



National Air Force Museum of Canada

Home Of The RCAF Memorial Collection

JOSEPH (Joe) HARCOURT TOMBS, VC

A HERO REMEMBERED

Introduction

A fascinating journey is about to begin ! As a volunteer at the National Air Force Museum of Canada which is located at 220 RCAF Road, 8 Wing, Canadian Forces Base Trenton, Ontario, I was approached by a visitor, Margaret Johnston of Campbellford, Ontario, with a picture of the cemetery headstone of Sergeant Joseph Tombs, VC. The lady understood this Victoria Cross winner had been buried in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, without the ceremony normally accorded military heroes.

I was asked if I would follow up on Sgt. Tombs' history. With some trepidation I agreed to do the research and began this fascinating journey to discover the story of this Australian-born Canadian, his early years; his heroics in WW1; voluntarily enlisted in the RCAF to serve his adopted country in WW2 ; his postwar life and finally to his death. This has taken me on a most rewarding adventure! Now the story of Sergeant Joseph Tombs VC.

Born on 23 March 1888, in Melbourne, Australia, this young boy and his parents, Frederick & Mary Tombs, subsequently relocated to England. Circa 1901 at age 13, Tombs left England ending up in Hobart, Tasmania, an island state off the south coast of Australia. As a carefree and independent sort of fellow, an enigma if you will, Tombs wandered for a few years, working on the "steamers" (boats) off the west coast of South America; as a mercenary in Peru, and for a time as a dredger on the Panama Canal. Returning to England, Joe found casual employment for a time, eventually deciding to join the army.

On 5 March 1912, Tombs joined the King's (Liverpool) Regiment, 1st battalion, "B" Company, a British militia unit, stationed at Warrington Barracks. Shortly after the First World War began he served with a Mobile Field Force in Scotland , and shortly thereafter rejoined the 1st Battalion in France, landing there in Feb 1915.

Lance Corporal Joseph Tombs was awarded the Victoria Cross for his action near the Rue De Bois during the Battle of Festubert, France 16 May, 1915. His unit had advanced on the German lines. Without support the unit was cut down by German machine-gun fire. A witness said that "Tombs looked over the parapet of the trench for a moment as though he couldn't quite make up his mind then he scaled the parapet and advanced through withering machine- gun fire to the body of the nearest wounded man whom he dragged back to the trenches." Despite a severe shrapnel wound to his stomach, Tombs made four trips through the screaming shells and chattering machine-gun fire to pick up the wounded, some of whom he carried back on his own

back or dragged to safety with his teeth. The battle of Festubert resulted in 5445 casualties.

King George V invested Lance Corporal Tombs with the Victoria Cross, the British Commonwealth's highest and most prestigious award for gallantry in battle, at Buckingham Palace on the 12th August 1915. As a Victoria Cross winner, he received an annuity of 10 English pounds each year for the rest of his life. Interesting to note that Joe, many years later, in an interview with his employer, Sun Life Assurance Company of Canada recalled that his grandfather, Lt Col Henry Tombs of the Bengal Artillery was also awarded a Victoria Cross on 9 July, 1857, "For Valour" during the Indian Mutiny of 1857.

After recovering from his wounds, Tombs participated in a recruiting campaign for the army, later returning to his Battalion. In 1916, Tombs transferred to the RGA (Royal Garrison Artillery) where he was assigned to an anti-aircraft battery, subsequently he was transferred to the Canadian Pacific Railway ship "Minnedosa" as a gunner, serving to protect the ship from the enemy. He was mustered out of the army (released) on the 31 March 1920.

In 1921, Tombs immigrated to Canada where he again worked for a short period with the Canadian Pacific Railway steamship line. Returning to dry land, Tombs was employed by the Sun Life Assurance Company of Canada in Montreal from 1921 through 1942, although he was granted leave in 1939 to join the Royal Canadian Air force. He married Muriel Sylvia Gooding on 25 December 1925 and they took up residence at 5168 9th Avenue, Rosemount (Montreal) Quebec.

During the late 1920's, Tombs was a member of the "Non-Permanent Active Militia of Canada", serving in # 6 Field Ambulance Regiment, his regimental number was 91. He was eventually released on 15 May 1933. His interest in the world of "military medics" continued as Joe served with the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps (RCAMC) from 1933 through 1936. Of note, with the recommendation of Air Marshall WA (Billy) Bishop, VC, RCAF, he maintained an association with # 50 Division, St John Ambulance Brigade. Cpl Tombs attended several banquets for VC holders, the first in Montreal in the late 20's, followed by a dinner in London, England given by the House of Lords in November, 1929, and a banquet in May 1939, held in Montreal, Quebec, as a guest, in honour of HM King George VI and Queen Elizabeth.

