

SAPPER MAURICE CLOUÂTRE: THE EFFORTS AND SACRIFICES OF A GENERATION



This story could have been about Sapper Spence who died in Europe on February 19, 1945 for the reason that his father wrote on his death certificate that according with his son's real date of birth; he was only 20 years old when he died. He had falsified his identity so that he could join the army when he was only 15 years old. It could have been about Sapper Osgoode, who got married in England on March 19, 1943, and took part in the Normandy landings when his wife was six months pregnant. His daughter, Shiona, was born on November 21, 1944, but he was killed in action on January 3, 1945, having never seen her. Instead, we are going to talk about Sapper Maurice Clouâtre, who like Spence and Osgoode was one of the 25 members of the 16th Field Company who fell in Europe during the Second World War. His story helps us understand just how much each tombstone in the many war cemeteries bears witness to the efforts and sacrifices made by an entire generation of Canadians so that we can appreciate the peace and freedom we enjoy today. Using archives, a few service files and the 16th Field Company's war diary, we can retrace Sapper Clouâtre's life story, his achievements in Europe and the impact of his death on his family. This personalised approach sets the connection necessary to fully appreciate the value of our predecessors' efforts and sacrifices.

Sapper Clouâtre's life story is typical of that of many volunteers who went off to fight in the Second World War. He enrolled on March 9, 1942, when he was 23 years old and living with his parents with three brothers and five sisters. Like most of the other enlisted men, he said in his screening interview that he wanted to join the Canadian Army out of a sense of duty. He asked to be able to follow in his older brother Rosario's footsteps and join the 16th Field Company, a company of the Corps of Royal Canadian Engineers mobilized from Montreal. He was more likely looking for adventure than a way of making more money, and he left his weekly wage of \$35 as a carpenter down to only \$23 as a sapper.

Like 368,000 other Canadians, he left Canada from Halifax and reached England two weeks later. Once there, he was one of the many soldiers who were reprimanded for a breach of discipline. He was fined £4 and sentenced to 14 days field punishment for having missed a turn and damaged a military motorbike he was illegally driving on his way back from a night out. In his defence, he said, "I had a few beers, but I wasn't drunk." Fortunately, he had no other disciplinary incident after he made the acquaintance of his one true love, Heather Dearn from Dorset County, in December 1943. Three months later he asked permission from his chain of command to marry her and the approval came on June 11, 1944, five days after he had taken part in the Normandy landings. The two lovers took advantage of a period of short leave and got married on February 12, 1945, in England. But his tragic fate was sealed six weeks later, in Germany.

In short, Sapper Clouâtre's personal story contains many clichés that we associate with most soldiers at the time. He was a young man full of ambition who hoped to settle a family after the war. Unfortunately, his tombstone and all the others laid in military cemeteries are a painful reminder of the high price paid to restore peace and liberate Europe during the Second World War. On that note, Sapper Clouâtre's achievements are a poignant demonstration of the efforts deployed by the Canadian soldiers during the European Campaign.

While serving in the 16th Field Company, Sapper Clouâtre took part in some of the most important military operations leading up to the liberation of Europe. His unit was one of four Canadian engineer companies that participated in the Normandy landings and continued to support the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division throughout the European campaign.

Within the first hour of Operation OVERLOAD on June 6, 1944, the whole company, including all its heavy equipment, landed on the beach at Normandy. Sapper Clouâtre was under the good care of Company Sergeant-Major Seymour Wylde Howes who returned twice under constant enemy fire to a landing craft which had hit a mine 100 yards from shore, to save the sappers from drowning. He participated in the first engineering tasks which were to clear the beach of mines and build ramps to move the vehicles off the beach. He must have witnessed Sapper John Duval as he skillfully handled his D7 bulldozer under a heavy barrage of mortar and machine gun fire. He and the fellow sappers of 16th Field Company also helped the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade advance by making breaches in the barbed wire fences, destroying booby-traps and blowing 16 German 88-mm guns. He may have seen Major V.C. Hamilton, his commanding officer, getting shot three times by a sniper. He may also have seen how Lieutenant-Colonel Lewis Gordon Clarke of the 19th Canadian Field Artillery Regiment saved Major Hamilton's life by positioning his vehicle to cover the extraction manoeuvres.

During the operations leading up to the taking of Falaise, Sapper Clouâtre and the 16th Field Company sappers built Bailey bridges, repaired roads, destroyed German combat vehicles, operated water supply points, defused explosives, conducted route reces and built POW cages. However, those military accomplishments did not come without a price. In the three months following the landings, the company had 9 members killed in action, 4 died of injuries, 3 were reported missing and 45 were injured, out of a total strength of 249 men.

