



**FROM NOVA SCOTIA TO THE NETHERLANDS
(AND BACK)**

JAMES E. KERR'S WORLD WAR TWO MEMOIR

(Written in 1995-99, edited by Ted Kerr 2021)

v.3

1



James Edward Kerr (Jan. 24, 1915-July 5, 1999)

SUMMER OF 1940

In the summer of 1940 Ted Stockall and I (*both working at father Edward Kerr's lumber mill in Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia**) decided we would go in the army.

We went to Halifax on Monday morning and went to two or three places, including the Armories, as we had seen an ad in the paper that they wanted some recruits for the 82nd Heavy Battery (coast artillery). But they had lots of applicants and only wanted 12, so we were not wanted.

Canada, with a permanent army of just over 4,000 men at the end of 1938, had declared war on Germany on Sept. 10, 1939, nine days after Germany invaded Poland. However, apart from the disastrous raid on Dieppe in August 1942, the Canadian Army saw little real action until the invasion of Italy in the summer of 1943.

We finally went to a recruiting centre on the corner of Spring Garden Road and Queen Street and put our names in. They told us to come in again in two weeks or they would send us word to come in. We waited two years. We had tried everything but the infantry. I finally got a call from the N.P.A.M. (Non-Permanent Active Militia) to report to District Depot No. 6 (on *Chebucto Road*) in Halifax on July 21, 1942. Ted had gotten married to my sister Jen in 1940 so he didn't get a call.

I had a medical and X-ray and passed okay. We were all camped on Strawberry Hill with six to a tent and open washstands (outside) with cold water. In my tent were D.J. MacDonald and Joe LeBlanc from Cape Breton, Ross Clayton from Young's Cove, Annapolis County, Bill Seldon from Caledonia and Ashley Myers (or Horner) from Eastern Passage. (*Seldon was killed in action in the Netherlands on Feb. 19, 1945*).

There were many from Ontario and New Brunswick and many from Nova Scotia. I was there about a week and (*then*), along with a number of other fellows, was sent to Aldershot, near Kentville, Nova Scotia.

(*Aldershot*) was where we had our basic training and, later on, instructions on the 3.7 anti-aircraft gun, which had a lethal area of 60 feet (*18 metres*) whereas a light aircraft gun (Bofors) had to make a direct hit. The 3.7 was a heavy artillery gun. All artillery men were gunners and the ones who were NCOs (non-commissioned officers) were bombardiers. So I was Gunner Kerr, J.E. The men in the tanks were troopers, engineers were sappers and the men in the infantry were privates.

(*Right: the Vickers 3.7 inch anti-aircraft gun*).

I tried to get home on some weekends. I'd catch a train at Kentville and get off at Windsor Junction (*near Halifax*).



