

Gemmell, Thomas Mitchell
North Shore New Brunswick
Regiment
Private
B134732



Thomas Mitchell Gemmell was born June 25th, 1923, in a hospital in Galt (now Cambridge) Ontario to Matthew Stevenson Gemmell and Irene Isabella Currie. Tom had two brothers, James William and Robert Earl. He was raised on his father's dairy farm near Ayr, and the family belonged to the local United Church. Tom attended a rural school, enjoyed playing baseball in the summer and hockey as a forward in the winter. When he was fourteen Tom left school after completing grade eight. He worked on this father's farm for several years but did not enjoy dairy farming. Tom took a correspondence course in diesel mechanics from the Chicago Vocational School and was also able to gain experience driving trucks. In 1939 his mother passed away and about this time he left home.

From August 1940 to September 1942 Tom served with the militia of the Highland Light Infantry of Canada and on Oct. 29, 1942, he enlisted for active duty with the Canadian Armoured Corp (CAC) in Hamilton. Documents show that he was living at 27 East 28th St., Hamilton, at the time. He was working as a truck driver for the Electric Transport Co. in Hamilton and enjoyed driving his motorcycle whenever possible. His enlistment documents recommended that he take an auto tradesman's course, that he could be a driver and that his knowledge of diesel mechanics would serve him well. Following enlistment, Tom was sent to Basic Training Camp #100 in Portage La Prairie, Manitoba. This was completed in mid-February 1943, and he was transferred to Camp Borden in Ontario. Advanced training included protection against chlorine and mustard gas attacks and specializations. At Borden Tom studied and

qualified on Apr. 7, as a Class III driver of wheeled vehicles. A month later he qualified as a driver of tracked vehicles. On completion of Advanced Training, on May 3rd, it was recommended that he continue to train and serve with the Canadian Armoured Corps Reinforcement Unit (CACRU). Tom's placement was put on hold however as he contracted scarlet fever and was quarantined for a period of time.

On Mar. 30, 1944, Tom embarked for the UK, arrived on Apr. 8th and was placed with the CACRU. In May, however, he was transferred to the Canadian Infantry Reserve Unit (CIRU) and On Aug. 28, to the North Shore (NB) Regiment that was fighting in France. The North Shore had suffered heavy casualties in July and needed reinforcements. Tom fought with the regiment as they cleared the ports along the English Channel and during the early stages of the Battle of the Scheldt.

On Oct. 13, 1944, Tom was wounded in the arm and spent time in recovery in a Belgian hospital. Afterwards, he was assigned to Capt. C.F. Richardson of "B" Company as a driver for his jeep.

Following the Battle of the Scheldt, the regiment advanced to Nijmegen, the Netherlands, close to the German border to relieve American paratroopers who had captured the bridge over the Maas River. The early winter was spent making numerous raids across the border to obtain information and capture Germans for interrogation. During this time Tom met and became friends with a Dutch girl, Betsy Heutinck and her family. As the Germans vacated the Netherlands they took or destroyed all food and fuel and left the Dutch starving. To assist, Tom would often share his food packages and was soon considered part of the Heutinck family.

In February 1945 the Canadians crossed the border into Germany. Their objective was to clear the Rhineland (western Germany south of the Rhine River). Betsy kept in touch with regular letters to Tom. One of the deadliest battles in the Rhineland was fought for the capture of the village of Keppeln. Allied intelligence had reported that there was no significant enemy activity at Keppeln and the assistance of tanks would not be required. On February 26, 1945, Lt. Col. Rowley implemented orders to advance and sent the North Shore's "B" & "C" Companies across a thousand yards of open farmland to seize Keppeln. Intelligence was wrong. The Germans waited until the North Shores were 150 yards from the German line and then opened fire. Keppeln was eventually captured but the cost was 28 North Shore soldiers dead and 56 wounded. The day after the capture of the village, Tom dropped off Capt. Richardson at his

destination, parked the jeep, and was walking near Company HQ when a shell exploded nearby. His left leg was severed above the knee and he was knocked unconscious by the blast and the shock. Tom was immediately transported to the Regimental Aid Post (RAP) but died on the way. He was twenty-one years of age.

When Betsy Heutinck discovered that there were no longer replies to her letters she wrote to Lt. Col. Rowley and was told that Tom had been killed in action. Once a week after Tom's burial Betsy would travel, at times on foot, eight miles to visit and care for his grave. Betsy took photos of the tulip covered grave and sent them to Tom's father. After the war, Tom's father Steven traveled to the Netherlands to visit Tom's grave and stayed with the Heutinck family. Upon returning to Canada he made arrangements for Betsy to come to Canada, which she did.

For his service to Canada Pte. Thomas Mitchell Gemmell was awarded the following medals: the 1939-45 Star, France & Germany Star, War Medal 1939-45 and CVSM with Clasp.

Pte. Thomas Mitchell Gemmell is buried in Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery, the Netherlands, grave reference **X. C. 3.**

Life story by Bruce Morton, brucehmorton@gmail.com

Note that the photo and much of the data for this biography were provided by Lou Daley of Charlottetown, PEI.



Biography made available for Faces To Graves, with courtesy of Bruce Morton.

