

Sergeant George Elliott French (1911-1944).

7th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment (17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars)

French, George Elliott, Sergeant (D3892)

George Elliott French enlisted with the 17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars at the Montreal South Depot on 30 April 1941. He was given service number D-3892.



George was born on 11 Nov 1911 and was thirty years old when he enrolled. Prior to enrollment he had lived 20 years in Glenelm, Quebec, 5 years in Athelstan, Quebec, 4 years in Shawbridge, Quebec and 1 year in Ste-Marguerite, Quebec. Glenelm and Athelstan were farming villages in the flatlands near the United States border approximately seven kilometres South of Huntingdon, and 84 kilometres Southwest of Montréal. Shawbridge and Ste-Marguerite are in the Laurentian Mountains 82 and 95 kilometres Northwest of Montreal.

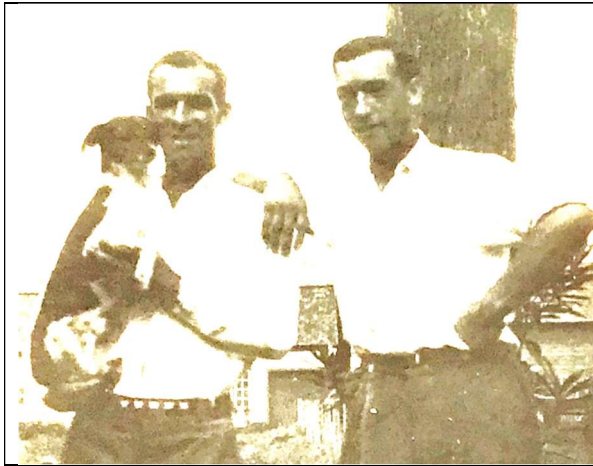
According to his enrollment documents, he left school at the age of fifteen, probably in 1926, attending up to the seventh grade. From 1927 to 1930 he worked as an apprentice carpenter for his uncle, Arthur Elliott of Huntingdon, Quebec, where he earned \$18 per week. On his enrollment forms, he claimed to have 10 years' of general farming experience. His last job before joining the army in 1941 was as a groom at a sporting club business (possibly at a riding club or stables) in Ste-Marguerite where he had been employed for six years.

His medical examination form shows that he was 5' 7", weighed 140 pounds, had light brown hair and brown eyes, and was in good health. The terminal phalanx (last bone) on his right thumb was missing, possibly because of an earlier accident.

His father, Hugh French, a labourer, died on 14 October 1932. His mother was Jane Elizabeth Elliott French. Their marriage was held on 29 May 1901, in Huntingdon, Quebec. George had three brothers William John French (37 in 1941), Clifford Hugh French (35 in 1941), and Clarence Angus French (29 in 1941). He also had a sister, Violet French Grant, who died 7 Dec 1935.

Sergeant George Elliott French (1911-1944).

7th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment (17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars)



George (on right) and his brother Clifford



George and his wife Carrie

George was married on 31 March 1940, to Caroline (Carrie) Burt Macfarlane who also grew up in Athelstan, Quebec and later became a school teacher. The couple had no offspring. She was 34 years old when he enrolled. Carrie's father, Thomas S. MacFarlane was a farmer from Athelstan, and her mother was the late Helen Anderson. According to the notices sent announcing George's death, Carrie Macfarlane lived at 730 Labelle Street, St-Jerome, Quebec then moved to 666 Carillon Avenue, St-Jerome. The couple's move from the Huntingdon area to Shawbridge may have occurred when Carrie was hired there as a teacher in a local school.

Deployment to England

Twenty-three days after enrolling in the armed forces on 30 April 1941, George was posted to Camp Debert, Nova Scotia, where he joined the rest of his unit, the 7th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment (17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars). There he started his training as a driver/mechanic. On 23 August, the unit was deployed to Southern England to undergo further training and to be available to help defend against a possible German invasion. Over time, he became a qualified driver/mechanic and a qualified motor mechanic. He was promoted to Corporal on 13 February 1943.

As shown in the map below, the 7th Reconnaissance Regiment was moved frequently from camp to camp.