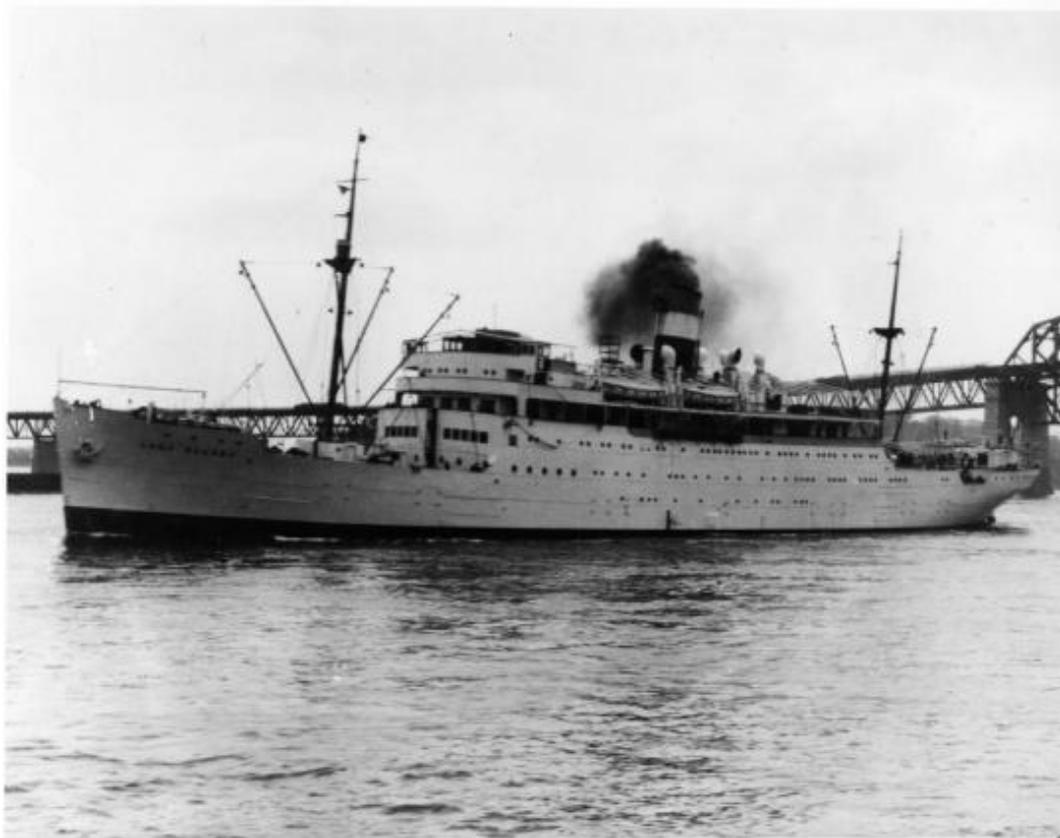
**All italicized text has been added in editing*

Most of us joined the Active Service at Aldershot. We wanted to join at the depot but they told us there was lots of time. My number was F3968.

In October, we moved to Bedford (*near Halifax*) to a new camp where the Bedford Mall is now situated. There was a rifle range there so we had practice now and then. We had to go on parade every morning and did some drill. We went on route marches too. One afternoon we went to Upper Sackville (*about 15 km one way*) and the next afternoon we went to Burnside (*about 22 km*). I wouldn't want to walk that far now; it would take me a week, maybe a month. (*At the time of writing he was in his 80s and his right leg had been amputated*).

One Thursday we packed up and moved to the south end of McNab's Island (*in Halifax Harbour*). The first fellow I saw was Earle Taylor who used to fire the boiler at the mill in Shubenacadie. We were with the 10th Search Light Battery. We didn't do much over there so the next Thursday we moved back to Bedford. A new bunch of men from Eastern Passage (*across the harbour from Halifax*) joined the battery, as quite a few fellows we started out with did not join the active army.

In December 1942 we found out we were going to Newfoundland. I got a pass to go home but had to be back at camp on Sunday. Geordie Ross, who worked at Reid's store *in Milford* and lived in the Annex at the Milford Inn (*a building owned by Edward Kerr, and subsequently by James Kerr*) with his family, drove me to the camp. The next day, we were taken by truck to the waterfront in Halifax. That was on Dec. 15. We boarded the "Lady Rodney" and sailed for St. John's, Newfoundland.



Lady Rodney

The Lady Rodney was one of five “Lady Boats” owned by Canadian National Steamships that were taken over by the government for wartime service. The Rodney, armed with a 4-inch gun aft for protection, was the only one of the five not sunk by subs. She was scuttled in the Suez Canal during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

We joined a big convoy that was going overseas and did not make very good time as the convoy had to travel at the speed of the slowest boat. The last two days we were with an escort, a corvette, on both sides of our ship. I don't know for how far, but sometimes we couldn't see them as the sea was very rough.

On the fifth day one of our men went out and jumped overboard. The gunner on the stern saw him lower himself by the ropes looped over the side of the boat, and let go. He had been playing poker with some of the boys in the recreation room before he went out. I had just come in a little while from doing guard duty. He was one of the bunch that had come from Eastern Passage and I did not know him.

We landed in St. John's on the 21st. I did not get home again until next September. The first time I was in town was Christmas Eve (with) John Rogers, Tony Russell, D. J. MacDonald, George McInnis and Bill Seldon.

