

V-E DAY 65

Joyful Dutch civilians and Canadian soldiers celebrate the liberation of Utrecht, May 7, 1945.

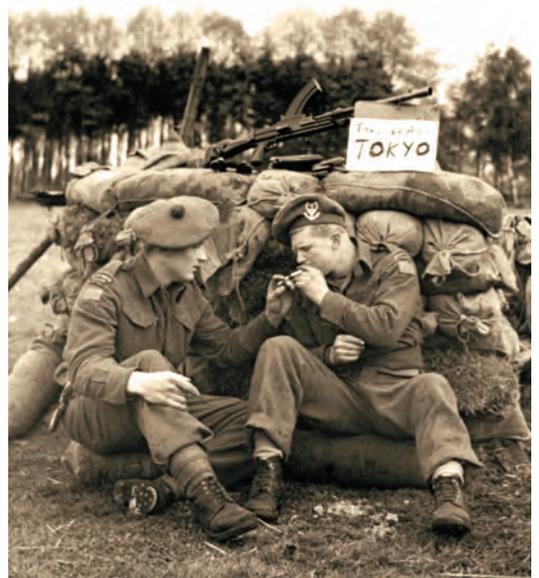
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THE ROADS TO VICTORY

by J.L. Granatstein



Clockwise from left: Torontonians read the news during downtown VE-Day celebrations, May 1945; members of the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada enjoy a smoke on May 5, 1945, in front of a sign that draws attention to the war in the Pacific; a smashed portrait of Hitler leans against a destroyed German vehicle, May 1945.



John Gray, an intelligence officer, was one of the first Canadian liberators to enter Rotterdam after the German surrender. He came out of the city hall where he had been inquiring where he could find the city's resistance leaders, and saw a dozen or so Dutchmen around his jeep. "As I was about to climb in I saw the cardboard box with the remains of our lunch—sandwiches and pie. If these men were hungry—would it be resented?" Gray then asked one man if the food was of interest. The Dutchman "stared at me incredulously—any use? He climbed onto the bonnet of the jeep and began to break the sandwiches into little bits and to give each man a small handful. The men ate slowly, relishing every crumb, licking at their hands to get the last taste. Some got sandwich, some pie, but all had something, relishing it, smacking their lips.... Many soldiers," Gray went on, "had a similar experience that first day...and to many Dutch people the very taste of liberty remained for a long time a mouthful of good bread or pastry such as they had almost forgotten."



At The Hague, a Dutch teenager watched the first of the Canadian tanks roll down his street. "There was a big hush over all the people," he wrote later in a cadence that might have come straight from the King James Version of the New Testament, "and it was suddenly broken by a big scream, as if it was out of the earth, and the people climbed on the tank and took the soldier out, and they were crying."

The reaction of the Dutch to liberation was exuberantly evident everywhere. After five years of Nazi occupation and terror, they were free; after the "starvation or hunger winter" of 1944-45, they would be fed. The soldiers of the First Canadian Army had liberated the Netherlands, the most joyous part of the Second World War for Canadian soldiers. But it had been a long road to VE-Day.

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Second Canadian Corps had fought its way through Normandy, serving as part of First Canadian Army under command of Lieutenant-General Harry Crerar. Then it was the struggle to clear the Channel coast, followed by the brutal, bloody battle to open the Scheldt Estuary in October and November 1944.

By late February, General Charles Foulkes' I Canadian Corps was on its way north from Italy to rejoin First Canadian Army, while II Canadian Corps, led by Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds, fought its way through the Rhineland and then, in Operation Plunder, crossed the Rhine. The fighting was difficult, the casualties heavy, as the Germans resisted with great determination the closer the Allied armies got to the Reich.

