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The Uncle I Never Knew

A journey to Dieppe to discover Jimmie Burnett

Hanna Burnett

In the Dieppe Canadian War Cemetery rest the bodies of 761 allied soldiers, the majority of whom fought and died on the beaches of Dieppe on 19 August 1942 during Operation "Jubilee." Among them lies a fair-haired, blue-eyed, 18-year-old private from Toronto, Ontario who had eagerly enlisted for active duty after the outbreak of the Second World War. The headstone of this private, Jimmie Burnett, is marked like many others in Commonwealth cemeteries around the world with a personal inscription – "In Life, Loved and Honored. In Death, Remembered." As a soldier of the Royal Regiment of Canada, Jimmie's story is not exceptional, nor is it more intriguing or romantic than the stories of the hundreds of others who lost their lives during the Dieppe Raid. However, his death serves as the lens through which I have come to examine and interpret the events on Blue Beach at Puits where the Royals fought. Jimmie's story is not merely the tale of a fallen soldier, but rather encompasses the trials and tribulations of an entire family that faced hardship and suffering at the loss of a beloved son and brother. To the annals of history he is but one on a long list of war dead but to my family he was much more.

My journey of remembrance and understanding of my family's past

Abstract: Jimmie Burnett lies in the Dieppe Canadian War Cemetery with hundreds of his comrades who were killed during the failed raid of 19 August 1942. He was an average Canadian boy who lied about his age to join the Canadian Army in 1941. His war was short; he was killed at Puits along with many others from the Royal Regiment of Canada. The epitaph on his headstone reads, "In Life Love and Honored. In Death, Remembered." This article chronicles the journey of Hanna to discover the circumstances of her uncle's life and death and ensure that his memory is both remembered and honoured.

began with the War and Memory history seminar at Wilfrid Laurier University in the summer of 2011. The class examined how the First and Second World Wars have been remembered and memorialized. The highlight of the course was a battlefield study tour of key places of Canadian involvement in both wars, including the beaches of Dieppe. To accompany our discussions of the battles students prepared research topics and a soldier biography. As an homage to my grandfather, I elected to study his uncle, who had fought and died at Dieppe, and his regiment's role in the battle. Looking back, I was excited to begin my research but completely unprepared for how intense, emotional and life-altering the experience would

become. Digging into Jimmie's life meant opening the floodgates to a study of my family, their wartime experiences and ultimately the torturous heartbreak that followed Jimmie's death.

The second son in a family of six children, Jimmie was born on 30 June 1924 to a loving mother, Margaretta, and a troubled father, George Sr. The family, including older brother George ("Mac") and younger sister Reenie emigrated to Canada in 1927 from Cullen, Scotland. After arriving in Canada, the family grew with the addition of Lily, Margie, and Isobel. Margaretta was the primary caregiver who supported and cared for all her children, while George Sr. had a reputation as a womanizer and a drunk. George Sr. was tormented by demons from his four years of service with the Royal Scots Fusiliers in France during the Great War and Mac and Jimmie frequently had to protect their mother and sisters during his drunken rages. Amidst threats of being thrown out, the boys stayed at the house on Aylesworth Avenue in Toronto. They left high school and sought work to support their mother and sisters.¹ What could not be anticipated was that a far greater destructive power than their father was brewing in Europe and it would have dire consequences for the family.



The Burnett family photographed in 1927 about the time of the immigration to Canada: George Sr. and Margaretta are seated with their children (l.-r.) Reenie, Mac and Jimmie.

an attempt to begin to foster a second front and ease the pressure in the East on the Soviet troops.² Jimmie joined the Royals after their deployment to Iceland. Leading up to the Dieppe operation the regiment was involved in the defence of England as well as training for future operations. The culmination of the training programme was Exercises Yukon I and II which tested the regiment in various aspect of conducting an amphibious assault.

