

Pte Nazaire Gray (Service # G57637)

Nazaire Gray was born Nov. 21, 1921 near Pointe Sapin, Kent Co. NB, the son of Francois (Frank) Gray and Emma Mazzerole. Frank was a farmer and carpenter. Nazaire was one of seven children, six boys, and one girl. During the Depression years, at age thirteen, Nazaire left school after completing grade five. Like his brothers, he went to work farming, fishing, and logging during the winter months.

In 1942, Nazaire was drafted into the Canadian Armed Forces for home defense duty under the new National Resources Mobilization Act (NRMA) that came into effect in 1940. He enlisted at Fredericton on May 15, 1942, and records show that he was bilingual. Basic training and advanced training as a rifleman and machine gunner were completed with the St. John Fusiliers (MG) at Fredericton.

The following spring, Rev. Camille Cormier, the priest for Pointe Sapin, wrote a letter to military authorities stating that Nazaire and other soldiers from poor local families were needed to help with the family fishing business. He asked that these men be allowed to fish and support their families until Sept. 1943. Records indicate that that request was not approved.

During this time the Saint John Fusiliers were transferred to BC and assigned a home defense responsibility. Nazaire served at Nanaimo and in Prince George and in August 1943 he was promoted to the rank of Corporal and became a section leader. While in Prince George, on June 15, 1944, Nazaire changed his status by enlisting for active service wherever he was needed. A few months later he also chose to return to the rank of Private.

At some point, Nazaire met a young woman by the name of Rita Dignam, from Chatham, NB. Records indicate that they exchanged letters, fell in love, and planned to be married. These plans were interrupted however as Nazaire was shipped overseas to the UK in November 1944. In January 1945, he was transferred again to NW Europe and in February, placed with the North Shore (NB) Regiment.

The invasion of Germany, Operation Veritable, was launched on Feb. 8, 1945. During the initial phase, the First Canadian Army was responsible for the clearing of the Rhineland, a region of Germany south of the Rhine River. Nazaire would have fought here in the brutal battles of Keppeln and the Balbergerwald. On March 25th the NSR crossed the Rhine into the heart of Germany and in early April turned northwest with orders to liberate the Netherlands.

On April 5th, The North Shore (NB) Regiment and the Régiment de la Chaudière were given orders to capture the Dutch town of Zutphen that sits on the east bank of the IJssel River. Zutphen is a fairly large town and the river is partially diverted through a series of canals mainly on the south and the east sides of the city. These created natural defense barriers and all bridges over the canals had been destroyed. There were many young German soldiers here, cornered and fighting with desperation. They were excellent shots with machine guns and rifles and were Nazis to the core. Much of the ground was too soft for tanks and the attack was to proceed with flame-throwing WASPS and troop carriers. In preparation for the attack, the Allied artillery fired 25-pound shells into the town and the entrenched Germans responded with artillery from the west side of the IJssel River.

The assault was launched April 6th, 1200 yards to the east of Zutphen. The Chaudières led the attack into the heart of the town while NSR B & D Companies attacked on their northern flank. NSR A & C Companies attacked on the Chaudière's left flank.

At about 6:00 AM, while still dark, B Company proceeded west from the start line but a blown bridge soon slowed their progress. The Germans were now well aware of the attack and had responded swiftly with machine guns and rifles. At times the Germans would allow a platoon to pass and then would attack resulting in separation of the Canadians and intense close contact fighting with grenades, machine guns, rifles, pistols and hand to hand combat. In addition to snipers, the

Germans used tracers to light up the early morning battlefield and then opened up with Spandau machine guns firing 1200 rounds per minute.

The excessive resistance prevented B Company from advancing more than 350 yards from the start line. D Company made an effort to assist but the resistance was so strong that they were unable to proceed. A new plan was needed. A and C Companies now moved closer to the town's eastern edge and relieved the Chaudières.

The following morning, Sat. Apr. 7th, C Company led the advance and moved waist deep across a canal via a partially submerged bridge that had been destroyed. The German snipers were deadly accurate, however, and it was clear that the North Shore men would need assistance to continue. Tank support was again not available but Sgt Roy Savoy of the carrier platoon was able to get three carriers, with machine guns and flamethrowers, across the partially submerged bridge and into the core of the town. After a short reconnaissance tour of the site, Sgt Savoy climbed into his carrier and drove full speed into the defended streets while their Browning machine guns fired at almost anything that moved. Upon reaching their target they blasted full flame onto the enemy position. Savoy's team now provided covering fire while Sgt Glendenning and Sgt Howatt repeated the exercise with their own carriers. A and C Companies now moved in and secured positions around the Zutphen warehouses and rail yard for the night.

The next morning, Sunday, April 8th, tanks and flame-throwing Crocodiles arrived and led an attack northwest across the rail line and into the freight yards. It became apparent, however, that many of the Germans had moved out, although numerous snipers remained. Zutphen had to be cleared house by house and some snipers would fight to their death. Several NSR soldiers including stretcher bearers were wounded or killed during this procedure. By the time darkness fell on Apr. 8th, the town was cleared right through to the Ijssel River.

Father Hickey wrote, "I buried over twenty men at Zutphen and most had been picked off by German snipers." Records show that Pte Nazaire Gray was killed in action on April 7, 1945. He was twenty-three years of age.

On the morning April 9th, Mass was held in the remains of the Zutphen schoolhouse. Hickey wrote, "as the men came up to Holy Communion, in each war-weary face I could read my own fondest hope, the hope that the end was near."

For his service to Canada, Pte Nazaire Gray was awarded the following medals; the 1939-45 Star, France & Germany Star, War Medal 1939-45, and CVSM with Clasp. Pte Nazaire Gray is buried in the Holten Canadian War Cemetery in the Netherlands. Plot I. H. 11.