

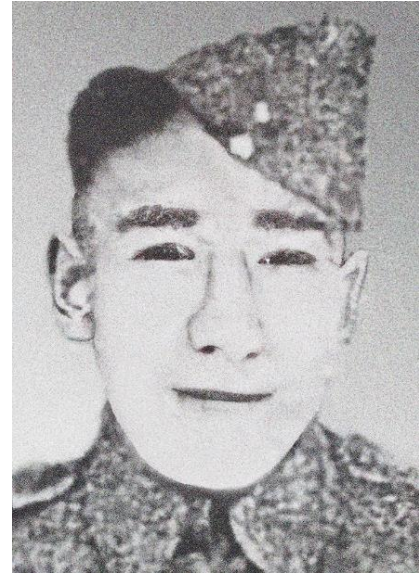
Chaske, Tom

Rifleman

Royal Winnipeg Rifles Regiment

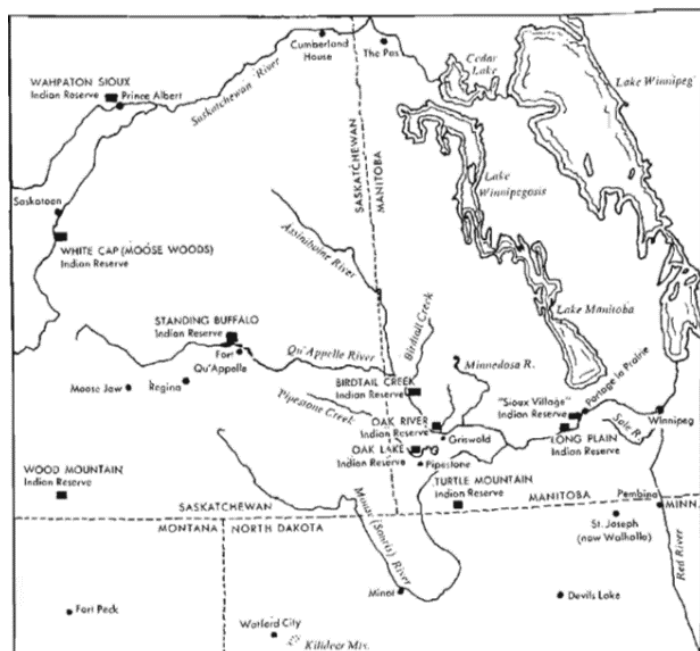
Royal Canadian Infantry Corps

H/8778



Tom Chaske was born 3 March 1922 in Edwin, Manitoba, a small farming community southwest of Portage la Prairie. He was a member of the Long Plain Reserve, a mixed group of Ojibway and Dakotas. His father, also named Tom Chaske (the surname means 'firstborn son' in Dakota-Sioux), may have been descended from the group of 22 families who migrated northwest into Canada, driven out of the USA after the Minnesota Uprising in 1862.

They established Sioux Village along the Assiniboine River, on land purchased through a lawyer and held in trust for them, as Indians were not allowed to own land back then. Tom's mother Nyjookwah was likely of the Ojibway people and the Salteaux language was spoken at home.



Reserves where Minnesota Sioux settled in present-day Manitoba and Saskatchewan

*A dirt street in
"Sioux Village" at
Portage la Prairie,
Manitoba*



Tom's father died while he was still a young child, as did his brother and sisters. He was placed into the Portage la Prairie Indian Residential School and received a basic education up to Grade 6. The school was then run by the United Church of Canada and the students were put to work doing domestic and agricultural labour. Tom had the opportunity to participate in sports such as baseball and soccer in summer plus hockey in winter. He also came to enjoy swimming and hunting.



*Portage la Prairie Indian Residential
School circa 1930*

After finishing school at sixteen years old, Tom worked as a farm labourer in the summers and did bush work in the winters, including woodcutting and trapping. Tom attested with the Canadian Army in Winnipeg, Manitoba 18 March 1943, shortly after his 21st birthday. His medical exam recorded him at 5'10" tall and 151 lbs. When interviewed, he said his health had been "all right" and "I'm never sick".

Soon after enlisting, Tom was Away Without Leave for eight days in April 1943. When he reported for duty again, he was given permission after the fact to marry Marjorie Thomas of the Roseau River Reserve near Letellier, Manitoba. With his explanation for being away accepted, the new recruit avoided being reprimanded and proceeded to Fort Garry for his eight weeks basic training. From there, Private Tom Chaske was sent to Camp Shilo, Manitoba for infantry training in June, then was posted to the Royal Winnipeg Rifles in July 1943.

