

Colin D. MacEachern - WW2



(Photo enhanced and colored with AI technology)

Personal Profile

Full Name: Colin D. MacEachern

Date of Birth: February 28, 1909 at Cape George, Antigonish Co., NS

Next of Kin: Mrs. Bessie MacEachern, Cape George, Antigonish Co., NS (mother)

Trade: Fisherman and Farmer

Religion: Roman Catholic

Marital Status: Single

Attestation: September 9, 1942 in Halifax, NS

Service No.: F/75722

Unit: Cape Breton Highlanders

Height: Five feet five inches

Service Timeline:

- September 9, 1942: Enlisted with the Canadian Active Service Force (CASF) at Halifax, NS
 - September 18, 1942: Transferred to No. 60 (Basic) Training Centre, Yarmouth, NS
 - November 17, 1942: Transferred to No. 14 (Advanced) Infantry Training Centre, Aldershot, NS.
- February 11, 1943: Transferred to West Nova Scotia Regiment Overseas.
 - March 10, 1943: Departed Canada for overseas
 - March 17, 1943: Arrived in the United Kingdom
 - March 18, 1943: Taken on strength of No. 7 Canadian Infantry Reinforcement Unit (CIRU)
 - March 25, 1943: Admitted to No. 3 Canadian Medical Centre (CMC)
 - April 11, 1943: Discharged from No. 3 CMC
- June 17, 1943: Struck off strength of No. 7 CIRU and transferred to Princess Louise Fusiliers (Halifax, NS).
- August 20, 1943: Struck off strength of Princess Louise Fusiliers and transferred to Cape Breton Highlanders (CBH). The unit was part of the 5th Canadian Armoured Division's 11th Infantry Brigade, which also included the Perth Regiment (Ontario) and Irish Regiment of Canada (Toronto, ON).
 - October 23, 1943: Departed the United Kingdom for the Mediterranean theatre aboard US vessel SS Monterey.
 - November 7, 1943: Arrived in Phillippsville harbour, Algeria, around 0500 hours after harrowing experience the previous day, when a German air attack succeeded in sinking the SS Santa Elena, one of the troopships in the Allied convoy, and five other vessels. A total of 1,400 personnel perished but another 6,000 were rescued by other vessels in the convoy.
 - November 9, 1943: Vessel weighed anchor at 0400 hours and headed for Italy.
 - November 10, 1943: Arrived in harbour at Naples, Italy, and disembarked. Established camp in Afragola, on the outskirts of Naples.

The entry of the 1st Battalion, The Cape Breton Highlanders into Naples, Italy, on November 10, 1943, marked the official beginning of their arduous 15-month deployment in the Italian Campaign. Composed primarily of coal miners, steelworkers, and fishermen from Nova Scotia, the regiment served as a core infantry unit within the 11th Infantry Brigade, 5th Canadian Armoured Division.

- November 19, 1943: Cape Breton Highlanders (CBH) moved out to Altamura for a period of training.
 - November 30 1943: Absent without leave. Confined to barracks for 14 days and forfeits seven days pay.
 - December 25, 1943: CBH celebrated the Christmas season in Altamura with Midnight Mass and a noon Christmas dinner for all ranks.
- January 9, 1944: Unit moved out of its Altamura camp on the way to the forward area. The convoy passed through Ururi on January 10, arriving in the vicinity of the front lines late the following day.

The 1st Battalion, The Cape Breton Highlanders arrived in the Ortona salient in January 1944 under very different circumstances than the units that fought in the famous, bloody street battles of December 1943.

While regiments like the *Loyal Edmonton Regiment* and the *Seaforth Highlanders of Canada* engaged in the intense urban combat inside the town itself, the Cape Breton Highlanders—as part of the 11th Canadian Infantry Brigade (5th Canadian Armoured Division)—were deployed just to the north and west of the city along the Arielli River valley. Their mission was to relieve the exhausted 1st Canadian Division and hold the static frontline against entrenched German paratroopers.