During this period, Jimmie and Mac spent their leave by travelling up to their birthplace of Cullen in Northern Scotland and visiting the house of a favourite aunt, Jessie Patterson. Here they were welcomed into the open arms of their aunts and grandmother and on more than one occasion Mac and Jimmie spent time together in Cullen. After the cancellation of the first planned raid on Dieppe, Operation Rutter in July 1942, Jimmie visited Cullen for the last time, at which point he shared his feelings about being a soldier with his grandmother. He said he was terrified and had "a bad feeling" about the engagement he had just narrowly avoided with

When war broke out in September 1939, many Canadians volunteered for service. Among them was the young, courageous and devilishly charming Jimmie who became the first of the Burnett boys to enlist in April 1941. Jimmie, a member of the Army Cadets program before leaving high school, first had to find a way around being only 16. As a veteran, George Sr. saw it as the duty of his sons to fight for their country as he had once done. Jimmie's father recruited the help of their landlord, a police sergeant on the Toronto force, to forge the paperwork of a number of eager young boys from Jimmie's high school. And so at the tender age of 16, Jimmie Burnett enlisted as a private in the Royal Regiment of Canada, although his papers stated that he was 18.

Jimmie was not the only member of the Burnett clan to serve Canada

during the war. Mac, whose new wife Margaret was pregnant with their first child, took up the call with the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps in May 1941 while Margaretta and her eldest daughter Reenie worked at a munitions factory in Ajax. In September 1941, Reenie and Margie travelled to North Bay where Jimmie and the other members of the draft for the Royal Regiment of Canada waited to depart for England. As the girls said their goodbyes they did not know that this would be the last time they would see their brother.

By that September, the decision had been made that an amphibious assault would be launched against a port on the northern coast of France in

The note on the right was written by George Sr., to confirm his son's age for the military. It reads:

"I, George Burnett, Father of James Burnett, certify that James is 18 years + 10 months old and I do not wish to have him taken out of the army. Signed George Burnett"

B 68141
 I, George Burnett Father of James Burnett, certify that James is 18 years + 10 months old and I do not wish to have him taken out of the army
 Signed
 George Burnett

Rutter's cancellation. The relief of having evaded combat with the enemy was a lot for the 18-year-old to handle and for the first time since he had eagerly enlisted over a year earlier, the generally confident and cool Jimmie was frightened. His grandmother, who later relayed the conversation in a letter to his mother, wrote that Jimmie did not want to go back and rejoin his unit. However, his grandmother warned him of the obligations he had to serve his family and his country and insisted that he return. Soon after this conversation, Mac and Jimmie saw each other one last time and Mac attempted to have Jimmie transferred into the Service Corps. This attempt failed and Jimmie was with his unit when leave was cancelled on 12 August 1942.

The raid against Dieppe had been revived almost immediately after the cancellation of Rutter in July and was scheduled for 19 August 1942.³ For the Royal Regiment of Canada, the renewed plan, now known as Jubilee, did not change their mission of attacking on the eastern flank at the small village of Puys, known as Blue Beach. Their orders were as follows:

The Royal Regiment of Canada will land on Blue Beach and secure the headland east of Jubilee (Dieppe) with a minimum of delay. There

they will destroy the local objectives which consist of machine-gun posts, heavy and light flak installations and a 4-gun howitzer battery south and east of the town. The battalion will then come into reserve and detach a company to protect an engineer demolition party operating in the gasworks and power plant.⁴

The situation was, however, not as simple as their orders had made it seem. According to D.J. Goodspeed, the regimental historian, "it would have been difficult to discover, anywhere on the coast of



Margaretta (left) and her two boys – Jimmie (above) and Mac (above right).

Europe, a less favourable area for an assault landing."⁵ The Royals, when they landed just after dawn on 19 August, were unable to secure the headland as they faced failures in their communication, tactically well placed German defences and beaches composed of large stones that would splinter when hit by mortar or artillery shells and cause just as much damage as shrapnel or bullets.⁶ In spite of the terrible coast, the Royals endeavoured to accomplish their

mission as failure to secure and clear the East Headland was critical to the overall success of Jubilee: "if this was not accomplished, the numerous weapons would bring a murderous fire to bear upon the main beaches."⁷ And so they did. Only a handful of men were able to get off the beach and they were too small in number to complete the mission. The Royals were not alone in their failures as the Canadian units who assaulted the other beaches also faced tremendous difficulties and suffered horrible casualties.⁸

The conditions that Jimmie and his regiment met on the beach were characterized by disillusionment and chaos as one mishap followed another. The Germans, although not forewarned, saw the craft carrying the Royals who, landing at approximately 0507 hours – 17 minutes late – had lost the cover of darkness which was essential to their attack plan.⁹ The beach at Puys was not ideal for an assault. It was "short, narrow and overlooked by a tall cliff on which a number of concrete pill boxes had been skillfully sighted."¹⁰ The few soldiers who were able to make it ashore were confronted by large belts of barbed wire which ran along the high sea wall at the inner edge of the beach.¹¹ Only 15 men of the first wave were able to make it even that far because any time a landing craft opened its doors it was

LCMSDS Photo Collection



Top left: This German photo shows the carnage at Puy immediately after the battle.

