

Burns, William Rupert

Private

Royal Hamilton Light Infantry

Royal Canadian Infantry Corps

D/140143



William Rupert Burns was born on September 30, 1923, in St. Rose, a town in Laval, Quebec, Canada. He was the son of Frederick William Burns and Florence Burns (Ward). His parents got married on April 8, 1915 in Montreal and had four children together. The youngest of the bunch, William had an older brother, Douglas William Burns, born December 5, 1916, and an older sister, Helen G. Redshaw (Burns), who was married when William enlisted in the military. There was also a brother, Russell Charles Burns, he died before William's birth, on October 8, 1922. The Burns family was a member of the United Church of Canada.

As a little boy, William attended the Public School in St. Rose. He attended classes there for seven years and left school when he was twelve. After school he had several jobs. He first worked as a gardener's assistant with his father for a few hours a week for a few years, then he started working in the Feron Garage in St. Rose, his brother Douglas also worked there.

William also spent nine months working at T. Eaton's warehouse before joining the Royal Air Force, Ferry Command, Dorval. There he learned how to maintain planes. His love for tinkering with cars and planes was born and William wanted to become an aircraft mechanic. He also learned how to drive a car, a truck and even a construction crane (CaterPillar Cranes). William spoke both French and English and enjoyed reading aviation books, swimming, playing hockey and baseball.

William was 19 years old and still single when he enlisted in the army on April 13, 1943. He had brown eyes and brown hair, being a little short in stature at 5ft.5. He had a chest size of 33 inches and weighed about 135 lb. He had poor teeth and a scar on his right index finger.

William developed normally into a fine young man and was described as ambitious, eager to learn and stable. His greatest wish was to be able to join "The Black Watch".

On April 16, William went on active duty and began basic training at St. Johns, Quebec, which he successfully completed. He did end up in the infirmary in Farnham on 7 May 1943. He was there for ten days and when he was discharged on May 17, he had to catch up on some training.

After basic training, William received follow-up training at the Canadian Infantry Training Centre in Farnham, followed by various courses at the Canadian Army Motor Mechanics School in Farnham, London and Woodstock, Canada, respectively. In the meantime, he ended up in the London Military Hospital, for the second time, for ten days, this time with acute tonsillitis (inflammation of the tonsils). He was reported better there on October 20, 1943 and then he could focus on his training again. Finally William received his diploma on January 26, 1944 and he could call himself Driver IC Class III (wheeled).

On April 5, 1944, William left Canada with the 3rd Canadian Infantry Reinforcement Unit and went overseas to the United Kingdom where they arrived on April 12, 1944.

On July 27, William was assigned to The Royal Hamilton Light Infantry and was sent to France. They arrived there after one day of travel on July 30, 1944.

General Montgomery had become obsessed with the idea of quickly ending the war in 1944 with an attack on Berlin. On August 17, he proposed to General Omar Bradley a plan to advance quickly with a solid group of forty divisions to Belgium and then to the Ruhr territory in Germany. Both Bradley and General Dwight D. Eisenhower were not really charmed by this plan, but because it was assumed that there would be no significant resistance from the enemy, plans were made anyway.

The already weary soldiers got no rest and the 2nd Canadian Army Corps was ordered to advance immediately to Rouen, to cross the river Seine and capture the ports of Le Havre and Dieppe. They handed over the battle in which they were still engaged at Faillaise to the British and started their journey to Rouen on August 20. Soon several Canadian

regiments followed this Maple Leaf Up Route. The journey was not without a struggle, several battles had to be fought on the way to the Seine.

The troops of the 3rd Brigade were the first to reach the Seine at Elbeuf. A Bailey bridge was immediately started by Royal Canadian Engineers. On the left flank the 2nd Division besieged a hilly wooded area known as the Forêt de la Londe, which was situated on the direct route to Rouen.

The 4th Brigade, including the Rileys, had to protect the Engineers while building the bridges, and on the way to Elbeuf, on the night of August 26 The Royal Hamilton Light Infantry led the way.

On August 27, several photos were taken when William was smoking a cigarette in Elbeuf, together with a Canadian buddy and a few American soldiers, seemingly relaxed. Just a moment of calm, for shortly after that they ended up in a fierce battle.



Group Photo – Private William R. Burns is the 2nd person on the left. This picture take in Elbeuf, Normandy (near Rouen). 27/08/1944.

