

Why was there only one temporary grave in Borculo for a Canadian soldier who died months after the liberation of the Netherlands?



Elie Antonyszyn was born the oldest child on March 10, 1923 and raised in a Greek Orthodox family of Ukrainian descent.

After him, two more girls are born into the family, Mary and Olga. Mary has admired him all her life. She remembers how they raced home from school together and how he challenged her to walk across the ice for 25 cents. Together with their little sister Olga and their parents Michael and Wasalena, they lived in Rorketon, a small village on the prairies of Manitoba. They had a farm on which father worked day and night and mother of few prepared delicious meals and also kept the house super clean, which was not easy with three very boisterous children.

He is still a high school student himself when he has to report for service in Winnipeg on February 2, 1943. He planned to take the druggist training and loves cards and draughts. He is seen as a student-type of guy, is reliable and happy. He looks good and

is healthy, loves to exercise and is 1.68m tall and weighs 59kg. He prefers something mathematical, therefore the military suspects he could be a good gunner and he is assigned to the artillery. He follows his military training in Canada. Eventually, he gets the rank of Gunner of a light anti-aircraft gun and is mainly located on Vancouver Island to defend the coast against a possible Japanese invasion.

He was in the hospital with the mumps for a month and a half in the spring of 1943.

The fact that he is trained in North America for so long (more than two years) and is not deployed in Europe has to do with the way conscription was arranged in Canada during the war. In June 1940, the government decided that the army could call on men and women to perform war duties. This also includes the Defence of Canada, and therefore specifically not serving overseas. Tens of thousands are called up for conscription and remain in Canada for years. Because they are not allowed to fight, they are nicknamed Zombies.

In order to allow them to participate in actual action, they are used in the Battle of the Aleutians, a battle on the islet of Kiska. The Aleutians belong to Alaska and therefore the United States. That was not considered overseas for convenience and therefore the Canadian Zombies could still be deployed on Kiska. Canadian conscripts deployed in the Aleutian Islands Campaign were pointedly issued American helmets.

On June 6, 1942, the Japanese occupied Kiska and nearby Atta to protect the northern flank of the Japanese Empire. In response to the Japanese occupation, the American and Canadian air forces began bombing Kiska. American warships blocked and fired at the island several times. Several Japanese war and transport ships and submarines that wanted to sail to Kiska or Attu were damaged or sunk.

In May 1943, the American forces landed on Attu and destroyed the Japanese garrison there. Then, on July 29, 1943, the Japanese Imperial Navy successfully evacuated the garrison at Kiska within an hour, ending the Japanese occupation.

However, the Battle of the Aleutians did not really end until August 15, 1943, when American and Canadian troops, including Antonyszyn, unsure of the Japanese evacuation, landed on the island, finding only a few dogs there. The army leaders couldn't believe the Japanese could have gotten away so quickly and searched the island for eight days. In addition, 24 allied soldiers were killed by their own fire, mostly caused by dense fog. 'In the end, it was decided to label this failure as "training exercise".'



*A Japanese flag on Kiska captured by members of the Royal Canadian Fusiliers. August 23, 1943. Courtesy National Archives*

The major battle that the men of the 13th Brigade had to fight during their six-month stay on Kiska was with the taxmen over the question of whether they were overseas or not, as the former meant exemption from paying taxes on the grounds that they were west of the International Date Line, which they used to argue that they were in fact in Asia, making them overseas. The Revenue department won.

It was not until the heavy fighting during the Battle of the Scheldt in 1944 that the Zombies were called upon to fill up the large gaps in the Canadian Army. By that time they were desperately needed to quickly replenish the infantry in particular.

In February 1945, almost 13,000 soldiers were therefore deployed overseas in Western Europe. Mainly consisting of conscripts. Only a small number of them see battle in Europe, only 2463 men reach units at the front. 69 of them lose their lives in the process.

We find Elie Antonyszyn in England from February 1, 1945 to May 1, 1945, after which he is embarked for the European continent and is assigned to the 6th Anti Tank Regiment RCA. By the time he arrives in the Netherlands, the capitulation of Germany is a fact. He will hardly and more likely not have participated in active combat at all.