Tom was on the move again to Halifax, Nova Scotia in August 1943 for overseas embarkment. Tom was interviewed by an officer with the Canadian Infantry Reserve Unit in early September shortly after arriving in

the U.K. and deemed suitable as an infantry combatant. Newly designated Rifleman Tom Chaske was taken on strength with the Royal Winnipeg Rifles (RWR) 24 September 1943 and joined the regiment in Inveraray, Scotland that fall to begin training for the invasion of France.

The RWR were one of three Western infantry battalions of 7 Brigade along with the Regina Rifles and Canadian Scottish, part of 3rd Canadian Division. They were among the first Commonwealth units to land in Normandy on D-Day, 6 June 1944, and Tom Chaske was with them. The RWR suffered heavy casualties that day, about 130 men.



RWR in first wave D-Day assault landings

The next two days were even worse for the Winnipeg Rifles, also known as the Little Black Devils, experiencing another 300 casualties at the small village of Putot-en-Bessin, almost half of the battalion's combat strength. The RWR withdrew in the aftermath of Putot and gradually rebuilt their strength. They were on the move again in early July, with their next mission to seize the airport near the village of Carpiquet. That bloody battle turned out to be another costly one with 132 RWR casualties.

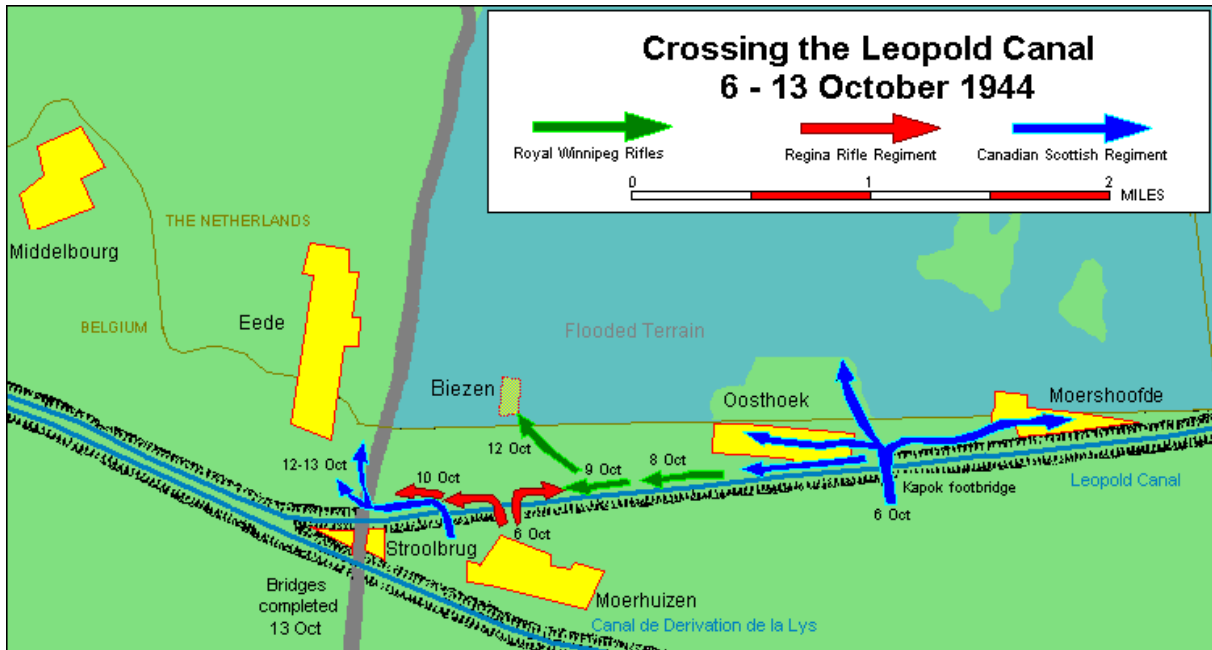


Winnipeg Rifles – Normandy July 1944

By August 1944 the Germans were in retreat, fighting delaying actions as the Allied forces pursued them. Tom was made acting Lance Corporal in the field 7 August 1944. Falaise was captured later that month with many German prisoners taken. The RWR and 7 Brigade played a key role in securing the Channel port of Calais, France in September 1944. Tom requested that he revert rank back to Rifleman six weeks after his promotion and was likely assigned to the regiment's pioneer platoon at that time.