In September and October, the company helped capture Boulogne, Calais and the Breskens Pocket by carrying out bridging operations, opening roads and crossing with assault boats in the face of a determined enemy who never wanted to concede a port to the Allies. Thus at the end of October, from the men who took part in the landings, only half of them were remaining. That's only 126 members, including 3 of the 7 officers.

November saw the advance to Nijmegen, when on the night of the 10th the company supported the movement of the 3rd Division over more than 250 km. In December, the company was deployed in Groesbeek to reinforce defences along the Meuse. During Operation VERITABLE in February 1945, the company conducted amphibious operations to support the Division in their advance through flooded areas. The company finally arrived in Germany at the end of March.

Once they reached Germany, there was no doubt that the Nazis' surrender was only days away. Unfortunately, Sapper Clouâtre ran out of time. He and Lance Sergeant Carl Oscar Overby, were killed in action in the night of April 1 while conducting mobility tasks in support of the operation that would lead to the liberation of the Netherlands. What was he doing exactly? How did he die? Did he suffer? Those are the kinds of questions asked by the relatives of every soldier who fell on the battlefield, often without getting any answers. And if they do, the answers don't ease the pain of losing a loved one so young, from so far away. Having no answers about Sapper Clouâtre certainly brings into sharper focus the painful

sacrifices made by all who loved a soldier. To make matters worse, at about 20:30hrs on May 5, the long awaited news was broadcasted on a German radio, picked up by 16th Field Company on D-Day: "All forces in Northern Germany have surrendered to General Montgomery."

In a nutshell, Sapper Clouâtre and his fellow sappers from 16th Field Company took part in the most important military operations leading to the liberation of Europe. In the face of a determined enemy, he stood by many heroes and saw many of them fall. While it is a tragedy that his story ended so near the German surrender and left us with so few details about how it unfolded, it should be remembered as evidence of the efforts and sacrifices made by a whole generation of Canadians. For his efforts, he was awarded the 1939-1945 Star, the France-Germany Star, the Defence Medal, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal 1939-45. For their sacrifice, his wife and mother received the Memorial Cross, making it apropos to look at the legacy his death left on his family.

The very sad legacy that war left to Sapper's Clouâtre family is a vibrant testimony of the significance of the sacrifices made by all the families of our war dead. Heather Clouâtre, who was newly married and recently widowed, did like 48,000 other war brides and asked to be sent to Canada. She arrived aboard the Queen Mary in July 1946 and went to live with Sapper Clouâtre's parents. She shared both grief and household duties with Diana, Maurice's mother, and gradually learned French. Adding to the tragedy, some of Maurice's personal effects were lost during the restitution process. His notebook, which could have included his last thoughts of his loving wife, was missing. So was his camera, which might have contained pictures of their last moments together. And his watch had disappeared, a person's watch having no small sentimental value at the time. Rosario, Maurice's older brother, came back from Europe in September 1945. However, he spent several months at Ste. Anne's Hospital for treatment for his anxiety. He remained dependent on his parents and was never able to find another job. The Clouâtre family contributed to the war effort through their two eldest sons. They inherited a death, a widow and an invalid. They would face hard times, relying on pensions, bonds and Maurice's will to survive. That is the very sad legacy that war left to many Canadian families. The Victory only meant continued efforts, sorrow and sacrifices. There was no happy ending for those who loved those who were confined to a war cemetery, for eternity.

Clouâtre, Osgoode, Overby and Spence are the four 16th Field Company sappers laid to rest in the Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery in the Netherlands. They are part of the 44,090 Canadians that died during the Second World War. Our Canadian history was forged by our war efforts and sacrifices. While numbers and statistics provide clarity on their scope, personal stories offer the connection necessary to truly appreciate their value. Sapper Maurice Clouâtre was a young man full of ambition who hoped to settle a family after the War. Unfortunately, after taking part in the most important military operations leading up to the liberation of Europe, he met his destiny in Germany in the face of a grimly determined enemy whereas his family inherited sacrifices and sorrow. When realising that behind each and every tombstone lay a story as exasperating as Sapper Clouâtre's, we come to fully appreciate just how much effort and sacrifice were made by an entire generation of Canadians. Let us remember the pain, grief and sorrow that our predecessors had to endure so that we can appreciate the peace and freedom we enjoy today. Let us also remember that the country was steeped in as much if not more grief and loss after the Great War. As the Centennial of the Capture of Vimy Ridge is fast approaching, it would be interesting to take the opportunity to expose the life and death of the farmers, bankers and students who participated and to study how the war impacted their families.



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