

Obituary: Military cross recipient was thrice wounded in gallant, hilltop assault



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Second World War veteran Guy Robitaille with his son, also named Guy.

Julie Oliver / Ottawa Citizen

As a boy in his hometown of Lauzon, Que., Guy Robitaille grew up listening to his two uncles relive their experiences in the First World War. Awestruck, he set his sights on becoming a soldier.

Family tragedy led him to engineer his way into the Canadian military at 16. Six years later, in

July 1943, he was a platoon commander with the Royal 22nd Regiment tasked with a hand-grenade of a mission: to mount a daylight assault on a fortified, German-held hilltop in central Sicily.

Leading his men up the hill under blistering mortar and machine-gun fire, Lt. Robitaille was shot in the leg then hit in the right bicep with shrapnel. Still, he kept pushing forward until, as his platoon neared the summit, Robitaille was felled with another blast of shrapnel that tore into his chest.

His actions that day would send him to hospital for a year and earn him a Military Cross for bravery, one of about 700 awarded to Canadian soldiers during the Second World War.

Lt.-Col. Robitaille, who would go on to a long career as a military staff officer, died at the Perley and Rideau Veterans' Health Care Centre on June 21 from lung cancer. He was 93.

Robitaille's death comes two weeks after that of Vice-Admiral Ralph Hennessy, a Distinguished Service Cross recipient. They were the only remaining residents of the Perley and Rideau to hold such exalted officers' decorations from the Second World War.

Guy Robitaille was born into a family of eight children. His father worked in the shipyards, while his mother was sickly and rarely emerged from her bedroom. She died of tuberculosis when he was only five.

Robitaille left school after Grade 8 and went to work, first as a delivery boy and then in the shipyard beside his father. When his father died of lung disease in 1936, Robitaille was largely on his own. He was 15.

One year later, he lied about his age and joined the militia. By the time Germany invaded Poland to launch the Second World War, Robitaille had qualified as a sergeant and was responsible for training new recruits — even though he was younger than most of them. He successfully trained as an officer despite his lack of academic credentials.

“I had to work doubly hard,” he told the Citizen in a 2012 interview.

Lt. Robitaille was one of 26,000 Canadians who formed part of the Allied invasion force that landed in Sicily in July 1943. The 1st Canadian Infantry Division faced little resistance until it reached central Sicily where combat-hardened German troops defended each natural stronghold before retreating to fight again.

As a commander with Quebec’s famous Van Doos, Robitaille was assigned on the morning of July 27, 1943 to lead three platoons in an assault on Mount Santa Maria. The German position blocked the advance of Canadian forces.

Robitaille led two platoons up the rocky slope while the other put down covering fire. The Germans opened up with machine guns, rifles and mortars. A sniper’s phosphorous bullet found its mark in Robitaille’s leg.

The wound burned like mad and Robitaille had to decide whether to continue his charge or retreat to the safety of the river bed below. His decision ultimately turned on what he feared most: being labelled a coward.

“I was very afraid if I go to the river bed, I might be killed with a bullet in my back and they’d say, ‘Robitaille, he was chicken. He was chicken,’” he told the Citizen.

So Robitaille kept moving forward. He was struck a second time — this time with shrapnel in his arm — but again he continued. As the Canadians neared the summit, Robitaille was felled by a mortar blast that sent shrapnel into his chest, collapsing his lung.

Robitaille’s men moved him behind some rocks; he ordered them back into the fight. He was evacuated by stretcher after the battle was won late that afternoon, but didn’t reach a casualty clearing area until the next morning. Assessed as “unlikely to survive,” he passed out.



Guy Robitaille won his Military Cross, left, for actions in Sicily when he was wounded three times while charging a German hilltop position.

Julie Oliver / Ottawa Citizen

After five operations and a year in hospital, Robitaille assumed the life of a staff officer.

One of his first assignments required Robitaille to travel to the Philippines to help liberated Canadians returning from Japanese prisoner of war camps and to investigate war crimes allegations. About 1,700 Canadian soldiers were taken prisoner by the Japanese during the fall of Hong Kong in December 1941. Forced to work as slave labourers, hundreds died from disease and malnutrition. Robitaille helped establish rehabilitation services for them in Canada.

Robitaille's military career later took him to France, Belgium, Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, Washington, D.C., Montreal and Ottawa, where he bought a house in the city's west end in the early 1960s. He raised two daughters and a son with his wife, Annie, who had grown up down the street from him in Lauzon.



Guy Robitaille kisses his new bride, Annie. Annie died in 2012, a few months before the couple's 70th wedding anniversary. Family photo / Ottawa Citizen

Robitaille left the military in 1971, then worked for the Official Languages Commissioner. He officially retired in 1985 and devoted his time to tennis, volunteering, reading history and making conversation.

Robitaille liked to sit in his driveway on Bonnie Crescent with a few extra lawn chairs; he would invite neighbours and passersby to sit and chat.

"He'd talk about politics, history, anything," remembers his son, Guy, 59, a retired Air Canada employee. "He was loving and giving man: my dad was the kind of person who would go out of his way for other people."

Robitaille moved to the Perley and Rideau in August 2010 at the behest of his wife, who worried that she wouldn't be able to look after him because of her own declining health. Annie died in March 2012 of heart failure a few months shy of what would have been the couple's 70th wedding anniversary.

At the Perley and Rideau, Robitaille delivered newspapers to residents on his floor and served as president of the Veterans' Council. He was awarded the Mayor's City Builder Award last year for his citizenship and service.

Robitaille will be buried Saturday in Ottawa's National Military Cemetery.

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