

On Saturday May 4th, 2002 Mr. Alan Earp made the following moving speech at the Canada Netherlands Friendship Day flag raising ceremony at Burlington City Hall.

Burlington is an appropriate part of Canada in which to be celebrating the very special relationship which exists between this country and the Netherlands. It was, of course, in Holland, during that terrible winter of 1944-45, that this long-lasting love affair began. Three of the Canadian infantry regiments which fought their way into North Brabant that October, and thus began the liberation, were from Hamilton and the Niagara Peninsula: the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, The Lincoln and Welland Regiment, and the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders of Canada, Hamilton's Highlanders, whom I represent.

Sadly, we would be stalled there for the rest of the winter, while the Allied supply lines were consolidated, and the population north of the Maas would come close to starvation while they remained in German hands. In the course of that winter there would be the final German offensive in the Ardennes, the costly and unnecessary battle for a little island in the Maas, Kapelsche Veer, and then the fierce Battle for the Rhine, which would, at last, make possible those heady final days of liberation and the victory we celebrate.

I find it impossible to recall that winter without a lump rising in my throat and a shiver running down my spine. The shiver comes from the recollection of how cold it was, even for Canadians, especially huddled in a slit trench beside the swollen River Maas, - the lump in the throat arises from remembering the warmth, the extraordinary warmth of our reception by the Dutch civilian population, whom we came to regard with admiration and affection. It was their presence which reminded us that we were at war for the very best of reasons, in order that men and women might be free.

"Kommen bei der kachol setten." Those may be among the few words of Dutch that I remember, and still cannot pronounce, but that invitation to come and sit by the stove warmed many a Canadian at heart, as well as limbs chilled by long exposure on open dyke and flooded polder.

After four years of occupation many of the population had almost nothing, but what they had they shared with us, and we, in turn, could share with them our rations and supplies. I spent part of my 20th birthday in a bombed-out bakery in Loon op Zand, but out of the rubble the baker, helped by men from Hamilton's Highlanders, somehow produced the best birthday cake that I have ever had. No cake since then has ever meant as much. The traditional wish of "Many Happy Returns" also had added meaning as that night I would take a patrol across the swollen river to the German side.

On March 31st 1945 we crossed the Rhine and at long last were able to start liberating again. There were great scenes in Lochem, Almelo and Hengelo but, alas, a few days later the Argylls and the Lincoln and Welland were directed eastward into Germany to help in cutting off the German armies in the north, so we exchanged a largely pleasant task for one that was much less agreeable, and a lot more dangerous, since, unlike the Dutch, the Germans did not welcome us with open arms. Like many others, I was wounded shortly afterwards and was shipped back to Britain and later, Canada. So that was all I got to see of Holland, but the memories lingered and would be re-inforced.

Back in Canada I would meet many Netherlanders and feel that somehow we had an instant bond. Of course, the first wave included some of those lovely Dutch girls whom we still remember wistfully, this time as Canadian war brides. That was just the beginning of a westward flow which would be highly beneficial to Canada, bringing some of the best of post-war immigrants. They have made their mark in many parts of Canada, not the least in our own area, and shown themselves to be exemplary citizens.

And then, after 40 years or so, the time would come when many of us would get an opportunity to go back to Holland, - only to lose our hearts all over again, this time to younger generations. We would be astonished, and greatly moved, at finding how the thousands of Canadians whom we left behind, including several hundred from these three regiments, in the cemeteries of Bergen op Zoom, Groesbeek, Holten and elsewhere, - are held in honour still,- and by Netherlanders of all ages. Thank you, Holland, for that.

And there would be the extraordinary welcome that we ourselves were given, often undeservedly. But no one who experienced it is likely to forget. I once asked a Dutch friend why Canadians were given such a royal treatment; after all there were troops of other nationalities involved. "Oh," he said, as though it were obvious, "you were all volunteers. you didn't have to come. You chose to do so. "Which is true enough, but a very charitable interpretation of how we happened to be there.'

That era is almost over, as we who are left have grown old, but so much that is positive has come from it, including an enduring bond between our countries, and the emergence of new organizations and individuals who have taken initiatives such as this, to make sure that a friendship that was forged more than half a century ago, in very special circumstances, will never come apart.

I cannot think of a better Memorial.

Alan Earp