

**Campbell, John**  
**Major**  
**The Calgary Highlanders**  
**Royal Canadian Infantry Corps**



John Campbell was born on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1917 in Calgary, Alberta, the son of Archibald Thompson Campbell and Janet Campbell. As far as we know, John had no brothers or sisters. There were Scottish roots at least on one side of the family. The Campbell's religious denomination was the United Church of Canada.

John started his school career at Hillhurst Public School in Calgary, before graduating from Crescent Heights High School when he was 20, in 1937.



*Crescent Heights High School – 1937*



School photo 1937.



**THE TEAM**

Guards—Campbell (Captain), Currie, Phillips and Belkin.  
 Centres—Graves, Pegler and Dick.  
 Forwards—H. Johnson, W. Johnston, Lewis, Ratledge and Kathrens.  
 John (right) as captain of the basketball team - 1937.

John (bottom row, third from the right) as coach of the girls' basketball team - 1937.



**JUNIOR BASKETBALL CHAMPIONS**

**BACK ROW**—Jean Rollo, Fay Toms, Leone Hess, Jessie Sweet, Mae Craik, Olive Riley, Olive Barnes (captain.)  
**FRONT ROW**—Madge Aked, Virginia Wilson, Huxley Johnson, Georgina Craig, John Campbell, Norma Cook, Hazel Turtle.

**ROOM 25 — BOYS**

Name	Pastime	Ambition	Heard to Say	Future
Bill Matheson	Letting pucks slide past him	Goaltender in N.H.L.	"She's all right!"	Slinging hash
Harry Pegler	Talking back to Miss Wylie	To do all his homework	"It's a fake! There ain't no Santa Claus!"	Hollywood and M. West
Clifford Lofgren	Answering Mr. McLennan	To be able to sleep in peace	"Got a match?"	Astronomer
Bob Surradge	Getting to school late	To succeed Mr. Aberhart	"Do I need a late card?"	Street car conductor
Tom Campbell	Playing hookey	To be a second H. Lauder	"Loan me your pencil?"	Policeman
George Lem	Doing Mathematics	To be a Math. teacher	"That's simple"	Restaurant owner
Fred Beaver-Jones	Playing hookey with Tom Campbell	To be a wrestler	"Do you think that if I skipped . . ."	Jockey
Lincoln Van Sickle	Hockey	Be a Pee Wee hockey player	Nothing	Running a pool hall
John Campbell	Coaching girls' basketball	Olympic swimmer	"Phooey! Bah!"	Monkey trainer

THE CRESCENT BUGLE, 1937

He studied at Hepburn Business College in Calgary and was fluent in both English and French. Following his College graduation he was employed as an accountant with the Greyhound Bus Company. John's military career started early, during his years at Crescent Heights High School. On June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1934, he enrolled for the NPAM, Non Permanent Active Militia, in Calgary. A militia that arose after the British Army withdrew from Canada so that, if necessary, Canadian armed forces could be mobilized. In 1940 the NPAM was disbanded and became part of the Canadian army.

John was assigned to the Calgary Highlanders and promoted to lieutenant quite soon. Even before the merger of the NPAM and PAM (Permanent Active Militia) with the Canadian army, John registered for active service on November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1939. He was 22 years old, single and lived with his parents in Calgary on # 1221 Bowness Road.

I, John Campbell do solemnly declare that the above particulars are true, that I hold His Majesty's Commission in the Canadian Militia and I am willing to serve in the Canadian Field Force if, when and so long as required.

Date: 8 November 1939 John Campbell Lieut  
(Signature and rank)

**CERTIFICATE OF OFFICER COMMANDING**

The application of Lieutenant John CAMPBELL for appointment to the  
(Rank and name)  
Calgary Highlanders C.A.S.F. with the rank of: Lieutenant  
(Unit) (was) recommended, appointment  
(is)  
 and appointment 8<sup>th</sup> November 1939 has been approved.  
(is) is recommended for approval.

Authority John  
(Signature of O.C.) THE CALGARY HIGHLANDERS (Rank)

Date November 8-1939 Calgary Highlanders C.A.S.F.  
(Unit)

**FINGERPRINTED**

*(Circular stamp: M.F. RECEIVED X SEP 23 1940)*

He underwent a medical test and was considered a healthy young man. He had black hair and brown eyes, was 5 feet and 10 inches tall and weighed 175 pounds. In his spare time, he enjoyed mountaineering, swimming and hunting.

Upon registration, John reported for training and took several courses both in Canada and in England.

In April, 1940, he attended the Army Gas School in Ottawa, Ontario. Here he learnt how to deal with chemical weapons. On May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1940, John was granted some farewell leave to say goodbye to his family. He was then about to travel to Europe.