In 1939, Tombs was granted a leave of absence from Sun Life to join the RCAF and on 2 December 1939, at the age of 51, Joe was enrolled in the RCAF Special Reserve. He was assessed as a "short stocky fellow at 5ft 3 inches weighing 165 lbs. An excellent man with a distinguished record from the First World War. Good appearance, very polite, with good manners". His address at that time was 108 Greenfield Park, Chambly, Quebec.

AC2 (Aircraftsman 2nd Class) J H Tombs, VC; R54678 (his Second World War serial number) was posted to the RCAF #1 Manning Depot in Toronto, Ontario - for recruit training! Now an Acting Corporal, Tombs next posting was on 13 June, 1940 to RCAF Station Trenton where he was employed at the Central Flying School as a Disciplinarian and Drill Instructor for young aircrew. This school was but one of about 135 schools across Canada that trained aircrew for the British Commonwealth Training Plan (BCATP) during the Second World War.

Of significant interest on 3 August 1941, Air Commodore His Royal Highness the Duke of Kent was conducting a tour of the facilities at RCAF Trenton. While the royal entourage was on their way to inspect the Station Hospital, an aide to the Duke of Kent, Wing Commander Sir Louis Grieg, spotted the tell-tale crimson ribbon of the Victoria Cross on the uniform of Corporal Tombs.

The Wing Commander immediately escorted Tombs to the hospital for an introduction and chat

with His Royal Highness. (see picture following) Corporal Tombs explained that he had received the Victoria Cross for a "bit of a thing" at Festubert, France in 1915. He went on to explain, with great pride, that this was the third time that he had been presented to members of the Royal Family while in Canada. "I was presented to the Governor-General a few days ago (9 July 1941) and was presented to King George VI and Queen Elizabeth when they visited." Pointing to his chest he advised a reporter that the late "His Majesty King George V presented the VC to me!"

Tombs went on to explain to the reporter how he enrolled in the RCAF. "I called the Recruiting Officer and told him I wanted to enlist again. The officer told me I hadn't a chance as I was way over the age limit and that ended the conversation. Then I called a different recruiting office and asked " would you be interested in enlisting an older man with a Victoria Cross?...why certainly, let me know his name and I'll get in touch with him....you're talking to him now sir! So I signed up and here I am at RCAF Station Trenton." A side-light to his enrollment suggests that Air Marshall Billy Bishop had earlier contacted the recruiter on Joe's behalf!

On 10 August, 1941, Joe left Trenton for #12 Service Flight Training School (12 SFTS) at Brandon, Manitoba. There he continued his duties as a Drill Instructor. His next posting, on 26 April, 1942, to #12 Technical Services Detachment (12 TSD) in Toronto saw Tombs promoted to the rank of Sergeant on 15 June 1942.

Sgt. Tombs was granted an Honorable Release from the RCAF on 8 December, 1944. Ironically, he was discharged from #1 Manning Depot in Toronto where he began his RCAF training some 5 years earlier! Sergeant JH Tombs, VC, was given an "Exemplary" discharge and a \$100 allowance for the purchase of civilian clothes so that he could begin his re-integration into civilian life. His address was listed as 33 Roxborough St. West, Toronto, Ontario.

And now, we begin the story of his post war life, his death on 28 June, 1966, and a military funeral with all of the honours befitting this Canadian hero...

The heat was becoming almost unbearable. The funeral began at 10 am sharp in the somber air conditioned chapel of the Trull Funeral Home on Danforth Avenue, Toronto. Organ music whined gently as veterans and friends sat watching the coffin, with Joseph Tombs' medals lying on a velvet cushion on its grey felt covered top.

Major HG Clifford, padre of the Royal Regiment of Canada, read the austere words of the Anglican service for the burial of the dead. Six NCO's of the Regional Ordnance Depot carried the coffin slowly out of the chapel into the bright sunlight. A 22 man guard of honor of the Canadian Guards, in three ranks, shouldered arms. Their black boots smashed down on the concrete, hands slapping the stocks of their automatic rifles. As bystanders watched silently the coffin was locked into place in a military hearse, and the guard of honor marched stiffly to the head of the procession. The six pallbearers flanked the hearse. As the procession moved away, the passing soldiers attracted faces to the windows above the small stores on Danforth Avenue, children, storekeepers, shoppers and motorists watched silently.

On Greenwood Avenue the Guard of Honor and the pallbearers boarded a military bus and the procession moved quickly to Pine Hills Cemetery where Joseph Tombs was buried on a sloping hillside overlooking the graves of other veterans.

