

Johnston, George McDonald

Lieutenant

South Alberta Regiment

29th Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment

Royal Canadian

Armoured Corps



SOUTH ALBERTA REGIMENT
(29th Cdn Arm'd Recce Regt.)



George McDonald Johnston was born 13 January 1918 at Toronto, Ontario (ON). His father William James Johnston was from Ontario of English descent. His English mother Annie Parsons emigrated to Canada in 1912 and married William at Oshawa, ON in 1916. The Johnstons were Presbyterian and identified with the Salvation Army.

William worked as a mill foreman and auto factory labourer. They were living in Whitby, ON in the early 1930s before moving to Toronto. George



was their only child and played baseball, football and hockey as a boy. He joined the Militia 48th Highlanders of Canada in 1931 and was a piper with them until 1935.

*48th Highlanders Toronto, ON
early 1930s*

George completed two years of High School at Central Technical where he studied machines, motor mechanics and electricity. He also took a commercial course and quit school age fifteen to work as a clerk. George moved to Chicago, Illinois, USA in 1939 where he was employed by Victor Gasket and Manufacturing Company as an accounting clerk. He returned home the next year and decided to join the Canadian Army active service, with plans to finish his accounting education after the war.

George attested 17 July 1940 at Toronto age 22, enlisting directly with the 48th Highlanders and assigned regimental number B/74496. He was by then a tall man at 6'3", 159 lbs with blue eyes. Following several months in Toronto, George was sent to the Canadian Army Basic Training Centre at North Bay, ON May 1941 and promoted to acting Lance Corporal the next month. He was promoted again to acting Corporal 1 October 1941 and was likely employed as an instructor at North Bay.

George was transferred to the Canadian Armoured Corps (CAC) 8 April 1942 and reduced rank to Trooper at the CAC Training Centre Camp Borden, ON. The commandant at Borden recommended George for officer cadet training, describing him as a "very good type, very keen, good appearance". George was enrolled at OCTU (Officer Cadet Training Unit) Gordon Head, British Columbia that July and received his commission as 2nd Lieutenant 7 November 1942. George returned to Camp Borden for additional training and was cleared for overseas service, disembarking in the UK 31 March 1943 where he reported to the CAC Reinforcement Unit.

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RECOMMENDATION FOR APPOINTMENT TO A COMMISSION

1. Particulars of Candidate:—

Name JOHNSTON, George McDonald Christian Names George McDonald Regd. No. B.74496
 Enlisted July 17th, 1940 Date Toronto, Ontario Place 48th Highlanders of Can.
 Present Unit A-S C.A.C. (A) T.C. Date T.O.S. April 8th, 1942
 Present Rank Trooper Acting Acting Corporal Date October 25th, 1941
 Medical Category PA1 Birth Date January 12th, 1918
 Place of Birth Toronto (Town or Twp.) York County (County or Prov.) Ontario, Canada (Country)
 Civil Occupation Accountant Religion Presbyterian Denomination
 Married or Single Single Nationality of Wife

2. Military Qualifications:—
 Character (certified copy of M.F.M. 6 to be attached) Very good
 Courses attended (A.F. and (R.F. (state month and year) (R.F.) Fort Chmura, B.C., North Bay, Ont., July 7th, 1941, September 5th, 1941. Qualified Drill, War Planning, Platoon Tactics, Weapon Training, Military Law, First Aid, etc.
 Technical qualifications in detail (if any): 2 years Technical school, machine shop, motor mechanics and electricity.

3. Educational qualifications, including degrees (if any): Grade and Public School, 2 years Technical school as shown above.

4. Languages (state if written or spoken): English

4. Previous service (state period and length of service):—
 (i) P.F.
 (ii) R.F. (years in which training was carried out): 1932-1934 - 48th Highlanders of Canada
 (iii) C.E.F.
 (iv) Other British Forces:

5. Arm, Corps or Unit in which a Commission is desired by Candidate: Canadian Armoured Corps.
 Date April 9th, 1942

6. (a) GENERAL REMARKS by O.C. making recommendation:—
Very good type very keen good appearance
 Date 8 July 1942
 (Signature of Candidate's C.O.)

