

*During the war years, thousands of families were devastated by the deaths of their loved ones. This is an account of one of those families as told by Dora McArthur, sister of Murray Chamberlain, who died tragically in 1946.*



My brother, Murray Chamberlain, was born on August 8, 1925 in Chatham, because my mother went home to be cared for by her parents when he was expected. She said when he was born he looked like a little angel, he was so pink. He was never red and ugly like the rest of us. Murray had two brothers, Clayton and Carl, and two sisters, Jean and me, Dora. Our parents were Roy and Lena Chamberlain.

Murray went to school at S.S. No. 17 Southwold in Lawrence Station. When he got to high-school age he went on a train to Glencoe. While he was there he was very active on their soccer team. He was well-liked by everyone, he was so good-natured. He was the jolly one of our family. When we would get home from school, he would entertain us with all the antics that had gone on that day.

When the train to Glencoe was discontinued, those who were attending high school in Glencoe had to transfer to Arthur Voaden Vocational School in St. Thomas, and Murray made a lot more friends there. Because we had to get ourselves to school for the first while and then later travelled by bus, none of us could stay for after-school activities. There again, he would entertain us by relating all the funny things that had taken place.

Murray was the adventurous one in our family and was wonderful at sports. He pitched to our local ball team, as well as for a St. Thomas team, and he really did well. We went at night when they were playing ball to see him pitch.

As soon as Murray turned eighteen he was conscripted, even though he still had another year of school. That summer he had applied to work at the Highway Department, and as soon as the government saw his name, they conscripted him. When I found out that Murray had to join the service, I felt it was just something he had to do. There was no choice, you just accepted it.

Stewart Brown and Murray went to Arthur Voaden Vocational School together, and Stewie told me recently why Murray decided to join the army. The boys had gotten their call, and Stewie told Murray that he was going to join the navy because he knew all the girls liked the navy uniform. Murray told Stewie that he was going to keep his feet on the ground, because if you ever fell in the ocean there would be an awful lot of water to drink.

There was a party held for Murray in the neighbourhood and he was given a watch as a parting gift, then he left to take his basic training in Chatham. I was living there, so I saw a lot of him when he was in training. My grandparents were in Chatham as well, and I boarded with them for three and a half years.

At that time I was working in a bank. When the units marched uptown along King Street, we would all flock to the bank window to watch them go by. The boys didn't dare turn their head to acknowledge us, though.

During their basic training, the boys were entertained out at the camp. We girls would be invited there for dances, and we had wonderful times dancing with the soldiers. One of the churches arranged this and invited perhaps one unit at a time, and they had a list of girls they would call. We would go and have lunch and dance. It would be over at an early time in the evening and that's all there was to it. The relationships never went beyond that.

After Chatham, Murray went to Ipperwash and to get there he had to hitchhike. I think that was all the basic training he had. Then on December 13, 1944 my dad and mother, my sister, and Murray's girlfriend drove him to St. Thomas to the railroad station. The two girls continued with him on the London and Port Stanley Railroad to London and remained with him there for a while.

When Murray went off to war it was sad, but we all believed he would come back. I did not see any reluctance on his part about going to war. To him it was probably like going on an adventure. Now, that's what I felt, but the rest of the family may have seen it differently. I wasn't with him when he actually left. I had been home a couple of days before, but I had to go back to work.

From London, Murray went to Debert, Nova Scotia, and stayed awhile, until he was sent overseas in January 1945. He was in the Essex Scottish Regiment first and then transferred to the Highland Light Infantry sometime between June 27, 1945 and July 11, 1945. Murray was so good about writing letters that when he got overseas, he would send telegrams home saying, "I am safe and well. Please do not worry and please write." His letters home were censored, though, so he couldn't describe very much.

I do know that Murray went to Germany and I believe he was in the battle of Hochwald Forest. During basic training it was stressed that they wear

their steel helmets low over their eyes. That training proved itself. A bullet struck his helmet over his eye, left a dent, and flew over his shoulder.

My brother came through the war unscathed, and then he and the boys had to wait in the camps for the day when they could come home. While there, they played different sports and formed a basketball team, and apparently Murray was the captain of his team. One day they were in the back of one of the army trucks going to another camp, so they could play basketball there. The truck was sideswiped by an armored vehicle and rolled over.

On February 13, 1946 a taxi drove into our yard. I was home with my mother. My two brothers, Clayton and Carl, were in the barn doing chores and happened to look out when the taxi drove in. The taxi driver got out of the car and started toward the barn. Clayton went to meet him. Well, Carl could see that something was going on, so he followed. Clayton opened the telegram the driver handed him and read it, and he said it was just like someone hitting you over the head with a stick. It said:

"Deeply regret to inform you A110942 Lance Corporal Murray Leroy Chamberlain has been officially reported to have died ninth of February 1946 as a result of a road accident. When further information comes available it will be forwarded as soon as received."

