

## Drama on the Ems

# Drama on the Ems

At the end of April 1945, Canadian troops were just across the Dutch-German border in East Frisia (in north-western Germany) just before the river Ems. The town of Leer was situated on the other side of the river on the way to Emden. Surrounded by lowlands that were difficult to pass in the north, and Ems River in the west and Leda River in the south, Leer, a port town, was easy to defend and therefore difficult to overtake. All access bridges across the Ems and Leda were blown up by the Germans. For Canadians there was no other choice to reach the town except by water.



Leer was attacked from three directions.

source [www.ibiblio.org](http://www.ibiblio.org)

This was no easy task. Since the Ems River flows into the Wadden Sea, tides affected the water level and the flow in the river. Ebb and flow currents were unpredictable and the Canadian Army did not have the right information about the tides. What was clear was that high tide was the best time to make any attempted crossing.

Aerial photographs had showed that German troops were dug in well behind the dikes surrounding the city.

The River Ems was three to four hundred meters wide. Only under the protection of a smokescreen and strong artillery support would it be possible to successfully attack Leer with boats on the river Ems. General Simonds ordered that there should be a firm beachhead before midnight on April 28, 1945, from which the attack on Leer could be deployed. That meant that the attack had to take place in the middle of the day, around three pm, when the water was at its highest.

The crossing was made in three different places. Simultaneously, the defense of the Germans was tested with artillery fire and attacks from the air. The *North Nova Scotia Highlanders* would cross the Leda from the south bank and occupy the harbour of Leer which was situated on a peninsula in the town.

With three companies in thirty boats, the *Highland Light Infantry* crossed the river Ems at the spot where Leda flows into the Ems. This was about three kilometers south of the town center.



Infantry troops of "A" Company, Highland Light

Infantry of Canada, run to the boats that they must take to cross the River Ems for the attack on Leer. Source: <http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/>

The *Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders* Regiment would cross near Bingum from the west bank of the Ems River to attack the town from the west. The three regiments would start their attack at exactly the same time. The attack began with heavy shelling of the German defense as of 2:30 pm.



Canadian attack boats on the river Ems in Leer.

Source: [www.euhausen-klaus.de](http://www.euhausen-klaus.de)

The attack from the south was spectacular and successful with relatively few losses.

### **dramatic progress**

But for the *Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders* Regiment, the operation from the west went less smoothly, not to say dramatically. A number of boats had engine problems or capsized. Some of those shipwrecked were rescued, but at the end of the day at least nineteen men from the regiment were killed, drowned, or missing.

After the German surrender, a team of *Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders* went back to the Ems. The river was dredged for bodies of the missing men. Some of the drowned men were found with their complete gear still on their bodies.

*Major Forman, Lance Corporal Abrams and Private Whitcombe explained later what had happened to the boat in which they were trying to get across. They were in a boat with fourteen men. Their boat ran into trouble because the soldier who sat at the front of the boat (bow man), almost went overhead, possibly because he was hit. The man hung over the bow. Perhaps as a result, but at least practically at the same time, the front of the boat was hit by a wave caused by the boat in front of them. In seconds their boat disappeared under water and the crew ended up in the cold river water. Forman, Abrams and Whitcombe saw their comrades disappear in the water.*

### Missing for twenty years

The ten missing men from their boat were *Cpl John Sawatzky, Pte Steven John Gravelle, Pte E. Joslin, Pte F. Munroe, Pte W. Brooks, Lance Corporal M. Moore, Pte J. Hinds, Pte Cecil Lawes, Pte S. Powel and Pte I. Langille*. Most were found within a few weeks or months, with the exception of farmer's son **Earl Harcourt Joslin** (born April 20, 1911). Joslin was missing for a long time after he disappeared into the cold water of the Ems.



Joslin's grave in Nijmegen. Photo: Wouter van Dijken

His wife, Nellie Joslin, had after the disappearance of her husband received a letter from him, which was written two days before the attack on Leer began. Nellie was left behind with their two-year-old daughter Rosemary Anne.

