



Roy Walter Coffin was born on May 11, 1922, in the Last Mountain Valley in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan. The administrative center of the district was the town of Nokomis, but the farm where he was born was located on the prairie about 20 km west of it. His grandparents had settled in the area with their four sons in 1906, shortly after it was opened up for homesteading. His parents were Chester Daniel Coffin (1897-1987) and Mildred Jane Otto (1890-1930). Roy had an older half-sister, Maxine, two brothers, Arthur and Bernard, and a younger sister, Avis.

When Roy was eight years old, his mother died in an accident on the farm. She lit a match to see if there was gasoline in a barrel. The gasoline fumes ignited, her clothes caught fire, and Mildred suffered severe burns, from which she died three days later in the hospital.

Roy left Nokomis *Public School* during eighth grade, when he was thirteen years old — "for no particular reason." He then earned his living working on farms, in forestry, and in various other jobs. In the 1930s, during the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, most of his family moved away from Saskatchewan, mainly to British Columbia. Roy also left and ended up in Ontario.

In 1942, Roy voluntarily enlisted in the Canadian Army in Toronto. A major motivation was that he wanted to join his brother Arthur, who was serving in Europe with the Royal Canadian Artillery.

On November 6, Roy underwent a physical examination, followed by an interview the next day. He looked rather unkempt and his physical condition left something to be desired due to being underweight. The interviewer noted that he was withdrawn and did not look you straight in the eye. This slight reserve didn't prevent Roy from being accepted, but he would have to see a psychiatrist a month later. On November 9, the paperwork was completed and he was officially enlisted in the army.

In Canada, Roy received eight weeks of basic training in Camrose, Alberta, and six weeks of artillery training at Camp Shilo, Manitoba. He proved to be a good marksman and was proud of it. After about a month, his medical category was upgraded to A1: fit for all duties. Around that time, he was also visited by a psychiatrist, who found that he showed no signs of "unusual nervous problems." Nothing stood in the way of his deployment overseas.

On March 29, 1943 he was transferred to southern England and assigned to 2 CARU (Canadian Artillery Reinforcement Unit) where he remained for almost a year and a half before being deployed to mainland Europe.

In the period following D-Day on June 6, 1944, the Canadian Army's infantry suffered unexpectedly heavy losses, both in absolute numbers and relative to other units, such as the artillery. This led to an acute shortage of infantry reinforcements in England. Soldiers from other branches of the army were transferred to the infantry. This also happened to Roy. He received three weeks of retraining and was then transferred via France to Antwerp in September. His regiment became *The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders of Canada*, part of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division.

The city of Antwerp and its port had been captured in early September 1944. However, the port could not be used for the —critically needed— supply of the Allied troops because the Germans controlled the banks of the Western Scheldt. In early October, the Battle of the Scheldt began. The 2nd Infantry Division was deployed to capture the German defenses on Zuid-Beveland and Walcheren.

On October 3, just one day after leaving Antwerp, Roy was wounded. He was shot in his left upper arm. The wound was treated in a field hospital near the front; after a week, he rejoined the Camerons. After heavy fighting with heavy losses, his division reached Goes on October 30. The army unit was then granted a rest. In a four-hour night drive, they moved to Willebroek between Antwerp and Brussels, a journey across a piece of land that had been fought over for a month. The Battle of the Scheldt ended on November 8.

In the months of November–January, the 2nd Infantry Division was deployed near Nijmegen. After Operation *Market Garden*, a static front had developed there with a bulge in German territory, the *Nijmegen salient*. The 2nd Infantry Division was stationed on the river Maas near Mook and was responsible for the front from Groesbeek to Gennepe.

The German lines at the Reichswald were not far away. There were exchanges of fire and night patrols on both sides to inflict damage on the enemy. On the night of December 19-20, the South Saskatchewan Regiment carried out one such "fighting patrol." The next day, a German counterattack on the Camerons resulted in sixteen casualties: one fatality and fifteen wounded. Among the wounded was Roy Coffin; a piece of shrapnel pierced his left ankle. He was transported to a hospital in Turnhout that same day and five days later to a hospital in Bruges.