- January 13, 1943: Companies began to move to the front line at 1500 hours and began the relief process at 1815 hours. Process of relieving West Nova Scotia Regiment completed by midnight. Soldiers immediately commenced “recce” patrols of the unit’s section of the front line, approximately five kilometers north of Ortona.
- January 14, 1944: Intermittent mortar and artillery fire throughout the day. Two direct hits on buildings occupied by CBH soldiers, but no casualties. “Enemy appears very nervous tonight and has been shooting up flares and firing artillery, mortar and m. g. [machine gun] quite heavily during night.”
- January 15, 1944: “Heavy shelling was encountered during the day, during which our first man was killed and first wounded as actual battle casualties. Our own artillery kept bothering him [i.e., the enemy] all day and night with harassing fire.”
- January 16, 1944: Battalion withdrew from the front lines for a day’s rest prior to a planned attack on enemy positions on a nearby ridge. The Perth Regiment (Ontario)—CBH’s Brigade mates—would launch the first attack in the early morning, with CBH passing through their line once the ridge was secured and continuing the attack. “An elaborate artillery fire plan” would support the operation.

The Ill-Fated Battle of the Riccio River (17 Jan 1944) - The regiment’s first major, large-scale engagement of the Second World War took place in the Ortona salient at a stream called the Riccio (Arielli Valley).

The Objective: On January 17, 1944, the 11th Brigade was ordered to cross the stream and capture a heavily fortified ridge held by elite elements of the German 1st Parachute Division.

The Outcome: The assault ran into a wall of prepared German machine-gun crossfire and defensive artillery. Denied critical tank support due to the deep, sticky mud immobilizing Allied armor, the Highlanders fought fiercely but were ultimately forced to withdraw back across the stream.

The Cost: This single action resulted in severe casualties for the battalion, marking a

tragic and bloody "baptism of fire" for the Nova Scotian working men.

- January 17, 1944: Opening artillery barrage commenced at 0530 hours, in support of the Perth attack. The fire prompted enemy machine gun fire down the gullies leading up the ridge, as well as mortar and artillery fire. Several shells landed in the CBH area, but no casualties occurred. Around 1345 hours, CBH's leading two Companies began their advance toward the ridge, proceeding down a gully, across a river and then up the ridge. The lead platoon was approximately 30 meters from its first objective when enemy forces opened fire.
 - Mortar fire and smoke covered the valley as HQ lost contact with the forward platoons. Two C Company officers with the lead party were wounded and the entire Company pinned down by enemy fire for two hours. A smoke screen provided by supporting artillery finally allowed Company HQ and one platoon to withdraw, while two others "worked their way around to the left and were able to withdraw back up [the] gully although some casualties were suffered."
 - D Company, the second attacking group, was "pinned down near the river bed and many of them took cover in the river itself." A mortar landed in the midst of its leading platoon as it reached a road, inflicting "quite a few casualties." Any movement "drew fire at close range." The company was "unable to move forward and had suffered many casualties." After darkness fell, both Companies were able to withdraw to the top of the gully leading up the ridge. Meanwhile, supporting personnel organized stretcher bearing parties to evacuate wounded comrades from the area around the river, despite "continual mortaring and machine gun fire in the valley." Personnel received orders at 2130 hours to withdraw to the rest area where they had spent the previous night.
- Colin D. MacEachern was among the men wounded in the field north of Ortona, Italy, on January 17, 1944. In total, the unit had suffered 51 casualties, 36 of whom were evacuated to hospital. One was killed and the remaining 14 casualties were initially listed as "missing" in the immediate aftermath of the fighting.
 - January 18, 1944: Admitted to No. 2 Casualty Clearing Station and proceeded to No. 24 Canadian Field Ambulance.
 - January 20, 1944: Admitted to No. 19 Casualty Clearing Station.
 - March 18, 1944: Evacuated to the United Kingdom.
 - March 29, 1944: Admitted to No. 16 Canadian General Hospital.

- March 9, 1944: Awarded Canadian Volunteer Service Medal with Clasp.



- April 25 1944: Taken on strength of No. 1 Non-Effective Transit Depot while in 16 Canadian General Hospital.
- May 13, 1944: Struck off strength of Canadian Army Overseas on preparing to return to Canada
- May 24, 1944: Landed in Halifax.
- May 25, 1944: Granted disembarkation leave to June 23, 1944.
- July 11, 1944: Discharged at Halifax, NS, - "unable to meet the required military physical standards." Retained in Camp Hill Hospital for "post-discharge treatment."
- October 14, 1975: Died at home in Cape George Point, Antigonish County.
- October 17, 1975: Funeral held in Holy Rosary Church, Ballantyne's Cove. Pallbearers were veterans Morrison MacEachern, John H. MacInnis, Albert MacInnis, John Rankin Gillis, Joseph MacLean and Gillis MacEachern.