory of  
**Steve Bryksa**  
West Bend, Saskatchewan

**Regina Rifle Regiment**  
**Rifleman, L601925**

On Active Service To His Country  
Killed in Action  
March 29, 1945  
Age 25  
Buried at  
Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery  
Holland





*Cemetery find 11 November 2016.*



Life story Gwyn de Jong, Research Team Faces To Graves

Information and photo Steve: Elaine Bryksa

Source: Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Library and Archives Canada

Photo Bryksa Lake: Doug Chrisholm

Photos: Ghost Town, West Bend Saskatchewan (Photo Essay)