

"Regret deeply..."

The Second World War Experiences of Bill and Fred Tucker

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Over a million Canadians wore a uniform in the fight against Hitler's Germany. The Tucker family of Kitchener, Ontario sent two brothers, Bill and Fred, to aid in this cause. Only one returned.

In May 1941, Bill Tucker enlisted in the Canadian army. He had already seen many of his neighbours and friends board the train for various destinations and he had mixed feelings when he left for basic training. It was the first time he had left his hometown and he was excited at the prospect of traveling across Canada. On the other hand, he was leaving behind a family that needed him. His father died two years before leaving behind eight children, and many household responsibilities rested on his shoulders.

Bill reported for basic training in Chatham, Ontario on 20 May 1941. His enlistment papers describe a typical Canadian young man. He was a healthy 21-year-old, 5 feet 5 inches tall, 130 pounds with brown hair and brown eyes. He spoke only English and he had a grade eight education. He had five years experience as a worker in a shirt factory and was licensed to drive a car. His hobby was raising homing pigeons.

Upon enlistment Bill Tucker became Private Tucker, W.E. A-61502. He was paid \$1.30 per day for his services of which he had \$20 per month (over half of his pay) sent directly to his mother Ida, his designated next of kin. After completing his basic training, he was dispatched in January 1942 to the First Battalion Saint John Fusiliers of New Brunswick. More advanced

training took place with the regiment in areas across Canada including Debert, NS, Prince George, BC, Jasper Park, Alberta and Melville, Saskatchewan. He felt he was fortunate to have seen a great deal of Canada thanks to the hospitality of the Canadian Army.

Bill was serving with the Fusiliers when his brother Fred, who was one and a half years younger than Bill, came of enlistment age. They thought it would be great if the brothers could be together. Bill talked to his officers and found Fred a position as a clerk. Bill thought that this would be a nice 'safe' office job for Fred. Both Tucker boys were thrilled to be together again, and Bill could keep better watch over his 'kid brother' Corporal Fred Tucker.

Though Fred appreciated having his older brother there to show him the ropes, Bill was not the best role model. He did not see the importance of shiny buttons, polished boots and other regulations that were, in his eyes, only in place to bolster the egos of commanding officers. As a result Bill was often punished with tasks such as peeling potatoes, washing the floor in the mess hall, or being restricted to barracks. Above all, Bill had the most difficulty with being Absent Without Leave (AWOL).

Bill loved his family very much, and when he was granted a few days leave he would always go home. But a couple of days with his family often turned into a week or more. He didn't care if he was going to be in trouble when he went back, his philosophy was, "What are they going to do? Fire me?" A little extra time with his family was more important to him than a tongue lashing



Bill and Fred Tucker of Kitchener, Ontario.

from his commanding officer and a few days confined to barracks. Soon the Colonel looked forward to hearing what kind of a story Bill would come up with to explain his absence.

On one occasion, Bill and Fred were granted four days leave to attend their older brother Jack's wedding. They had so much fun that they just couldn't bring themselves to leave. After being absent for 11 days the Military Police came looking for them. As the MPs knocked on the front door of their mother's house, Bill and Fred ran out the back door, and their mother told the police that they had already left to return to their regiment in Nova Scotia. When they got back to camp, the Colonel immediately summoned Bill and Fred. Two MPs marched them into the Colonel's office separately, where Bill was penalized 15 days pay for being absent without leave for 9 days, 5 hours, 38 minutes. This was Fred's only infraction, and it cost him 10 days pay. Only two incidents appear on Bill's crime sheet (the other was also an AWOL). All of the others are not found anywhere in his military records. The rest of the pages disappeared when he went overseas. Fred, who looked after the

personnel records, had no idea what happened to them.

By the fall of 1944 the Canadian Army overseas was desperately short of trained infantry. Amidst considerable pressure, Fred and Bill - the clerk and the well-trained soldier - both volunteered for overseas service. After a last furlough to visit their worried family, Bill and Fred boarded a ship for Britain and landed on 28 November 1944. In February 1945, they were sent to Italy as reinforcements for the Perth Regiment. Then their ways parted - Fred remained with the Perths, while Bill was transferred to the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada.

Bill was with the Seaforths for only five days before he was wounded. During an exchange of fire, Bill was hit on top of the head by a piece of shrapnel from a large mortar bomb on 19 February 1945. A medic in the field bandaged his head several times as the blood kept soaking through. He did not arrive at the hospital until the next day and refused to sleep for fear that if he closed his eyes he would die. Following his



Clockwise from above:

Bill Tucker, photographed early in the war.

Bill and his mother Ida at their family home.

Fred (left) and Bill in Saint John, NB, 1942.

Fred (left) and Bill in Debert, NS, 1944



surgery, Bill was to be released on 5 March, but when he got word that the Seaforths were leaving Italy he checked himself out against doctor's orders on 27 February. After a lengthy search, Bill found the Seaforths on their way to Holland.

