

Veteran says old foes have become friends

By Sheldon Alberts

Calgary Herald

REICHSWALD FOREST, Germany — They died in enemy territory, but their graves are now cared for by friends.

That's the way Calgarian Allan Stodalka sees it.

He was one of about 120 veterans who paid quiet tribute Wednesday to 706 Canadians buried here in the Reichswald Forest War Cemetery in northwest Germany.

"I know it bothers some of the veterans that Canadians are buried in Germany, but it doesn't bother me at all," said Stodalka, 75, who lives in University Heights.

"Personally, I don't think it matters where a person is buried. We are all supposedly equal human beings and we can't say that one country's land is better than another's."

Stodalka was attached to an artillery regiment when he fought through this area 50 years ago. Then, Germany was near defeat and anti-German sentiment was at its highest.

Canadian newspapers, including the Herald, referred to Germans in derogatory terms like Jerry or The Hun.

During the past week, celebrations and commemorations marking the 50th anniversary of the end of the war in Europe have stirred up many of those old, bad memories.

But Stodalka, who lost many friends during the war, said he had long since stopped holding grudges.

"Your foe today could be your friend tomorrow, and we are friends today with Germany," he said. "I don't think that it's right that people should continue this animosity from birth until death."

For those who visit, the Reichswald cemetery is a symbol of remembrance. The ceme-

tery's register includes names of visitors from Holland, Germany, Canada, Great Britain and Australia.

More than 7,600 Allied war dead — mostly British, Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders — are buried here, just four kilometres east of the Dutch-German border. All but one of the 706 Canadians here were members of the air force.

The German government has an agreement with the Commonwealth nations to preserve the land for the war dead. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission pays for its upkeep.

The Reichswald Forest was the site of some of the fiercest, and most costly, fighting during the final months of the war in Europe. Hundreds of Canadians who died in Germany were buried in war cemeteries like the one nearby in Groesbeek, The Netherlands.

But unlike the United States government — which repatriates its war dead — the Canadian government permitted its war dead to be buried on enemy soil.

"They're buried with their comrades here. They are buried where they fell. That was the policy of the Canadian government," said Lawrence McAulay, Secretary of State for Veterans Affairs, who attended the Reichswald Ceremonies.

Today, flowers grow near most of the 7,600 tombstones. The cemetery is surrounded by the hardwood trees of the Reichswald Forest.

"This is a beautiful cemetery, quiet and peaceful — I think it's a fine place," said McAulay.

Wednesday's ceremonies were the last, and most low-key, of several held in the past week at cemeteries where Canadian victims of the Second World War are buried.

Dear Canada

*O Canada, we can't forget
The bitter tears that you have shed
You fought for us so willingly
To set our little Holland free
Some came by boat, others by plane
So many never returned again
We saw them coming one by one
A Father, Brother or a Son
No one could ever put in writing
The strength of these Canadians fighting
Fifty years we have been free
Thank you Canada for Liberty.*

*O Canada, you know their name
Of Canadian men who never complain
They saw us through in forty-five
Returning home being scarred for life
They followed orders to the end
Saved the Dutch and spared their land
To them all Honour and all Glory
They are the heroes of our Liberation story
Canadian love, so great and deep
The Dutch still treasure and always keep
Canadian men, the greatest in our history
Thank you Canada for Liberty.*

*O Canada, we can't repay
The cost of Dutch Liberation day
You came and saw our crying land
And wiped our tears with your own hand
You fought courageously side by side
'Twas for the Dutch your loved ones died
So many crosses left behind
Are always in our hearts and minds
Without these crosses we'd have been lost
Still Dutch-Canadians count the cost
To all the families of this nation
Thank you Canada for Liberation.*

*O Canada, after the war
You opened wide your country's door
With love you sent an invitation
Come see us through immigration
And when the Dutch put their feet ashore
You were waiting and caring once more
The days went by and love grew strong
For we had learned to speak your tongue
To live with those we've loved so much
A dream came true for many Dutch
And we still like to say in a humble way
Thank you Canada for Liberation Day.*

*O Canada, Dutch Liberation
Brought great mourning to your nation
Amongst our flowers your dears ones sleep
And the Dutch will always weep
For all the riches of this earth can't pay
The cost of our Liberation day
Canadian hearts, so filled with sorrow
Cared for the windmill land's tomorrow
With love were planes sent into the air
Dropping food and clothing everywhere
And from the heart, Dutch-Canadians say
Thank you Canada for Liberation Day.*