She asked the army for more information regarding the disappearance of her husband. Clarity was delayed for twenty years. Although Joslin was not found, it was officially accepted that he was deceased as a result of drowning.

Nellie Joslin had already taken the surname of her second husband (Gordon) when, in the 1960s, she received a message that that Earl had been found. He was reburied on May 23, 1967 at the Jonkerbos Cemetery in Nijmegen (23, I, grave 6). He is the only one of the drowned men of his regiment who was not buried in Holten.



Gravelle's grave. Photo: Wouter van Dijken, through [Findagrave.com](https://www.findagrave.com)

22-year-old **Steven Gravelle** had run away from home to join the army. His initial assessment noted that he was "possibly too immature, independent self-conscious, small and not very robust. A crazy child. Possibly too immature to know what he wants. Incapable of performing any tasks given to him. "

A week after he had disappeared in the waves of the Ems, his remains were found along the banks of the river. Gravelle was buried in Holten: Plot 11, Row D, Grave 5.



Munroe's grave in Holten. Photo: Wouter van Dijken

22-year-old **Frank Munroe** was initially reported missing. His body was found relatively quickly. He was first buried temporarily in Bingum, then finally got his final resting place at the Canadian War Cemetery in Holten (Plot 11, Row D, Grave 9). Munroe had two brothers who were also in the army.



Merle Coleman Moore . Source: [www.findagrave.com](http://www.findagrave.com)

**Merle Coleman Moore**, farmer by profession, was born on New Year's Eve in 1922, and wounded in September 1944. He was a few weeks in the military hospital with a shrapnel wound on his left shoulder. He fell out of the boat on April 28, 1945 in the Ems and was reported missing. In October 1945 his body was found and he was registered as killed in action. He was laid to rest in Holten: Plot 11, Row D, Grave 7.

Items sent to Brooks family had severe water damage: a Mido wristwatch, a Parker fountain pen, and a pipe.



Brooks. Photo Wouter van Dijken (treated)

**Walter James Brooks**, born on May 24, 1917, was truck driver by profession. He also drowned in the Ems. Items sent to Brooks family had severe water damage: a Mido wristwatch, a Parker fountain pen, and a pipe. After a delay, it wasn't until November 1945 that his wife Kathleen Rita heard for certain that her husband had died.

He first got a temporary grave on the west side of the Ems Bridge in Leer. Later, he was reburied in Holten (Plot 11, Row D, Grave 3).



Sawatzky. Source: [findagrave.com](http://findagrave.com)



Farmer **John Sawatzky (20)**, had been previously wounded in the Normandy landings. He was mortally wounded at the crossing over the Ems. He was buried temporarily at the roadside at the Bailey Bridge on the road from Weener towards Leer.

In Holten, he was reburied in Plot 11, Row D, Grave 14.



Joseph Gerard Hinds. Source: [veterans.gc.ca](http://veterans.gc.ca)

20-year-old **Joseph Gerard Hinds** was initially also declared as missing. But he was found after a few days. He was buried in Holten: Plot 12, Row D, Grave 5



Lawes. Source: [ICB Holten](http://ICB Holten)

**Cecil Arthur Lawes** was 27 when he fell into the water in the Ems. He was married to Helen May. Together they had a son, Melvin Ross. Three weeks before Cecil Arthur drowned his brother - who served in the same regiment - died during the liberation of Leesten (near Zutphen). Just after the summer, Helen May Lawes got a message that her husband was deceased and was officially reported as "*killed in action*". He was buried in Holten: Plot 11, Row D Grave 13

*An incorrect newspaper report made Viola believe that her husband was still alive.*

32-year-old **Ira Charles Langille** had four children with his wife Viola Estelle when he went to the front in northwestern Europe: Mae Marilyn (1937), Eileen Marie (1938), Arnold Bruce (1940) and Doreen Lillian (1942). Ira himself had been an only child.