After Christmas they took three of us to Ordinance to get a truck apiece. I got an old Bobcat 30 cwt (i.e. 1-1/2 ton, type shown) which was pretty well worn out. I gassed up at RCASC (Royal Canadian Army Service Corps) and when I pulled out on LeMarchant Road I almost forgot they drove on the left



side of the road in Newfoundland,

a British dependency until 1949. However, it didn't take long to get used to it. I joined the other trucks and we headed for Torbay, about six miles (10 km) from St. John's. We were at South Camp, handy to Torbay airport. It was a snowy day and my old truck would not stay in 4-wheel drive.

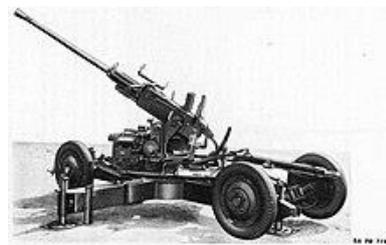
In the new year, we started to haul ammunition for our 3.7 anti-aircraft guns from the waterfront. Two shells were packed in a metal case and weighed about 100 pounds (45 kg). We hauled them to an ammunition dump near the airport, where they were stored in round-roofed buildings covered with steel sheets. Of course, I did not have to help load, I just drove the truck. After a few days they gave me a good 3-ton truck (similar shown).



The western North Atlantic was infested with German submarines for much of the war, and hundreds of ships were sunk. Up to November 1944, in the so-called Battle of the St Lawrence alone, U-boats had sunk about 20 merchant ships and four Canadian warships in the shaded area shown. Casualties included the Nova Scotia-Newfoundland ferry Caribou, sunk in 1942 with the loss of 137 lives.



I made quite a few trips to the wharf at Portugal Cove, 12 or 15 miles (20-24 km) from St. John's, to take supplies for a battery on Bell Island, *where there was an iron ore mine*. I made two or three trips towing Bofors guns (*example right*). *The artillery was of little use in September and November 1942, when U-boats sank four ships waiting to load ore, killing 70 sailors.*



At the end of March, two (3.7) guns were towed to Pouch Cove and Flat Rock for a practice shoot. A light plane towed a drogue on a long line behind and the gun crews tried to hit it. There was a lethal area of 60 feet, so you had to have the right fuse so the shell would explode within that area.

Some days the ceiling would be too low and the plane couldn't fly so you might spend two or three days before you could fire a shot. Three or four boys (*from the 154th Heavy Battery*) and an NCO would have to stay overnight to guard the guns.



Snow storms are a fact of life in Newfoundland, and the winter of 1943 was no different. On the last day of March, a big storm started and continued on next day with a heavy wind. I left the next morning with a new guard and to bring the other guards back. I got almost to Torbay but couldn't get any further as the snow was so deep. At the top of a hill I got the truck turned and came back to camp. The snow or hail would hit your face like sand. I stopped to pull an American truck onto the road. I could hardly see the trail the snowplow had made but I made it back and took a hot shower.

The next day we started out with about 30 men with shovels and *a truck with a plough*. Going uphill out of Torbay we came to four or five Newfoundlanders shoveling snow so we started to help them and found a Plymouth sedan buried under three feet of snow. A little later, the truck with the plough got stuck in the ditch. A few moments later a big tractor with a dozer blade came from the other direction and everything was cleared, so the new guards took over from the old.

A week later I took the head cook over to the army service camp at the airport to gather the rations. While we were waiting for our turn I took sick and vomited, then we finally got our load on the truck. When we got to the camp and I was backing the truck up to the kitchen I had to vomit again, so I was told to go to my bed. Big Frank Tyios, who slept in the next bed, took sick at the same time.

After an hour or so Dr. Green, who was from Halifax, came and tapped on my chest and back and told me I had pneumonia. Then he looked Tyios over and told him he had measles. We were taken to the hospital at Lester's Field. The doctors there thought I had the measles also and would not believe Dr. Green's diagnosis and sent me down to the Navy hospital for an X-ray. That showed Dr. Green was right. I spent Easter in hospital. One of the nurses was Sister Clark, also from Hants County (*the central Nova Scotia county in which Milford is located*).