Middle left: The beach at Puy as it looks today.

Bottom left: The formidable task assigned to the Royal Regiment of Canada is apparent in this photo. The beach at Puy was narrow and dominated by soaring cliffs and a high seawall.

Photo by Mike Bechthold



Photo by Mike Bechthold



met by a stream of bullets from the German defences along the top of the cliff.¹² The second wave of landing craft were even more delayed and also suffered high casualties as the bodies began to pile up on the beaches and in the water.¹³ In less than an hour it was clear that the German defenders at Puy were the victors of the day.

With all of the confusion of the day's events at Dieppe and with so

few of those who embarked returning to England,¹⁴ the news that reached Canada was distorted at best. For months, most of the men who were killed or became prisoners of war were listed as missing until more accurate information of what had actually happened at Dieppe could be pieced together from the accounts of the few survivors, and information about who was held prisoner by the Germans came through the Red

Cross. The Burnetts, sharing the agony of so many families, awaited news of what had befallen Jimmie. After hearing that his regiment had been involved in the raid at Dieppe, Margaretta gave up her job at the munitions factory so that she could be home when news finally came. The official telegram detailing Jimmie's death arrived on 5 December 1942. Soon after, Margaretta told a Toronto newspaper that she "had not given up hope until now that her son was a prisoner," but the family's greatest fears had now come true.¹⁵


Dieppe stands as a particularly troubling loss for Canada and for the Royals during the Second World War. The high cost of the raid does not seem justified in light of the conditions under which the raid took place, both militarily and politically. The historiography on the Dieppe Raid is expansive and the opinions of historians and military figures vary greatly. Those who justify the raid dwell on what was learned and the application of those lessons to subsequent, successful Allied landing culminating at Normandy on 6 June 1944; those who condemn the raid focus on the near complete reliance on surprise and darkness to get the troops ashore, and the near absence of firepower to support the exposed troops when, as might well have been anticipated, minor delays resulted in daylight landings.¹⁶

Among all the regiments at Dieppe, the Royals faced perhaps the most difficult task. The beach at Puy was narrow, the cliffs were high and the loss of surprise combined with

the late landing virtually ensured the destruction of the regiment.¹⁷ However, in the aftermath of the raid Jimmie's family did not place the blame on those military leaders who had planned Operation Jubilee. Rather, they turned inward and to this day feel anger when they are asked about who bear the blame for Jimmie's death. In December 1942, after receiving that dreadful telegram, tensions rose within the family as Margaretta blamed her husband for Jimmie's fate, for he had urged Jimmie to enlist. She called him a "bastard" and scorned him, fearing the same fate awaited her eldest son. Mac's first child, my grandfather Jim, had been born in November, less than a month before news of Jimmie's fate had reached the family. Though we will never know for sure, family lore suggests that it was guilt that prompted George Sr. to enlist a month after learning of Jimmie's death at age 52. He served with the Veterans Guard of Canada until May 1945 in Bowmanville at POW camp 30.

The family received word on 14 June 1943 that Jimmie's body had been interred in the Dieppe cemetery at Hautôt-sur-Mer, and later that month Margaretta also received word that her son's personal belongings had been found and would be returned to her. Not much is known about the circumstances of Jimmie's death, but the fact that his body and personal belongings were found suggests that Jimmie was one of the few soldiers who made it onto the shore during the assault. Although he had shared his reservations and fears with his grandmother and brother in Cullen, there are indications that when it came time, Jimmie had not lost the courage he had demonstrated in support of his mother and sisters before the war.

