

Gemmell, Thomas Mitchell

Private / B134732

**North Shore New Brunswick
Regiment**



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 Bordon 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 Plot **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.



FACES TO GRAVES

Stichting Faces to Canadian
War Graves Groesbeek

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

Soldier's Father Would Adopt Dutch Girl



Betsy Heutinck, who cared for grave of Pte. Thomas Gemmell, killed while serving with Canadian troops liberating her home town of Nijmegen, Holland, is seen (left) at grave's side, with Matthew Gemmell, 344 St. George St., Toronto, his father, who brought Betsy back to Canada and wants to adopt her. She shows Mr. Gemmell (right) how to put on wooden shoes.

Graves of Canadians Shaped in Maple Leaf

Canada's military cemetery at Groesbeek, Holland, four miles from Nijmegen, is laid out in the shape of a maple leaf, according to Matthew S. Gemmell of 344 George St., who has just returned after paying a visit to the grave of his son, Pte. Thomas Gemmell, formerly with the North Shore, New Brunswick Regiment, killed in action Feb. 26, 1945.

The 65-year-old father and retired farmer brought back with him 18-year-old Betsy Heutinck of Nijmegen, who tended Pte. Gemmell's grave weekly, and whose family befriended the Canadian soldier when troops were stationed nearby.

"Graves of our boys who were buried in Holland are well cared for," said Mr. Gemmell. "The Hollanders have great respect for the Canadian soldiers and it made me proud to be a Canadian when I went among the Dutch people."

"The Canadian cemetery is laid out like a maple leaf and it is well looked after. There are about 3,000 graves in the cemetery, marked with wooden crosses. They haven't put up the headstones yet because they are waiting for the ground to settle," Mr. Gemmell said.

With Mr. Gemmell at his home was Betsy. A typist in her home

town, she hopes to secure a similar job here after she masters the language, although she speaks fair English now.

When the Canadians fought the battle of Nijmegen, in November, 1944, Pte. Gemmell became acquainted with the Heutinck family, father, mother, two sons and six daughters, one of the daughters being Betsy, then 15 years old. Pte. Gemmell often shared his food parcels with them and he was regarded as one of the family.

When the Canadian troops pushed on, Betsy wrote to Pte. Gemmell and in February, 1945, when she failed to get a reply she wrote to the commanding officer of the North Shore Regiment, and learned that Pte. Gemmell had been killed in action. He was buried in the cemetery at Groesbeek.

Once a week Betsy walked eight miles to the cemetery to care for the Canadian soldier's grave. She wrote to Mr. Gemmell and sent pictures of the tulip-covered grave. Six months ago Mr. Gemmell, a widower, who sold his farm after his son's death, decided to visit Holland, where he stayed with the Heutinck family.

"I became deeply attached to the family," Mr. Gemmell said, "and I'd like to adopt Betsy. I feel Betsy would fill the void made by Thomas' death. I feel she will like Canada and if she decided she wants to remain here and can stand no parting from her

adopted Betsy, she says: "I think I will like it in Canada." Arriving in New York Thursday, she and Mr. Gemmell took in the sights before coming to Toronto.



Pte. Thomas Gemmell Of the North Shore Regiment, on motorcycle when home on leave. He was buried in the Canadian military cemetery at Groesbeek.

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