Ira and Viola with their children. Source: [ICB Holten](#)

Viola initially received the news that her husband was missing. She got hope when she read in a newspaper that he was wounded. By telegram, she asked for clarification. The answer came by return mail and deflated any hope: *"THE REPORT OF PRIVATE Langille BEING WOUNDED AND REMAINING ON DUTY IS A NEWSPAPER ERROR AS HIS NAME WAS RELEASED TO THE PRESS ON SIXTEENTH MAY AS MISSING STOP IF FURTHER INFORMATION BECOMES AVAILABLE YOU WILL BE IMMEDIATELY advised "*

In September 1945 Marilyn Mae was finally notified by telegram: *"DEEPLY REGRET F86580 PRIVATE IRA CHARLES Langille previously REPORTED MISSING NOW OFFICIALLY REPORTED KILLED TWENTYEIGHTH APRIL 1945"*

Langille was buried in Holten: Plot 11, Row D Grave 6.



Pte. Samuel Donald Powell

Samuel Donald Powell Source: [www.findagrave.com](http://www.findagrave.com)

**Samuel Donald Powell**, born on September 18, 1922, also drowned in the Ems. His wife wanted to know more about the way he had come to an end. "We especially want to know how he died and where he is buried. It's been six weeks since he apparently was killed and we have not heard anything. "The Powell file doesn't mention whether she received an answer to her question.

Powell was reburied in Holten in 1946 in Plot 12, Row D, Grave 3

25-year-old **James E. Sullivan** was in another boat which included about ten men of the *Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders* Regiment. Among them were **Leonard Gordon Brough** and **Sydney Alexander Oslund**.

Sullivan also was initially reported missing. On May 28, his family was informed by telegram that the body of *Lance Corporal* James Edward Sullivan was found. He was killed in action.

His colleague *SGT* GW McGill explained what had happened: "At about 3:30 in the afternoon on April 28, we crossed the Ems over in a boat during the attack on Leer. Suddenly the nose of the boat got submerged in the water and we capsized. Everyone was in the water. When I emerged, I was picked up by another boat, along with *Cpl* WMJ Wood. We searched for about ten minutes, but were unable to find *Lance Corporal* Sullivan. A check by the platoon commander on the other side showed that Sullivan, Brough and Oslund were missing. "

Sullivan's mother, Augusta Sullivan, complained in the autumn of 1945 that she did not receive a death benefit, although she was still dependent on him. She thought that she was entitled to one. The frustration was deep, as shown by the somewhat awkward letter she wrote. "If I were *French*, I would have gotten the money," she believed.

Meanwhile, her son was already reburied at his final resting place in Holten: Plot 11, Row D Grave 16.

Much later, when Sullivan's mother was already deceased, his father wanted to know who had adopted the grave of his son. The director of *War Service Records*, HM Jackson, sent the name and address of the adopter (HA Marsman from Wierden). But he also wrote e that adopting a tomb was nothing official. "*I might point out that this adoption is purely unofficial. Those who have undertaken such voluntary work visit the cemeteries from time to time, place cut flowers on the graves on special dates, and send snapshots to the next of kin. However, the official care and maintenance of the graves in perpetuity is the responsibility of the Imperial War Graves Commission of which Canada is a partner.* "



Brough's grave in Holten. Photo Wouter van Dijken

**Leonard Gordon Brough** (May 29, 1924) was on the same boat as Sullivan. Brough was injured by mortar fire shortly after the invasion of Normandy on July 5, 1944.

He was last seen by McGill, who made the same statement about him as about the disappearance of Sullivan.



Brough's body was found on May 13, 1945 by Sgt LT Dennison. He noticed, from looking at Brough's body, that he had been killed immediately by a shard from a grenade or a bomb, or perhaps from a piece of iron from the nearby railway bridge. "He has been submerged in the water for about a month. It's most likely that he was killed in the battle for the bridge," said Dennison, who had no knowledge of the circumstances in which Brough had been thrown overboard. Dennison helped recover the body and gathered the items found on Brough's body. The items sent to the Canadian military authorities. He took photographs of the place where Brough was buried temporarily, just across the dike, near the railway bridge over the Ems on the west side of the river. Based on the items found and the place where the body was found, they concluded that it was Brough, who had been missing since April 28th. Brough's mother Violet Brough received on July 28, 1945 a letter that said it was now established that her son had been killed in action.