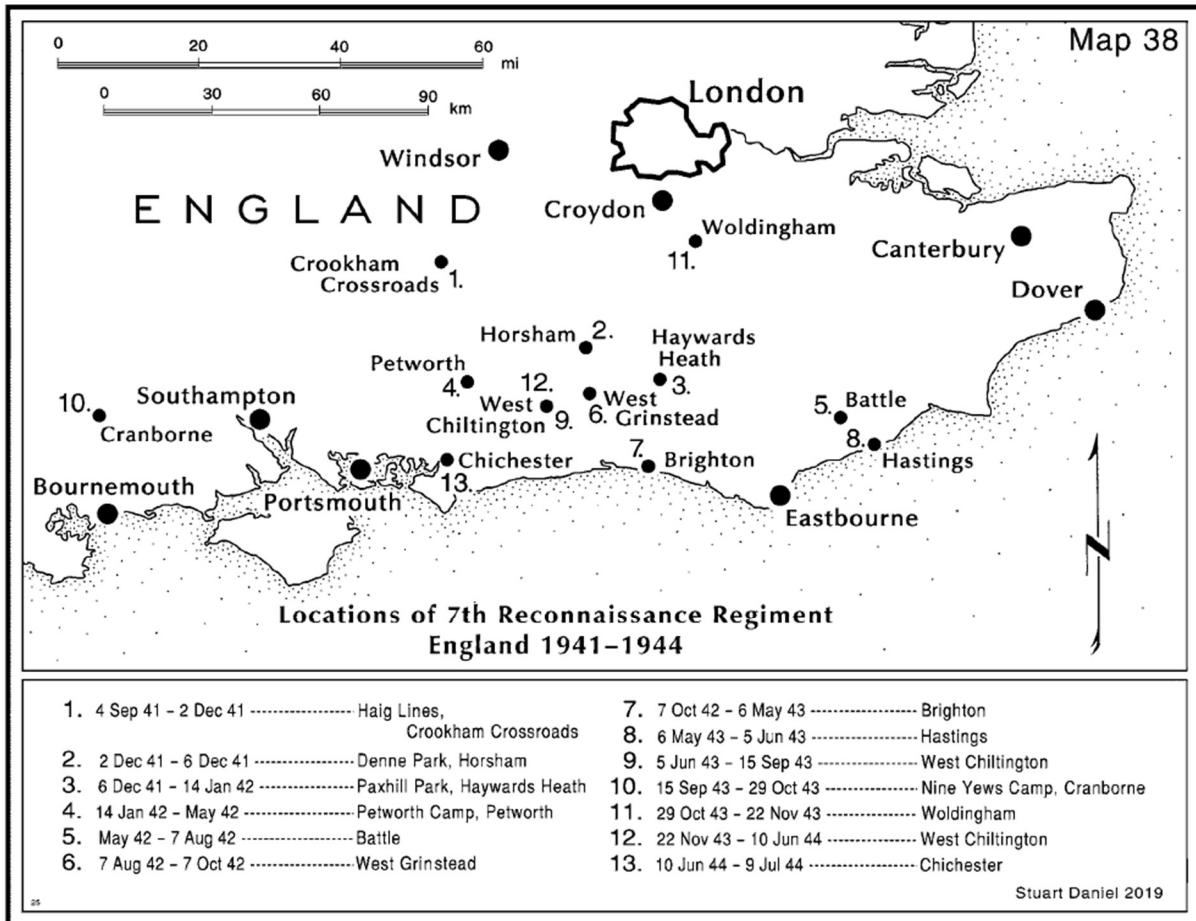
Time at Battle Abbey May to August 1942

The 7th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment (17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars) was billeted at Battle Abbey from May 1942 to August 1942. Battle Abbey was built on the site of the 1066 Battle of Hastings by William the Conqueror to atone for the huge loss of life - both Norman and Saxon - during the battle. In 1538, when King Henry VIII suppressed the monasteries, it became a private country home, and then in the early 20th century, a school. When the Second World War broke out it was requisitioned by the War Office, hence becoming a base for various British and Commonwealth regiments, with the Canadians being billeted there. During the Hussars' stay, "B"

Sergeant George Elliott French (1911-1944).

7th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment (17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars)

