

John (Jack) McKee

Pte. B. 118837

Died April 11, 1945

Hoogeveen, Netherlands

Soldier Biography delivered at Jack's grave at the Holten Canadian War Cemetery July 18, 2017



John McKee was a family man. He came from a family of 10 children, John had 5 sisters, and he was the eldest of the 5 brothers. John and his wife Catherine (Kay) had 3 girls early in their marriage. Gloria, born in December 1940, Peggy July 1942 and Judy October 1943. Sadly Judy died just less than a year later.

The McKee family lived and worked in Falconbridge, Ontario which was company mining town for Falconbridge Nickel Mines Ltd. There was a one room school house where John – known as Jack to friends and family – completed his education at Grade 9.

Jack and Kay were married September 20, 1940 while Jack was employed as a shift boss at the mine.

Jack enlisted on July 17, 1942 just a few months after English Canadians had voted overwhelming in favour of releasing the Federal Government of its promise not to impose conscription in a national plebiscite held April 27.

Nickel mining was a valuable commodity in Canada's war industry and men were considered to be doing their duty to the war effort by working in the mine. In Canadian Mining History, Stan Sudol explains the importance of mine where Jack worked, and just how difficult the job was that he was leaving.

The first industry identified as an essential occupation was the nickel industry. Workers could not leave the employ of Inco or Falconbridge without the permission of a National Selective Services Officer. Hard-rock mining in the 1940s was a tough, dirty and dangerous job...

Nickel workers in 1943 laboured for 56 hours a week with no overtime pay. They earned 51 cents an hour for surface work, 61 cents for underground labour while miners made 71 cents and first-class trades earned 78 cents an hour. There were no fringe benefits except a one week paid vacation.

Perhaps the difficult job and the long hours make it easier for Jack to enlist. His daughter, Peggy, wrote to me that "he went to war as he felt it was his duty."

Jack trained at the Canadian military training camp in Petawawa, Ontario. Later in Valcartier QC, Jack undertook further training and passed his trades exam. Leaving his wife and daughters was difficult. On May 25, 1943 over a furlough at home, Jack wrote to the Minister of Defence, asking to be discharged. His wife, now pregnant with their third child, did not have a home and was living temporarily with Jack's parents. As a company town, perhaps the housing was strictly for miners and their families while they were at work – not at war. Jack had worked at the Falconbridge Nickel mine for ten years and "had faced death a dozen times in the mine" but was desperate to get back to work because as he wrote "my wife needs me and needs me bad; a darn sight more than the army does."

But it was no use, Jack was not discharged. He did forfeit 2 days' pay after a 24 hour period of Absence Without Leave on July 13, 1943. He had a short coal miners leave in October 1943, before being recalled to Valcartier where he requested the permanent rank of Private.

Jack left Canada on May 1, 1944 on a transport ship bound for the United Kingdom. By the 31 of August 1944, he was en route to France to support the Allies in the South Saskatchewan Regiment as a sapper.

Wounded just fourteen days later, Jack was hit by a sniper's bullet in the arm and chest. He spent 17 days in hospital at a reduced pay. In a letter home Jack describes the injury and his difficulty getting to medical attention

In April 1945, the Canadians had the task of clearing out the remaining German troops in the Netherlands. While there were no large scale battles, the deaths of soldiers on both sides continued, along with the losses of Dutch civilians. The South Saskatchewan Regiment was tasked with liberating Hoozeveer before pressing on the larger city of Groningen. Jack was there, on a day described as clear, sunny and hot. The war diarist describes the scene:

The men enjoyed the experience this afternoon of being cheered on by thousands of Netherlanders as the convoy moved along the highway. People decorated with bright orange sashes, ribbons and flags lined both sides of the road and as each vehicle went past everyone cheered and gave the "V" sign. Everyone came out to see us, from old Grannies to the youngest of babies.

In the midst of this festive atmosphere the South Saskatchewan Regiment still had a job to do. In Hoogeveen the Germans had partially destroyed the Queen Juliana bridge, leaving the remains to block the Allies liberation route.

In the midst of all the commotion the Canadians wanted to remove the bridge to create space to install a Bailey bridge. Jack stood nearby, sharing a smoke with Dutch civilians. He got back into his truck, awaiting further movement. Klaas Zwiggelaar, a member of the Dutch resistance who was standing nearby, recognized they were about to blow up the bridge and tried to get Jack to move. But in the confusion, Jack misunderstood Klaas and stayed in the truck. The bridge exploded with significant force and shrapnel was sent flying. According to an eyewitness, Jack was killed instantly when the bridge shrapnel smashed through the cabin of the truck and into Jack.

Jack's field commander later wrote to Kay mentioning Jack's cheerfulness and a spirit that was much appreciated by the men in his platoon. A memorial service held April 26, 1945 at the Falconbridge Community Hall was "taxed to capacity for the popular Falconbridge boy" according to the local paper. Jack was just 29 years old when he died.

His wife, Kay is still alive at 94. His daughter Peggy, will celebrate her 75th birthday today. Jack, a family man, has 4 grandsons, 4 great granddaughters, 6 great grandsons, and both a great-great grandson and granddaughter.

Let us honour Jack's memory and his family with a moment of silence.

Works Cited

"Inco's Sudbury Nickel Mines Were Critical During World War Two – by Stan Sudol." *Republic of Mining*. N.p., 18 Sept. 2016. Web. 05 July 2017.

This is what he wrote about being wounded - Dated Oct. 3, 1944.

My wound was considered slight. The sniper's bullet went in my right shoulder and came out under my arm at the back. It glanced across a couple of my ribs but no bones were broken. It happened when we were sneaking up past an enemy pill-box, when all of a sudden they sent up flares and then opened up with machine guns and mortar shells. We all dove for cover but I guess I didn't get low enough. I started back to our lines to get my wound dressed and darned if I didn't get lost. Somehow I got into a mine-field and was wondering around there when the stretcher bearers found me. They took me out to a deserted pill-box and told me to wait there for help. I rested about four hours but when no help came I tried to make it back to Headquarters by myself. I knew I had to get help for myself and the rest of the boys who were wounded. When I arrived back to where I expected to find my company there was no one there. I went on alone but got lost again. I was unarmed as I had dropped my gun when I got shot. I swore I could hear the enemy behind every tree. I came to a small town but I didn't know if it was the enemy's or ours. I walked straight on through it. No one bothered me but I must admit I was plenty scared. I started out across country then I tripped over some barbed wire rigged up with tin cans. It made an awful noise. I got out of there in a big hurry but I fell into a deep ditch, up to my arm pits in dirty water. My wound was really bothering me a lot but I got out of there and pushed on. There were Mortar and artillery shells firing close by but I didn't know who's it was. An older soldier might have known. By daylight I was getting pretty tired and I had left my tunic and my shoes where I had rested. or when I ran from the mine field. I tried to guess where the enemy was and snuck past them. I came to a canal and was ready to give myself up when I heard our men on the other side! I quickly pulled off my heavy pants and went in. I don't know how I was able to swim across with my arm but somehow I did. Once I got to the Reg. Aid Station I was all right but I had lost everything.

They've been giving me needles every four hours to kill the infection. The nurse says it's something new and that each needle costs \$200.00. She says I now have \$6,000.00 worth of this new drug in me. I'll be getting it for one more day but I'm pretty well. I can shave now and I can write. I'm almost ready to go back to the front.

He was
later
killed
April 12