Clayton asked the taxi driver, "Are you sure this is right?" The taxi driver said yes. We often thought later that the telegram should have been taken to our minister so that he could have come and given us the news.

Murray was twenty years old when he died. This was the third death in our family in five months. My grandmother, who lived with us, died on September 19, 1944. My father died of a sudden heart attack on September 30<sup>th</sup>, eleven days after his mother's death. When my father died, we received a telegram from Murray saying, "Sorry to hear of Dad's death. Am trying to get home. Letter following." But it was impossible because so many men were coming home then.

My brothers came into the house and told my mother and me about Murray. Mother took it very badly; the rest of us seemed to be in a state of disbelief. I phoned the doctor and he soon came. He spoke most sympathetically to Mother and I'm sure he gave her a sedative. I phoned her sisters in Chatham, and they came as soon as they possible could.

My sister Jean was in high school at the time, and she was having lunch in the Collegiate lunchroom when someone noticed there was a man coming down the steps. She looked up and saw it was our neighbour, Campbell Carroll. She said she went to the door, and she knew that something was wrong because there were tears in his eyes. He brought her home, and although he had somebody else with him, she doesn't remember who. She sat in the back seat and never said a word all the way home.

My father had always kept a diary, and when he died, Mother kept it up. On that very day all she wrote in the diary was: "We received the bad and sad news that Murray was killed." That's all she said. Later on in the diary, she wrote: "It was two weeks ago today that Murray was killed." And then: "It was one month ago that Murray was killed." She bore us really well during that day, but my sister and I were saying recently that we often heard her crying in the middle of the night. I won't say that Murray was her favourite, but he was certainly different from the rest of us.

After the news got around in the neighbourhood, we were never alone. Neighbours came any time of day or evening to be with us. I received a letter from a gentleman who had been captain of the soccer team that Murray played with in Glencoe. He sent his deepest regrets and said that they had lowered the flag at Glencoe High School to half-staff.

We carried on our daily life, what else could we do? But when we got a letter from Murray two days after the telegram arrived, I remember Clayton saying, "This can't be right because we just got a letter from him."

Other letters confirmed Murray's death, though. We received official notification from the Department of National Defence and letters of sympathy from C.L. Laurin, Colonel, Director of Records for Adjutant-General; Willox Duncan, H/Major, District Chaplain (P), Military District No. 1 and E.G. Weeks, Major-General, Adjutant-General. We even got a letter from King George:

"The Queen and I offer you our heartfelt sympathy in your great sorrow. We pray that your country's gratitude for a life so nobly given in its service may bring you some measure of consolation."

Murray was initially buried in Germany because that was where he was killed. Recently, my sister came across a letter in one of my mother's albums describing his funeral.

"Dear Mrs. Chamberlain:

This afternoon it was my sad duty to commit your son, Lance Corporal Murray Chamberlain, to rest in the Canadian Military Cemetery at Osterscheps, Germany. His passing was a blow to all of us. He was a fine chap, well-liked and respected among his comrades.

We received the casket at the chapel of Sixteen Canadian General Hospital at Oldenburg and proceeded in convoy to Osterscheps. The pallbearers carried the casket into the cemetery and deposited it at the grave.

After the burial service was read, Last Post was sounded by the bugler. After the silence the note of Reveille rang out. The pipe major then played the

Lament, the company commanders saluted the grave, and mourners left the cemetery.

When we had completed filling the grave, the cross was placed at its head. I am sorry that I did not know Murray better. One of our chaplains, Padre Stewart, who was a passenger in the other vehicle involved in the accident, was with him when he passed away.

We do indeed commend him into the hands of a great God. We cannot understand but trust that you may find comfort in this time of sorrow.

With sincere sympathy, yours faithfully,  
R.R. Gordon, Chaplain and H/Capt."

After the boys began coming home from the war, we found out a little more about Murray's death from those who were with him when he died. One of his pallbearers, Murray Nichols, came to see us and told us everything he could remember. It was comforting to know someone who had been with my brother at the time.

At one point we heard that there would be a Court of Inquiry. A letter explaining the accident arrived sometime later.

"Dear Mrs. Chamberlain,

May I, on behalf of the officers and men of Highland Light Infantry Regiment, extend to you our sincere and deepest sympathy on your recent bereavement.

Lance Corporal Chamberlain was killed at approximately 1200 hours, ninth of February 1946 in an auto accident in which a vehicle he was riding in collided with an armoured car. Within three minutes of the accident your son was on his way to Sixteen Canadian General Hospital, approximately six miles away in Oldenburg. On admittance to hospital, the medical officer declared that he had died almost instantly from a broken neck. There was not a mark or bruise on his body. He was buried with full military honours in the temporary Canadian cemetery at Osterscheps near Oldenburg, with Captain R.R. Gordon, the unit padre officiating.

