



Frederick James Essery, known as Fred, was born on January 1, 1924, in St. Catharines, a city on the southern shore of Lake Ontario. His father, Frederick Robert Essery (1881–1954), was also born in Ontario. His mother, Charlotte Ellen Davis (1895–1961), was born in London, England, and had emigrated to Canada in 1909. His parents were married in St. Catharines in 1916 and had five children: Kathleen, Edwin, Walter, Audrey, and Fred. The family belonged to the Church of England.

On April 12, 1932, which was Kathleen's 17th birthday, 12-year-old Walter drowned in the Old Welland Canal. The canoe he was in with two friends took in water and capsized. One of Walter's friends also drowned; the other managed to swim to shore.

Fred completed the eighth grade of public school and left in 1938, when he was 14 years old. For the last year and a half before he enlisted, he worked as a *machine operator* at Columbus Chain Co. in St. Catharines, a company that was part of McKinnon Industries, a supplier of automobiles and auto parts. McKinnons had been acquired by General Motors in 1929, but the locals still referred to it as McKinnons. It is possible that Fred's father, who was a *moulder*, was also employed by this company.



*McKinnon Industries Ltd., Ontario Street, St. Catharines, 1938.*

*Source: Archives & Special Collections, Brock University Library.*

Fred didn't have any specific hobbies, but he did enjoy playing sports, in particular lacrosse, Canada's national summer sport. In 1943, he played on the *St. Catharines Athletics* lacrosse team, where he was nicknamed 'Skipppy' — a name that fits in well among names like 'Geezil', 'Builder', 'Pung', 'Tank', and 'Spark'.

In 1943, he was drafted into military service under the National Resources Mobilization Act. Initially, NRMA troops were only deployed to defend Canadian territory. Fred enlisted on April 5 in Toronto and was assigned to the Royal Canadian Artillery (RCA). In May and June, he underwent basic training in Peterborough, Ontario. He then received artillery training at the *A23 Coast and Anti-Aircraft Artillery Training Centre* in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

In August, Fred was assigned to the RCA's *40th Heavy Anti-Aircraft Battery* in Sault Ste. Marie, in northern Ontario. This unit was responsible for protecting the Canadian locks in the important shipping route between Lake Superior and Lake Huron. At the end of 1943, the Battery was relocated because the risk of an air raid was deemed higher elsewhere.

Fred was then stationed at various locations as part of the *Home Defense*, eventually ending up in Saint John, New Brunswick. There, he volunteered for active duty in the Canadian Army. On June 28, 1944, he underwent a medical examination and was deemed fit for service *overseas*; he was assigned to the Infantry Corps. On July 25, he arrived at Camp Debert, about 100 km north of Halifax, Nova Scotia — a staging area for soldiers being deployed to Europe.

On September 1, 1944, Fred embarked in Halifax and arrived in England a week later. There, he was assigned to 3 CIRU, a reinforcement unit for the infantry. While awaiting his deployment to mainland Europe, he underwent further training. On October 6, he left for France and was transferred to his new unit, the *Royal Regiment of Canada*, where he was formally enlisted — '*taken on strength*' — on October 14. The regiment was part of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division.

On October 14, the *Royals* were located 6 km southeast of Woensdrecht. They were fighting in the Battle of the Scheldt — the offensive to capture the banks of the Scheldt estuary from the Germans so that the port of Antwerp could be used to supply Allied troops. The 2nd Infantry Division was deployed on the north bank, on the Zuid-Beveland peninsula and the island of Walcheren. The Battle of the Scheldt lasted from October 1 to November 8. The Allies suffered heavy losses during the fighting: 12,783 killed and wounded; half of them were Canadians, and the rest were soldiers of other nationalities serving under Canadian command.

