

Lt. William Craig McNeill

III.E.5



William Craig McNeill was born on July 26, 1916, in Toronto, Ontario. His parents, Hugh McNeill and Margaret Carter, were both from Scotland. They owned a grocery store on Eglinton Avenue in downtown Toronto. Craig had a brother, Andrew, who was a year and a half younger.

Craig first attended Wellesley Public School and then Oakwood Collegiate, but he left high school after three years at the age of 16. He then did administrative work. For the last two years before joining the Army, he was an aircraft mechanic at De Havilland Aircraft.

On May 24, 1941, Craig married Aileen Mary Cruickshank, born on November 27, 1914, in Toronto. Aileen was also of Scottish descent; her father had died in 1937. The couple had no children.

In 1942, Craig volunteered for the Canadian Army. He underwent a medical examination on May 14 and enlisted at *No. 2 District Depot* in Toronto on June 1. His brother Andrew had already been serving in the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) for seven months at that point.

In Ontario, Craig completed basic training in Peterborough and infantry training at Camp Borden. He also trained as an *infantry/signaller* (a soldier responsible for communications) in Kingston, which he completed in November 1942.

In 1943, Craig was sent to England. He left for England by boat on March 10 and arrived seven days later. He was assigned to the *No. 1 Canadian Signals Reinforcement Unit*. Three months later, he began training to become an officer. The final report of his training states:

This Cadet is able to accept the responsibilities of command, and good powers of leadership. He is rather quiet and it would be to his advantage to assert himself more. Intelligent and able to apply his knowledge.

On October 19, 1944, he was promoted to lieutenant.

Not long after, on November 10, he left for mainland Europe to take part in the war. On November 28, he joined his regiment, *The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders of Canada*, part of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division. The *Cameron's' war diary* states:

Lts W.C. McNeill and C.E. Whitten were taken on strength of Bn from 44 Adv Rft Coy today.

From November 1944 to January 1945, the 2nd Infantry Division was deployed near Nijmegen. After operation *Market Garden*, a static front had developed there with a bulge in German territory, the *Nijmegen salient*. The Camerons were stationed on the river Maas near Mook and were responsible for the front from Groesbeek to Gennepe.

On February 8, the allied forces launched a major offensive to capture the western bank of the Rhine north of the Ruhr area. On February 17, the Camerons were deployed to the front south of Kleve. They fought heavy battles at Kalkar and in the Hochwald northwest of Xanten. On March 12, they were withdrawn to the Reichswald near Kleve, where they were given a rest.

On March 3, the Camerons suffered heavy losses in the Hochwald: 15 of them were killed and many more were wounded. Their War Diary reads:

0400 Battalion attack launched after 30 min heavy artillery barrage. Attack went slowly from beginning due to intense machine gun, mortar and shellfire. Leading section u/c Lt Meredith of "C" company wiped out [...]. "C" company pulled back to original position. "A" and "B" company pushed on fighting hard and slowly. [...]

0515 . Enemy shelling and mortaring was so intense, it brought back memories of St André sur Orne [in Normandy]. "A" company reported 30 casualties "B" company 6 casualties. "D" company remained in reserve.

The report of the B company, of which Craig was one of three lieutenants, states:

"B" Company attack 0400 hrs 3 March 45

Attacked houses and forest area MR 050412 under heavy artillery fire. The coy attacked 2 platoons up and was successful. Lt Waddell surprised an incoming enemy patrol and captured same complete. 20 prisoners of war were taken. Own casualties were light, one killed 3 wounded. CSM Breakey was hit by heavy rocket fire and was evacuated.

Lieutenant Robert Waddell died on March 6, a few hours after being wounded in heavy artillery fire.

On March 23, 1945, the attack to cross the Rhine between Wesel and Rees began. After establishing a bridgehead, the 2nd Infantry Division crossed the river on March 28, led by the Camerons. Emmerich and the ridge to the northwest, Hoch Elten, were captured after heavy fighting. After that, it was possible to build a bridge over the Rhine at Emmerich.