Lance Corporal Chamberlain was the captain and coach of the regiment basketball team, and they were on their way to play a game when the accident occurred. The vehicle he was in pulled out onto the road to pass another vehicle but collided with the armoured car before getting back in the traffic lane. No blame has been laid on anyone for the cause of the accident.

Your son was an extremely popular man in the regiment. He was a very good soldier and his officers thought highly of him, and he was to be made

Sports Sergeant in a matter of a few days. You have lost a good son and we have lost a grand comrade. Yours is much the greater loss.

Sincerely, G.P. Buchanan, Commanding Officer of the Third Highland Light Infantry”

Later, Murray was exhumed and reburied in the Holten Canadian Military Cemetery in Holten, Holland, a military burial ground that receives care and maintenance in perpetuity. At first, the grave was marked with a temporary cross, but this was replaced by a permanent headstone. We were asked to submit a short personal inscription for engraving on the headstone. The inscription we chose was “Those we truly love never die”.

Murray’s personal effects were sent to us, and they amounted to one parcel and one box. In the box was the watch that the community had given him when he left, a pen and pencil set my mother and dad had given him, and little knick-knacks that he had picked up along the way, among which were four wooden elephants and a porcelain bird, a canary.

Jean has the canary. The elephants sat on one of our desks at home for a long time. I’m not sure whether my brother has them or Jean does now. We divided up a lot of his belongings: his chauffeur’s license, forty-one snapshots, his regimental badge, and other little things that really were not valuable to anyone except us. My youngest brother has them all in a small box. Mother collected his estate which amounted to \$273,50.

On April 28, 1946 there was a memorial service held for Murray at our church in Lawrence Station, and so many people came to it. He subsequently had two nephews named for him, Murray Palmer and David Murray Chamberlain, and when my daughter was born I made up the name Marilee Roy for her. People think it’s very strange when she signs her name. I see a lot of Marilee’s in the paper now, but I made it up in memory of my brother.

In 1964 Jean and her husband Ralph went to Holland to visit my brother’s grave, and Carl and his wife Kay went sometime after that. My husband Malcolm and I went there in 1970. The trip was sponsored by the War Graves Committee in Holland and the Canadian Legion. They sponsored family trips for several years and all we had to do was pay for our flight.

The Dutch family that hosted Jean and Ralph came to visit them in 1969, and at that time invited Malcolm and I to stay with them when we did our pilgrimage in ’70. They lived in the country, five kilometres from Holten. He was a teacher and their residence was in the school; she drove into Holten every morning to work. They took us on trips to Amsterdam and furnished us our meals and saw that we got on the coach that would take other Canadian families and ourselves on site-seeing tours. We were there for ten days, and they had a big party for us at the end of the trip.

There was one special day set aside for when we and the other Canadian families were to be taken out to the cemetery for a memorial service. We drove up in the coach, and the minute it stopped I just sobbed and sobbed. We had taken flowers, and we went immediately to the site and placed the flowers and had our pictures taken. During the service, children from the village put flowers on the graves.

Each of the graves had been adopted by a local citizen who placed flowers and tended the grave. Jean said that the person who had been looking after Murray's grave had died before we arrived, and during our visit I never met the one who looked after it then. It was the most beautiful, peaceful place, surrounded by trees.

When it came time to leave, we were sitting on the coaches and citizens of the town came out and waved flags, and everybody was crying inside and outside the coach. On the plane to come home, I thought "Oh dear, I'm going home and leaving him." It felt far away.

Each November, when Ottawa has their memorial service, they run films of the memorial services that we attended. Jean and Ralph were in the first one, which showed them at the service. In the second film, we saw the people who had looked after us, our tour guide, and others that we had met. It was so nice to see them again.

When the war memorial was put up in Shedden, I was asked to be on the committee to research all the names, and I found that to be a tremendous pleasure and so gratifying. When the plaque had been put in place for the first memorial ceremony, on November 12, 2000, I was really pleased to be asked to lay the wreath on behalf of the Silver Cross mothers.

Now, just being able to go out and sit on the bench in front of the plaque is very comforting, it seems to bring the boys closer to home. Having researched all the names on the plaque, I know something about them that I never knew before. During the two world wars, there were five hundred and forty-six men from Southwold Township that were in the service.

Murray died fifty-six years ago. Fifty-six years! The memories – and the good times – just remain forever.



Back left: Dora, Clayton, Lena (mother), Roy (father), Murray.  
Front: Jean, Carl. Circa 1943.