

The Brown suitcase

The title I gave my presentation is “the Brown suitcase”.

I’ll start the biography with a quote, from John 15:12-14

“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.”

Honorary Captain Walter Leslie Brown was born in Peterborough, Ontario on August 13, 1910, the son of George Brown, an inspector, and Florence Brown. Shortly after Walter’s birth, the family moved to Orillia, Ontario. There was no mention of Walter Brown having any sibling anywhere during my research.



Captain Walter Leslie Brown
Courtesy Veterans Affairs Canada

From a very young age, Walter wanted to answer God’s call: to become a priest for the Church of England, so this is what he chose when it was time to register at University. He completed his bachelor of Arts and a license in Theology from the Huron University college in London, Ontario. After his graduation, Father Brown became a priest in Windsor, Ontario. On April 1, 1941, at the age of 30, without any prior qualifications, he answered another call: joining the army. He drove from Windsor to Toronto to enlist. His military file describes him as a rather stinky guy: 5 feet 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches tall, weighing 226 pounds. He had blue eyes, and greying hair. His vision and hearing were both 20/20. He was in good health, although at age 5, he had pneumonia and at 6, he had his tonsils removed. Both times he recovered, according to his medical

record. During my research, I wondered what his parents thought of his decision to enlist in the Canadian army to be a chaplain to soldiers, if indeed he was an only child.

He first joined the Canadian Chaplain Service at Borden camp, north of Toronto; then, he was transferred to the 11th Canadian Infantry Battalion, also known as the Grey and Simcoe Foresters. How would military life be for a soldier of God, Padre Brown often wondered? How would soldiers react? Would he be able to gain their respect, although he did not carry a weapon? Most of the men in his unit were younger than him; would they be looking up to him? Would he be able to connect and make friends?

He arrived in Aldershot England two years later, in June 1943. After he had spent 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ years ministering to the men, Walter asked his superiors if he could participate in the action that would be taking place in Normandy in the days to come. His request was granted. One can infer he did not wait for the call... he made the call because he wanted to be with his men.

On May 15, 1944, he was attached to the 27th Canadian Armored Regiment (aka Sherbrooke Fusiliers) as an honorary Captain padre. This gave Walter just three weeks to learn about all the troops and to connect with the new soldiers: where did they come from? What about their faith, their family, were they married? Did they have any children? A girl back home perhaps? Would he again be able to gain the respect of his men?

On 3 June 1944, three days before the Normandy invasion, Padre Brown boarded a transport ship along with members of the 27th Canadian Armoured Regiment in preparation to cross the English Channel. For the next three days, soldiers lived in cramped quarters, anticipating the worst to come. During these seemingly long days, soldiers put on brave faces but many of them would get emotionally overwhelmed by what was about to occur. It was Walter's job to go around talking and listening to the soldiers' worries and try to put them at ease, reassuring them, offer encouragements, maybe pray for awhile. Everyone had a vague idea of what they were heading into; everyone hoped they would survive unscathed... But they also knew this was no exercise and casualties are part of any war. That's what tore the soldiers inside: they are family and they know someone close might not make it. Padre Brown knew this as well. Like his men, he volunteered, he had asked for, he had chosen to be part of the "Big Show". There was no turning back!

On the morning of June 6, after three long days of waiting, despite less than ideal weather conditions, the large troop ships pushed their way through the English Channel. The ships were rocking back and forth, making it very hard for the soldiers to hold down their food.

Everyone was nervous and many had a very hard time controlling their anxiety. Padre Brown tried to encourage them as much as he could; but underneath it all, he too was scared, he too was starting to doubt. Would he die as soon as he touched the ground, like some of the brave soldiers he accompanied? Would he have the courage to go on? Who encourages a Padre when he feels lonely, unsure and discouraged? During that time, I imagine him asking God for comfort. I also imagine him reciting the words from the New Testament: "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

In the early hours of 6 June 1944, Padre Brown landed with his men from the 3rd Division in the first wave of action on Juno Beach. He was the first Canadian chaplain to do so. He carried with him a small brown suitcase, which contained everything necessary to conduct a religious service. This was his only possession.

At the end of the first day, Padre Brown officiated at the burials of many of the Canadians killed on Juno Beach; some of these soldiers are now buried here at Bény-sur-Mer cemetery. According to British records, it was not until 10:20 am that Juno had been cleared of resistance. The majority of the 961 casualties suffered by the Canadians on 6 June were inflicted during the first few hours it took to secure the coastal area.

