Bill Tutte was born on May 14, 1917 at Fitzroy House in Newmarket, England. His father was the House gardener, his mother the cook. Simply put, he was born "downstairs". Employment for his parents was unstable in his first years: they moved about to several locations in southwestern England and then, starting when Bill was about three, lived somewhat longer in a House called Moorend, located high on the Yorkshire moor overlooking the village Aislaby, not far from Whitby and the east coast. His parents were the caretakers there. This is where he grew to remembered consciousness, where he first went to school. Just a few months after he began school the family again moved, back to the Newmarket area, to Cheveley, a village three miles east of Newmarket centre. They lived there in half a flint cottage, on 54 Church Lane, just adjacent to the 600 year old Anglican church. His father worked several places in the area until he got the position of gardener at the Rutland Arms Hotel in Newmarket, a position he kept until his death in 1944. Bill’s school was a quarter of a mile up High Street, the main road; it was run by the Anglicans. Here Tutte was a student from age 6 until 11. He spoke of the school as enlightened in its religious teachings, of his early fascination with astronomy, and of what a rich source of information was the school’s encyclopedia.

He was a successful student: at age 10 he took the Scholarship examination for secondary school. Now, curiously and significantly, Cheveley is located in the county of Cambridge, though it lies three miles east of Newmarket, in Suffolk, whereas the city of Cambridge lies fifteen miles to the west. So when Tutte won a scholarship, it was to the distant school in Cambridge. The eighteen mile trip was judged by his parents to be too much, and he was kept at home. However, a year later, when he was again successful in the examinations, he was permitted to enroll at the Cambridge and County High School for Boys. Here he further excelled in studies and, in the course of time, went up to Cambridge University, and to Trinity College. For this he was, in his words, "adequately supported financially by a State Scholarship, a College Scholarship and a grant from the County." His major at university was Chemistry: in this he obtained First Class Honours. All the while he applied himself with great vigor to his first projects of mathematical research. From his first days he participated in the meetings of the Trinity Mathematical Society. Here he met and formed a bond with three other Trinity undergraduates, Leonard Brooks, Arthur Stone and Cedric Smith. It was with them that he investigated "squaring the square". By all accounts, this was his first intense friendship: it would remain a close bond throughout their lives. The world began to open to him.

It was only six weeks prior to his death that Tutte learned that he had lymphoma of the spleen. And then, one week later, he learned of congestive heart failure: his aortic valves were leaking, the heart was enlarged. Each of this pair affected the treating of the other: the combination brought about his death.

In this, he never expressed despair; he remained unfailingly positive. He looked death straight in the eye, with a directness that could not be matched. There were numerous ways this directness was manifested: here is just one. On the last Friday, he went as an outpatient to the Grand River Hospital to receive the last of two units of blood that his doctor had prescribed to counter the loss of red cells to lymphoma. He seemed to the attending nurse so tired that she recommended that he stay in the Hospital for the weekend. He accepted the suggestion. The resident physician gave permission for his admission, but the nurse had the task of first asking Tutte of his views of the life-preserving measures that should be taken if his heart failed on the weekend. "I suppose you may not have thought about this" she said with a somewhat hesitant tone. He replied firmly"When my wife was dying eight years ago from cancer, we discussed this and decided 'No heroic measures!' That applies for me now." He entered the Hospital, and six days later he died, at peace.

It was just last October that Bill was awarded the Order of Canada; this award thrilled him. The ceremony was held in Ottawa, at the Governor General’s mansion, Rideau Hall. They do everything possible to make it a splendid occasion. At the award ceremony, which some of you have seen on television, it so happened that Tutte sat in the front row of the recipients, and on the centre aisle. This special position was in part due to his receiving the rank of Officer, but within that subset, it was a happenstance of alphabetical order. However that may be, it made it seem as though he was "the man." And as he, one of the last, stood with a special dignity, the citation was read, and in that citation reference was made to his war work, how he had deciphered a series of codes known as FISH, there was a hum of excitement that spread round the room, a palpable buzz. I later asked him whether he was aware of this. He said that he was too preoccupied to notice, but the occasion in general gave him great pleasure.
At dinner, I sat with Phyllida Kent, who herself had spent the war years at Bletchley Park. She reported that the German Ambassador, who was at the ceremony, had been heard to say "It is because of Tutte’s work that I am here." What could that mean? Tutte supplied the correct interpretation: the ambassador had likely seen the citations, and noted that Tutte’s involved second world war cryptography, and that had motivated him to come to the ceremony.