

Spencer, William Albert

Lieutenant

M27203

**8th (New Brunswick) Princess
Louise's Hussars**

5th Canadian Armoured Regiment



Personal Information: William Albert Spencer was born on 5 November, 1921 in Calgary, Alberta to parents Alexander and Sarah Spencer. He had one older sister, Virginia Louise. William was of the Anglican faith. He was of dark complexion with black hair and hazel eyes.

William had completed high school and was in his first year of an Aero-Engineering course when he was called into active service on 15 November, 1940. At this time, he had spent five years with the Alberta Military Institute Cadets and had been a part of the Calgary Tank Regiment since 1936. Prior to being called into active service Bill also worked as a store clerk for the Hudson's Bay Company. His military records indicate that he was approximately six feet tall and weighed 161 pounds.

Military Movements: William was an acting sergeant with the Calgary Tank Regiment reserve army when he was called into active service on 15 November, 1940. During March of 1941 he was taken on strength by the 14th Army Tank Battalion and posted to #13 District Depot, then he became Acting Company Sergeant Major, and finally Bill was taken on

strength at Camp Borden where he trained until departing Halifax on 20 June, 1941. Upon arrival in the United Kingdom William received further training.

As of April 1942 William was back in Canada. Initially he was in Calgary; in May of 1942 he went to Brockville, Ontario to the Officers Training Centre. A few months later, in August, William returned to Brockville where he completed another course and was recommended for appointment and promotion to rank of 2/Lieutenant. On 14 November, 1942 at Camp Borden he was promoted to Lieutenant - it's clear that he had excellent leadership abilities as he rose up the ranks fairly quickly. William was then reposted to the 23rd Army Tank Regiment CAC in Borden while waiting to return overseas.

William Spencer was granted permission to marry on 16 January, 1943 and on 23 January in Borden, Ontario he married Emma Louise Magloughen. After having been taken on strength by the Canadian Army Overseas, William landed in the UK on 24 June, 1943. Bill was then taken on strength by the 23rd Army Tank Regiment on 15 August, 1943. Sadly, William wouldn't be returning home again and he would miss the birth of his son on 9 December, 1943.

Bill completed his last stay in the United Kingdom on 26 October, 1943. He was to take part in the Italian Campaign. There were two main objectives of the Italian Campaign, one being to redirect the Germans from the Eastern Front and the other being to use Italy as another base from which to attack Germany. The soldiers fought through all the weather that was thrown their way. 6,000 of 90,000 Canadians would never return home from Italy.

William was taken on strength by the 5th Canadian Armoured Regiment on 25 May, 1944. He then fought with the 5th Armoured at the Gothic Line. On 1 September, 1944 Canadian tanks were making their way towards the Germans in an effort to take Monte Marrone. In the field two of Lieutenant William's Shermans were hit by high-velocity anti-tank shells. Corporal Lorne Fraser and Trooper William Harper were killed when their tanks caught fire.

When the squadron tanks were at Coriano Ridge they were faced with the Germans who had turned Villa Salvoni into an awaiting war zone – each home was defended by machine guns and anti-tank guns. William was the solution to this problem. Major Bob Ross said, “He was a ball of fire and had his troops into and out of scrapes as fast as the law allowed. “Bill used the false crest to hide his tank which he lined up on a house with multiple machine guns. He sent a high explosive shell that had a one-twentieth of a second delay fuse at the house. The shell punctured the wall blowing off the roof and opening all doors and windows. William cleared the rubble himself and shot the foot of the lead man running at him and then used a burst of .45 calibre fire to stop the man’s comrades.

The 8th Hussars continued to move up through Italy. Canadian soldiers played a major role here. Their efforts helped to speed up the fall of Mussolini’s fascist regime, the liberation of Italy and the weakening of German military might in preparation for the final stage of the war. In February of 1945 the Hussars left Italy. They sailed to Marseilles, France where they boarded trains and headed to Northwest Europe where they played a role in the liberation of Holland.

The Final Days: In the early days of April 1945 Rossforce (named after commanding officer Bob Ross) was to be guarding the flank of the 11th Brigade as it made its way up the area between the two arms of the Rhine. They sent out many tanks to check the positions of enemies, and made attacks on previously chosen targets during the 10th and 11th. Spring had come bringing mud with it and those members of the regiment not partaking in the attacks were busy attaching rat grousers to the tank tracks to give them more traction.