Source both photos Canadian Virtual War Memorial



The enemy was situated on a ridge, close to the river. This hill, codenamed Masie, they had firmly in their hands against all odds. From there they bombarded the Canadians with devastating artillery and mortar fire. The Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, which consisted mainly of armed men with little experience, tried with all its might to attack the Germans on the night of the 28th, but the operation was impossible to carry out. In the first daylight of the 29th the enemy made a counterattack that the Canadians were not up against and they lost control. What was left of the battalions started retreating.

During this three-day battle, more than 600 casualties, dead and wounded, were to be regretted. William was also injured and he was admitted to a British hospital on August 30. Here he lay for a long time and was not discharged until November 17. On December 4, he did not seem to be doing well and he was admitted again, this time in the 12th Canadian Hospital, where he stayed until December 16, 1944.

William returned to work on December 24 with the 11th Battalion of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Reinforcement Group.

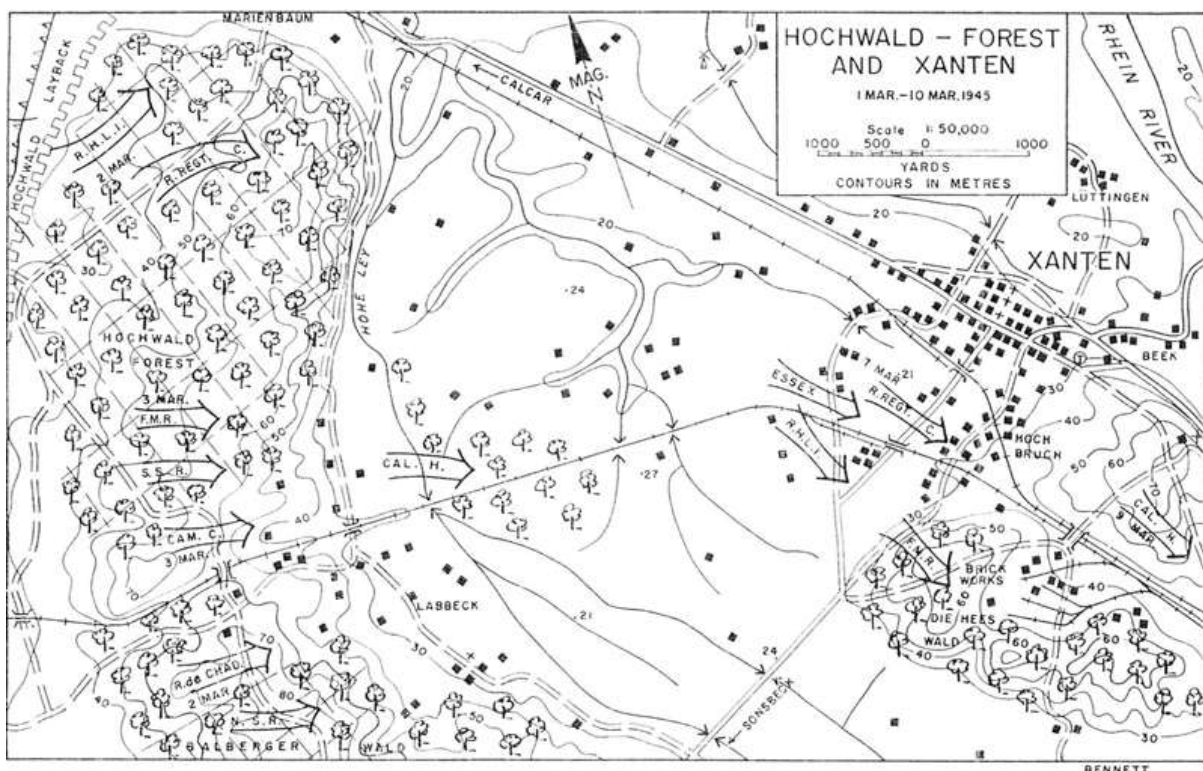
On January 31, 1945, he rejoined the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, but he was not going to be on the scene for long.

At the beginning of February 1945, 500,000 allied soldiers in the area around Groesbeek and Nijmegen were gathered together to end the war, along with 1,000 cannons and 34,000 vehicles. It was to be the largest offensive ever launched from Dutch soil and the largest operation in northwestern Europe, the Rhineland Offensive.