Margaretta's fears for her eldest son Mac did not come true and he returned to Toronto after being honourably discharged in October

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World Wide Communications

Send the following message, subject to the conditions on the back thereof, which are hereby agreed to.

CASUALTY

OTTAWA DECEMBER 5 1942

MRS MARGARET GRETA BURNETT
106 AYLES WORTH AVENUE
TORONTO ONTARIO

11966 REPEAT DEEPLY B68141 PRIVATE JAMES BURNETT PREVIOUSLY REPORTED MISSING IN ACTION NOW REPORTED BY BERLIN THROUGH INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS GENEVA KILLED IN ACTION NINETEENTH AUGUST 1942 STOP FURTHER INFORMATION FOLLOWS WHEN RECEIVED

Officer i/c Records

PREPAID
(J.L. Coleman), Lt.-Col.,
(Cas.)

1945. Mac saw his young son for the first time and in 1946 he and wife Margaret welcomed their second child, daughter Georgeen. However, Margaretta's fears were eventually realized in another way when in 1954 Mac lost his battle with cancer that had developed shortly after the war. Two beloved sons had passed away before their time.

Nearly 70 years later when I had the opportunity to walk along the beach at Puy and visit the cemetery I was deeply moved by the family memories the ground holds. Since then, and throughout my later research on the Dieppe Raid, I have found it difficult not to allow hindsight and personal biases to dictate my understanding of the raid. However, in those moments I am reminded of my family and how in the aftermath of the death of their own son their patriotism and sense of duty in wartime would not allow them to blame his death on the higher powers. There is no question that the Second World War required difficult decisions. Much as I try to understand the broader context of the raid, the conflicted history coupled with family memories make that almost impossible. When I stood on the rocks and pebbles that

litter the beach at Puy and stared up at the German pillboxes that still sit along the high rocky cliffs I was immediately drawn back to the regimental historian's gloomy assertion that "it would have been difficult to discover, anywhere on the coast of Europe, a less favourable area for an assault landing." On that beach that day, I discovered my connection to the story of a young soldier who died. That is the lens through which my family and I remember Jimmie. More than a statistic, a pawn or a soldier, Jimmie was a beloved son, brother and uncle – even to those who never knew him.

Notes

Photos supplied by author unless otherwise noted.

1. Personal details about the family have been provided through interviews with Jim Burnett, Margie Spence, birth certificates, postcards, letters and documents, as well as Jimmie and George Sr.'s military records, retrieved through Library and Archives Canada.
2. J.L. Granatstein, *Canada's Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), p.206; D.J. Goodspeed, *Battle Royal: A History of the Royal Regiment of Canada, 1862-1962* (Toronto: The Royal Regiment of Canada Association, 1962), p.385.