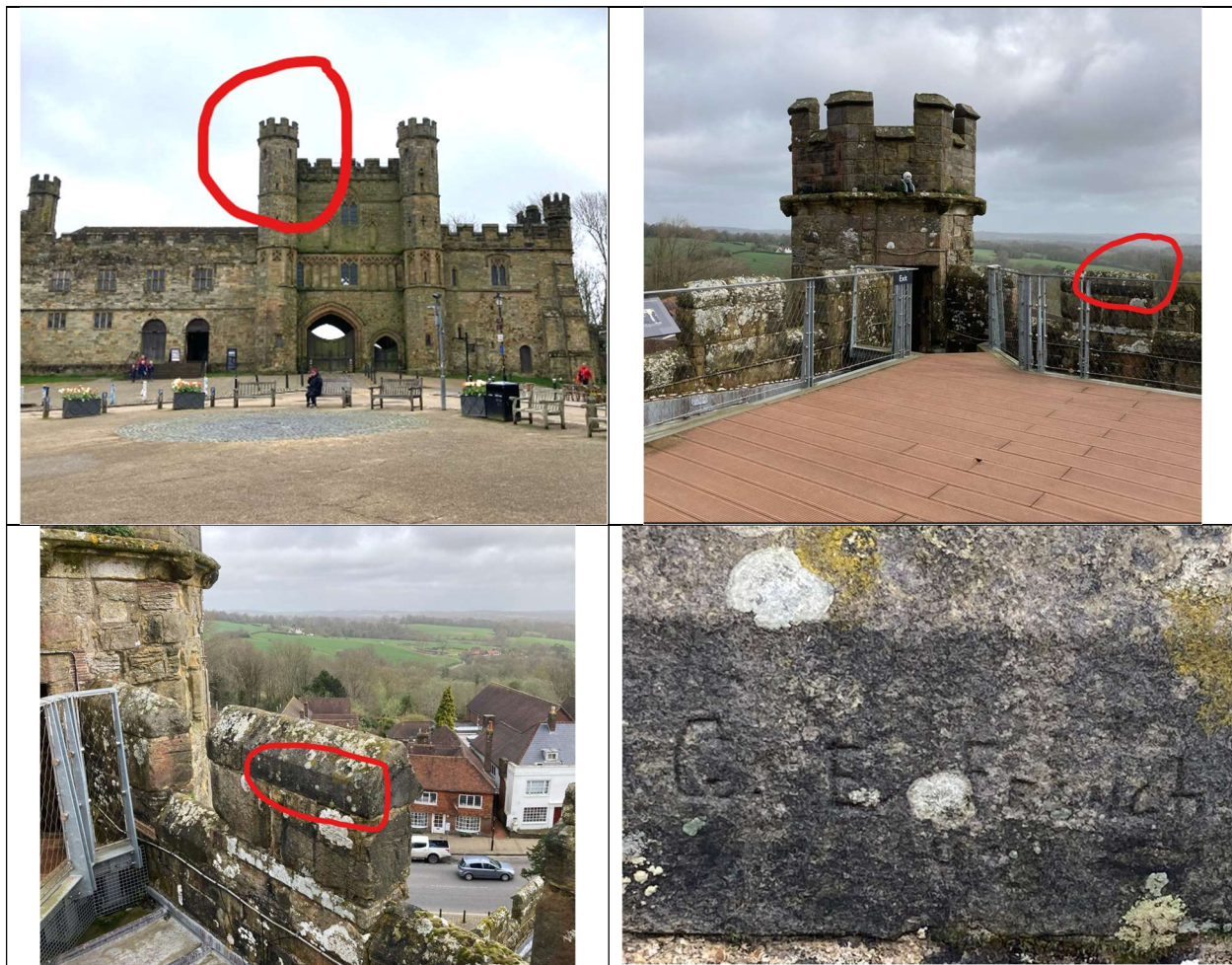
Squadron took up quarters in the Abbey, while "A" Squadron was down the road a few miles, and "C" Squadron was in Vinehall on the main road to London about 4 miles from Battle.



It was during the unit's stay at the Abbey that some soldiers including Sgt George Elliott French carved their names in the ancient stonework. His name carving is right at the top of the Abbey Gatehouse on the stonework abutting the roof. The walls of Battle Abbey, and in particular, the Gatehouse are festooned with graffiti, much of which long predates the 17th Hussars' time there. This includes medieval graffiti which predates the Reformation, with mason's and carpenter's marks, as well Witch Marks, and a number of "W"s depicting the "Double Virgin" (The Virgin Mary) which were carved in medieval times to ward off evil spirits.

Sergeant George Elliott French (1911-1944).

7th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment (17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars)



The carving "G.E. French" can be found on the inside of a parapet at the top of the gatehouse (tower) of Battle Abbey. It is directly to the right of the structure which is the top and entrance to a spiral staircase which runs down a tower forming the NE corner of the Gatehouse.

Deployment to the continent

Sergeant George Elliott French disembarked in Normandy on 18 July 1944, possibly with "A" Squadron. In France, the unit then took part in the battles of Caen, Falaise, and the River Laison. As the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division's reconnaissance regiment, it then rushed out in front of the advancing infantry and pursued the retreating enemy in a north-east direction through France. It eventually helped to encircle and obtain the surrender of the large, fortified garrisons at Boulogne, Cap Gris Nez, and Calais along the English Channel. During this run through France, George was then promoted to Lance Sergeant on 20 August 1944 and then to acting sergeant on 27 September 1944.

The Regiment then moved through Belgium to the Netherlands, where it was essentially used as dismounted infantry during the battle of the Scheldt, to help clear the enemy from the low-lying land south of the Scheldt Estuary. This important operation was necessary to shorten the

**Sergeant George Elliott French (1911-1944),
7th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment (17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars)**

overextended supply lines from Normandy, and it gave the Allied Forces unrestricted access to the Port of Antwerp.

