

Colonel
Frederick
Albert
Tilston VC



Frederick Tilston's Victoria Cross
ROYAL CANADIAN MILITARY INSTITUTE/JEREMY HOOD



Major (later Colonel) Frederick
Tilston VC PICTORIAL PRESS/ALAMY

HERO *of the* MONTH

by Lord Ashcroft

A Sherman 'Firefly' in the ruins of Uedem. During the Canadian assault, the armour was unable to accompany the infantry OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH



Frederick Albert Tilston became the inspiration for an educational prize that was awarded for the best example of “effort, persistence and tenacity in studies and all other activities”. It was entirely appropriate that this honour was for such gritty qualities – rather than simply academic achievement – given Tilston’s incredible courage displayed towards the end of World War Two.

Fred Tilston was born into a Roman Catholic family in Toronto in Ontario, Canada, on June 11, 1906. He was the eldest of three children born to Frederick Tilston Senior and his wife Estelle (née Lemay). When Fred was eight, his parents moved to Chicago, Illinois, for three years. He was an adventurous and mischievous boy – for example, on one family holiday to North Michigan he collected numerous snakes and ambushed unsuspecting walkers by throwing the non-venomous varieties in their path to get a startled reaction. This was much



Major Tilston enjoys a cigarette in the field ALAMY

to the amusement of him and his two younger sisters.

When Fred was 11, his father was killed in an accident in Chicago and, soon after, the family returned to Ontario; Fred went to live with his grandparents while his sisters boarded with an aunt. His mother took herself off to business school so she could earn a decent living and eventually found a job and modest accommodation so she could be reunited with her children. However, life was tough: all four members of the family lived in a single room while Fred took various jobs, including a paper round, on top of his schoolwork to boost the family’s meagre finances.

As a teenager, Fred attended De La Salle High School in Ontario, where he shone at mathematics and science. In the evenings, he carried out deliveries for a local pharmacy. Fred had wanted to become a doctor but there was no money for the six years of training and so he instead became a pharmaceutical



Tilston's VC, 1939-45 Star, France and Germany Star, Defence Medal 1939-45, Canadian Volunteer Service Medal 1939-45 (with Maple Leaf clasp), Canadian Forces Decoration, War Medal 1939-45, Canadian Centennial Medal 1967, Jubilee Medal 1977 and Coronation Medal 1953 ROYAL CANADIAN MILITARY INSTITUTE/JEREMY HOOD

apprentice. He also undertook a part-time degree course, graduating second out of 105 students. Later, he worked as a salesman for Sterling Drugs, a Canadian pharmaceutical company. By 1939, aged 33, he was sales manager for the company and living in Windsor, Ontario.

Friendly fire

Later that year, after the outbreak of the war, he volunteered for the army, eventually enlisting the following year as a private but soon being promoted to sergeant and embarking on officer training in Ontario. In February 1941, he was commissioned as second lieutenant into Essex Scottish Regiment, Canadian Infantry Corps, joining the unit in Britain. Tilston missed being involved in the Dieppe Raid of August 1942, which saw most of his regiment wiped out.

In 1943, he was injured in a live-fire training exercise, receiving a bullet in his back. The round passed through one of his lungs and also the muscle tissue of his heart and it seemed his military career was over before it had properly begun. Indeed, the bullet was just half an inch away from killing him outright. However, after delicate surgery, he was able to rejoin his regiment in France in July 1944, a month after D-Day.

Later in July, Tilston was wounded again, this time when the vehicle he was travelling in hit a mine in Normandy. He was concussed, his eardrums were

blown out and he had shrapnel in his right eye. After a two-month stay in hospital, he was back with his regiment once more.

By early 1945, Tilston, 6ft 2in tall and wearing size 13 boots, was serving as an acting major, commanding a rifle company that on March 1, 1945, took part in Operation Blockbuster – a three-division effort to capture the Hochwald Gap, land between the Rivers Meuse and Rhine. The task of the Canadians was to breach the Schlieffen Line in the Hochwald Forest, between Uedem to the west and Xanten to the east.

However, Blockbuster quickly ran into trouble. Tilston's lengthy citation for his VC describes what happened: "The 2nd Canadian Division had been given the task of breaking through the strongly



British and Canadian infantry and tanks form up during the Operations Veritable/Blockbuster OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH

fortified Hochwald Forest defence line, which covered Xanten, the last German bastion west of the Rhine protecting the vital Wesel Bridge escape route. The Essex Scottish Regiment was ordered to breach the defence line northeast of Udem [sic] and to clear the northern half of the forest, through which the balance of the brigade would pass.

"At 0715hrs on March 1, 1945, the attack was launched but due to the softness of the ground it was found impossible to support the attack by tanks as had been planned. Across approximately 500 yards of flat open country, in the face of intense enemy fire, Major Tilston personally led his company in the attack, keeping dangerously close to our own bursting shells in order to get the maximum cover from the barrage. Though wounded in the head he continued to lead his men forward, through a belt of wire 10ft in depth to the enemy trenches shouting orders and encouragement and using his Sten with great effect. When the platoon on the left came under heavy fire from an enemy machine gun, he dashed forward personally and silenced it with a grenade; he was first to reach the enemy position and took the first prisoner.