The RWR moved on to Belgium and participated in the battle at Leopold Canal 6-13 October 1944 along the Dutch border. Much of the Scheldt areas of Belgium and Holland had been flooded by the Germans, making it

very difficult terrain to fight in. The 7th Brigade led the attack without armour support.



Major Lockie Fulton was placed in command of the Winnipeg Rifles upon return from his leave and after meeting with the 7th Brigade General, found his regiment to be in a bad way, down to about fifty fighting men in A Company. Some of the men were stranded on the other side of the canal, under enemy fire and without support. "I got the pioneer officer and told him we simply had to have another bridge across the canal to give us an opportunity to get more (men) across so we could try to get inland. I sent the pioneer officer to get another bridge across, though he protested a little bit because it was under (enemy) shellfire. Any time you crossed on the one we had across, the Germans immediately would fire onto it with mortars and machine gun fire, so you picked your time to cross, and you'd cross as fast as you could go. And hope that you could find a slit trench or something to jump into when you got across." These were often the conditions that Tom and his pioneer platoon mates worked under.



Area where the 7th Brigade made their assault crossing 6 October, photographed in 1946. The bridge in background is near Oosthoek. (From Official History of the Canadian Army)

After three hellish days of fighting, the Canadians launched an amphibious assault across the Leopold Canal and shattered the German defence. The

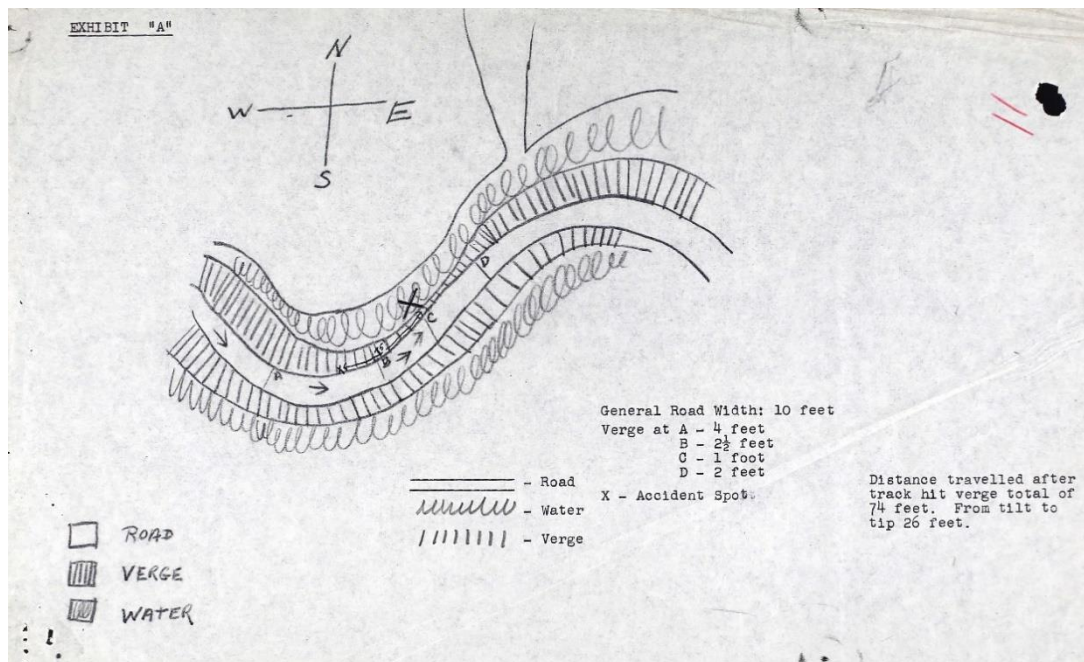
three separate battalions were able to link up and form an unbroken 7th Brigade front on the north side of the canal, leapfrogging each other into Holland and forcing the Germans to retreat. As they began liberating the Dutch towns and villages, they couldn't believe the condition of the citizens there who were starving. The Canadians shared their rations with them. By the end of their ordeal 13 October, 7th Brigade's three battalions suffered 553 casualties over seven days of fighting at Leopold Canal.