Then, as I Canadian Corps moved north and west into Holland, II Canadian Corps moved north and east across the Twente Canal and the Dutch-German border in the first week of April, its objective Oldenburg and the Weser River beyond. The fighting that faced the 4th Canadian Armoured Division was frequently fierce. At Delden in the Netherlands, one company of the Lincoln and Welland Regiment had to call for mortar fire on its own position to drive off a German attack. At Sogel across the border on April 9, the motorized infantrymen of the Lake Superior Regt. cleared the town and then faced a vicious counterattack the next day. About 30 of the enemy penetrated into the town centre, catching the 12th Field Ambulance in its sights. Captain Harry Jolley, a dentist in his late 30s who had previously served in Britain and Italy, found himself fighting for his life and, perhaps to his surprise, performed well enough that he received a Mention in Dispatches (he had hoped for the Military Cross) and later the British Empire Medal. In his next letter home, Jolley said nothing of the action, only telling his sister that he'd been reading *Forever Amber*, the sexy novel of the day that he found "not very exciting."

A few days later, Major-General Christopher Vokes, commanding the division, learned (incorrectly, as it turned out) that the commanding officer of his Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders had been killed by a civilian in Friesoythe. Vokes then ordered the destruction of the town in reprisal. "We used the rubble to make traversable roads for our tanks," he said years later. "I confess now to a feeling still of great loss" about his officer's death, "and a feeling of no great remorse over the elimination of Friesoythe." Canadians tried hard to spare Dutch civilians from their fire. They had no such concerns about the Germans.

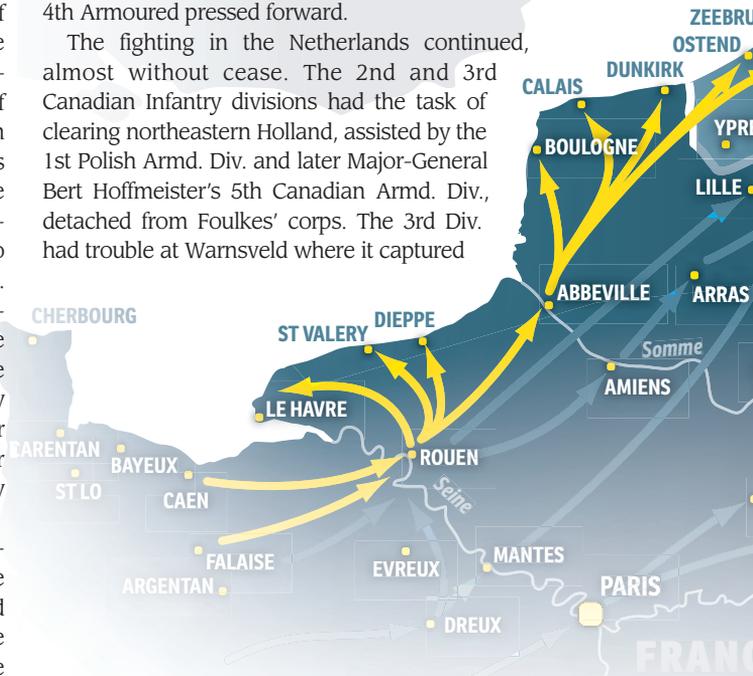
Vokes' division, its infantry coming from Brigadier J.C. Jefferson's 10th Brigade, then had to find a way across the wide Kusten Canal, a few kilometres south of Oldenburg. The Germans had two battalions of a marine regiment and some paratroops defending their bank of the canal, and on April 17 and 18 Jefferson



A German officer is linked up with Canadian and German forces at Wageningen in the Netherlands.

sent his infantry from the Algonquin Regt. across in boats. Against very heavy resistance, the bridgehead held, and soon the Royal Canadian Engineers had rafts operating and a bridge across the canal. The losses were heavy and continued to be so, but the 4th Armoured pressed forward.

