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Photo by D.E. Grant, NAC PA 111565

A Case of Mistaken Identity

R.J. Lowe at St. Lambert-sur-Dives, August 1944

One of the most famous photos in Canadian military history shows Major David Currie accepting the surrender of a large group of German prisoners in St. Lambert-sur Dives on 19 August 1944 near the end of the Normandy Campaign. For his role in the action, Currie was awarded the Victoria Cross. In referring to this picture, C.P. Stacey wrote in the official history that, "This is as close as we are ever likely to come to a photograph of a man winning the Victoria Cross."¹ Standing next to Currie is a soldier in a white shirt with his back to camera. A recent publication² identified this soldier as Corporal G.L. "Pete" Woolf. Unfortunately, this is in error.

The Lowe family remembers their father, R.J. Lowe, mentioning that it was he who was standing next to Currie in that photograph. He has been described as "a quiet confident man. never bragging about his accomplishments. Instead, he was very careful about which wartime memories he shared." As such, he was not the type of man to make unfounded claims. The Lowe family was content to keep this information to themselves until the soldier in the photo was misidentified. Initial attempts to get the issue resolved proved unsuccessful and the family turned to a forensic expert to analysis the photograph. By comparing photographs of R.J. Lowe and G.L. Woolf with the famous photograph, it was found that it



Three photos of R.J. Lowe - **Left:** An enlargement from the St. Lambert photo; **Centre:** A photo taken in September 1944. The tattoo is visible on his right arm; **Right:** Of all the pictures of Lowe, this one bears the greatest resemblance to him at St. Lambert. It was taken in 1946 when Lowe was wrestling a black bear (visible in foreground). The bear managed to rip his shirt off, but Lowe escaped without a scratch.

certainly was not Woolf in the photo. Woolf stands 5' 8" while Lowe and the figure in the photo both stand 5' 11". As well, features such as the wave in the hair, the hook of the nose and the tattoo just visible on the right arm prove conclusively that it is indeed Lowe in the photo.

Trooper R.J. Lowe enlisted in Regina, Saskatchewan in January 1943 and arrived in the UK in April 1944. He joined "C" Squadron of the South Alberta Regiment on 13 July 1944 and landed with the Regiment in Normandy at the end of the month. During the battle at St. Lambert-sur-Dives, Lowe was knocked out of his tank by enemy fire. His tunic and shirt were burned off and his ankles and calves were burned in the process. In September he was again wounded. The incident was described as follows in Lowe's papers:

We had been using the machine guns a lot and when we did finally get a lull, our machine gun in the turret cooked off [fires a single round on its own from the heat of the barrel]. The ejector pulled out only part of the empty casing. Being automatic the mechanism slammed another round into the chamber that already had a casing in it. This caused the gun to explode, blowing the cover off the gun. His seat was only a foot or

so from the gun and he received most of the blast which was mostly flash and cordite gunpowder. He couldn't see for several minutes. His eyes were red and sore for a few days but seemed to come back to normal but his left eye gradually deteriorated. The eye was never medicated and the incident was never reported as there was not much pain involved after a day or two. Also there was very little opportunity to report a minor injury in a combat unit.

What was classified as a minor injury ended up causing a 90 percent loss of vision in his left eye.

Lowe spent a total of 37 months in uniform including 23 months in the UK, France, Belgium, Holland and Germany.

Following the war, Lowe settled in Alberta, married and had five sons. At various times he worked as a farmer, and a grain buyer and also owned and operated a hotel for five years. Lowe passed away in January 1997.

Notes

1. C.P. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign, Vol.III. Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1960), p.274.
2. Donald E. Graves, *South Albertas: A Canadian Regiment at War* (Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, 1998), pp.148, 183.