

Ayer, Donald Holman, Lieutenant



- Donald Holman Ayer was born on 22 April 1912 in Bangor, Maine. He was 32 years old when he was killed in action on 4 March 1945 in Germany.
- On 15 July 1940, he enlisted with the 3rd Canadian Motorcycle Regiment (17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars) in Montreal, Quebec and served locally until, February 1941, when the unit was redesignated as the 7th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment (17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars) and deployed to Camp Debert, Nova Scotia. On 17 July 1941 he was promoted to sergeant. On 28 August 1941, he travelled with the unit to England. There, he was selected for officer training, and, on 18 September 1943, was promoted to lieutenant. He was deployed to France on 14 June 1944, and was wounded twice, once on 8 July 1944, and once again on 14 August 1944. After recovering in the hospital, he returned to serve with the unit on the 28 October 1944.
- Prior to enlistment, he attended four years of secondary education then, upon graduation, attended the United States Naval Academy, where he obtained a Bachelor of Science in 1939.
- After graduating, he was employed as a factory inspector for 2.5 years by the Prest-O-Lite Co., Inc., a manufacturer of welding supplies in Speedway City, Indiana.
- His address submitted on enrolment was the YMCA on Drummond Street, Montreal, a temporary accommodation while he volunteered for active service in Canada.
- According to his medical examination, he was 5 foot 11 inches tall and weighed 125 pounds. He had fair hair and grey eyes. He was found fit for category A.
- He was the son of Nathan Chase Ayer (deceased) and Katharine Holman Ayer, of Kittery Point, Maine, United States.
- When he was killed, Donald was a bachelor and had no children.
- The two beneficiaries of Donald's will were his mother and his brother Nathan Chase Ayer.
- His body is buried in the Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery, Groesbeek, Netherlands (Ref VII. E. 3.) (plot, row, grave)

Context

- In April 1942, Americans in Canadian ranks were given permission to get discharges so they could join the armed forces of the United States, who had recently joined the war. The regimental war diary reported that, of more than 50 Americans in the 7th Reconnaissance Regiment, no more than six were contemplating making the switch. Donald Ayer was one of the Americans who decided to stay with the unit.
- On 8 July 1944, Lieutenant Donald Ayer led an old-style cavalry charge at Gruchy, near Caen, where the Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders were held up outside the village by heavy machine gun fire. Ayer assembled all 15 or 16 of "B" Squadron's Universal carriers and without hesitation, charged right into the middle of an enemy company position. With grenades and Bren guns firing at point-blank range, they drove the enemy from his dugouts, killing dozens, wounding others, and capturing between 25 and 30 prisoners. This initiative allowed the infantry to advance into Gruchy. Donald Ayer was lightly injured in the scalp during this attack.
- By the end of July 1944, the US, and British Forces further west in Normandy had broken through the enemy defences. To stem this tide, the German command moved several armoured units further west. When this happened, the Second Canadian Corps was ordered to advance to the south-east, with a view to cutting off the German lines of retreat. Operation Totalize (7-11 August) was initially successful in breaching the defences along the Verrieres Ridge, south of Caen, but then the advance got bogged down. On 13 August, plans for Operation Tractable were drawn up for the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division and 4th Canadian Armoured Division. These plans envisaged three phases. The first two were intended to secure the high ground overlooking the River Laison. Under the third phase, the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division would cross the river, secure the high ground on the other side, and exploit with armour to Falaise. The 7th Reconnaissance Regiment was to follow the leading armoured elements, and hold the ground between them and the infantry, mopping up any remaining pockets of enemy. At noon on 14 August, the 7th Reconnaissance Regiment crossed the start line, behind the tanks of the 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade and ahead of the infantry of the 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade. As the "C" Squadron's No. 10 Troop vehicles went over the crest of a hill and down the slope on the other side, the Germans fired their weapons, destroying several vehicles. Despite this, the unit continued advancing and firing until it reached the bottom of the valley where it was ordered to dig in for a counter attack. When the armoured elements were blocked from crossing the River Laison, the regiment got orders to find a crossing over the river and take the hill to their front. On the left, Sergeant George Routley found a small bridge at Rouvres and seized the south bank of the River Laison. On the right, Lieutenant Ayer discovered a small ford near Montboint, enabling "B" Squadron to establish a bridgehead. Lieutenant Ayer pushed forward with six carriers to the high ground at Point 159, the dominating height above Falaise. Although severely wounded in the chest by machine gun fire, Ayer refused to be evacuated until his small force was deployed to hold this salient feature. This action relieved the entire crossing from observed fire and directly influenced the crossing of the whole regiment. Ayer was awarded the Military Cross for this action.
- On 3 February, the Regiment moved to Nijmegen in preparation for Operation Veritable, whose mission was to clear the west bank of the Rhine, cross the river and advance into Germany. The operation was divided into three phases, corresponding to the three main fortified zones

established by the Germans. The 3rd Canadian Infantry Division was given the task of clearing the area between the Nijmegen-Kleve road and the River Waal. On the afternoon of 4 March 1945, Lieutenant Ayer was tasked to "probe to Sonsbeck" from Uedem. The fighting vehicles had become "practically useless by bogging down all over the place," so Ayer led a foot patrol from No. 7 Troop along the road to Sonsbeck. The patrol was provided with cover by a carrier section and by two Daimlers that the troop had managed to un-bog. It got to a point just south of the Hochwald Forest when it came under fire from a 20-mm gun and multiple machine guns. After Corporal E. R. Johnson was wounded by a round from a 20-mm gun, Ayer started over to help him. Before he got there he was hit and killed.