Part of this Rhineland Offensive was Operation Veritable, which erupted on February 8. The plan was to capture the left flank of the river Rhine, cross the Rhine and advance further into Germany. The regiment moved towards Nijmegen on February 12 and orders followed on February 14 to cross the border and go to Kalkar and Xanten.

On February 19, at 11 a.m., an attack was launched. This attack was successful despite the loss of a number of officers and soldiers who were buried in the Bedburg cemetery.

"During these heavy operations against the German army, the morale of the troops has been exceptionally high and a huge factor in its success. This battalion has been fortunate to have officers as company commanders who have been with us in England and during the campaigns in Europe. Their leadership has been of the highest order and it is deeply regretted that some will no longer be with us in the future," their War Diaries said on February 28, 1945.



On March 1 the battalion was put on readiness to move to the Hochwald but that was postponed due to heavy opposition that the Essex Scottish experienced. The next morning they received orders to move in that direction after all and sixty German soldiers were made prisoners of war.

On March 5, a temporary rest was held and the troops could catch their breath. On March 6, they received orders to move to a concentration area near Xanten

On March 8, 1945, the Canadian artillery put down a very effective barrage that lasted sixteen minutes and preceded the infantry attack on Xanten. The A and D Companies attacked, followed by the B and C Companies forming the second wave ten minutes later.

The Germans used an effective form of tactics in their defense of this area by letting the two leading companies pass through their positions and then opening fire on them from behind with MG42 machine guns and field guns. This considerably slowed down the attack and caused many casualties on the Canadian side.

One of the victims of this attack was William. He was seriously injured and was transported by field ambulance to Sint-Michielsgestel. After the liberation of the village Canada's 6th General Hospital was located in the "Institute for the Deaf" there.



Institute for the Deaf, Sint-Michielsgestel in 1910 – source Ivdvariatie.nl

Three classrooms of this "Institute for the Deaf" had been converted into operating rooms, the former theater room housed the pharmacy and the dormitories were used as infirmary for the wounded soldiers. There was a neurosurgical team in this hospital, perhaps William was transported all the way there especially for that purpose.

On March 9, the residents of Sint-Michielsgestel held a festive procession through the village, during which the Canadian hospital was visited to thank the wounded and to hearten them. William Rupert Burns did not live to see it anymore, he died this day from his injuries.

William was temporarily buried in Sint-Michielsgestel on March 10, 1945, 350406 on field 5, row 8, the 7th grave.



Temporary cemetery in Sint-Michielsgestel – source Heemkundevereniging

"De Heerlijkheid Herlaar"

Florence Burns, in a letter she sent on May 29, 1945, asked if her son's body could be returned to Canada so that she could bury him there. She received a letter back from the deputy defense minister on June 4, 1945. In it he expressed his deepest regret but that unfortunately this was not possible and he promised that William would be buried with honour, side by side with his fallen comrades and that the grave would receive perpetual care and attention from the government.

On October 23, 1945 William was reburied at the Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery, grave reference **XVI. G. 1.**

The text on his tombstone reads as follows:

AS YOU REST
IN PEACEFULL SLEEP
YOUR MEMORY WE'LL EVER KEEP
MOTHER AND FAMILY

Awards William Rupert Burns:

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



Groesbeek, 7 October 2021 - Photo Susanne Steegs



FACES TO GRAVES

Stichting Faces to Canadian
War Graves Groesbeek

Life story: Susanne Steegs, Research Team Faces to Graves.

Sources:

Commonwealth War Graves

Library and Archives Canada

Canadian Battlefield Tours

Canadiansoldiers.com

Legionmagazine.com

Local History Association "De
Heerlijkheid Herlaar"

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

**Pte. W. Burns, 21,
Fatally Wounded**

Information has been received that Pte. William Burns, 21-year-old son of Mr. and Mrs. F. W. Burns, 75 Dufferin road, Ste. Rose, died March 9 of wounds received in action in Germany. Private Burns was educated at Strathcona High School, Outremont, and worked with the Royal Air Force Transport Command prior to enlisting with the Black Watch (R.H.R.) in February, 1943. He was wounded while in France in August of the following year, and again in Germany on March 8, 1945, when with the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry regiment. A brother, Douglas, is a flight engineer with the R.A.F.T.C.