John boarded a troop ship in Halifax, Nova Scotia on August 24<sup>th</sup> and disembarked at Gourock, Scotland on September 4<sup>th</sup>.



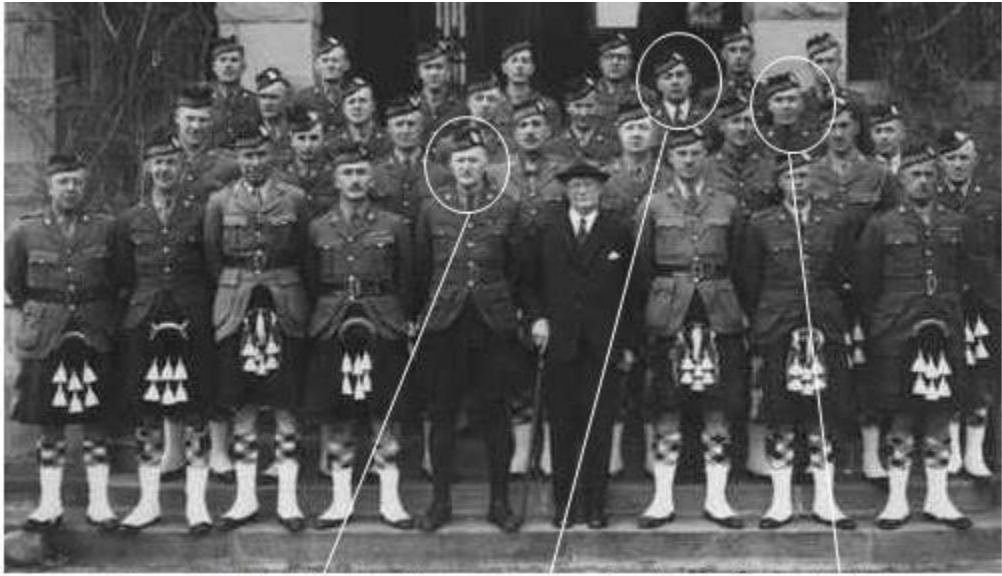
*Convoy in Gourock harbour, Scotland.*

On arrival in Scotland, John was headed for Camp Aldershot, southwest of London. A large Canadian base was built here in 1939 and John was trained in the use of a Bren gun during the month of September. He was offered a week's leave in October. Come December he was at the Junior Leadership School.

In April, 1941, he left Camp Aldershot for Harrogate, north of Leeds (England), for a month to train as a truck driver and mechanic. Once back at Camp Aldershot, John received advanced training in combat techniques and was subsequently promoted to captain on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1941.

Canadian troops who had been in England for a long time were starting to show signs of boredom. On October 8<sup>th</sup>, John accompanied Lieutenant Colonel J. Fred Scott to attend a British "battle drill", a demonstration by the 47th Division. Both men were impressed and decided his men would be trained at the 47th Division Battle Drill School. Even after the school was closed by the British, Scott continued with the training.

On October 23<sup>rd</sup> , the Calgary Highlanders Battle Drill School in England first saw the light of day. John (temporarily) left his regiment and on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1942, he was put in charge of the "Battle Drill" department of the Canadian Training School in England. He was promoted to A /Major on the previous day. The fresh department required a lot of work. Together with Scott and Lieutenant W.H. Buchanan he travelled to Stansted Park, north of Portsmouth on the English south coast, near the town of Rowlands Castle.



Officers of the First Battalion, Calgary Highlanders, Canadian Active Service Force photographed in Calgary

Lieutenant-Colonel J. Fred Scott. Lieutenant J. Campbell. Lieutenant W. H. Buchanan.

They got more than two weeks to set up a tent camp. But the facilities already in sight were proving so poor that the command Centre and infirmary were being moved to Rowlands Castle Lodge House.

The camp was ready on time, contact had been made with local residents (John and Buchanan were invited to lunch by Lord Bessborough of Stansted Park) and good training sites have been searched. On 1 May 1942, the first 89 officers started training.





*Battle Drill at Stansted Park.*

As the chosen location was suitable for the summer months only, the last course of 1942 ended on September 19<sup>th</sup>. A new location was found by then and the school moved its operations to Windlesham House School, Washington, west of Brighton on the south coast of England. John would be promoted to major there on October 24<sup>th</sup>.

The Battle Drill School was extended to include an anti-gas section, when John returned to his regiment, the Calgary Highlanders, on December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1943. Up until his departure for France, he followed two months of training at the Senior Officers School.

Just before his departure for France, John had drawn up his will. He determined that Pamela Marguerite d'Esney Ramsay was to be the sole beneficiary of his inheritance.