On 2 April 1945, the Canadians prepared to cross the Ijssel and Rhine Rivers in Holland in an effort to push the Germans back into Germany. The 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade, including the Seaforth Highlanders and the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, was chosen to make the first attack across the Ijssel River. Bill was asked to take out a large machine gun that the Germans had on the road that ran across the top of the dike. They had been pinned down in the mud for days by that gun and could not advance until it was knocked out. Two or three other soldiers had tried before. That night Bill crawled as close to the edge of the river as he could and dug himself a small trench to provide good footing. He also dug a shelf into the bank at eye level and lined up the grenade on the shelf for easy grabbing. When he began to throw them he didn't stop until every grenade was gone and the enemy guns were silent. He had managed to blow off the wheel of the support for the huge gun, and the troops could finally move along the road along the dike. Years later, X-rays revealed an old fracture to his right elbow that had healed incorrectly, resulting in his inability to fully straighten his right arm. The only time he could remember hurting his elbow was after throwing all of those grenades the day he crossed the Ijssel River.

The Seaforths spent the next month patrolling from town to town. They took roaming Germans prisoner and came across small groups who were determined to fight to the bitter end. One afternoon, Bill and some other soldiers stopped at a Dutch store to purchase a few things. When they came out sniper fire rang out. Bill felt the bullets whiz past his face as he ran back into the store. A few minutes later there were some Canadian gunshots and the sniper was dead. Thankfully, Bill was still alive.

With the war coming to an end, the Tucker family was understandably anxious about Bill and Fred. A telegram reporting that Bill had been "slightly wounded" arrived in Kitchener in late

February. The boys' mother wrote to the army Director of Records to find out more. His assurances did little to calm her worries and did not relax until she received a letter from Bill.

The family received an optimistic letter from younger brother Fred in late April. It was dated 10 April 1945 "Somewhere in Belgium." Fred's first thoughts were for his brother Bill who he hadn't heard from in almost two months. Fred reported:

I wrote him [Bill] several letters and told him I thought it would be O.K. for us to get together again, now that it looks like the war is on its last days. At least we'd be sure of getting back to Canada together which would be a lot nicer than if we both arrived home separately....Surely this war can't last much longer. Germany's armies are completely shattered and there's really very little to stop the Allies. It's funny they intend to fight to the end. They could sure save themselves a lot of grief to give in now. Sooner or later you'll see them crack. It's amazing the way they stood up to it as long as they have. It shouldn't be long anymore before we're sailing back to Canada and believe me if I can help it that will be my last boat ride.

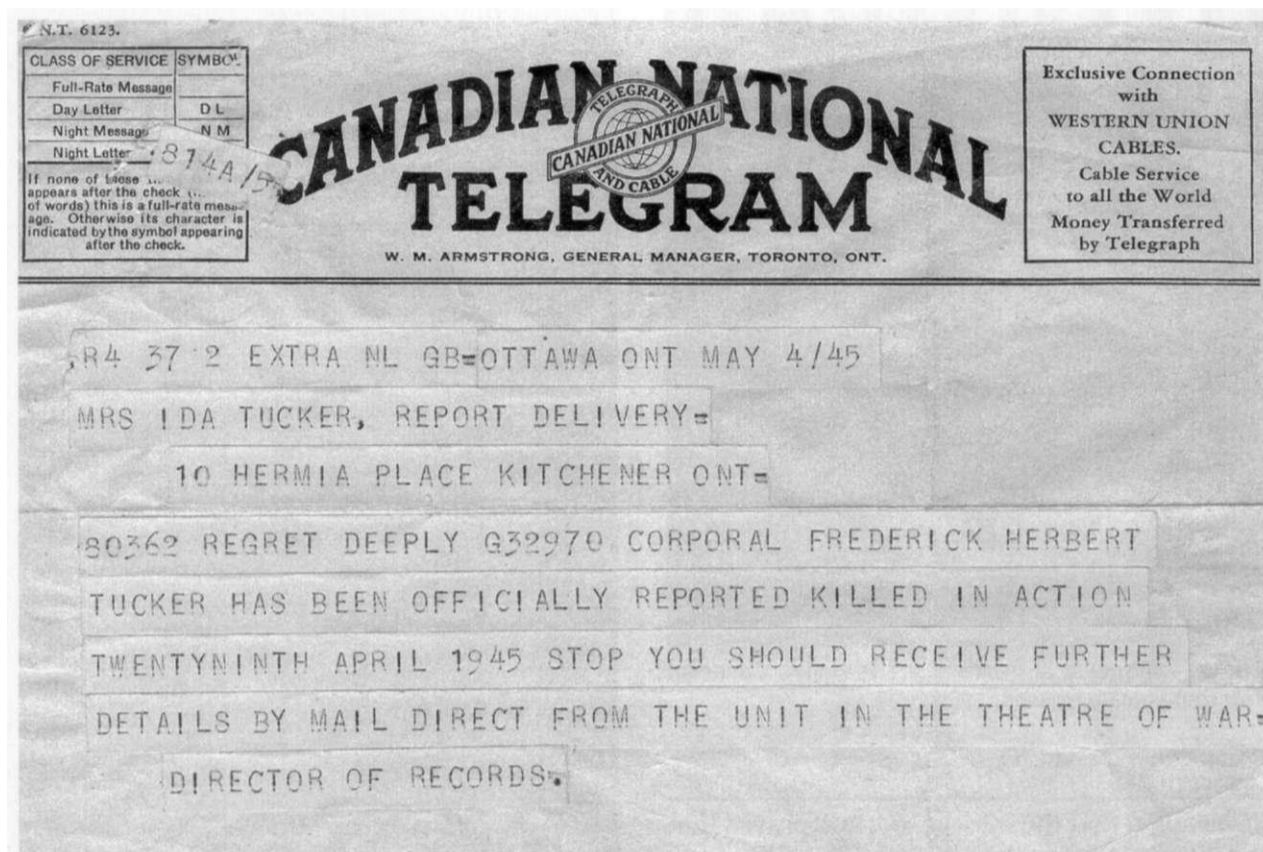
Less than one month after Fred Tucker wrote this letter, the war in Europe was over. For Bill Tucker, the great relief and joy was highlighted by the Seaforths' trek to Amsterdam. As the Regiment reached the edge of the city they were totally unprepared for what they were about to witness. People poured into the streets to celebrate their freedom and thank the Canadians. Women kissed them in the streets and said in their broken English "Thank You, Canadian Heroes!" Children hugged them and asked for "chokolat," which all of the soldiers had in their packs.