He has just spent 9 days with his new unit, the 8th Light Anti Aircraft Regiment Royal Canadian Artillery, when he was in billets in public primary school No. 2 in Borculo (also called Hofschool, that building now houses the local fire brigade museum) on July 15, 1945.

The circumstances of his death seem like a scene from a horror film;

Most men sit at breakfast around 8 a.m. that morning. However, two men from Elie's room are not. They think they heard a shot, and moments later they see red liquid dripping down from the wooden ceiling. Soon they determine that it is blood and they run up the stairs to the attic. There they find a soldier's body and next to him lies a gun. They don't recognise him because the shot blew away part of his face and the top of his skull. Blood and bone debris are on the wall and floor.

Moments later, two more men arrive in the attic and one of them recognises the dead man as Elie Antonyszyn.

For a few weeks, Elie had no longer had his own rifle and ammunition and apparently he grabbed a rifle from another soldier at night to take his own life.

A note is found on the body which reads as follows:

*"I Have been doped since my childhood not by my parents but so called friends. Also in the Army by jealous persons. I have brought my parents to ruin. I should of never had gone to that place & board at Ste. Rose. I have found out but too late. I knew there was something wrong but could not figure out. Once again I have been doped in the past. My life is not worth living.*

*A lone had.  
Elie*

*Antonyszyn*

*The people were jealous and gave alcohol in tea, coffee milk or water"*



*Ste. Rose's station in the 1940's*

A remarkable and also quite incoherent note. In any case, he expresses regret; he should never have boarded in Ste. Rose. That is the closest station from Rorketon. From there, he will have travelled to Winnipeg to report for service. It seems that at that time something was already wrong. He must have carried that feeling with him for years.

During the investigation into his death, various witnesses are heard and they outline Elie as follows:

'He has a vivid fantasy because he takes detective- and mystery- novels too seriously'; 'he was always very loathe to spend any money and was always telling rather weird stories', 'he seemed to think that someone was after the money that he had sent home in care of his father'. 'id that the money he sends to his father will be stolen'; 'he lies on his bed and does not mix himself in the conversation', 'he always seemed to be worrying or thinking about something'.

His mates found him depressed and heard him talking to himself. A soldier who had walked with him the night before had not been given the impression that he was about to commit suicide. Someone who knew him a little longer indicated that he had behaved normally in March '45 and that he easily made friends.

Obviously, Elie was pretty confused until he could not cope anymore and took his own life. That conclusion is also made by the officers in the official report made after the incident.

We will probably never know what the exact reason was. Elie had been away from home for years and when the war came to an end he was still sent to Europe knowing he would not take part in any fighting. Perhaps that has had an effect on his mental health.

What we do know is that up to 10% of the soldiers had PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder). A mental health condition that's triggered by a terrifying event — either experiencing it or witnessing it. During WW2 the term 'combat fatigue' was used. From Elie's farewell note and the testimonials, it can be concluded that he had at least a number of symptoms of PTSD.

What he went through during his service remains a guess at the moment. In any case, it has led to a tragic act of a desperate person.

Elie Antonyszyn was buried in the Roman Catholic Cemetery in Borculo. From April 17, 1946, his body is transferred to his final resting place at the Canadian War Cemetery in Holten in plot 10, row H, grave 2.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the ICB Holten has focussed attention on Canadian soldiers of Ukrainian descent. Because that article also came through in Canada, we unexpectedly received a photo of him from a cousin of Elie.



Sources:

Ancestry.ca

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conscription\\_Crisis\\_of\\_1944#CITEREFMorton1999](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conscription_Crisis_of_1944#CITEREFMorton1999)

CWGC.org

Obituary as published in Winnipeg Free Press on Jul 22, 2017

Google streetview

<https://www.ensie.nl/monumenten-in-gelderland/de-voorm-openbare-lagere-school-nr-2-in-borculo>

[mayoclinic.org](https://www.mayoclinic.org)

[https://veterans.gc.ca/pdf/mental-health/ptsd\\_warstress\\_e.pdf](https://veterans.gc.ca/pdf/mental-health/ptsd_warstress_e.pdf)

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/the-invasion-of-kiska.htm>