



James & Janet Shepherd



Courtesy of: The First Hussars

Written by: Nick Corrie

Assisted by: Nancy Murray



HODIE NON CRAS

Name: Eric J. Shepherd

Rank: Trooper

Service Number: A 106469

Born: March 3, 1917, Salford, Lancashire

Discharged: Killed In Action

Cemetery: Bayeux Memorial, France

Served In: WWII

Service: Canadian Army

Battle Group: 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade

Regiment: First Hussars - 6th Canadian Armoured Regiment

Service Details: Trooper Shepherd came ashore on D-Day, June 6th, and fought with distinction through to July 25, 1944. While advancing on the ridge at Verrières in *Operation Spring*, two 88 mm rounds struck his Sherman "Firefly" tank setting it alight, killing him and a fellow crew man and wounding one other.

Service Notes: The First Hussars landed on Juno Beach along with two other Canadian armoured regiments, the Fort Garry Horse and the Sherbrooke Fusilier Regiment, (the 10th and 27th Canadian Armoured Regiments respectfully). The regiments came ashore in both floating, self propelled DD tanks (Duplex Drive) or landed directly onto the beach from LCT's (Landing Craft Tanks). The First Hussars proudly cherishes the distinction of advancing further inland on June 6th than other unit of any Allied army engaged that day.



HODIE NON CRAS



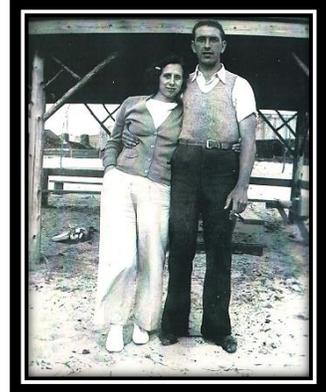
CANADIAN MEDALS: NW EUROPE

Eric James Shepherd – Personal History: Before and during the war

Early in 1943, Eric James Shepherd joined the First Hussars. A native of Salford, Lancashire, b. March 3, 1917, the English born Eric was married in 1939 to the Scottish born Janet Methven Walker, b. June 1912, d. March 15, 1955, in London.



At the time of his enlistment, Eric and Janet were parents of two children: daughter Beverly and younger son Eric, a lad who quickly became known, to avoid confusion, as Ric.

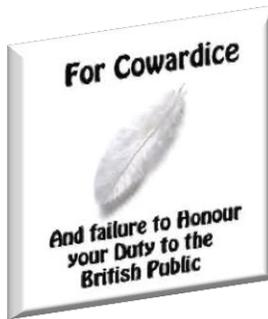


Eric was a working man who earned his living supporting his wife and children through very practical means. At one time he was a trusted truck driver for Hunt's Flour Mills, a locally owned, old and respected purveyor of baking goods. At the time of his enlistment, he was gainfully employed by S. F. Lawrason Company, manufacturers and distributors of chemical products.

The question arises - why he would leave a good job which supported his wife and children, give it all up and enlist in the army? The answer for the Shepherd family and many others where this apparent contradiction played out across the country, may lie in Eric Shepherd's military family history and the war culture in Canada from 1939 on.



Old school textbooks liked to impress upon the reader that all motivation which took a man, or woman, off to war was patriotic fervour. In Canada's earlier years when the vast majority of the country's citizens were from "over 'ome," a familiar reference to back home in Britain, a place still fondly remembered and proudly ready to defend, patriotism was more than an allegation – it was a fact! To fight for King and Country was a duty not easily avoided.



In Great Britain during the Great War, 1914-18, a man found out of uniform was liable to be branded a coward and ordained with a white feather to single him out, to cause such grievous embarrassment that he was compelled to join up.

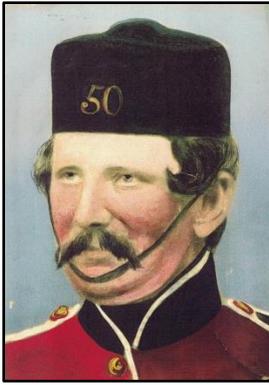
With the outbreak of WWII in 1939, the call heard from across the Atlantic to fight for the Old Flag may not have been as strong, not to the same degree which a young man's British born father experienced in 1914; after all, our country had to some degree matured on its own merits. Canada in the intervening years had morphed away from its colonial days when it was part of the old British Empire. Instead, as a new war loomed, the country had a more politically palatable distinction: along with other former colonies our ties were less Imperial but still evident, for now since 1931 we were part of the British Commonwealth of Nations.