(b) I am prepared to accept this soldier as an Officer if subsequently appointed to this Unit.
Amstrong Lt. Col. R.A.T.R.
 Commandant, (Signature of Officer Commanding)
 A-S C.A.C (A) T.C. (CA)

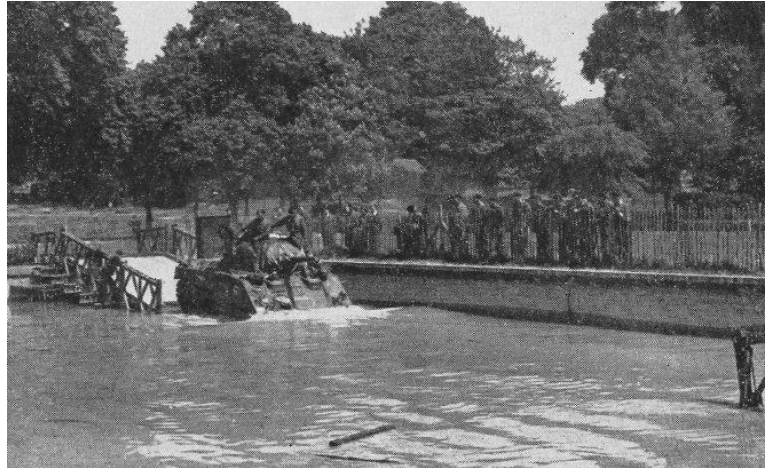


CAC training on Ram tank Borden, ON 1943

George completed refresher officer and gunnery courses in the UK and was promoted to Lieutenant 28 May 1943. He qualified as Driver Class III 30 September 1943 following a Driver Mechanic course.

*D-Day preparations Brighton,
England 1944*

As part of the Allied plans for the invasion of Normandy the next year, George was enrolled in a waterproofing course 1 November 1943. He was taken on strength with 1st Canadian Waterproofing School later than month



and made acting Captain 17 May 1944 while serving with them. George remained in the UK during the D-Day attack and the waterproofing school was closed down later in June, with his rank then reverting to Lieutenant.

George attended the Armoured Fighting Vehicle School in the UK July and August 1944. He took crew commander gunnery and wireless courses in September and was landed in Northwest Europe December 1944. George was taken on strength with the 29th Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment, South Alberta Regiment (SAR), 23 January 1945 in The Netherlands.

The SAR was part of the 4th Canadian Armoured Division, and assigned to work under 10th Brigade, supporting three Ontario infantry battalions: the Algonquins, Argylls and Lincolns. They helped clear the Germans from Normandy and Belgium summer and fall 1944 before liberating Bergen op Zoom, Netherlands at the end of October.

In mid-January 1945 the SAR did some shooting over the Maas River, focusing on the island of Kapelsche Veer near Capelle. The Regiment played a key role in Operation ELEPHANT later that month 26-30 January in assaulting a German outpost there, supporting the Lincolns and Argylls. That bitter action cost the SAR 4 killed plus 5 wounded and was George's first taste of battle.

First Canadian Army launched Operation VERITABLE 8 February (Feb) 1945. By 21 Feb they had closed in on Hochwald Layback and planned a new operation to take it. Operation BLOCKBUSTER was to be carried out by 2nd Canadian Corps, including 4th Canadian Armoured Division, and was scheduled to commence 26 Feb 1945.

The SAR mobilized 22 Feb from Nijmegen, Holland to Germany, travelling through two inches of mud along the road. BLOCKBUSTER kicked off 0430 hours, 26 Feb 1945. The first two phases of the attack were completed by 2nd and 3rd Infantry Divisions plus 4th Armoured Division, including the capture of the high ground above Udem in the face of stubborn German opposition. The way was clear for the third phase of the

