



Roger Joseph Casavant was born on March 26, 1923, on a farm in Legal, a small town in the Canadian province of Alberta, about 40 km north of Edmonton. His parents were Emile Casavant (1878–1951) and Malvina Guertin (1888–1957). Roger grew up in a French-speaking, Roman Catholic family.

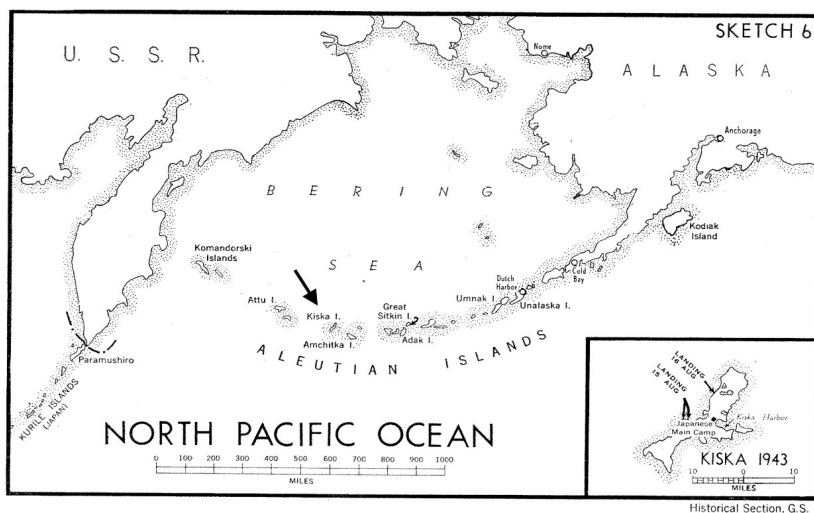
Legal, named after Bishop Émile-Joseph Legal, was founded in 1894 in an area that had recently been opened up for *homesteading*. Thanks to the efforts of the Catholic priest Jean-Baptiste Morin, many French-speaking Catholics from Quebec settled in Legal.

Roger's grandparents, Odilon and Céline Casavant, had settled in Legal in 1900. Over time, their five sons all started farms near Odilon and Céline's homestead, causing the area to become known locally as *Casavant Corner*. Their eldest son was Emile Casavant, Roger's father. In 1904, Emile married Eva Desrosier from Quebec, with whom he had six children. Eva died in 1918; a year later, Emile remarried Malvina Guertin, who was also from Quebec. Of the five children they had together, three lived past the age of two: Laurette, Roger, and Marcel.

Roger attended the public school in Legal and completed eighth grade in 1938, when he was 15 years old. He then began working on his father's farm. In 1940, the Casavant family moved to a farm in Shoal Creek, 50 km northwest of Legal. Roger continued to work with his father.

In 1943, Roger was drafted into military service under the *National Resources Mobilization Act (NRMA)*. He underwent a medical examination and enlisted on February 12 in Edmonton, Alberta. He then completed basic training in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, and infantry training in Calgary, Alberta.

On June 25, 1943, Roger was assigned to the *Rocky Mountain Rangers* in Nanaimo, British Columbia. On July 12, his unit departed for Alaska as part of a U.S.-Canadian force. In doing so, the Canadian government made use of the possibility of deploying conscripted NRMA soldiers outside Canada — an option that existed since 1942 but was a highly sensitive issue among the French-speaking population.



Source: C.P. Stacey
(1955), *Six years of war:
The Army in Canada,
Britain and the Pacific.*

In June 1942, Japan had occupied the western Aleutian Islands of Attu and Kiska. In June 1943, Attu was recaptured by the United States, but the operation cost the lives of 1,000 American soldiers. For the recapture of Kiska, a large force was deployed with Canada's assistance: 35,000 soldiers, including 5,300 Canadians. They were shipped to the island of Adak to train under the arctic conditions of the Aleutian Islands. On August 13, the invasion force set out for Kiska, landing there on August 15 and 16, only to discover that the Japanese occupiers had disappeared. The American soldiers quickly left Kiska, the Canadians remained there for another five months. Roger was among the last soldiers to return to Canada. He arrived in British Columbia on January 25, 1944.

On June 12, 1944, Roger volunteered for active duty in the Canadian Army in Prince George, British Columbia. A month later, he was transferred to Camp Debert, Nova Scotia, to prepare for his departure to Europe. On August 4, he departed from Halifax to England, where he arrived a week later. He stayed there only briefly and was transported to France on August 29. A few days later, he joined his new unit, the *Calgary Highlanders*, part of the 5th Infantry Brigade of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division.

In early September, the *Highlanders* rested for a few days in Dieppe. They had suffered heavy losses in Normandy and were short more than 300 men. On September 4, they were reinforced with 140 men, and more reinforcements arrived in the days that followed.