*O Canada, you'll understand
The Dutch-Canadians of your land
Now we have come to live and stay
All Dutch-Canadians will pray
Lord bless, protect us furthermore
From another terrible war
So many died and could not see
Our glorious day of Liberty
If ever danger threatens this land
May Dutch sons be the first on hand
Through love we have become one nation
Thank you Canada for Liberation.*

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Editor's Note:

This poem of thanks to Canada and Canadians was written by Mrs. Annie Westerhof, the organist with The Salvation Army Toronto Temple Corps, in 1970 when the Dutch were celebrating 25 years of liberation. With the minor change to the first verse it still holds true the sentiment of love and gratitude felt by the Dutch towards Canadians for their part in liberating Holland in 1945.

- Brenda van Vliet



KONINKLIJKE
ALGEMEENE VEREENIGING VOOR
BLOEMBOLLENCULTUUR
KAVB

THIS IS TO CERTIFY .

In honour of the troops of the Canadian Armed Forces, which in 1944 and 1945 participated heroically in the liberation of the Netherlands, and to reflect the immense gratitude of Dutch people for the thereby regained Liberty, Peace and Justice, the City of Nijmegen presents this new tulip to all Veterans.

During the official ceremony on the Traianusplein at Nijmegen on this day, Mr. Serge Rainville, on behalf of the Canadian Veterans, accepted the new tulip which received the name

'CANADIAN VETERAN'

This new bright red Late Tulip cultivar has been created by the Bulbgrowers of Holland and is of great merit. At the request of the National Committee "Thank you Canada", Naarden, Holland, the name has been reserved by the International Registration Authority for Tulips, of the Royal General Bulbgrowers' Association (KAVB), of Hillegom, Holland.

Mr. Serge Rainville
Executive Director of "Canada Remembers"

Mr. E.M. d'Hondt, LL.M.
Mayor of the City of Nijmegen

Ds. C.M. Graafstal
Chairman
National Committee "Thank you Canada"

Drs. J. van Scheepen
Registrar/taxonomist
Royal General Bulbgrowers' Association

Mr. R.D. de Jager
for the International Flower Bulb Centre

HILLEGOM, Holland
May 5th 1995



CANADA REMEMBERS

Netherlands Pilgrimage. May 1-11- 1995

This year marks the 50th Anniversary of the end of World War II the liberation of the Netherlands and consequently a liberation Celebration lasting throughout the first two weeks of May (1995). The length of the celebration period was established to include the dates of liberation of all the cities and major towns during the closing days of the war.

Why were all those Canadian Veterans there? To appreciate what it was all about, a brief recall of history is necessary. The Netherlands were invaded by Germany on May 10-1940. Their freedom was entirely taken from them. While the situation was somewhat tolerable during the first couple of years, after the invasion of Europe on D-Day, June 6-1944 matters progressively got worse. Later in the year the Dutch Railway went on strike to resist the transportation of German war goods. The Germans retaliated and took over the railway and denied use of it to the Dutch people. Hence there was no distribution of food nor transportation of coal to heat their homes and to generate electricity. The winter of 1944-1945 was amongst the coldest in history leading to the starvation and freezing to death of many people. Also a black market came into being and urban people traded their valuables for food and fuel. This caused a transfer of wealth from urban citizenry to that of rural citizenry. This was the situation in the Spring of 1945 when we of the first Canadian Division and those of the fifth Canadian Division were transferred from Italy to North West Europe to combine with the Second, Third and Fourth Divisions already there to establish the First Canadian Army.

During the Spring of 1945 the allied forces advanced North East across the Rhein river towards Germany. In the final days of the war, the British, Americans, Polish and others progressed Eastward into Germany while the First Canadian Army was directed Westward out of Germany to free the Netherlands and to assist the Dutch in establishing order.

and their own government after all the remnants of the German forces and their control had been removed.