Next, after arriving in the central part of the Netherlands, the advance of the Allied Forces was paused for the winter of 1944-45 notably while the supply lines were redirected through the Port of Antwerp and their supplies of ammunition, fuel, and other essential elements, were built up in anticipation of a thrust into northern Germany. While this was going on, the River Waal in Central Netherlands became the frontline. Starting in October 1944, different British, Canadian, Belgian, and Dutch regiments rotated through a line of fortified outposts along the Allied side of the river. From 17 December 1944 to 3 February 1945, the 7th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment (17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars) took over the positions near Dreumel, a small community about thirty-five kilometers west of Nijmegen.

The troops occupied observation and listening posts along the high winter dike overlooking the river. Apart from the shelling, which was intermittent, things tended to be quiet during the day but would heat up at night, with enemy patrols, shelling, outbursts of small arms fire, flares, and signal lights. In his book entitled "A Historical Account," Lieutenant Walter Pavey, a troop officer at the time, described the "amazingly wide frontage and the responsibilities handled by the individuals of the Regiment. As the darkness increased, each section became a tiny 7- or 8-man isolated stronghold, with nothing between it and the next 'fortress' but some two hundred yards of eerie, windswept dike."



Watercolour by Captain Alex Colville, "The Watch on the Dyke," 17 November 1944. It depicts two soldiers of "B" Squadron, 7th Reconnaissance Regiment manning a position on a dike in the Nijmegen area. (Susan Ross; Beaverbrook Collection of War Art; CWM. 19710261-2127)

Sergeant George Elliott French (1911-1944).

7th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment (17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars)

Circumstances of death

Sergeant French was wounded during an incident late in the evening of 24 December 1944. A Court of Inquiry held on 5 January 1945 probed into the circumstances leading to his death. According to the testimony received, during the night of 24 December, the troop Sergeant (Sgt R.T. Baker) and Sergeant Woodburn, both members of "A" Squadron, were visiting the outpost on the winter dike along the River Waal manned by Sergeant French's section, when Sten gun fire and explosions were heard from a Dutch outpost on their right flank. Sergeant Baker and Sergeant Woodburn decided to go and see if the Dutch soldiers needed help, and Sergeant French volunteered to lead the way as he had previously gone over to establish contact. They walked along the rear of the winter dike, but when they were 15 metres from the Dutch post, rather than asking the approaching visitors to halt and say the password, one of its Dutch occupants, who was extremely nervous, opened fire, hitting Sergeant French in the head. The Dutch soldier was stressed as it was only his fourth day at the front, and moments earlier, he and his colleagues had spotted enemy soldiers crossing the summer dike five hundred metres to their front. The other two Canadian sergeants hit the ground and shouted the password, and finally the Dutch soldier realized that he had mistakenly fired on friendly forces. Almost immediately, a medic was called forward to apply first aid and start the evacuation process. Sergeant French sustained a bullet wound to the head resulting in a compound depressed fracture of the vault of the scull and the right parietal region. Due to the seriousness of his wound, he died the following day in an ambulance on his way, from the 5th Canadian Field Dressing Station to the 88th (British) General Hospital, located in Belgium.

Burial and awards

Sergeant George French is commemorated on Page 309 of the Second World War Book of Remembrance. His body is buried at the Bergen-op-zoom Canadian War Cemetery, Noord-Brabant, in the Netherlands.



Sergeant George Elliott French (1911-1944).

7th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment (17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars)

During and after his service he was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the France & Germany Star, the Defence Medal, the War Medal 1939-1945, and the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp.

May he rest in peace. We will remember him.

After note

The Royal Canadian Hussars Association does not condone the defacing of monuments or historical buildings in any way, shape, or form, especially a building of such historical importance in a country that the unit was sent to help defend. But this is a unique story brought to us by a volunteer at the Abbey, who wanted to know who George Elliott French was, where he came from and what happened to him after he left Battle Abbey. We felt it was worthy of publication, especially as a means of remembering the service of one of our fallen soldiers, despite his indiscretion.

Bibliography

- E-Mails and photographs from Tim Birch, Volunteer at Battle Abbey and 1066 Battlefield near Hastings, England, March 2024
- Telephone discussions and photographs from Gerald French, nephew of the late Sergeant George Elliott French, living near Huntingdon, Quebec, March 2024
- Service Files of the Second World War - War Dead, 1939-1947, on-line search from Library and Archives Canada, Sergeant George Elliott French
- Court of Inquiry held to inquire into the circumstances leading to the death of D 3892 A/Sgt. French G.E., presided by Captain L.D. Johnson, 17 Jan 1945.
- Montreal's Cavalry – The History of the Royal Canadian Hussars, by Anthony Kellett, Steven Linton, and John Cochrane, published by The Montreal Cavalry Institute, 2021.
- Watercolour from Canadian War Museum.

Document prepared by John Cochrane, volunteer with the Royal Canadian Hussars Association, with the help of Tim Birch, Guide at the Battle Abbey, and Gerald French, nephew of George.