In the summer we were moved to Kenney's Pond and slept in tents. There were a lot of small trees and bushes on the property and some of us made beds with some of the 2 x 4 (boards) that we picked up where they were building new barracks.

We used little fir bushes and cut off the limbs and laid them on the bed and put the mattress on and they made a pretty good spring. There were only two to a tent. My first partner was Henry Gogan from Fairville, New Brunswick. My next partner was Ivan Cushman from London, Ontario. In September my turn came to get my leave.

Captain Bev Piers knew someone at the airport and he got chances for seven of us for a flight to Moncton, New Brunswick, on a C47. It took freight over to Torbay and was to return empty. There were seven Americans on the same flight. We were about three hours to Moncton. I had to stay overnight as it was too late for any train to Halifax. I was the only one from Nova Scotia. I bought a ticket on the Maritime (*Canadian National train service*) and I remember Elmer Mingo (*from Truro*) was the conductor (Private Kerr went to high school in Truro by train).

I was home about two weeks and then reported back to Moncton and met the boys from Ontario, but we could not get a flight back to Newfie so we got travel warrants for the train to No.6 Depot in Halifax to wait for the next trip by the "Lady Rodney".

While we were there a strike took place on the waterfront. A boss at the waterfront came up and asked us to work. We did this work for two or three days and the last day we loaded three freight cars of Scotch whiskey that a ship had brought in. We thought we were going to be paid for our work, but a fellow from the Harbour Board came up to the depot and we were called out and he *just* thanked us very much for the work we had done. After about a week the Rodney arrived and we headed back to St. John's. We were only 46 or 48 hours getting there; no convoy this time, but with an escort.

Before Christmas we moved to the camp on Pennywell Road.

One of the big guns from Torbay was at Ordinance getting overhauled and was ready to go back, so I got a big 4-wheel drive truck. Sgt. Alex Henry from Toronto was with me and sat on the little seat on the gun to work the brake. The truck had quite a load of bagged sand on the back and the gun, weighing 9-1/2 tons, made quite a load to haul out of St. John's. I had to gear down two or three speeds and as it was icy on the hill I got stuck. Using another truck as an anchor, I winched the gun up to bare ground, re-hooked it and got up the hill.

Jack Shields (*Enfield, N.S*) was at our camp then and on Boxing Day 1943 he sketched my picture (*in chalk, applied by finger. The book is a Halifax history, Tales Told Under The Old Town Clock, a gift from sister Avis*).



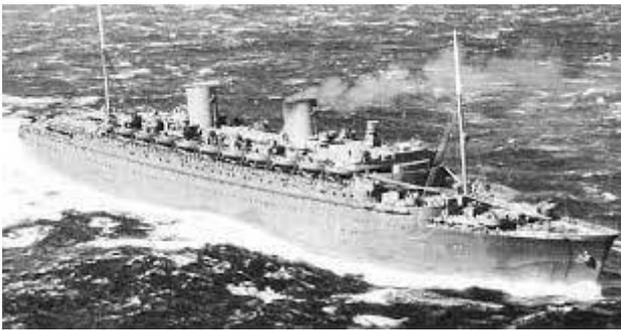
CROSSING THE ATLANTIC

In April 1944 a good many from our battery were shipped back to Canada. We landed in Halifax on the last day of the month on the “Lady Rodney” after 46 or 48 hours from St. John's, boarded the train, and went to the army camp. After a few days there they gave everyone a short leave, about a week, which we spent at our homes.

After that we reported back and went before the army examiner who asked us what we wanted to join. Some of us who were drivers told him the tank corps. Of course we had gone before him one at a time. He asked me what my category was and I told him I was "A-1". He said I would be going in the Infantry, my only choice.

That was a month before D-Day and he knew there would be heavy losses at that time. In a few days we took the train to Truro and Debert to train in the infantry. We were split up into platoons of about 40 men. That was where I met Aubrey Higgins from Moose River (*Halifax County*), who had been in some other outfit before. I knew most fellows, mostly from our outfit in Newfoundland.