That evening, he requisitioned a jeep in order to ... (different info found on different documents):

- visit a wounded officer who was recuperating at the Canadian field hospital in Les Buissons /
- deliver medical supplies to the Canadian field hospital /
- pick up - aided wounded soldiers

Accompanying him were lieutenant Granger – who was the last soldier to see him alive – and Lance-Corporal Greenwood, a mechanic who would act as the driver. Unfamiliar with the terrain, Greenwood apparently missed the turn for Les Buissons and instead continued heading southward, in the direction of Cussy. After a few minutes, it became clear to the Canadians that they were lost. Brown and his companions fell to Nazi soldiers from the 12th Panzer Division (Hitler Youth - all members of the class of 1926; 18 years old soldiers in 1944) recently arrived in Caen, who had received orders by their commanding officer not to take any prisoners. The name of the German officer was *standatenführer* – equivalent to a Colonel – Kurt Adolf Wilhelm Meyer.

The Nazi soldiers first killed the driver, Lance-Corporal Greenwood and wounded Lieutenant Granger, who eventually made his way back to the Canadian lines. Padre Walter Leslie Brown, his clerical collar and black shirtfront visible above his uniform, surrendered with his hands up (according to Granger, who was the last Canadian to see Brown alive). Weeks passed and Brown was listed as missing in action.

On July 10, 1944, (more than 30 days after his capture), the body of padre Brown was discovered at a dusty road side by British troops moving towards the front at Caen. Inspection of his body showed he had been killed by a single bayonet thrust to his heart, as there were no other bullet wounds or signs of violence on his remains. He was recognized by his little brown suitcase with his name written on it, which laid beside his body. He was the only chaplain who was ever executed during the war. On July 11, 1944, he was buried at Beny-sur-Mer (grave XIII C 1) Honorary Captain Walter Leslie Brown was 33 years old. (Place the rose)

The rose comes from Dieppe; it comes from l'Association Je me souviens – I remember – to commemorate the 75th anniversary of Canadian soldiers who gave their lives during the battle of Dieppe, to put on their tombstone next August 19. When I told the lady at the kiosk if I could get the rose to put on the tombstone of my soldier, she obliged gracefully.

Soldiers who fell during the initial D-Day assault of Juno Beach are resting here with him, as well as some of the Canadian Prisoners of War illegally executed at the Ardenne Abbey, which we will visit later on during the day.

But Padre Brown's story does not end here.

In May 1999, 55 years later, a Huron University College student, Christopher McCreery, researched each Huron University College veteran. Mr. McCreery entered a store in Windsor, Ontario, where he spotted a suitcase containing a silver chalice and paten, a small breadbox to contain the bread for holy communion, faded pieces of brocade fabric of the stole, nurse and chalice veil. This complete communion kit bore the military stencil "Walter L. Brown", which had made its way back to Canada, and to Windsor, where Rev. Brown's last parish was. He had found the communion kit that had belonged to Padre Brown! Mr. McCreery donated the kit to Huron University College, so that the Reverend might continue to educate our youth and lift our spirits! The Communion Kit is used each November 11 Remembrance Day at a Communion service commemorating those who served and those who died serving Canada during times of war.



As I was writing my soldier's bio, I wondered how to end my presentation. A poem? A letter perhaps? Questions that would remain unanswered? A song?

After pondering for many days and night until early this morning, I decided to connect my soldier's bio – actually, all of the soldiers' bio – to my purpose here. As I have been listening to your wonderful presentations – in my opinion the highlight of this PD opportunity – it became clear that these soldiers are more than just names on a gravestone. They are individual who deserve to be

remembered for their sacrifice, but also for who they were: ordinary men doing extraordinary things. This is how I would like you to remember Padre Walter Leslie Brown.

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During the past two weeks, we've heard that some soldiers liked to take risks, some were adventurous, they all came from families large small from all over Canada and beyond. Some of them even got pay cuts for disobeying an order fights or for being drunk, they got detention for being in fights. But we also heard stories of sacrifice, of heroism, of loyalty toward their fellow combatants, their battalion, their family, their community. All of them loved their country and went to war to make it a better place.

We could easily draw a parallel between soldiers and our own students: some of them might cause trouble, be disruptive or even be disrespectful. But each one of them is good at something, each one of them is worthy of our respect because in the future, they might also do like the soldiers we have been honoring: give their lives so that we can live in freedom.

Before we get back in our respective cars, I would simply ask you to sign the CWGC register; it is an important gesture which signifies "We are here and we remember".

NOTE:

German Waffen-SS General Kurt Meyer, the commanding officer of the SS Hitler Youth Division was charged with being responsible for the murder of Rev. Walter Leslie Brown and other Canadian POW's by the Canadian Military Tribunal for War Crimes. He was found guilty and sentenced to death, but his sentence was commuted to life in prison by the Canadian Commanding General in occupied Germany General. Meyer served his sentence at the Dorchester Penitentiary in New Brunswick. He was released from prison in 1954

Question: was justice served?