Despite the diminished Empire connection and the never diminished distance between the old and new countries, there resided near the young Shepherd family, old English stock, British emigrants like themselves in living form - Eric's extended family. Time and distance may have faded ties to the old countries, but for all these Brits the ties were real and compelling; they were amongst the first to support the war and enlist.



Eric's English parents in Canada

While Eric's past personal military background was not extensive, having served in Army Cadets 1932-33 as part of the Signal Corps, the power of WWI pictures gallantly displaying three perfectly turned-out soldiers of the Bentum family, men from his mother's side, would certainly have made an impression on him, appealing to his sense of duty. In fact Bentum men had impressive military histories defending the Empire: India, Crimea, Canada 1858, and WWI. This was a military tradition which couldn't easily be dismissed with Canada at war.



* Above are pictures of the Bentum family's military heritage: British – English - Empire - *to the core!* *

The Canadian Army had deployed twice since 1939: once at Dieppe and in 1943 they were fighting in Italy. With the need for recruits becoming critical, the Government launched public appeal campaigns to fill the ranks. In windows, magazines and newspapers they displayed attractive, colourful posters boldly displaying brave soldiers doing their duty. Movie newsreels filled the screen with clean cut determined young men enjoying their training while a narrator called out for others to join. In towns and villages impressive troop parades wowed the crowds, arousing emotions of patriotism and pride. With friends in the service and his brother Alan an Airman in the RCAF, one suspects Eric felt it was the right and honourable thing to do, he of British stock, to go and join up. But this wasn't a gesture of turning his back on his family. No. This was what a man did to protect them, to risk his life on their behalf. To be clear, this was not an isolated belief, many men across Canada, married and single, felt the same responsibility towards their families and signed up for the duration.



He knew and liked driving a truck, why not try a tank? Having made that decision, the London Armouries and the First Hussars was the natural next stop.

On March 31, 1943, against this family and cultural backdrop, English born Eric, age 26, husband and father, became Tpr. Eric J. Shepherd, Regt. # A106469, the newest recruit to the First Hussars.

To learn the fundamentals of military drill and discipline, Tpr. Shepherd spent time in Chatham at the #12 Basic Training Unit, BTU, then sent off to Camp Borden to #3 Canadian Armoured Corps Recruiting Unit, CACRU. It was here where he would have been introduced, if that term is appropriate, to the reality of sliding your bum for the first time into some variation of a tank, only to discover an uninviting cold, hard, steel box. By December 1, 1943, he was sufficiently trained and accepted as a potential tank crew-man, to be shipped off across the Atlantic to the country of his birth, to finish his training before the much anticipated D-Day.



WWI Renault in Camp Borden

The English Channel was the great dividing line between the opposing forces. In France manning the “Atlantic Wall,” awaited German troops, all well seasoned and prepared for the allied onslaught which they knew was coming at some point – in anticipation they confidently trained their guns out to sea at the ready!



Canadian built Ram tank

Across the Channel beginning in 1942, the First Hussars underwent 29 months of extensive training in preparation for the beach assault and ensuing battles. It was a time of learning and re-learning over and over again, newer tactics passed on from experienced veterans of North Africa and Italy. New tactics were introduced along with new tanks including the floating DD tank (Duplex Drive) the most bewildering of all issued: a typical Churchillian “funny.”

Finally, the last variant issued to the Regiment was the ubiquitous American Sherman, the tank of choice for all Allied forces. Its late delivery challenged the crews to learn its intricacies quickly for they knew it would be their rolling weapon from D-Day to war’s end; that end would take eleven months of intense fighting and sacrifice.

The Hussars main battle tank has received some rather nasty reviews in the post war years. American author Belton Cooper noting the tanks propensity to easily ignite, has been so critical of the Sherman that he named his book “*Death Trap*.”

The tank's origin goes back to the 1930s in response to tanks being developed by the Axis powers. Since the USA didn't enter the war until late 1941, about the same time as the Hussars were arriving in England, they took their directives for improvements from the British whose battle experience in the North African desert against Rommel, provided invaluable



"Firefly" like Eric's, the most lethal Sherman suggestions, or sometimes – demands - towards the tank's development. Still, in peacetime America, the Sherman was originally conceived as a medium tank, fast, lightly armoured and perfectly equipped for infantry support, but less effective and not seriously intended to be an anti tank weapon. To engage tank on tank, demanding it duke it out with often superior enemy armour, was regarded by the Sherman designers in the early development years, as a role more suitable for anti-tank guns. This assumption which as time and battle conditions progressed, became a critical miscalculation with lethal results.