The fighting in the Netherlands continued, almost without cease. The 2nd and 3rd Canadian Infantry divisions had the task of clearing northeastern Holland, assisted by the 1st Polish Arm'd. Div. and later Major-General Bert Hoffmeister's 5th Canadian Arm'd. Div., detached from Foulkes' corps. The 3rd Div. had trouble at Warnsveld where it captured



teenage soldiers who even in April 1945 "thought Germany would win" with "their belief in Hitler and Nazism...still unshaken." The war diarist of the Régiment de la Chaudière noted at Zutphen that "the enemy...were often first-class troops and have shown a bitter fighting spirit...." The Canadians had the town by April 8.

On April 13, 2nd Div. reached Groningen, the sixth city of the Netherlands, where it too faced heavy resistance from German infantry and some of the small number of Dutch SS troops. The SS, knowing their fate when Holland was freed, resisted bitterly, with hand-to-hand fighting raging in the houses and on the streets. Some put on civilian clothes, mingling with the Dutch citizenry who were celebrating their pending liberation, and fired on the Canadians of the 5th and 6th Canadian Infantry brigades. They were shot on sight. By the 16th, the Germans had surrendered. The 2nd Div. had 209 casualties among its infantry.

The 3rd Div. cleared Deventer on April 11, then pressed on toward Leeuwarden, just 15 kilometres from the North Sea. At Harlingen on the coast, the Highland Light Inf. staged a "rush order" attack, the battalion moving forward as fast as it could go. Over 400 Germans fell into their hands, "many of them in a drunken condition"; there were no casualties, so quickly did resistance collapse.

At Otterlo, a German breakout led to a frantic night of fighting on April 16-17. General Hoffmeister's headquarters were in the town along with troops of the Irish Regt. of Canada, the



Lt.-Gen. Charles Foulkes (left centre) accepts the surrender of German forces in the Netherlands, May 5, 1945.



**TROOP MOVEMENT
1944-1945**

German Border

First Canadian Army

Allied Troop Movement



Dutch Resistance members and Canadian Maj.-Gen. B.M. Hoffmeister examine a captured German car, May 11, 1945.

Governor General's Horse Guards, and three artillery regiments. The enemy took everyone by surprise, throwing grenades, firing mortars and yelling (drunkenly, some Canadians said). The gunners took them on hand-to-hand, and Hoffmeister was in the middle of the fight—in his pyjamas, some accounts said. The Germans lost 300 men in the chaotic fighting.

Hoffy's Mighty Maroon Machine then moved on Delfzijl, the small Dutch port across the mouth of the River Ems from the German town of Emden. Here the Germans, some 1,500 troops behind a well-wired trench system and supported by heavy naval guns on the German side, also fought fiercely. The Canadian attack, commanded by the able Brigadier Ian Johnston of the 11th Canadian Inf. Bde., began on April 25. The infantry, men from the Westminster Regt., the Irish Regt. of Canada, the Perth Regt. and the Cape Breton Highlanders,

moved to breach the German perimeter, advancing slowly under fire while lifting mines. The ground was sodden which made life even more miserable. The Perths suffered 78 casualties over five days clearing the outskirts of Delfzijl.

Taking the town itself was the task of the Capes, their main attack going in at 10 p.m. on April 30. The German defences, anchored by huge bunkers constructed of concrete four feet thick had to be cleared and resistance did not cease until May 2, with Adolf Hitler already a suicide in the ruins of the Third Reich in Berlin. Ten days of fighting near and in Delfzijl cost the Cape Breton Highlanders 62 men killed and 168 wounded. The regiment's war diary called it the Capes' hardest fight of the war, an extraordinary comment by a unit that had fought through the Hitler and Gothic Lines in Italy, a testament to the fanatical Nazi resistance that lasted to the very end of the war.