Brough was reburied in Holten: Plot 12, Row D, Grave 6.



Oslund's grave in Holten. Source: [www.findagrave.com](http://www.findagrave.com)

Although Sullivan, Brough and **Sydney Alexander OSLUND** (born April 24, 1911) of the *Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders* Regiment were in the same boat, they were not buried together. Oslund and Sullivan are adjacent, Brough is located in plot 12.

Beginning in June 1945 it was clear that Oslund was drowned. He was buried temporarily in a field grave in Bingum, where he was later transferred to Holten.

His mother Hannah Oslund received a telegram on May 8, 1945 saying that her son was missing. This was followed, a month later, on June 6, by a letter stating definitively stated that her son was killed in action. They also got an excerpt from the story of McGill on how Oslund, Sullivan and Brough were killed.

On behalf of Mrs Oslund, Reverend AP Addison wrote a letter to the military authorities some time later. He asked, on her behalf, if she could get back the wristwatch and the accordion of her son. No accordion was mentioned on the list of personal items that was made on the death of each soldier.

*Frank Biernaski's brother was killed in France in August.*



Frank Biernaski. Source: [www.findagrave.com](http://www.findagrave.com)

**Frank (Joseph) Biernaski** was born on December 2, 1913. Like his brother Philip (who was assigned to the *Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa*), he was sent to the battlefield in Northwest Europe to fight the Germans. Frank's brother Philip was killed in France on August 11, 1944 and buried there.

Frank's mother received a telegram in early May 1945 that Frank was wounded. Then she got the message that he was wounded and missing. That confused her. She sent a letter in which she asked for clarification on May 15, 1945 asking how the military authorities could now know that he was missing and injured. "We cannot understand," Anna Biernaski wrote. "We would be grateful for an explanation, because this would be the second son we would lose in this war."

#### **No clarification, but the Army speculates**

Clarification did not come. However, speculation on the part of the army came in a letter dated May 22, 1945: *"However as no further explanation was received other than the bare cable that he was wounded and missing it is regretted that I am unable to supply additional information. However similar cases in the past have occurred during patrol. Usually when members of the patrol had become wounded and due to circumstances at the time were unable to be taken back to their own lines and have eventually been reported as Prisoners of War. It is also thought that in this particular instance a thorough search of the area in-which your son was reported missing was made later and as no sign of his body was found he was reported missing."*

On May 23, there then came a telegram which gave a definitive answer: " (...) *DEEPLY REGRET TO INFORM THAT PRIVATE C34053 FRANK JOSEPH BIERNASKI previously WOUNDED AND REPORTED MISSING IN ACTION IS NOW OFFICIALLY REPORTED KILLED IN ACTION* (...)."

Frank Biernaski was buried in Holten in Plot 12, Row D, Grave 4.



Francis Wilber Spencer. Source: [www.veterans.gc.ca](http://www.veterans.gc.ca)

Widower **Francis Wilber Spencer** was 35 when he was killed in the attack on Leer. He was initially reported as missing. In August 1945 he was officially removed from the list of missing and included on the list of casualties.

After the death of her mother in 1945, his daughter Angela (born in 1933) was looked after by the aunt of Francis Wilber Spencer, Elizabeth Burns.

Spencer was temporarily buried in Jemgum in Germany, on top of the dike along the Ems. He was reburied in Holten: Plot 11, Row D, Grave 4.

*It was the second time that Jack Steward was injured.*

The wife of **Jack Allen Steward** (March 25, 1921) was given on May 29, 1945 a report that her husband had died after she too initially had the news that Jack was missing. Nine months earlier she had had a similar message when her husband was wounded in France. Jack was a month in the hospital to recover from the injuries to his left shoulder that he got on August 9, when he was hit by a shell fragment.