The celebrations were short-lived. Just weeks after the war ended, Bill received a letter from his mother. It said that she had been sent a telegram informing her that Fred had been killed in action. She asked if he would try to find his grave and represent the family. Bill couldn't believe it. He had last heard from Fred just weeks before, still safe and far from the front. Bill was determined to find his brother and write his mother telling her it was all a big mistake and that Fred was fine. He explained

the situation to his Commanding Officer who allowed him to leave in search of his brother.

Bill headed north towards Wurdum, where his mother said Fred was temporarily buried.

be repatriated early. As a widow, she needed Bill at home to take care of the household. With her very limited income and four daughters to support at home, she felt that having Bill at home would be a great relief for both herself and the



On his way there he ran into someone he knew from Kitchener who had served with the Perths. The soldier told Bill that he was very sorry but Fred had been killed. Bill asked him how he knew that, and the man said that he was with him when he died. The soldier then led him to the farm where they had been. He told Bill that Fred was standing in front of a window in the barn when he was shot. Fred crumpled to the ground and the other soldier grabbed him and asked him if he was O.K. Fred replied "Ya, I'm fine" and then he died. Fred Tucker died on Sunday, 29 April 1945, five days before the end of hostilities. He was just 23 years old.

The Tucker family was devastated by Fred's death. Bill never figured out why Fred, a clerk through most of the war, was involved in the fighting at all. Mrs. Tucker requested that Bill

family. An army investigator recommended that Bill return home. Bill was granted an early discharge on compassionate grounds. On 2 November 1945, Bill Tucker returned to civilian life.

Bill Tucker earned the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, 1939-45 Star, France and Germany Star, and the Italy Star during his hard fought efforts in the Second World War. He understood the importance of the war and shuddered to think about how things would have been if the Germans had won. In his lifetime, Bill made sure that he instilled in his children and grandchildren the importance of family, and the values of teamwork and helping others in need. He learned how quickly life can change and he savored every moment with the ones he loved. He knew first hand the horrors and



Above: Bill Tucker at Fred's grave in Holten Canadian War Cemetery in Holland, 1995.

Right: Fred's gravestone.

devastation that the war caused, and prayed that the atrocities that he witnessed would never again become a reality.

The people of Holland have never forgotten the brave Canadians who liberated their war torn country. In 1990 and again in 1995, Bill Tucker returned to the Netherlands with his wife Mary and sisters Rita, Mildred and Marie and her husband Noble to celebrate and remember. They were greeted with Canadian flags everywhere and banners hanging in the streets saying 'Welcome Canadian Heroes!' Strangers stopped veterans in the streets to shake their hand and say thank you. Bill always had a soft spot for the Dutch people because they were so good to him and because they wholeheartedly appreciated the help the Canadians gave when they needed it most. That bond must have been some consolation when Bill and his sisters visited their brother Fred's grave in the quiet woods of Holten Canadian Military Cemetery.



Angela Fritz graduated with a BA in History from the University of Waterloo in 2001, with a particular interest in the Second World War. She wrote this article about her Grandfather and Great Uncle Fred to preserve this piece of her family history for future generations. Angela says, "I am very grateful to have heard these stories first hand from my Grandpa, and want to make sure that his story is never lost."