It must be realized that the end of the war in Europe in 1945 evolved over a number of days. On May 2-1945 the German Armies Surrendered in Italy. On May 4 our Commander General Montgomery (Field Marshal) accepted the Surrender of the German Forces in Northwest Europe. On May 5 at 8:00 L.D.D.S.T (London double daylight saving time) all hostilities were to cease. Then May 8 was declared to be the official (Victory in Europe) V.E. Day. At this time most of the Canadian Army was in the Nijmegen, Arnhem, Apeldoorn Area. My regiment was near Apeldoorn and it was here that I transferred from my L.A.D. (Light Aid Detachment) to #2 Workshop R.C.E.M.E.

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Immediately after V.E. Day the Canadian Forces were dispersed throughout the Netherlands to take charge of the collection of German troops in order to disarm them and repatriate them back to Germany. The other duty was to assist in establishing local and Federal Governments. During this time the Canadian Airforce participated in parachuting in massive quantities of Food and Medical Supplies. In about two months the Dutch had pretty well taken over control of everything and our job was completed. The fact that it was Canadians who carried out the final liberation and then occupied every major town and city has lead the Dutch to recognize us as their Saviors. Hence, the invitation from the Dutch to Canadian veterans to participate with them in the 50th year anniversary of their liberation. They wanted us to come back so that they could thank us personally for their freedom.

There were estimated to have been about 13,000 Canadian Veterans in the Netherlands during the first half of May 1995. They came from all walks of life and from all over Canada. Many were sponsored by Dutch organizations and billeted with families, some groups were organized through legion branches. They paid their own air fare but were billeted with Dutch

families. Some went entirely on their own. Our delegation was the official delegation code named "Canada Remembers" and was sponsored totally by the Department of Veteran Affairs Canada (D.V.A.). We had about 120 ex service personnel, some Government people (M.P.'s & Senators), several tour conductors, DVA personnel, nurses, doctors and many from various media making 182 in all. To fill the quota they selected one member only from a regiment and corps. The primary qualification was that you must have been present in Holland for its liberation in April-May 1945. I was fortunate to have been selected to represent the R.C.E.M.E Corps (Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers). As well there was a delegation of 10 youths, two from each of 5 regions in Canada. Our two youths came from Edmonton.

Our purpose of being there was twofold. One was to participate with the Dutch in celebrating the 50th year anniversary of their liberation; and the other was to pay homage to our fallen comrades. We stayed full time in a hotel at Deerwerth which is a suburb of Arnhem where the battle of Arnhem took place in Sept 1944. The book and the movie "A Bridge Too Far" originated with this battle. We travelled every day from the same hotel and each day included the two purposes of the pilgrimage i.e. celebrate with the Dutch people and visit as many war cemeteries as possible to pay tribute to our comrades buried there. These were very impressive events with a large Honor Guard - Bands and up to 10,000 Dutch civilians attending each.

Our days were very long - from about 8³⁰ AM departure to about 11⁰⁰ - 11³⁰ PM. return. The itinerary was as follows

April 30 Travelled from Calgary to Toronto
May 1 Travelled from Toronto to Amsterdam
May 2. Arrived in the Netherlands and got settled in
Our hotel - De Brandin - Deerwerth

May 3 Debriefing at the Hotel. Visited Arnhem-Oosterbeek war cemetery. In the afternoon drove to Westerbork to visit the site of the Concentration Camp which held about 10,000 Dutch Jews and captured underground and other Anti-Nazis. Ann Frank and her family spent time here. They have a silent commemorative service here every year on May 4. and a large Memorial service once every 5 years on May 5. There is also a museum.

May 4 Visited the Cemetery at Holten. There were about 10,000 people present for the ceremony. The children laid flowers on the graves. Every year on Christmas eve they have a service and light a candle on every grave. For the evening we drove to a Dutch military Camp at Nunspeet where our Honor Guard was staying. We had a huge reception and then a sit-down dinner. I met my young R.C.E.M.E counter part Cpl Cameron Stewart. We were the only two R.C.E.M.E there.

May 5 we drove to Nismegen for a special ceremony to officially register a new tulip variety (which took 25 years to develop) called "Canadian Veteran". This was followed by torch bearers bringing a lighted torch to light the "Flame of Remembrance" for the first time. In the afternoon we bussed to Apeldoorn for the evening meal with drinks etc and then attended tattoo of about eight bands. At the grounds of the old palace. One band was a combination of the Canadian 48th Highlanders pipe band and the Apeldoorn 48th Highlander band created to pay tribute to the regiment that liberated the city in May 1945.