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PHOTO: TACONIS KRYN, LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA—PA169941

While the battles were being fought on Dutch soil in April, the civilian population in the cities continued to starve. The Allied leadership and the Dutch government-in-exile in London knew of the privation—the daily food intake of working men was between 320 and 500 calories—but there was concern that German troops in the western part of the country might breach the dikes if attacked. This was the situation in early April when the Nazi Reichskommissar Arthur Seyss-Inquart agreed to allow food to be sent in providing Allied troops did not cross his defence lines. The Reichskommissar had run a monstrous tyranny, he must have feared his fate after the surrender, and he was trying to bargain for clemency. On April 28, a ceasefire on the I Canadian Corps front came into effect. Soon trucks crossed the line and Bomber Command aircraft began dropping bulk rations in Operation Manna. First Canadian Army sent in 1,600 tons of food a day, and higher headquarters arranged for coal shipments so that electrical power could be generated. The bombers dropped 11 million rations, literally manna from heaven, or so it must have seemed to the Dutch.

The emergency efforts did not halt the spiralling death rate at once. At least 150,000 Dutch in urban areas were suffering from starvation edema, the death rate approximating 10 per cent. Nor would Seyss-Inquart's "humanitarian" gesture—his troops had sullenly, sadistically breached the dikes and flooded Dutch land just before he began to negotiate—save him from the hangman.

If the Dutch were justly bitter, so were Canadians. General Harry Crerar had fought the Germans in two wars, and he did not want those of his soldiers killed in action in Germany to be buried in unfriendly soil. On his orders, the bodies of all those killed in Germany—losses over the last six weeks of the war numbered 1,482 killed—were brought to the Netherlands to be interred at Groesbeek or Holten, the sites selected by the Canadians for Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries.



This page, from left: With a spoon poking out of his trousers, a Dutch boy hopes for some food during the Hunger Winter; Prime Minister Mackenzie King and Louis St-Laurent broadcast a VE-Day message. Opposite page: German troops, under Canadian supervision, hand over equipment, May 9, 1945.

But at last the war drew to its close. Captain Jolley, listening to the radio on May 1, tuned into a German station that played *The Ride of the Valkyries* endlessly until its important announcement at 10:25 p.m.: Hitler was dead. "It was anticlimactic," he wrote. When the German surrender finally came on May 7, this too was unthrilling. "One would imagine that that would be one day at which an old soldier would look back and recall vivid unforgettable scenes—drama, intense emotion, relief, joy, tears and laughter." Not so. "None of us shouted, threw hats in the air, nor anything of that sort.... I felt—I don't know—practically nothing. If anything, what I felt most was surprise, maybe an impatient vexation with myself for failing to react in a manner more in keeping with the moment."

Jolley added that he learned later that most troops at the front had reacted as he did. Certainly Gunner James Brady and the men of his gun troop, also on German soil on VE-Day, did. "Our crew, however, are silent and thoughtful. Anticlimax. There is no feeling of exultation, nothing but a quiet satisfaction that the job has been done and we can see Canada again."

To see Canada again. The Canadians wanted only to go home. Almost all were civilians in uniform; almost all were civilians at heart. Brigadier James Roberts, commanding 8th Bde., negotiated the terms of the German capitulation on the 3rd Canadian Division's front. The German general he dealt with asked him if he was a professional soldier. Roberts, who had been a militia lieutenant in 1939, said in his memoirs that "I replied, simply, that I was never a professional soldier but that, like most Canadian soldiers, I was a civilian volunteer and that, in my former pre-war life, I had been an ice cream manufacturer." The German, Roberts noted, was more than slightly affronted that he had been forced to surrender to "a common civilian." The brigadier had become a first-rate officer, one who had learned on the job and become as close to a professional as one can be in what historian Lieutenant-Colonel Jack English called "the best little army in the world."

PHOTOS: NICHOLAS MORANT, LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA—C022716; MICHAEL M. DEAN, LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA—PA134394



The day after VE-Day, Gunner Brady's regiment had assembled for a memorial service. As he wrote in his diary, "The Colonel begins to read the 36 names of our fallen. He falters and hands the paper to the Adjutant who calmly folds the paper and puts it in his pocket and quietly says, 'It is not necessary. They were comrades. We remember.'"