On 12 April, 1945 the Hussars made a brief trip into German territory where they were to be prepared to head north towards one of the bridgeheads that the infantry were planning on taking control of in Arnhem and Apeldoorn. Upon arrival in Germany, after crossing the Rhine, the men entered a city that had been completely destroyed. By 14 April the city of Apeldoorn was under threat by the British, and Arnhem was under their control – the Hussars were close to Arnhem and going to fight.

During the dark, early hours of 15 April, 1945 the 8th Hussar tanks entered Arnhem – a city torn to pieces by the Germans. It was in Arnhem that the soldiers received their next orders. Operation Cleanser gave the

soldiers four days to go from Arnhem to the banks of the huge inland sea – Zuider Zee. It was 30 miles of distance to cover; they were told that the land awaiting them was mostly flat with the odd high ground that was heavily wooded.

By heading towards Zuider Zee two things would be accomplished – the German forces would be cut off by splitting Holland in two and it would cut off the Germans who were holding back the 1st Division near Apeldoorn. As the night went on everyone waited. Eventually Bob Ross headed into what would've been called no-man's land in another war. He was trying to figure out what way his tanks would travel by detecting where the Germans had set up a roadblock.

At dawn, in the drizzling rain, on 15 April, 1945 engines began to start. Rossforce was headed towards Zuider Zee, but first had to seize ground north of Arnhem, the village of Otterloo and then cut the road west from Apeldoorn. Roadblocks were their big problem and although Bob Ross had mapped around one of them, there were several more. After an hour of manoeuvring, the roadblocks were behind them and the regiment was waiting for sounds of enemy fire. When it came, the firing was pointed at William's leading troops in B Squadron.

Lieutenant William Spencer immediately moved his tank to outflank the position, but it left his tank fully exposed to enemy fire. His tank was hit at once by the Germans and Trooper Boone, Bill's gunner, took out an enemy gun while another crew fled. The tank turned on the other two enemy guns when a burst of explosive light hit William Spencer's tank. The tank went up in flames and William, along with his gunner, fell mortally wounded. William was first buried at the temporary burial ground in Arnhem.

There were three survivors who exited the tank; Lance-Corporal James Stanley Stewart re-entered the tank with a fire extinguisher when he noticed that William and the gunner hadn't evacuated. James put out the flames eating away at Bill's clothing and then extinguished the actual fire. Lieutenant William Spencer was dead. Two other 8th Hussars were killed on April 15, 1945: Hedley Bannan and Allan Maxwell Freeman.

The Hussars and other Canadian regiments continued to push the Germans out of Holland until a ceasefire was declared on May 5. Victory in Europe was proclaimed on May 8, 1945.

Lest We Forget: William Spencer's final resting place is at the Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery in the Netherlands, grave reference **VII. A. 8.**

The inscription on his gravestone chosen by the family reads:

While you, dear Daddy,
rest and sleep,
your loving memory,
we'll always keep.

2,610 Commonwealth burials of the Second World War and nine war graves of other nationalities can be found at the Groesbeek Cemetery.

William had \$250 in Metropolitan Life Insurance which he left to his wife, Emma.¹³ He was survived by his wife, Emma Louise (age 22), his son, William Bryan (17 months), his parents Alexander and Sarah (age 49) and his sister, Virginia Louise (age 24). He had planned to remain in the army after the war. This dream would remain unfulfilled. Lieutenant William Albert Spencer died at the age of 23.

William Albert Spencer

Lest We Forget

Biography courtesy of the Lest We Forget initiative of Belleisle Regional High School located in Springfield, NB.

Video by a student at Belleisle Regional High School as part of the school's Lest We Forget initiative: <http://youtu.be/CVu6xLIAU00>



Biography made available for Faces To Graves, with courtesy of Stephen Wilson, Belleisle Regional High School.

Bibliography

How, Douglas. The 8th Hussars: A History of the Regiment. (Sussex: Maritime Publishing, 1964).

Windsor, Lee. Steel Cavalry: The 8th (New Brunswick) Hussars and the Italian Campaign. (Fredericton, New Brunswick: Goose Lane Edition, 2011).

Archival Reference

Military service files of Lieutenant William Spencer obtained from Library and Archives Canada, 395 Wellington Street, Ottawa, Ontario.

Internet Sites

<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/war-dead/index-e.html>

<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/collections/virtualmem>

<http://www.canadaatwar.ca/>



William Albert Spencer's gravestone.

Source: From the collection of S. Wilson



The inscription on William's gravestone chosen by his family.

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