Exactly one month to the day following D-Day, at dusk, with bagpipes playing, John boarded 'the Isle of Guernsey' at Folkestone harbour. On board the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division, included in which were the Calgary Highlanders and part of the 5<sup>th</sup> Division. It was to be the first crossing to mainland Europe for the Calgary Highlanders. The night was clear and calm. As they approached the coast of France, the men gathered along the railing to view the impressive number of ships docked at the quayside. It was early afternoon, on July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1944, that John set foot in Normandy, France.

The Calgary Highlanders spent their first night in the fields around Banville, two miles due west of Juno Beach. The peace and quiet, quite far from the front, changed a few days later when they headed for Abbaye d'Ardenne on the northwest side of Caen, on the night of July 10<sup>th</sup>.



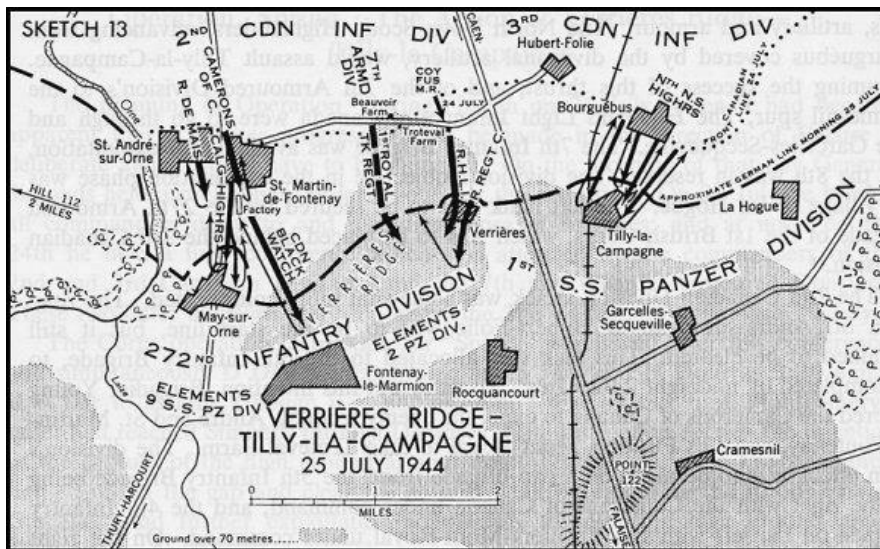
*Abbaye d'Ardenne, 1944.*

John experienced for the first time in his life what it was like to fight at the front. His regiment came under German fire, constantly and relentlessly. The military echelon made the decision to send the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division to Vaucelles, across the river Orne, as part of Operation Atlantic. Again, not without its struggles, the regiment continued towards La Haute and Fleury-sur-Orne on July 19<sup>th</sup>.

Following the fall of Caen, part of the German forces withdrew to the Verrières ridge south of Caen and Hill 67. This way they managed to keep an eye on all Allied troop movements. John was in command of A- Company. Orders from headquarters were to pull over the right flank and thus secure Fleury-sur-Orne for safer troops movement. The next day at 6 pm the A-Company left for Estevaux. Warily sneaking through the tall grass of the Orne valley, they came across a large group of German soldiers who had taken refuge in an orchard for the night. Fighting erupted all night from a distance of 400 meters. No respite during the next day when, frighteningly, even the radio link with headquarters was lost. John faced 400 German soldiers with his 200 men.

As darkness fell, John decided to carry out an all-or-nothing attack, but he and his men were called back by headquarters. Reinforcements arrived the next morning and A-Company was able to withdraw. Thirty-one Canadian soldiers were killed on Hill 67. The Calgary Highlanders moved further south.

Following some much needed rest after the battle of Hill 67, plans were made for Operation Spring in taking hold of the entire ridge of Verrières. This ridge was, among others, heavily defended by the German 1<sup>st</sup> SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, the elite troops of the Waffen SS. The Highlanders were to continue via St. André-sur-Orne and St. Martin de Fontenay to May-sur-Orne.



The attack is launched on the night of July 24<sup>th</sup>. At 03.30 am John and his A-Company tried to force a pass east of St. Martin. Just minutes later, they came under German fire. John decided to press on towards the east, but again here, there were many German soldiers in trenches. A-Company succeeded in passing the German barriers and forged ahead of the German artillery. Crawling in darkness, losing contact with B-Company, they still managed to reach their intended position northeast of May-sur-Orne. As daylight breaks, John decided to withdraw his troops to an old factory building southeast of St. Martin. By this time, there was total confusion on their position and the positions of other companies, the radio working only sporadically. The factory was under constant fire. Meanwhile, back at headquarters, they were convinced that John had reached May-sur-Orne with his men. By that afternoon, all four companies of the Calgary Highlanders found themselves in a very bad position. John and his A-Company, along with B- and D- Company, were in hiding a little east of the factory. Even though many German soldiers had been taken prisoner, the area was teeming with snipers. It was not until 3 pm that the Highlanders were ordered to withdraw to the southern edge of St. André. Despite the creation of a smokescreen, their situation remained precarious. Around 7:30 pm, John was hit by a bullet and was taken to a first-aid station.