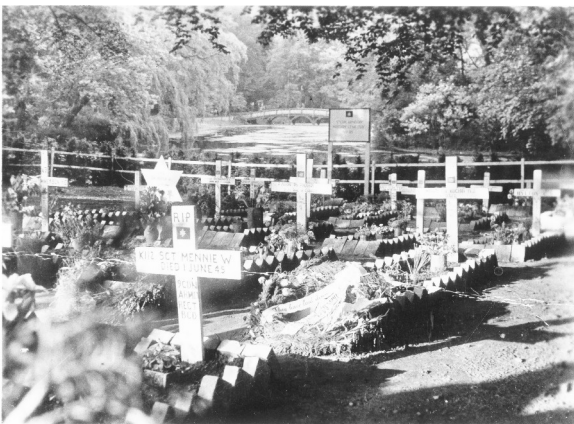
The 2nd Infantry Division entered the Netherlands at Netterden on April 1. The advance to the north of the country then proceeded rapidly: Doetinchem, Zutphen, Holten, and Assen were liberated. In the afternoon of April 13, the division's advance troops reached the southwestern edge of Groningen via Paterswolde, where the Battle of Groningen began that afternoon.

The Camerons followed a more easterly route and arrived via Haren in Helpman on the south side of the city, where they set up camp on April 15. By then, Groningen had already been virtually liberated; around noon on April 16, the German commander surrendered.

The Camerons were ordered to "clean up" parts of the city. Craig's B Company encountered fierce resistance from Germans who had retreated behind the Van Starckenborgh Canal. The Germans had opened the bridges at the Oostersluis lock to prevent the Canadians from passing through to Delfzijl and were lying in trenches on the other side of the canal with a clear field of fire across the lock area.

At approximately 1:15 p.m., Craig was hit by enemy fire; a bullet pierced his abdomen. His medical records indicate that he underwent surgery that same day. Complications arose later; he underwent further surgery on April 27 and May 4, but to no avail. Craig died on May 9 at 11:55 p.m.; his official date of death is May 10.

Craig was buried on May 11 in a temporary cemetery next to the water tower in the Groningen Sterrebos. On February 13, 1946, he was reburied at the Canadian military cemetery in Holten, where he rests in grave III.E.5. The inscription on his gravestone reads "ALWAYS."



Temporary Canadian military cemetery in the Groningen Sterrebos.

(Photo: W.A. Sanders, Groninger Archieven)

The administrative processing of the death took quite some time. On November 26, 1945, Craig's widow Aileen thanked the *Estates Branch* of the military headquarters in Ottawa for "the enormous amount of work involved with each man," and she wanted to let them know "that I appreciate the careful and considerate manner in which this matter has been dealt with." She concluded her letter with: "My husband was proud of the Army and his part in it, and I shall always be too."

Aileen moved with her mother to Vancouver, British Columbia, where she remarried in 1948. She had two children and died in 1988.

Postscript

Hugh and Margaret McNeill suffered a heavy blow. They lost not only Craig but also their other son, Andrew. On October 14, 1944, his plane went missing during a mission to Duisburg in Germany. In June 1945, he was officially declared dead. A year later, an on-site investigation revealed that he and the six other crew members had crashed between Rheinberg and Duisburg and were buried in the town of Orsoy. Andrew was reburied at the Reichswald Forest War Cemetery near Kleve.

Craig McNeill was posthumously awarded five decorations: the *1939–45 Star*, the *France and Germany Star*, the *Defense Medal*, the *War Medal 1939–45*, and the *Canadian Volunteer Service Medal with Clasp*.

Oakwood Collegiate Institute in Toronto has a memorial for students who died in World War I and World War II. In addition to their names, there are also photos of 105 students who died in World War II, including Craig and Andrew.

