

## **Captain Harold Barrett, RCA**

Harold Wilson Barrett was born on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 1920, the youngest of eight children, to Frederick William Barrett (1869-1943) and Leah Barrett - ne Gamble (1873-1946) on their farm in Leitrim, Ontario.

When Harold attended Ontario Agricultural College (OAC) in Guelph, he was conscripted, like most male students, into the Canadian Officers' Training Corps (COTC), Canada's university officer training programme. In World War Two the Canadian Army was able to produce quality officers due to the high standards of the COTC.

In October, 1943, Harold was commissioned as a 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant in the Royal Canadian Artillery (RCA). By the end of the war, he had been promoted to the rank of captain.

He seldom spoke of his military experience, but his stories about a couple of key incidents come to mind. While in training at Camp Shiloh, Manitoba, he fell from a tank onto frozen ground, sustaining a spinal injury that prevented his being posted overseas. Instead, he was assigned to Valcartier, Quebec, where he could use the fluent French that he and his brothers had learned as children from the hired men at the Leitrim farm.

At Valcartier, he served with the Artillery Proof Establishment which was responsible for quality control on new batches of artillery shells that were about to be shipped overseas. A random sample of a few rounds from each batch was test-fired to ensure that they performed to spec.

One summer day, young Captain Barrett decided to stretch out on the long grass near the artillery piece and focused his binoculars on the target downrange. Before he could give the order to fire, his non-commissioned officer insisted that the Captain retreat to the fortified observation bunker, as protocol required. Though Captain Barrett was probably somewhat chastened at being told off by a junior officer, he complied. When the Captain gave the order to fire, a defective round detonated in the big gun, which exploded in a hail of jagged, red-hot shrapnel. Fortunately, the bunker had protected everyone from injury. Once the stunned soldiers staggered out of the bunker, they discovered a large piece of smoking shrapnel deeply imbedded in the middle of the depression that the Captain's body had left in the long grass. Captain Barrett had narrowly averted being torn in two, thanks to the diligence of his non-com.

Harold married Vera Franklin in 1944, and they raised four children. Like most veterans, Harold brought back bits of military kit and memorabilia from his years of service. For instance, his old army haversack always accompanied me to camp.

Harold had done his duty during the war, but he did not romanticize the military. I remember asking his advice when I was considering the Regular Officer Training Plan (ROTP) as an option to finance university. ROTP would have required a commitment to serve several years in the military after graduation in exchange for a free ride through college. Dad advised me against it because “the army breaks more men than it makes”.

Harold passed in 2005 and Vera followed in 2015, so their household is long gone. In preparing this article, I was pleased to relocate a few of his mementos which are still in the family. His 1943 letter of commission from the King, a toy cannon fashioned from a machine gun shell and a shell casing commemorating VE day have become proud possessions of his great grandson. I still use his army issue sewing kit from time to time.

Robert Barrett

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