We were in Debert on June 6, when the D-Day landings took place. After training a little over a month our platoon was called out and lined up in threes as usual, and we were asked who wanted to sign up for overseas. We all, or most of us, put up our



hands. One little fellow was asked how old he was and he started to cry when told he was too young to go.

(Left: Troopship Nieuw Amsterdam. The ship continued to sail until the early 1970s, with frequent calls to Halifax bringing Dutch immigrants to Canada)

After a few days, the 26th of June 1944, we got on the train at the station at Debert and stopped for about half an hour at the station in Truro. Of course no one got off. Quite a crowd of people had gathered and the only one I knew was Tom Robinson who was sitting in his car. I called his name three or four times but I don't know if he heard me when I yelled his name. Tom used to buy lumber from my father.

When the train started I took my seat with four other fellows. The top of the door was open and when we got near Shubenacadie I went out to the doorway and stood. When we came to Milford, Mrs. Sandy Woodworth, who lives handy the crossing was standing in the doorway. I waved and waved and she waved back and I think she recognized me. I think she told some people that she saw me.

At the pier (21 or 22), we marched up the ramp to the second floor and walked right onto the “Nieuw Amsterdam”, a big Dutch liner. That night we pulled out for England.

We slept in hammocks and had to take them down every morning. The ship, *which carried about 6,800 troops*, travelled alone, with no escort.

The "Nieuw Amsterdam" could travel at more than 20 knots, making her, in theory, able to outrun most torpedoes. She also carried 36 anti-aircraft guns. On the first or second morning the alarm went off. I don't know if it was a submarine or life boat drill. We were ordered to take our hammocks down and lineup.

Murray Northrup opened a port hole and we looked out and saw where the ship had made a sharp turn to the left. This was at 4 a.m. but nothing happened.

The boat was four or five days crossing the Atlantic, *docking at Gourock, Scotland, on the River Clyde.* After about a month *at Helmsley, North Yorkshire,* we were called out on parade and they called the nominal roll starting at A. We had four choices to name the regiment we wished to join: The North Nova Scotia Highlanders, The North Shore (New Brunswick), Stormont Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders and the Black Watch (Royal Highland Light Infantry).

Aubrey Higgins (*left*) and I were going to choose North Novies but there were quite a few Nova Scotians there so when they came to the H's and K's they had enough.



Murray Northrup, who was in the line in front of us, turned around and said "come into the North Shore with McLauchlin and me". So we said "North Shore". When they came to the M's and N's that regiment was filled, so they chose the Black Watch.

I never saw Murray Northrup again. (*He was killed on Oct. 30, 1944 in the Netherlands. Joe McLauchlin was killed, on June 25, 1944 at Verriers, France.*)

The next day we got on the train and moved to another camp. I met Leo MacDonell from Enfield on the train. He had been over on D-Day and was going back to the regiment in Normandy with some other fellows, but they had been taken off the draft and given a short leave.

The next time I saw Leo he was at a ball game at the ball field up the road from here (*in Milford*). That was seven or eight years after.

NORMANDY, JULY AND AUGUST, 1944



Canadian troops arriving at The Mulberry Harbour, Arromanches, on July 23, 1944 – probably the day Private Kerr arrived in Normandy.

I don't know where we got on the boat (*an LCI – landing craft infantry*) to go to France, but we landed at The Mulberry Harbour (*Arromanches-les-Bains*). The dock was built in England and was towed over the strait after D-Day.

Aubrey Higgins and I dug our first slit trench that night after walking quite a distance. The next day we also marched quite a distance with all our equipment on to a place at the edge of a town. We left our equipment in a field and they took us to see a movie in a garage. The name of the movie was "Life Boat". I had seen it before and was sleepy.

When we went back to pick our packs, we were told we were going to the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, popularly known as the "Rileys". *The RHLI, originating in Hamilton, Ontario, was part of 4th Brigade, along with the Essex Scottish (Windsor, Ontario), the Royal Regiment of Canada (Toronto) and the Cameron Highlanders machine gun unit, based in Ottawa.* Light infantry means we had no heavy guns. We went by truck heading to the front.