37 Calgary Highlanders were killed during Operation Spring.

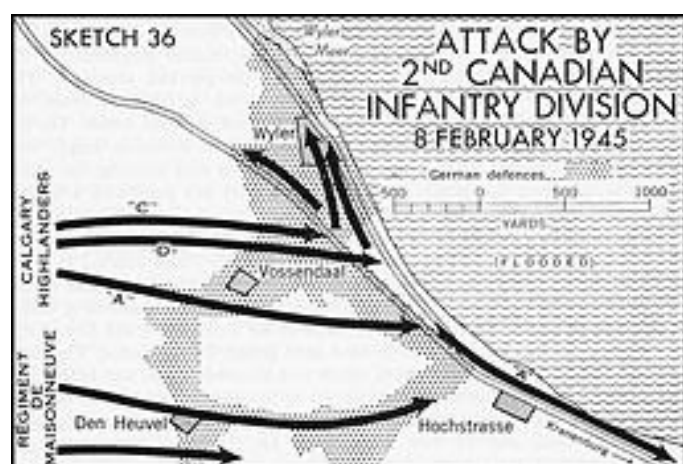


Upon his injury, John was repatriated to England. He spent more than three and a half months in hospital, convalescing. As soon as he was declared fit for active duty, he returned to the front.

On November 18<sup>th</sup>, John was back on the mainland. While he was in England, his company fought its way through northern France, Belgium and the Netherlands (a.o. taking part in the Battle of the Scheldt). When John rejoined his regiment, he was put in charge of C-Company, by then located near Nijmegen in the southeast of the Netherlands. Initially, the Calgary Highlanders were stationed in houses along the main road between Nijmegen and Malden. They were guarding bridges near Malden and Grave. In between days of rest and active duty, they were trained in the use of a new weapon, the WASP flamethrower. All through winter the regiment was deployed in safeguarding the Dutch-German border at Groesbeek. Two weeks on, one week off.

At the approach of Christmas, the first winter snow fell. Since the men were not kitted out with a winter uniform, their dark uniforms in rather sharp contrast with the white landscape, they wore their underwear over their uniform and white towels over their helmets during patrols. On Christmas Eve, just as the Calgary Highlanders were patrolling the front near Groesbeek, German soldiers across the street started a serenade. The Canadians replied by firing their rifles, grenades and mortars. The next day, the Canadians brought along two bagpipers to play for the Germans. On New Year's Eve, the Germans started firing at midnight exactly. Eyewitnesses said you could have read a newspaper by the light of all that gunfire. After 5 minutes the Germans shouted: "Happy New Year, Canada". On January 10<sup>th</sup>, the Calgary Highlanders would leave the front line for a week's rest in Nijmegen.

From February 1<sup>st</sup> onwards, preparations for Operation Veritable would start for the regiment. Leaving Berg en Dal for the German border, staying in forested area about three miles from Wyler, Germany, waiting for things to come.



The plan was that John and his C- Company would commence the charge on Wyler from the town's northwest, rejoining D-Company in Wyler.

On February 8<sup>th</sup>, at 5 am, the assault on Wyler was launched. While a bagpipe player could be heard in the background, John and Frank "Nobby" Clarke (Commander B Company) reminisced about their time in Calgary and England. They looked at the Wyler church tower and agreed to have a glass of rum in the church when next they met up again. Despite their best efforts, the Battle of Wyler proved much more difficult than expected and would last eight hours. Thirteen Calgary Highlanders were killed during this operation. The regiment stayed a further two days in the town's ruins and then returned to Berg en Dal and Nijmegen.



*Wyler.*

Nobby Clarke was never to have that glass of rum with John at Wyler's church. John was one of the thirteen Calgary Highlanders who lost their lives. Nobby found John in a trench, shot by a sniper. The trench was clearly visible from the village. Nobby never understood why John had been so careless. After finding John, he combed out the village with his B- Company and shot every sniper they came across.

John was temporarily buried at the Canadian Military Cemetery in Nijmegen, from where he was reburied at the Canadian War Cemetery Groesbeek, grave reference **V. A. 8.**

John Campbell was awarded the following distinctions for his years in the Canadian armed forces:

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

The inscription on his headstone reads:

ONLY SON  
OF ARCHIBALD THOMSON  
AND JANET CAMPBELL  
CALGARY, ALBERTA, CANADA



*Groesbeek – 20 November 2019.*



Life story by Sigrid Norde – Research team Faces to Graves.

We would like to thank I. Sadownik for the information provided from the Crescent Heights High School archive.

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