Although his injuries were described as "minor" in his medical records, Roy spent a month in the hospital. It then took another eleven days before he was transferred to Mook to join the Camerons. He arrived there a few days before the fighting in the Reichswald began.

On February 8, the Allied Forces launched a major offensive to capture the western bank of the Rhine north of the Ruhr from the Germans. In this offensive the 2nd Infantry Division was initially assigned a supporting role. On February 17, however, the Camerons were deployed to the front south of Kleve. They fought heavy battles at Kalkar and in the Hochwald Forest near Xanten. On March 12, the Camerons were withdrawn to Kleve, where they were given a rest period.

On March 23, 1945, the attack to cross the Rhine between Wesel and Rees began. After forming a bridgehead, the 2nd Infantry Division crossed the river on March 28, led by the Camerons. Emmerich and the ridge to the northwest, Hoch Elten, were captured after heavy fighting. The way was clear to build a bridge over the Rhine at Emmerich.

The 2nd Infantry Division entered the Netherlands at Netterden on April 1. After that, the advance proceeded very quickly: Doetinchem, Zutphen, Holten, and Assen were liberated. In the afternoon of April 13, the division reached the southwestern edge of the city of Groningen via Paterswolde, where the Battle of Groningen began that afternoon. The Camerons followed a more easterly route and arrived via Haren in Helpman on the south side of Groningen, where they set up camp on April 15. By then, the city of Groningen was as good as liberated; around noon on April 16, the German commander surrendered. The Camerons were ordered to "clean up" parts of the city. Roy's B Company encountered fierce resistance from Germans who had retreated to the outskirts of the city behind the Oostersluis lock.



*Monday, April 16, 1945. Soldiers of the Camerons on their way from Helpman to the Oosterparkwijk.*

*Source: M.H. Huizinga, Maple leaf up (1980), p. 163. Photo: D. Guravich, Library and Archives Canada.*

The Germans had raised the bridges at the lock to prevent the Canadians from passing through to Delfzijl. Civilians Popke Dijkema, his brother Jakob Jan, and the latter's son Jan offered their assistance. Popke, a maintenance mechanic, knew how to operate the bridges. Crawling over the closed lock gate, they reached the engine room on the other side of the lock. By turning the gears with their bare hands, they managed to lower the southern bridge. The

Dijkemas then attempted to open the bridge gates under enemy fire. Probably to distract the Germans, Roy emerged from behind one of the Canadian tanks. He was fatally wounded almost immediately. Pop Dijkema was also hit, but he survived. As it turned out, opening the gates was unnecessary: the tank that drove onto the bridge rammed right through them.

It was around 5:30 p.m. on April 16, 1945, when Roy Coffin was killed. He was the last Canadian soldier to die in combat in the municipality of Groningen. The same day he was buried at the temporary military cemetery in Eelderwolde, on the southwest side of the city. On February 14, 1946, he was reburied at the Canadian Cemetery in Holten, where he now rests in grave III.H.2.

Roy's personal belongings were sent to the *Estates Branch* of the Canadian military headquarters in Ottawa and then to his father Chester. There wasn't much: a cushion cover, a cigarette lighter, two leather wallets, sixteen souvenir coins, and two snapshots. Chester was disappointed that the watch he had given Roy as a gift just before he left for England was missing. The Estates Branch made no mention of the letters from an English girlfriend that Roy had with him — they had been destroyed.

In 1949, Roy was posthumously awarded five decorations: the 1935-1945 Star, the France and Germany Star, the Defence Medal, the War Medal, and the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal with Clasp.

On the initiative of several members of the ONS working group from the Groningen Oosterpark neighborhood, a monument called *Twee Bruggen (Two Bridges)*, was erected on April 16, 2016, in memory of Roy Coffin and the Dijkemas. It stands near the old Oostersluis lock, approximately where Roy was shot. A commemoration is now held there every year. In 2019, the monument was adopted by the nearby Oosterhoogebrugschool.

Roy's death did not go unnoticed in Canada either; in central Saskatchewan, a lake has been named after him: Coffin Lake.

