

## **Pte. Harry James Gibbons, A Soldier's Biography**

War and the Canadian Experience: Teachers Professional Development Tour to France  
and Flanders

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## **Harry James Gibbons**

Private B37218

Royal Hamilton Light Infantry (Wentworth Regiment)

### **Background**

Harry James Gibbons was born on 18 March 1921 in Mount Pleasant, Ontario to parents George and Teresa Gibbons. Living in rural Ontario, the Gibbons had a large farming family. Harry had six brothers and six sisters, including his twin brother Frank Robert. Harry had no secondary education, so he and many of his brothers worked as farm hands to make a living from a young age. On 13 October 1937, Harry travelled to Brantford, Ontario to enlist in the Non-Permanent Active Militia where he joined C Squadron of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> Dragoons. When war was declared on 10 September 1939, the 2<sup>nd</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> Dragoons was not immediately mobilized for overseas service. Harry, desiring to serve overseas, sought his discharge from the militia and, along with a number of other men from the 2<sup>nd</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> Dragoons, transferred to the Canadian Active Service Force (CASF) on 27 September 1939. At the age of 19, he was a private in the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry (RHLI), or as the RHLI was more commonly referred – the Rileys. Amongst the men who transferred from the 2<sup>nd</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> Dragoons to the Rileys was Harry's twin brother – Frank.

### **Wartime Service**

To prepare the battalion for overseas service, the soldiers of the Rileys underwent a strenuous training regiment in Hamilton and Camp Borden. As a member of D Company, Harry learned the business of soldiering through lengthy route marches, organized sports, musketry practice, lectures, and larger-scale battalion exercises. Despite being described as having “Good” character, Harry was a troublemaker of sorts. On 24 December 1939, he was charged for being absent without leave (AWOL). He was again charged for being AWOL on 2 January, 25 May, and 2 July 1940. For these offences, he was required to forfeit a total of 23 days pay. Following this period of training in Canada, the Rileys received its orders for Europe in July and sailed from Halifax for Scotland on 23 July 1940 aboard the *Antonia*. Despite the threat of U-Boats and a near collision with

another ship, the Rileys arrived in Scotland without loss and disembarked at Gourrock on 2 August. The next day, the battalion moved to Corunna Barracks in Aldershot, England to continue training. In the midst of the training, Harry and his mates could look up to the skies and watch the fighter pilots of the RAF and the *Luftwaffe* fight for control of the skies during the Battle of Britain. In addition to their training, the Rileys played a vital role as part of the Britain's mobile reserve against a possible German invasion. Always the troublemaker, Harry was charged with "conduct to the prejudice and good order and military discipline, in that he was inattentive, idle and creating a disturbance in lecture room" on 13 September. For this transgression, he was confined to barracks for four days. Perhaps bored with the monotonous training regimen or tired from a never-ending series of field exercises, on 11 November, Harry was again charged for being AWOL and sentenced to 72 hours detention and forfeiture of three days pay. Despite a busy training schedule in 1941, Harry still managed to get himself into trouble. He failed "to appear at a place of parade" and was awarded with 14 days forfeiture of pay.

Training continued, but in April 1942, the Rileys attended amphibious landing demonstrations in Portsmouth before moving to the Isle of Wight to continue amphibious training. The troops' excitement peaked. During this time, Harry would have learned how to embark upon and disembark from landing craft, scale cliffs, land under smoke, as well as the procedures for consolidation and withdrawal from beachheads. Although a fit man from his years working on a farm, Harry would have been in peak physical condition after the extensive route marches the Rileys did. Harry again was AWOL on 3 May and was given two days confinement to barracks. In early July, the Rileys, along with a number of other Canadian units, boarded transports and were told they were participating in another exercise. Once they embarked, they were told they were destined for France as part of Operation RUDDER – a raid on the port city of Dieppe. Due to bad weather, RUDDER was cancelled, and the troops disembarked. After all of this training, many soldiers – likely Harry as well – were disheartened.

## **Dieppe**

For a number of reasons, the plan for RUDDER was revived, in modified form, as Operation JUBILEE. The operation was scheduled for 19 August. Along with the Essex Scottish Regiment, the Rileys was tasked with a frontal assault on the town of Dieppe. After secretly embarking on 18 August, the men climbed out of the larger transport ships into the landing craft on the morning of 19 August. Harry's company landed on the Rileys' right flank, to the right of the infamous casino and closest to the headland. D Company was supposed to advance inland along the headland, seize the castle, destroy anti-aircraft batteries and machine gun positions on the west headland, and make contact with the South Saskatchewan Regiment, who landed further east in Pourville. Although I do not know where or when Harry died, his company sustained the heaviest casualties in the Rileys and was virtually decimated during the failed raid by machine gun fire from the western headland. Many men were killed or wounded before they even got out of their landing craft and those that did were pinned down on the beach under withering fire. Some soldiers in Harry's regiment managed to fight their way into the casino and even fought their way off the beach into the city.

After receiving notification that Harry was missing in action, his mother, Teresa, received formal notification of his death on 8 December 1942. He currently lies with his comrades in the Dieppe Canadian War Cemetery, Hautot-sur-Mer (Row K, No. 68).