The crews which manned the flaming Shermans, based on personal observation, coined a better, less onerous name than Beston's, it became – “the *Ronson*” - named after the cigarette lighter whose slogan boasted that it “lights up first time, every time.” This unfortunate tendency to flame-up when hit by enemy fire occurred too many times, witnessed too often by other crews who for the moment were spared but left on the battle field in a state of tension and apprehension, having no other alternative but to brave it out, to fight on.

Apparently after reviewing this advertisement by the Ronson Lighter Company, they were blissfully unaware of the derogatory connection ascribed by tank crews between their product and flaming Sherman tanks. The irony is that it conforms to the ignorance displayed by the tank's designers who persisted in believing, and making, tanks with poor armour protection and under gunned. It was the crews themselves who had tracks welded on for more protection; better weapons came later.





By June 6, 1944, the Canadians were ready for action. Behind the German shore defences awaited enemy tanks which had superior fire power. The heavily armoured Tiger sported the feared 88 mm while the equally deadly Panther tanks had a high velocity 75 mm gun. The

Germans cleverly doubled-downed on these weapons replicating them as anti-tank weapons. Our Allied troops were constantly faced with this deadly combination as they tried to manoeuvre into a good position to use their inadequate short barrelled 75s on the most vulnerable, thinnest, enemy armour plate: the sides and back. They no doubt recalled the C.O.'s motto: "Hit with the first shot and then hit again." Easy to say, not always easy to do.

Nearing the end of July, the Regiment had suffered some critical loses. First on D-Day there were 21 KIA followed all too soon on June 11, the "Black Day" still mourned, when 45 more paid the ultimate sacrifice. This was learning on the job the hard way with more terrible loses to come.

Leading up to squeezing shut the Falaise gap thus trapping the Germans desperately trying to escape from western France, it was necessary to capture the Verrières ridge dominating the route which the attacking Hussars must follow to make it happen. On July 25, Captain Conron was surprised to find eight Panther tanks blocking his



"C" Squadron's path. Despite four panthers destroyed, the record of this encounter for at least one Hussar tank, one of 14 lost, was recorded in the history of the Royal Regiment of Canada and is seen on pg. 167 of *The Gallant Hussars*:

On the ridge at Verrières the advancing Royals saw one Sherman burst into flames as they approached. The hatch flew open, emitting clouds of black smoke, and those of the crew who could do so threw themselves out. One man came out backwards, catching his knees on the edge of the hatch, and hung there for a moment, blazing like a torch, before he fell to the ground on his head. The burning trooper actually set the wheat field afire, and the stretcher bearers who rushed

forward had to put out these flames as well as those that covered the body of the man. Soon there were burning tanks and vehicles throughout the entire area of advance.



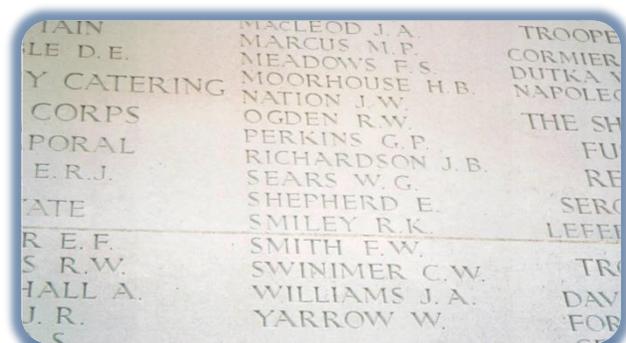
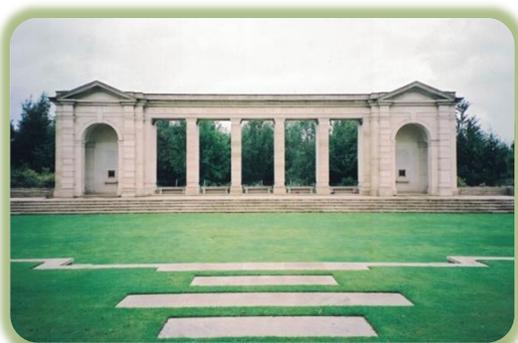
The name of this unfortunate Gallant Hussar is not given, it doesn't need to be because it was all too indicative of each "Ronson" brew-up. Trooper Eric James Shepherd's "Firefly" tank was hit with two 88 mm rounds which inflicted the same type of calamity (See Addendum) described by the Royals. Often the flames ignited the ammunition blowing off the turret and obliterating everything and everyone. For such unfortunate crew there is no known grave, their names KIA up until August 29, 1944, are inscribed on the BAYEUX MEMORIAL in France, a fitting and lasting reminder for 270 Canadians whose remains were never found.