May 6 we visited the war cemetery at Groesbeek where 2338 Canadians are buried. There were probably between

6-8000 Dutch people present. Each of us veterans laid a wreath honoring those in our particular regiment or corps. After a bag lunch we went to Nisvardal for an afternoon of festivities including performances by acrobats and a choir of 600 school children. There was a fly past of world war II airplanes and some parachutists. This was the national Liberation Day for this city.

May 7. We drove to Apeldoorn for the big national parade. Food, drinks, bouquets and kisses were given to us as we marched to the city centre. It is estimated that there were between 300-500 000 people lining the parade route. The children were always up front with their little hands stretched out to touch as many of us as possible. We gave out thousands of Canada flag pins. It was a very loud crowd-singing and cheering along the whole route. We had a reception at the Maple Leaf Club before we came home.

May 8 in the A.M. we drove to Arnhem to visit the Airborne war museum which houses artifacts and relics from the battle of Arnhem. Sept 12-26-1944. See book and movie "A Bridge Too Far" in the P.M. we drove to Amsterdam, had a canal cruise from mid city to the harbor where we boarded the Canadian Frigate "Toronto" for a reception. It was here that I met and had a chat with Gen J. DeChastelain.

May 9 we crossed the country to the west coast to the Schelde estuary and to the Bergen-op-Zoom war cemetery. After the ceremony we proceeded to the city of Bergen-op-Zoom which was liberated on Oct 27-1944. The city had a great reception for us in their city centre. Their specialty

was their famous Dutch gin. After the reception, two of us went to the city square and went into a McDonalds for coffee & Big macs, just because it was there. After our return to our hotel we had a banquet-of Steak Dinner.

May 10 in the forenoon we visited two war cemeteries in Germany. One was at Rheinberg where there is only one Canadian soldier, whose body was found in 1948. Later we went to a second cemetery in Germany in the Reichswald Forest. There are many Canadians buried here - mostly Air force. It was here that I was interviewed by the Calgary Herald. (see clipping attached). People back home who saw the article in the May 11 Herald believed that I was only in Germany. I was able to get a copy of the article after I got home. After this we left for home, stopping at the cemetery at Groesbeek again to try to take a few photos of Lead Stones

May 11 we left the hotel for good this morning to go to Amsterdam to board our flight to Toronto. We left at about 2:40 PM. and got to Toronto at about 4:30 PM - with 6 time zone changes. Stayed overnite in Toronto

May 12 Left Toronto at 8:45 AM and arrived in Calgary at 10:52 AM with 2 time zones.

The greatest concentration of veterans was at the parade at Apeldoorn. Many, including about 95% of our group wore their traditional Legion Dress. i.e. Grey Slacks, Navy beret, and Navy blazer with Campaign medals. My medals are from left to right (1) The 1939-1945 Star (2) Italy Star (3) France and Germany Star (4) Canadian Volunteer Service medal (with clasp - denoting

overseas Service (5) War medal 1939-1945 (Victory medal).
The route was several kilometers long and it was quite an emotional event.

One wonders why the Dutch have such an ongoing remembrance of those dark days in their history. The reason is that their freedom was taken from them causing them to live in suppression for five years and then it was restored by a relatively sparsely populated country (13 million in 1939) that came thousands of miles to their rescue and asked nothing in return. Present day Dutch children are third generation removed from the actual experience. However, through their grandparents, parents and schools the memory and feeling of gratitude is being perpetuated.

There have been many questions during our pilgrimage, about why people in Canada have such little knowledge and appreciation of why our country went to war in 1939. Part of the answer is that we have never lost our freedom to a much larger and powerful neighbor and then after many years of oppression had it given back to us again. Then too our political situation and the mass media influence the populace to abhor what we as a military force committed ourselves to do. Political correctness surely doesn't prevent the Netherlands people from honoring and remembering.

In conclusion I may say that we accepted the hospitality of the Netherlands people with grace and gratitude. Each of us who had the good fortune to be part of this pilgrimage wore his Legion uniform and medals with pride. It was a very touching experience which none of us will ever forget and God knows we won't be here when the next 50 years pass by. The message of the exercise was "Canada Remembers". It is a certainty that those of us on the pilgrimage will.

Alan A. Stodolka