Steward was part of the *Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders* Regiment involved in the attack carried out on Leer. He was killed on April 28.

Jack and his wife Ruth had a son, John Antony Steward, who was born on November 27, 1941. Ruth remarried after the war.

Steward was buried in Holten: Plot 12, Row D, Grave 1.

*Roy Thackeray used his pay book as a dance card.*



Roy Thackeray. Source: [ICB Holten](http://ICB Holten)

**Roy Iverson Thackeray** (January 9, 1925) probably didn't die in the water. His personnel file indicates that he was killed on April 28, 1945. Although it is not mentioned he probably died in the battle of Leer.

A few days earlier, in the Groningen village of Haren, Thackeray had met Janny Bakker, who lived in the Molenkamp Lane. He wrote her name in his pay book, as well as the name of Lenie Kruikemeier from the village of Zuid horn.

Thackeray did not have a reputation as a disciplined soldier. He refused to get his hair cut after he received an order to do so by a superior, he was regularly punished because his weapon had not been cleaned properly, and polishing shoes was also not his favorite pastime.

Thackeray was buried temporarily in the German Ihrhove. He later received his final resting place in Holten: 7 Plot F Row 11 Grave.

### No poem on the stone



Edgar Smith Source: [www.veterans.gc.ca](http://www.veterans.gc.ca)

Brenda Smith never knew her father **Pte Edgar Douglas Smith** (May 21 1918). She was born on September 1, 1944, when her father was stationed in England, where he was preparing for deployment in North-West Europe. Smith was sent to France in August 1944 from the United Kingdom to fight as a soldier with the *Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders Regiment*. In November 1944, he injured his right buttock. He had to recover for a month in the hospital before returning to his regiment.

At the end of April 1945, he was part of the troops who were taking Leer. It was fatal to him, as he died of the injuries he sustained.

After his family received a message about the death, Edgar's mother wrote a letter to the army command. She wanted to know how Edgar had died, and whether there was an opportunity to transfer his body to Canada in due time.

That was against the Canadian policy that was used during the First World War: fallen soldiers were buried not far from the place where they died. But the Canadian military leadership did not want to have the deceased soldiers or their survivors to live with idea that they were buried in enemy territory. Therefore, most of the Canadians killed in Germany are buried in the Netherlands.

Later (on February 14, 1947) mother Ida Smith sent a request to write a text on the tombstone:



Tombstone, with no additional text. Source: [findagrave.com](https://www.findagrave.com)

We can not forget his smiling face  
His happy carefree ways  
The smile That won so many friends,  
All those happy days gone by  
If all the world were ours to give,  
We'd Gladly give and more  
To see the face of one we loved  
Come through the door smiling.  
  
From loving father, mother and family.

The text never was engraved on the stone, which mentions only name, rank, age, and his regiment. Smith is buried in Holten in Plot 8, Row E, Grave 2.

*Harold Wakely would like to receive the honors of his father.*

Then sixteen-year-old Harold Wakely wrote a letter in 1949 to the military authorities. He would like, as a memento of his fallen father **George Sidney Wakely**, to receive his medals - if that was possible.





George Sidney Wakely Source: [veterans.gc.ca](http://veterans.gc.ca)

Wakely was part of the Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders Regiment that stormed the harbour town of Leer on April 28 on the Ems. He was married to Ida Wakely, with whom he had one son.

Wakely was killed at the Battle of Leer. Teenager Wakely wanted to have something tangible of his father. He would get the medals eventually, though he would have to ask his mother. The medals of deceased soldiers were sent to the next of kin, and that was Ida Wakely in this case.

The medals George Sidney Wakely was entitled to were the 1939-1945 Star, France-Germany Star, Canadian Volunteer Service Medal, and Clasp and War Medal 1939-45. These would, as soon as they were available, be sent by registered mail.

Wakely was buried in Holten: Plot 11, Row E Grave 13.