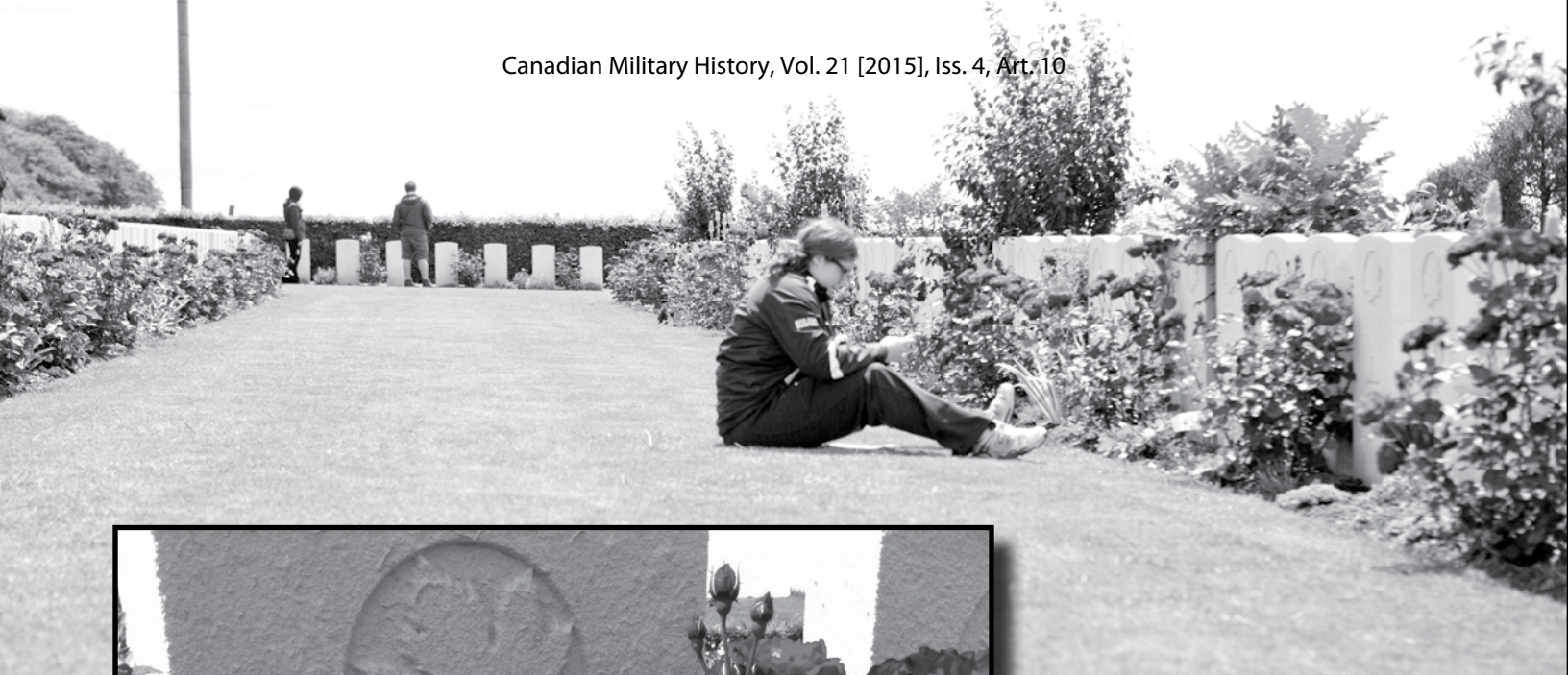


Photo by Matt Symes

Above: Hanna Burnett reflects on the life of her uncle at his grave in the Dieppe Canadian War Cemetery.

Left: Jimmie's headstone.



Hanna Burnett is currently working towards her MA in English and Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University where she also received her BA in History and Film Studies last year. She is interested in the study of history and memory in Hollywood and independent film, while Dieppe remains of continuing interest. At Laurier, Hanna is a member of the varsity women's lacrosse team and is a two time nominee for the Outstanding Women of Laurier Award. This piece is dedicated to her grandfather, Jim Burnett, without whom this project would not have had the emotional and personal impact that it did.

3. Ibid., 389.
4. John Mellor, *Forgotten Heroes The Canadians at Dieppe* (Toronto: Methuen, 1975), p.50; C.P. Stacey, *Six Years of War*. vol. 1: *The Army in Canada, Britain and the Pacific, Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War* (Ottawa: The Queen's Printer, 1955), p.363.
5. Goodspeed, *Battle Royal*, p.394.
6. Terrence Robertson, *Dieppe: The Shame and Glory* (Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), p.243.
7. Goodspeed, *Battle Royal*, p.391.
8. See Granatstein, *Canada's Army*, pp.207-210.
9. Dennis Whitaker and Shelagh Whitaker, *Dieppe: Tragedy to Triumph* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1992), p.294.
10. Goodspeed, *Battle Royal*, p.394.
11. N.M. Christie, *Suicide Raid: The Canadians at Dieppe August 19, 1942* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 2000), p.10.
12. Goodspeed, *Battle Royal*, p.395; Whitaker, *Dieppe*, p.241.
13. Whitaker, *Dieppe*, p.294; Goodspeed, *Battle Royal*, p.396.
14. Of the 4,963 troops that embarked for England only 2,210 returned. Many were taken as POWs while many more were fatal casualties, Stacey, *Six Years of War*, p.387.
15. "Waiting to send Yule gifts learn Dieppe sons killed," *Toronto Daily Star*, 7 December 1942, p.23.
16. For a positive view of Dieppe and its outcome see Whitaker, *Dieppe*; for a more negative view see Brereton Greenhous, *Dieppe, Dieppe* (Montreal: Art Global, 1992).
17. Stacey, *Six Years of War*, pp.363-368.