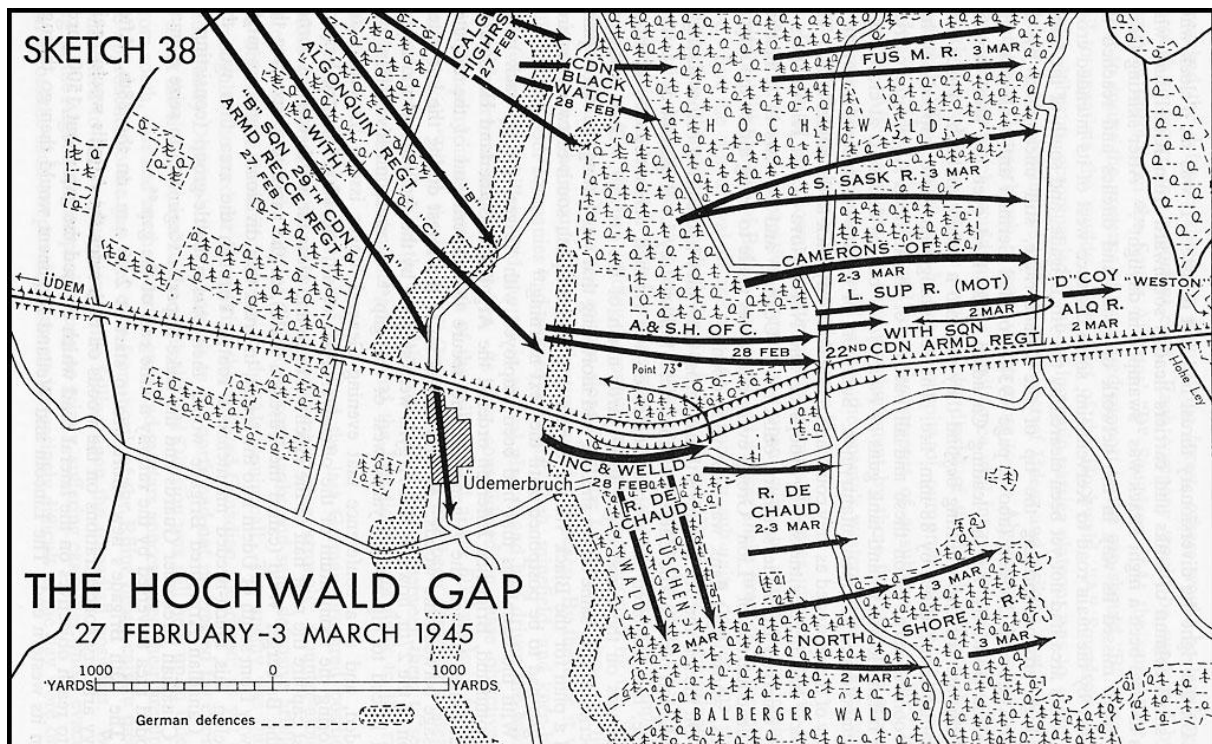
operation – the attack on the Hochwald Gap by the SAR and Algonquins, and the ridge to the south by 11th British Armoured Division.

With the Algonquins on their back decks, the South Albertas moved out of Hau at 0800 hours 26 February to be in position for the attack scheduled for that night. Recce parties had marked the route but progress became difficult as the tanks and wheeled vehicles tried to get through thick mud with the consistency of prairie gumbo. It was churned up to a depth of three feet by the preceding Divisions' traffic.



South Alberta Regiment tanks with Algonquin infantrymen on their decks 26 Feb 1945

The Regiment spent nearly an entire day trying to move a distance of less than five miles. It took almost 12 hours to get within a mile of the start line. The SAR tank crews were already exhausted and falling asleep on duty before the battle began. The South Albertas, with "A" Squadron leading and carrying Algonquins on their decks, moved out at 0130 hours 27 Feb. They had to detour around a Brigadier vehicle from 2nd Division that was stuck on the road, and the light Stuart tanks all got bogged down. Some Shermans also got stuck and it was finally every tank for itself. As a result, only about half of the tanks and infantry made it to the starting point in time for the attack. The attack went in at 0600 hours just as dawn was breaking. The shallow valley was a giant bog which "B" Squadron had difficulty traversing, making them sitting ducks for German artillery. B-3 Troop tanks became pinned down but the two surviving tanks of B-1 moved forward with the Algonquin "C" Company and helped them take their objective.



"A" Squadron met with disaster when its column of tanks and Algonquin carriers missed its way in the network of roads and ditches after skirting Udem. The area had still not been cleared and German anti-tank guns were waiting in deadly ambush. The three SAR leading tanks were instantly knocked out by 88-mm fire. The eight remaining were trapped and had no room to turn. Soon these and all but one of the thirteen Algonquin carriers fell victim to German anti-tank and infantry gun fire, with survivors making their way back to the Kirsell area. "A" Squadron was badly depleted and held back from further combat until they were able to regroup. The South Albertas suffered additional casualties before their battle for the Gap ended in the afternoon 2 March when the Regiment was relieved.



Rolling, rolling, rolling – keep those Shermans rolling. South Alberta Sherman and Stuart advance against Veen with the support of a Holstein cow. 7 March 1945. The future of the cow, as soon as the Canadian Army photographer departed the scene, was uncertain – but probably short, too soon.