The inscription on the Memorial reads:

NOS A GULIELMO VICTI VICTORIS PATRIAM LIBERAVIUS

Freely translated it means: *We, once conquered by William, have now set free the Conqueror's native land.*

Tpr. Eric J. Shepherd, born March 3, 1917 in Salford England, KIA on July 25, 1944, has his name inscribed there along with six other Gallant First Hussars who we honour each year in Victoria Park beside the Holy Roller tank, a total of 196 KIA, memorialised and buried in various Commonwealth War graves in NW Europe.



Post war family life

Men like Eric Shepherd who never returned from the war, were cheated from enjoying a good life in prosperous post war Canada. Their absence likewise denied their families of sons, fathers and husbands, forcing them into domestic life without them.

Janet Shepherd took the news of her husband's death, very hard. At first she couldn't imagine how she and the children could manage without a husband and father. She was grief stricken. Somehow, as in so many households across the country, life continued, it was renewed - life went on.



Wife's Silver Cross



Seen here is young Ric Shepherd decked out as an - *Air Force Cadet???*

Janet eventually remarried then succumbed to cancer in 1955. Daughter Beverly and son Ric graduated from school, married, had children and today function in their senior years with all the aches and pains so common to all humans over that certain age - the main topic of conversation at all *Tim Hortons* everywhere.

Ric discovered his independent nature and exercised bold initiative by founding a prosperous cartage company, appropriately signed as - *Shepherd Cartage*. Today they operate six trucks throughout SW Ontario. One day on a delivery he encountered a First Hussar who brought him into the Regimental fold where he made a tireless and valuable contribution to both the Regiment and Association by manning the Kit Shop for twelve years. Thanks Ric.

Special Note

As a gesture of commemoration for Tpr. Eric J. Shepherd here in London, the city on January 21, 1992, designated in compliance with their "Veteran Street Name List," a new street as *Shepherd Avenue*.



Addendum

In a letter from the Department of National Defence dated April 24, 1945, to Mrs. Janet M. Shepherd residing in London, Ontario, it is in response to her request for information pertaining to her husband's death. In that letter signed by Col. C. L. Laurin, Director of Records for Adjutant General, he states: "...I am to advise that the following statement from your Husband's unit is the only information received to date."

This information was a personal recounting by L/Sgt. Leonard M. Rogers, of July 25, 1944, when Tpr. Shepherd's tank was knocked out by two 88 mm rounds. By this account when combined with that horrible death recounted above by the Royal Regiment, one can vividly realise the ordeals each Hussar crew man experienced during each day of battle, faced with the prospects of death at any moment. Seen below as recorded, L/Sgt. Rogers states:

On 25th or 26th July 1944 at Verriers, France, I was in a tank with B-63223 Trooper Rae G.J.G and A-106469 Trooper Shepherd E and Trooper McLean A. We were in action all day. At approximately 1800 hours (6 pm) we received a hit on the left of the turret by an 88 mm. This shot probably killed A-106469 Trooper Shepherd E. Tpr. McLean A. said, "We are hit, get out." He then got out. At this time the tank received a second hit on the co-driver's side where ammunition is stored. The ammunition exploded and the tank started to burn. I was able to get out of the tank and from nearby together with trooper McLean watched the tank burn. I watched closely to see if either of the other two men were able to get out of the tank, but they did not. I am almost positive that both men perished in the tank that day.

We can assume from the details provided, that by his rank L/Sgt. Rogers was the crew commander of a four man crew and the tank was a "Firefly" equipped with a 17pdr. gun. Given that the first round struck the left side of the turret killing Tpr. Shepherd, he was probably the Loader/Wireless Operator, with Tpr. Rae the Gunner and Tpr. McLean the Driver who survived without injury.

The casualty list from this one, four man “Firefly” tank destroyed as recorded in *The Gallant Hussars*, is:

B 63223, Tpr RAE, Graham John George, KIA, 25 July 1944, Bretteville-sur-Laize, France

C 58322, L/Sgt ROGERS, Leonard M., WIA, July 25 1944

A 106469, Tpr SHEPHERD, Eric, KIA, 25 July 1944, Bayeux Memorial, France



LEST WE FORGET



Canadian Medals: NW Europe

1939-45 Star

France and Germany Star

Defence Medal

Canadian Volunteer Service Medal

War medal 1939-45



HODIE NON CRAS

(Today Not Tomorrow)