"Determined to maintain the momentum of the attack, he ordered the reserve platoon to mop up these positions and, with outstanding gallantry, pressed on with his main force to the second line of enemy defences, which were on the edge of the woods,"

Unyielding will

Having already shown the kind of grit and determination worthy of recognition – and being wounded early on in the attack – Tilston went further. His citation continues: “As he approached the woods he was severely wounded in the hip and fell to the ground. Shouting to his men to carry on without him and urging them to get into the wood, he struggled to his feet and rejoined them as they reached the trenches on their objective.

“Here an elaborate system of underground dugouts and trenches was manned in considerable strength and vicious hand-to-hand fighting followed. Despite his wounds, Major Tilston’s unyielding will to close with the enemy was a magnificent inspiration to his men as he led them in, systematically clearing the trenches of the fiercely resisting enemy. In this fighting, two German company headquarters were overrun, and many casualties were inflicted on the fanatical defenders.

“Such had been the grimness of the fighting and so savage the enemy resistance that the company was now reduced to one quarter of its original strength. Before consolidation could be completed the enemy counter-attacked repeatedly, supported by a hail of mortar and machine gun fire from the open flank. Major Tilston moved in the open from platoon to platoon, quickly organising their defence and directing fire against the advancing enemy. The enemy attacks penetrated so close to the positions that grenades were thrown into the trenches held by his troops, but this officer by personal contact, unshakable confidence and unquenchable enthusiasm so inspired his men that they held firm against great odds.”

A precarious situation became even more so when the Canadians’ supply of ammunition became acute. With the Germans unrelenting, it was imperative that reinforcements and, above all,

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MAJOR TILSTON’S VC CITATION

ammunition reach Tilston’s unit so that it may continue to hold on. This was something the major took upon himself: “He repeatedly crossed the bullet-swept ground to the company on his right flank to carry grenades, rifle and Bren ammunition to his troops, and replace a damaged wireless set to re-establish communications with battalion HQ.

“He made at least six of these hazardous trips, each time crossing a road that was dominated by intense fire from numerous, well-sited enemy machine guns. On his last trip he was wounded for the third time, this time in the leg. He was found in a shell crater beside the road. Although very seriously wounded and barely conscious, Tilston would not submit to medical attention until he had given complete instructions as to the defence plan, had emphasised the absolute necessity of holding the position and had ordered his one remaining officer to take over.

“By his calm courage, gallant conduct and total disregard for his own safety, he fired his men with grim determination, and their firm stand enabled the regiment to accomplish its object of furnishing the brigade with a solid base through which to launch further successful attacks to clear the forest, thus enabling the division to accomplish its task.”

Of 103 men on the start line in ‘C’ Company that morning – March 1, 1945 – just 26 were still on their feet at the end of the day. The others were dead or wounded. Once again, Tilston had come within a whisker of being killed but this time he had to have both his legs amputated. He later said of his time in hospital: “No matter how bad you are, there is always someone worse than you and that in itself is a boost... And if you ever feel at the bottom of the ladder, just go down to the burns unit and then you’ll know how lucky you are.”

Exceptional legacy

Tilston’s VC was announced on May 22, 1945, two weeks after VE Day. His investiture took place at Buckingham

Palace on June 22, 1945, Tilston receiving his VC from King George VI. The following month he went back to Toronto to a grand parade and a hero’s reception.

Tilston married Helen Adamson, whom he had met in Edmonton before war, in 1946. The couple went on to have a son, Michael. He made light of his disability, soon learning to walk again with artificial legs. His friend Keith Norris told author John Percival a story about Tilston’s determination: “On one occasion, after he had learnt to walk with a cane, he sort of stumbled on the sidewalk and I put my hand out to grab his shoulder and he said, ‘Just keep your hands off me. If I’m going to fall, I will fall on my own. I don’t need you pushing me.’”

Over time, Tilston became a keen horse rider, white-water canoeist, a good shot and fisherman. From 1957-70, he worked again for Sterling Drugs, working his way up to vice-president of sales and, eventually, president. He also carried out work for War Amputations of Canada as well as inspiring civilian amputees to walk again. In 1963, he was made the honorary colonel of the Essex and Kent Scottish Regiment. After retiring, Tilston lived in Toronto, where he died on September 22, 1992, aged 86. He was buried in the city’s Mount Hope Cemetery.

As stated, his legacy includes the Tilston Award for students at St Andrew’s College, Aurora, Ontario, the town where he lived and worked before retiring. His bravery both in military service and as a disabled civilian after the war was truly exceptional and it is wonderful that his memory lives on through this award and other memorials. His Victoria Cross can be viewed at the Royal Canadian Military Institute in Toronto.

Brigadier Joe Cardy, who in 1945 was chaplain to Tilston’s regiment, said of him: “He was a caring person... he loved his men and cared for them very deeply.” **BW**



Major Tilston at his investiture at Buckingham Palace, June 22, 1945 LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA

VICTORIA CROSS HEROES VOL.II



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