



Charles William Hawke was born Charles William Secord on August 8, 1922, in Grimsby, Ontario. His father, Abraham Hawke, died when he and his older brothers, Fred and Robert, were still young. His mother, Clara May Cooper (1891–1982), remarried in 1929 to James Adam Hawke (1905–1976). James was born in England and had emigrated to Canada in 1923. Charles' mother and stepfather had two children: James and Catherine.

The Hawke family lived in St. Catharines, a city on the southern shore of Lake Ontario. They were members of the Roman Catholic Church.

Charles attended a public school in St. Catharines and left after the seventh of eight grades, when he was 14 years old. He then worked for four years on his stepfather's farm, ten months as a carpenter's helper, one year as a labourer in a factory, and three months operating an electrical converter at a sub station of the *Niagara, St. Catharines and Toronto Railway*.

In 1942, Charles married Marcella Agnes Doyle (1919–2000) in St. Catharines; she was born in the hamlet of Colgan, 50 km north of Toronto. That same year, Charles was called up for military service. On September 30, he reported for duty at the NRMA Clearing Depot in Toronto. Marcella moved in with her parents in Colgan.

Charles completed his basic training in Brantford, Ontario, and then underwent infantry training at Camp Borden, Ontario. On March 20, 1943, at the end of his training, his son Charles Bernard was born.

After completing his training, Charles served with the Home Defence Forces. He remained at Camp Borden until April 19, 1943, and was then assigned to the headquarters of the 7th Infantry Division in Debert, Nova Scotia. Five months later, he was deployed to defend Canada's west coast in Prince George, British Columbia — first with No. 15 Defence Platoon and then with the Royal Rifles of Canada.

Charles had a hard time in the army. His service record notes twice that he suffered from "fatigues," military jargon for being unable to cope with the mental pressure of the circumstances. Starting in March 1943, his file contained several entries regarding his behaviour. He was absent without leave (AWL) on five occasions, for which he was confined to barracks for increasingly longer periods. On one occasion, he was punished with 14 days of detention for using inappropriate language.

Charles was drafted into military service under the *National Resources Mobilization Act* of 1940. NRMA troops played a role in the defense of Canada. Starting in 1942, the government was also allowed to deploy them *overseas*, but it was reluctant to do so due to the political sensitivity of the matter.

During the fighting in Europe, Canadian troops suffered heavy losses, particularly among the infantry. By the end of 1944, it was no longer possible to reinforce the infantry with units stationed in England without taking drastic measures. One of those measures was the deployment of Charles' regiment, the Royal Rifles of Canada. The soldiers were given the opportunity to volunteer for active duty. Charles did not do so, but he was nevertheless selected to serve *overseas*. The selection officer's report states:

A soft-spoken, shy, but friendly soldier. He is obviously unhappy at present, and a little confused, though a willing type. He [...] greatly prefers a smaller unit — in the large unit he finds it harder to make close friends and is worried because he doesn't know "who is his boss" ... "too many officers and Sergeant-Majors." This is rather an unusual point of view and seems sincere enough. Should an opportunity occur at any time to return Hawke to a Defence Platoon it would probably be wise to do so; he would give better service there than he is giving at present, and he may in time become a psychiatric problem under his conditions of service.

It is likely that the officer did not state his findings forcefully enough, and the pressure from higher up to provide reinforcements for the infantry was considerable: Charles was sent to Europe.

On January 2, 1945, the Royal Rifles of Canada departed for England, where the regiment was disbanded on January 10. The soldiers were assigned to infantry reinforcement units. Charles was assigned to the *No. 5 Canadian Infantry Training Regiment* in Aldershot, Hampshire, where he underwent additional training in preparation for his deployment to the European mainland. On March 27, he left for France, and on April 7, he arrived at his new unit, the *Royal Hamilton Light Infantry*, nicknamed the *Rileys*, part of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division. The Rileys were near Lochem at that time.

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 — which were used to transport soldiers from the Rileys. They approached the city from the southwest. At the city limits, the Canadians encountered a roadblock. They came under fire from machine guns and *Flak* anti-aircraft guns positioned near the Stadspark. This marked the beginning of the Battle of Groningen, which would last until April 16.

As dusk fell, the Fort Garry Horse's tanks withdrew; they were too vulnerable to anti-tank weapons. The Rileys, however, continued to fight and succeeded in breaking the resistance in the Stadspark and around the Paterswoldseweg. Seven soldiers from the Rileys were killed in the fighting on April 13; one soldier later died in a British hospital from the wounds he had sustained.



*Groningen, April 14, 1945.
Rileys advancing along the
Paterswoldseweg. Behind the
railroad crossing the Niemeijer
tobacco factory and the
Zeeheldenbuurt neighborhood.*

*Citizens are ignoring the
danger they face.*

*Source: Groninger Archieven,
NL-GnGRA_1785_18690.
Photo: D. Guravitch.*

On Saturday, April 14, the Rileys were deployed on the north side of the Paterswoldseweg, from the Parkweg to the Eendrachtsskanaal. The *Flak* anti-aircraft guns were gradually pushed back. The fighting moved from house to house to eliminate the snipers who had entrenched themselves there. Fierce fighting also took place during the clearing of the adjacent Zeeheldenbuurt neighbourhood. The fighting in this part of the city lasted all day. Just like the day before, the Rileys suffered losses: many wounded and three dead. Among the fallen was Charles Hawke.

On April 15, Charles was buried at a temporary military cemetery in Eelderwolde, a few kilometers southwest of Groningen. In 1946, he was reinterred at the Canadian War Cemetery in Holten, where he now rests in grave 03.H.10. The inscription on his headstone reads "MAY HE REST IN PEACE."

Charles is remembered on the headstone of James and Clara Hawke at Victoria Lawn Cemetery in St. Catharines. He is also listed on the *St. Catharines Honour Roll 1939-1945* — a plaque on the wall of City Hall.

After his death, Charles William Hawke was awarded the following Canadian military decorations: the *1939-1945 Star*, the *France and Germany Star*, and the *War Medal 1939-1945*.

In 1959, Charles' widow, Marcella, remarried Fred Harris (1927–2009); she died in 2000 at the age of 81 in Burlington, Ontario. Charles' son, Charles Bernard, emigrated to Australia and died there in 2006.



Version 3
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