Bandsman Jack Cole, dressed in the scarlet tunic of the Royal Regiment of Canada, stood on the hillside at Pine Hills Cemetery and blew the haunting notes of the "Last Post." Reserve officers of the Royal Regiment of Canada saluted. Eight non-commissioned officers of the Regional Ordnance Depot and six members of the RCAF Veterans' Association stood ramrod straight. The Union Jack stood at half-staff. Several First World War veterans, their chests

decked with medals, stood silently with dampened eyes. Joe would have liked that...

Nearby, his relatives, a middle aged man, a tiny old lady and a weeping girl watched the flag-draped coffin which contained the body of Sergeant Joseph Harcourt Tombs, VC, of the Kings' (Liverpool) Regiment. Four NCO's bolted the top of the outer case covering the single poppy lying on the grey coffin. A ubiquitous grey-suited man from the funeral home gently laid four flower wreaths over the case. The funeral of a First World War hero was over.

Later, in a small house on Secord Avenue, Mrs. Frederica Johnson, her fifty-year-old son William Wheaton and his 19 year old daughter, Mrs. Sheila Wallace, reminisced about the quiet-spoken, gentle hero who had lived with them for 20 years and whom they had known as Uncle Joe. Mrs. Johnson, a tiny 86 year old of extraordinary intelligence and vitality, struggled to reconstruct the life of a man who talked rarely about himself, and still less about his war experiences.

A time-yellowed photograph of a moustached L-Cpl Tombs dressed in the heavy khaki of his regiments' uniform and wearing the Victoria Cross, a tattered copy of the citation describing his exploits and his many medals are all that remain as links to that day in May 1915 at Festubert, France when Tombs wrote his name in the annals of his regiment.

William Wheaton produced a number of Tombs' medals from his pocket. There were the Victoria Cross with its faded crimson ribbon, a 1914/15 Star, two service medals, one with a Bar for being Mentioned in Dispatches, a medal for service in the merchant marine, and finally one small Russian Cross, which Mrs. Johnson said Tombs had won for saving a Russian man's life later in the war.

When the war ended Mrs. Johnson encouraged Tombs' to stay in her home and it was she who nursed him constantly during the last 10 years of his life. He never recovered from an operation in 1952 to remove shrapnel from his stomach. In 1964 he suffered from a minor stroke and was confined to bed, rarely ever speaking. A terse funeral notice announced his death following his demise on 28 June, 1966.

Major Handley Geary, Sergeant-at-Arms at the Ontario legislature, himself a Victoria Cross winner, got in touch with Major George Suzuki of the Royal Regiment of Canada, which is affiliated with Tombs' regiment in England. Together they had arranged for a full military funeral. Sheila Wallace remembered the old man who lived upstairs in her grandmother's house on Secord Avenue as a kind, considerate and gentle man who rarely discussed his past and never once complained of the obvious pain of his war injuries. Mrs. Johnson spoke softly, looking at Tombs' picture and thinking of the twenty years that she had spent with him. "He never talked about the war. He hated it. He lost too many of his friends, who never came back."Some time later, with William Wheaton in attendance, the Mayor of Toronto presented Sgt. Tombs' medals to the permanent care and custody of the Royal Regiment of Canada; the CO, Lieutenant-Colonel Bob Douglas, personally accepted on behalf of the Regiment. The medals are on display and can be viewed at the Fort York Armouries in Toronto.

In memory of Sergeant Tombs' service with the RCAF during WW 2, Margaret and Bob Johnston of Campbellford, Ontario, requested that an "AD ASTRA" memorial stone be created. The stone was completed in September 2009 and is now prominently displayed in the RCAF Memorial Airpark at the National Air Force Museum of Canada, Canadian Forces Base Trenton, Ontario. The stone will forever remain a silent witness to this enigmatic soldier, sailor, airman.



Pine Hills Cemetery, Toronto, Ontario



**CPL Joe Tombs and the Duke of Kent,
RCAF Station Trenton- Hospital
1941**



**Governor-General The Earl of Athlone chats
with Corporal Joseph Tombs, VC, RCAF
Station Trenton, Ont., 9 July, 1941**

LEST WE FORGET

SERGEANT JOSEPH HARCOURT TOMBS --DECORATIONS AND AWARDS

Victoria Cross

CMG, Companion, Most Distinguished Order of St. Michael & St. George

1914-15 Star / Victory Medal / British War Medal

**Coronation Medal, King George VI / Coronation Medal, Queen Elizabeth II /
General Service Medal / Canadian Volunteer Service Medal**

Mercantile Marine War Medal / Russian Order of St George, 4th Class

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PER ARDUA AD ASTRA