In *Always Ready: A History of The Royal Regiment of Canada*, Donald Graves quotes Captain George Blackburn, who believed that

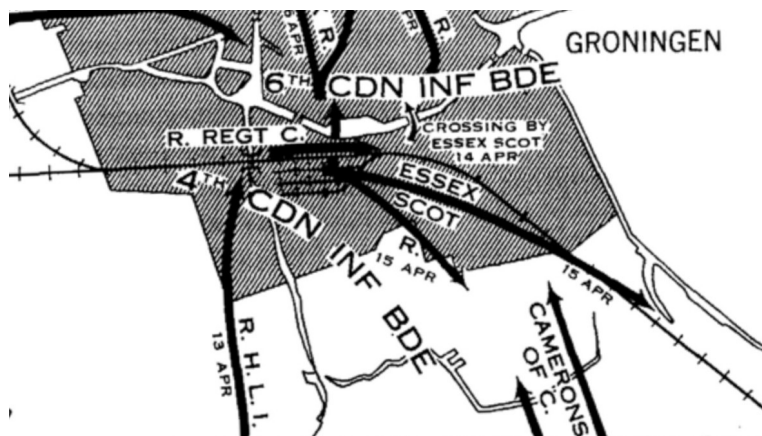
Words will never do justice to the courage of the infantryman — eternally cold, eternally wet, eternally boneweary — who at any time may be blown apart by a mortar or cut down by machinegun fire even as he waits at the rear of the battalion stretched out on the dike — waits to take his turn in what he knows will be a lottery of death when his section takes over the lead for the platoon crawling along the dike or wading through a flooded polder.

From November 1944 to January 1945, the 2nd Infantry Division spent the winter near Nijmegen. Following Operation Market Garden, a static front had formed there with a bulge into German territory, the *Nijmegen salient*.

In February 1945, the Rhineland Offensive began to capture the west bank of the Rhine north of the Ruhr from the Germans. On February 17, the Royals were deployed for the first time. The Allied troops suffered heavy losses during the offensive. For the Royals, March 3 was one of the hardest days; on that day, in the northwestern part of the Hochwald forest, the Royals suffered 43 casualties: 12 killed, 30 wounded, and one soldier missing. After Xanten was captured on March 11, the 2nd Infantry Division was withdrawn to the Reichswald forest near Kleve.

By the end of March, the 2nd Infantry Division was able to cross the Rhine near Rees after a bridgehead on the opposite bank had been established. A rapid advance into the northern Netherlands began.

On April 13, 1945, after Assen had been liberated, the 2nd Infantry Division advanced toward Groningen. The lead troops consisted of a column of tanks from the *Fort Garry Horse*, followed by 'Kangaroos' — tanks without turrets — with soldiers from the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, the *Rileys*. At the city limits, they came under fire from *Flak* anti-aircraft guns and machine guns. This marked the beginning of the Battle of Groningen, which would last until April 16.



*Attack on the southern part of Groningen by the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division.*

*Source: C.P. Stacey, The Victory Campaign (1960).*

The Rileys managed to break the resistance in the City Park and around the Paterswoldseweg, south of the Parkweg. They also tried, but failed, to capture the strategically important Parkbrug bridge over the Noord-Willemskanaal.

On April 14, the entire 4th Infantry Brigade — the *Rileys*, the *Royals* and the *Essex Scottish* — was deployed in the southwest of Groningen. The Rileys fought on the north side of Paterswoldseweg. Between 4:00 and 4:30 a.m., two companies of the Royals managed to cross the canal south of the Parkbrug by boat, thereby opening a second front. By 7:00 a.m., they had secured the Parkbrug.

Eight soldiers from the Royal Regiment of Canada were killed in the fighting in Groningen on April 14; one of them was Fred Essery.

Fred was buried on April 15 at the Zuiderbegraafplaats cemetery in Assen. In 1946, he was reburied at the Canadian War Cemetery in Holten, where he now rests in grave 10.E.04. His headstone bears no personal inscription.

After his death, Frederick James Essery 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*.

In Canada, Fred is commemorated at the *Grantham Township Cenotaph* at the *Victoria Lawn Cemetery* in St. Catharines. His name is also listed on the *St. Catharines Honour Roll 1939–1945* — a plaque on the wall of City Hall.

Fred's brother Edwin served in the Ordnance Corps of the Canadian Army; he was deployed to Europe and returned to Canada after the war.



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