The Winnipeg Rifles fought in some lesser skirmishes in the Scheldt that month before relieving a US regiment near Nijmegen, Netherlands on 11 November 1944. There they remained in static operations, with their pioneers often having to do road repairs using universal carriers to transport their crews and equipment.



On 12 December 1944, Lieutenant D.C. MacKenzie along with a crew of twelve RWR pioneers left their command post in a universal carrier pulling a small trailer loaded with picks and shovels to perform road repairs from the railway bridge back to regimental headquarters. Their vehicle had difficulty making the turn out of the gate, having to move back and forth a couple of times to do so. The intent was to drop men off along the damaged road to carry out repairs, but for some unknown reason the carrier suddenly moved to the verge (shoulder) on the north side of the road, and despite the driver braking and trying to steer back onto the roadway, it slid down into the ditch and rolled over. MacKenzie gave the command to jump and he along with five others managed to get clear of the carrier before it came to rest upside down in a few feet of water with a soft, muddy base below. MacKenzie dove under the water trying to find anyone who may be trapped and felt one body, but it was pinned underneath the vehicle. Tom Chaske was one of seven men who drowned that day in this terrible accident.

An investigation was conducted with the survivors interviewed, in an attempt to determine the cause of the incident causing multiple fatalities. While not conclusive, the findings seem to indicate it was more likely a mechanical issue as opposed to driver error. Lieutenant MacKenzie drew a map of the road and dike it was built on as Exhibit "A" in the investigation report.



Jim Parks of the RWR later recalled this tragedy. "The roads were always getting smashed up... and so on one particular time they sent out a crew of the pioneer platoon to repair it. On the way out... the fellow lost control of his carrier and it went into the side where all the water was and it tipped over. They lost seven people. I was part of the group that helped to retrieve them. We buried them the next day. There were two padres – a United Church padre and a priest from our brigade for the seven people. It didn't really matter who you were, denomination didn't mean a thing, the fact was there was some respect given."

Rifleman Tom Chaske was temporarily buried at Nijmegen, Netherlands and later relocated to nearby Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery, grave reference **I. H. 6.**



Winnipeg Free Press, 20 January 1945

In a sad epitaph, Tom's wife Marjorie suffered a similar fate in July 1946. She had received his Memorial Cross after his death, and as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police letter shows, they got it back from an unauthorized party. Tom had indicated that he wanted to have children with Marjorie, but it was not to be...

Drowned in River
 WINNIPEG, July 22 (CP).— Mrs. Marjorie Chaske, 25, of the Roseau River Indian Reserve, near Letellier, Man., was drowned in the Roseau River Saturday, Royal Canadian Mounted Police here reported today. The body was recovered by police shortly after the accident.

Phoenix-Star July 1946



ALL CORRESPONDENCE TO BE ADDRESSED TO:
 THE COMMISSIONER
 R.C.M. POLICE
 OTTAWA

122965

ROYAL CANADIAN MOUNTED POLICE
 OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER
 OTTAWA

REF. NO. 48 D 1082 Q 1 23 July 1948.

BY HAND.

ATTENTION: Secretary of Awards Board.

Re: Lost & Found Discharge Badges & Certificates & Rejection Badges, Armed Forces - Canada Generally.

Enclosed herewith please find Memorial Cross of H 8778, Rfmn. T. Chaske. Chaske was killed overseas in 1944. His widow, Mrs. Marjorie Chaske, an Indian from the Roseau River Indian Reserve near Emerson, Man., was accidentally drowned in July 1946.

2. The Memorial Cross was in the possession of another Indian girl, Edna Sennie, who had no legal claim to this medal. As far as is known, there are no near relatives of the deceased, and at the suggestion of the D.V.A., Winnipeg, this medal is now forwarded to you for disposal please.

[Signature]
 for Commissioner.

The Deputy Minister,
 Department of National Defence, Army,
 Ottawa, Ont.

[Red arrow pointing to the address] N. W. on Service Records (Attn: Major Chodnick)
 Passed, please.
[Signature]
 for Adjutant-General

Chaske Lake, northeast of Engolf Lake, Manitoba was named after Tom Chaske by the Manitoba Government in 1975 as a place of honour.



Biography by Jim Little, Research Team Faces to Graves.

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Leopold Canal map and picture

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