The SAR provided close support for the Algonquins in an attack on Veen, Germany 7 March 1945 in a costly battle for 10th Brigade which secured their objectives the next day.

SAR Sherman and Stuart tanks advance 7 March 1945

During the night of 31 March/1 April 1945 the

SAR became the first armoured unit of 4th Division to cross the Rhine River at Emmerich, Germany on a temporary pontoon bridge. 4th Division was ordered to take over the next German defensive obstacle, the Twente Canal in Holland about thirty miles to the north. 10th Brigade would lead the division's advance and hopefully seize a bridge over the Twente in the vicinity of Lochem, Netherlands. Daylight on 2 April found the SAR scattered in four or five vehicle groups on the road to their objective. A Recce patrol cleared landmines before crossing a bridge. As they came around a bend in the road near an unblown bridge over the Twente Canal, one of their Stuart tanks was hit by a German anti-tank gun. Their crew baled out and Trooper Clarence Lorensen was killed by German small-arms fire.

The Germans then blew the bridge, which would require an assault to cross it. The SAR concentrated at Lochem where German snipers were active. That night Lieutenant George Johnston of "A" Squadron was shot and killed at age 27 while observing the canal from his turret.

OFFICIAL CANADIAN ARMY OVERSEAS CASUALTY NOTIFICATION			
NUMBER (B-74496)	RANK Lieutenant	SERVICE UNIT 29th Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment (South Alta Regt) CAC (CA)	
NAME JOHNSTON, George McDonald			
DATE OF BIRTH DAY 13th MONTH January YEAR 1918	Date Enlisted: 17-7-40		
MARITAL STATUS Single	Religion: Presbyterian		
T OF KIN AS SHOWN ON M. 1, 2 & 3 RELATIONSHIP Mother	NAME Mrs. Annie Johnston,		
ADDRESS 189 Bartlett Avenue, Toronto 4, Ontario.	ADDRESS D.A.B.		
DITIONAL PERSON TO BE NOTIFIED	ADDRESS		
PARENTS NAME	ADDRESS (IF SOLDIER MARRIED OVERSEAS)		
AUTHORITY CAS. SIG. NO. CASUALTY DETAILS	Canrecords - 7905A Killed in action	H.Q. 338-45-432	DATE 2-4-45
WESTERN EUROPEAN THEATRE OF WAR			
AST WILL ATTACHED TO OTIFICATION TO A. OF E.T	YES/NO	M.F.M.S. ATTACHED TO NOTIFICATION TO A. OF E.T	YES/NO
			DATE 11-4-45
			OFFICER I/C RECORDS

**OFFICERS
KILLED IN ACTION
Reconnaissance Units**
JOHNSTON, George McDonald.
Lieut., Mrs. Annie Johnston (mother), 189 Bartlett Ave., Toronto.

Toronto Star 7 May 1945

Lieutenant G.M. Johnston was temporarily buried in The Netherlands at Lochem Cemetery and later relocated to Holten Canadian War Cemetery, grave reference **V. A. 9**.

Photo courtesy lestweforget1945.org

The inscription on his headstone:

WE CANNOT, LORD,
THY PURPOSE SEE
BUT ALL IS WELL
THAT'S DONE THEE

George Johnston's campaign medals:

- 1939-45 Star
- France-Germany Star
- Defence Medal
- War Medal
- Canadian Volunteer Service Medal/Clasp



Biography by Jim Little, Research Team Faces to Graves.

Sources Consulted:

Commonwealth War Graves Commission

Library and Archives Canada

Veteran Affairs Canada – Canadian Virtual War Memorial

Ancestry public trees

Newspapers.com

<https://museum.48thhighlanders.ca/soldier/piper-george-mcdonald-johnston/>

48th Highlanders Toronto, ON photo <https://torontoguardian.com/2021/12/old-photographs-of-the-48th-highlanders-gallery/>

Brighton, England D-Day preparations photo

https://www.mybrightonandhove.org.uk/topics/topicviews/mystery-photos-of-brighton-and-hove/mystery_photos_of_brighton_hove-7

Graves, Donald E. (1998). South Albertas – A Canadian Regiment At War

Hochwald Gap map and information

<https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/UN/Canada/CA/Victory/Victory-19.html>

* Do you have a photo of this soldier or additional information please contact info@facestograves.nl