There is no doubt that the Dutch still remember "onze Canadezen," our Canadians. The 50th and 60th anniversaries of VE-Day were huge national celebrations in Holland, and Canadian veterans were hailed everywhere with genuine emotion and enthusiasm. The parade in Apeldoorn in May 1995—which I saw with my own eyes—was one of the most moving experiences of my life, the vets marching or riding under banners strung across the flag-draped streets that said (in English) "Bless you boys." The Canadian war cemetery at Holten is visited every Christmas Eve by schoolchildren from Deventer who light a candle by each of the 1,394 graves.

Even more moving because unorganized and voluntary, are the numbers of Dutch families who visit year round. You can see them telling their children that these gravestones mark the places of the men who came from across the sea to give The Netherlands back its freedom. A police officer from a small community not far from Groesbeek summed it up best: "In the Second World War, you Canadians hadn't been attacked. You didn't have to go to war. But you chose to come over here and help us. Many of your young men and women gave their lives so that Holland would once again be free. We will never forget you for that."

This year is the 65th anniversary of VE-Day, and there will again be a commemoration and celebration in the Netherlands, surely the final one which many Canadian veterans will be able to attend. But there is no indication that the Dutch will forget. Consider the experience of Malcolm Young, 65 years ago a lieutenant in the 2nd Division's 8th Reconnaissance Regt. His troop had commandeered a home in Appeltern, its owners the Loeffens family and their 10 children. Young took snapshots of the family and had never forgotten how good they were to his men. In 2005, at St. Anne's Veterans Hospital in Montreal, he met Princess Margriet, born in Ottawa while her mother, Princess Juliana, was in wartime exile there. He asked the

princess to help locate the Loeffens, and she did.

The Montreal Gazette newspaper told the rest of the story: "Two weeks later, Young got a call from Hanny van Dongen, granddaughter of the couple who had put him up. 'My family was very surprised; they wanted to see him,' said van Dongen, who lives near Appeltern. In June, two years after the princess's visit, Young and his wife, May, returned to Holland for a reunion and a walk along the Maas with the four still-living Loeffen children. One of them, Thera Loeffen, who was nine in 1944, recalled Young giving her chocolate.... 'They were very good to us, and I wanted to touch base and thank them,' Young said." The mutual regard seems genuine.

The links forged during the war remain. Of course, for the Dutch there is an element of tourist promotion about it these days, but there is more, much more. The mothers in their 20s holding up their babies to kiss a Canadian veteran—something I saw in Apeldoorn in both 1995 and 2005—so they can tell them later that they once touched a man who helped free their nation in 1945—is surely the proof of that.

Those Canadians who fought the war remember their friends, their dead comrades, the good times and the bad. But do Canadians, most born well after the Second World War ended, large numbers of them postwar immigrants, remember the courage and sacrifices of the generation that fought and won the war?

Not as much as they should. For years little was done to encourage remembrance or to teach the history of those awful times. But this is changing slowly. There are many dedicated teachers who take students on battlefield tours and who teach about the Second World War. There is the new Canadian War Museum with its great exhibits and good website. There is the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Ottawa. And there is Remembrance Day, each year seemingly bigger and better. To watch the crowd at the National War Memorial put their Legion poppies atop the tomb at the end of the formal service each November 11 is inexpressibly moving—just as it was in 2000 when it first occurred with complete spontaneity. We know the Dutch remember and commemorate their sacrifices and their liberation; so increasingly do Canadians remember those who served in the army, navy and air force and fought for freedom.

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This page, clockwise from top: A VE-Day celebration rolls down Sparks Street in Ottawa, May 8, 1945; Smiles and a sign say it all following the end of hostilities in Europe; Canadian soldiers celebrate the victory in London, England; a Canadian soldier obtains information from a German officer and a soldier, May 11, 1945. Opposite page: Canadian soldiers supervise German soldiers during the delivery of food in Rotterdam, May 9, 1945.

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