On September 5, the *Highlanders*, together with the two other regiments of the 5th Infantry Brigade, departed from Dieppe for Dunkirk. The Germans attempted to keep the port city out of Allied hands. The *Highlanders* fought for two weeks in the waterlogged polders along the access roads to the city, under constant heavy artillery fire. However, the deployment of a single brigade was not enough to capture the city. The fighting cost the *Highlanders* 126 men, who were either killed or wounded.

The British 4th Special Service Brigade relieved the Canadians. Their task was to prevent the Germans from escaping from Dunkirk. On September 18, the Highlanders left for Antwerp, where they were given a few days of rest.

On September 4, 1944, the British had captured the city of Antwerp. Access to its port was crucial for shortening the supply lines of the Allied forces. The port was intact but could not be used because the Germans controlled the banks of the Westerschelde. Due to disagreements between Allied military commanders Eisenhower and Montgomery, it took two weeks before the use of the port was declared a top priority — two weeks that the Germans used to strengthen their defenses.

Prior to the Battle of the Scheldt, the 5th Infantry Brigade was deployed to capture territory northeast of Antwerp. On the night of September 21–22, the Highlanders managed to cross the Albert Canal via the damaged gates of a lock and to establish a bridgehead on the opposite bank. Two days later, they began crossing the canal from Antwerp to Turnhout, a crossing that involved three days of fighting. During the crossing of these canals, the Highlanders suffered heavy losses: 24 killed and 86 wounded.

On October 2, the Battle of the Scheldt began. The 2nd Infantry Division advanced from Antwerp and from the territory captured by the 5th Infantry Brigade. Their objective was to cut off access to the Zuid-Beveland peninsula and then advance to Walcheren, the German stronghold north of the Westerschelde.

Initially, the advance proceeded relatively smoothly, but near Woensdrecht, the 2nd Infantry Division encountered heavy resistance. Fierce fighting took place there from October 6 to 17. In Hoogerheide, the Highlanders could barely hold their ground against a German counterattack. On October 17, a stalemate developed, and both armies halted their offensives. After the 2nd Infantry Division had received cover on its right flank, it launched an offensive on October 23 to eliminate the last resistance around Woensdrecht, allowing the advance toward Walcheren to begin.

However, Roger Casavant was not present: his *service record* lists him as Absent Without Leave (AWL) as of October 23 at 7:00 a.m. It seems quite possible that — after a month and a half of intense fighting, with only brief respites, and large numbers of wounded and dead around him — he was mentally unable to take part in the renewed fighting.

On November 24, Roger returned to the Highlanders. It is unclear what happened in the meantime and how he rejoined the Highlanders. He was placed in custody until November 30 and was then sentenced to a 67-day deduction from his pay.

From November 1944 through February, the 2nd Infantry Division spent the winter near Nijmegen. On February 8, 1945, the Rhineland Offensive began — the Allied operation to capture the western bank of the Rhine north of the Ruhr

from the Germans. In the initial phase, the 2nd Infantry Division's role was limited: the 5th Infantry Brigade was tasked with capturing the town of Wyler on the road from Nijmegen to Kleve. It faced a strong defensive force that was well entrenched and had to approach Wyler partly through minefields. It took eight hours of fighting to achieve the objective. The Highlanders remained in Wyler for two days and were then withdrawn to Nijmegen.

On February 17, the 2nd Infantry Division was deployed to the front again. It took part in the fighting in the Hochwald forest, northwest of Xanten. In his history of the Calgary Highlanders, Bercuson writes about the Hochwald:

The thick woods made [...] fighting almost impossible. Because every trail or road held a potential ambush, the men had to move through the trees and the bush. Patches of snow, mud, and the wet leaves and pine needles on the forest floor made footing difficult. Bursts of machine gun and small arms fire ricocheted through the trees adding to the danger. Shells and rockets exploding in the treetops sent shrapnel and jagged piece of wood flying down on the men underneath. The cold and rain added to the misery of the men.

The Rhineland Offensive ended on March 11 after Xanten was captured and the last German troops had surrendered. All Canadian regiments had suffered heavy losses. Among the Highlanders, 41 soldiers were killed and 164 were wounded. The Highlanders withdrew to Berg en Dal near Nijmegen, and on March 29, they crossed the Rhine at Rees after a bridge had been built there. This was followed by a rapid advance into the northern Netherlands.

On April 13, the Highlanders were near Assen; they spent the night at Peelo, just north of the city. The next day, they advanced to Hoogkerk, west of Groningen, and found the village undefended. Late in the afternoon, they marched on to Groningen. The area west of the Reitdiep was cleared, and a bridgehead was established across the Reitdiep. At 1:00 a.m. on Sunday, April 15, the Highlanders had two companies on the other side of the water. They spent the rest of the day clearing the Schilderswijk neighborhood. Their *War Diary* states:

The objectives [...] were a series of blocks consisting of apartment houses each with three stories and each apartment having about four rooms containing several civilians and many snipers. However, the Companies smashed through one after another and by 1630 hrs all Companies were on their objectives and the Prisoner of War bag was something like 160. Casualties were surprisingly light for this type of house to house, room to room battles.

Just before dark, the entire neighborhood was under control. In total, they had taken 400 prisoners of war. On April 14, the Highlanders had no casualties; on April 15, several soldiers were wounded and one was killed in action.

Monday, April 16, was the last day of fighting in Groningen, particularly in the city center and the eastern part of the city. The Highlanders were not involved in the battle; they had already played their part in the liberation of Groningen.

They were allowed to rest and — as far as their duties permitted — take part in the celebrations in the city.

On April 19, the Highlanders left Groningen and headed for Germany. Roger Casavant, however, was not among them. On April 18, 1945, Roger was *absent without leave* starting from 5 p.m., as noted in his service file. His body was found on April 23 in the Hoendiep canal, on the outskirts of the city. The daily report of the Groningen municipal police states:

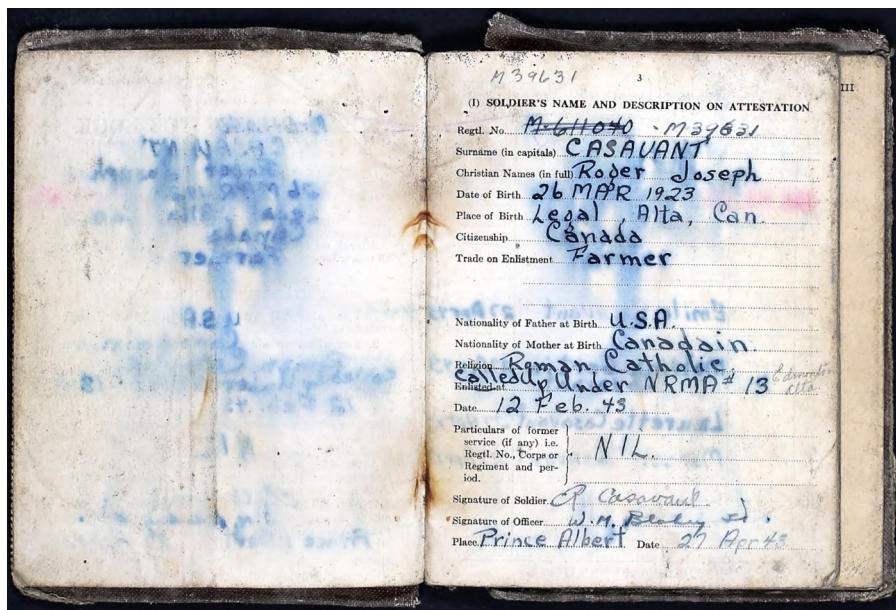
5:00 p.m.

It is hereby reported that the body of a Canadian soldier has been found in the Hoendiep. Second Lt. Oostland has notified Capt. Strijkel of this, who will alert the appropriate military authorities so that the body can be recovered and buried.

7:30 p.m.

The body of the Canadian soldier named: Casavant, Roden Joseph, born on March 26, 1923, in Legal, Alta, Canada, occupation: farmer, was transported to the Academic Hospital by Wilkens K. on a bicycle stretcher.

Roger was identified using the *Soldier's Service Book* he was carrying. It is not known what happened to him between April 18 and April 23. It was officially determined that he was *Killed in Action* on April 18.



Roger was buried on April 24 at a temporary military cemetery in Eelderwolde, a few kilometers southwest of Groningen. In 1946, he was reinterred at the Canadian War Cemetery in Holten, where he now rests in grave 03.H.08. His headstone bears the inscription

ALWAYS IN OUR THOUGHTS,
FOREVER IN OUR HEARTS.
FATHER AND MOTHER,
LAURETTE AND MARCEL

After his death, Roger Joseph Casavant was awarded the following Canadian military decorations: the *1939–1945 Star*, the *France and Germany Star*, the *War Medal 1939–1945*, and the *Canadian Volunteer Service Medal with Clasp*.



Sources

This biography draws, among other sources, on the websites of Library and Archives Canada, Veterans Affairs Canada, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, and the genealogy websites Ancestry, MyHeritage, and Find a Grave. The following books are also worth mentioning:

- Bercuson, D.J. (1994) *Battalion of Heroes: The Calgary Highlanders in World War II*.
- Histoire de Legal History Association (1995) *History of Legal and District*.
- Stacey, C.P. (1955) *Six Years of War: The Army in Canada, Britain and the Pacific*.
- Stacey, C.P. (1960) *The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945*.
- Wind, S. de (2021) *Endkampf om Groningen april 1945*. Thanks to Sipke de Wind for providing the police report dated April 23, 1945.

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