I was one of the last men getting on our truck, standing at the rear. We went through Caen (*left*), captured by Anglo-Canadian forces on July 19. That city was pretty well flattened by air raids by the Germans and the Allies. In a few minutes we passed quite a number of trucks of the RCASC (Royal Canadian Army Service Corps) and there standing beside one of the trucks was Wesley Wyer from

Shubenacadie. I called "Hey Wes" and he yelled back my name. The truck took us a few miles, and then we walked the rest of the way to Verriers and the front line.

The RHLI's War Diary for July 26, 1944, was less than enthusiastic about the new arrivals despite heavy casualties suffered the day before (abbreviations spelled out):

"Reinforcements of 5 officers and 175 other ranks arrived at "B" Echelon from Canadian Base Reinforcement Group to replace casualties suffered by the battalion in the attack on Verriers. These reinforcements had evidently been assembled hurriedly from available material and were, for the most part, not suitable for an infantry battalion's requirements. The majority of them were tradesmen and they include one regimental sergeant major, one pipe major and one staff-sergeant/clerk, none of whom were required by the unit. Four of the officers and 75 other ranks were immediately sent forward to the battalion position at Verriers under command of Captain H.A. Welch, the balance remaining at 'B' Echelon until further orders."

Privates Kerr and Higgins were among those chosen to move up. The RHLI had attacked Verriers Ridge, south of Caen, on July 25 and managed to get a foothold, but at a cost of 48 killed and 153 wounded. The Black Watch suffered even more severely; of the 300 or so who ascended the Ridge, only 15 survived.



(Right: Canadian troops on the move, near Verriers, July 25, 1944).

The Diary's July 27 entry notes that "It has not yet been found possible to recover and bury many of the killed owing to the battle still raging around our positions at Verriers." Overall, about 450 Canadians were killed in so-called Operation Spring, and 1,100 were wounded or taken prisoner.

It was quite late in the evening, maybe midnight, and we went in an old barn with some other fellows. I volunteered to stand guard for the rest of the night. On the next morning we went through a hole in the wall made by a shell and into a small orchard.

Aubrey Higgins and I dug a slit trench about 6 feet long and three or four feet deep. We were there together two or three days, and then one of us had to move ahead a few yards so we cut cards. I lost so I was the one to move.

Our section had seven men, two digging on the left and three digging on the right. In the middle a Black fellow was working alone in the middle. So I started to work with him. His name was Edison from Saint John.

When we finished we always looked around for something to cover the trench leaving an end clear for the other fellow to stand guard and the covered part for the other fellow to sleep.

We would put some mud over the covering. We would be quite safe unless we got a direct hit or were overrun by the enemy. One night when we were being shelled I woke up and Edison was backed in over me. By the way, we could not see over the knoll where the Germans were and they could not see us.

One morning it was my turn to get breakfast, so I was down behind the trench frying some bacon when a shell landed in front of the trench, blowing dirt and dust everywhere. Then Edison came down delivering little sweets and I said, "What are you bringing them down here for?" He said: "I'm not staying up there alone."

We used to put some dry mud in a tin can and pour a little petrol with it and it made a good stove. We used to make our tea that way. When I went up with the breakfast for the other men I noticed some pieces of iron out in front of the trenches.



On the next evening, Aubrey and his new partner, a young fellow named Smearer, came up to the trench to visit me. We had a little talk and then they went back to

their trench. The next day, I heard some of the boys calling for a stretcher bearer, and in a few minutes a Jeep came into the orchard and took a man out, but I did not know who it was. A little later Smearer came up and told me it was Aubrey. He had been hit by a piece of shrapnel on the back of the neck but he did not think it was very serious.

Higgins is officially recorded as having been killed on July 30, 1944, though he is listed, wrongly, as still being in the North Shore Regiment. At the age of 29, he left behind a wife and two children. The RHLI War Diary for the day records that two "other ranks" were killed and five wounded by enemy mortar and shell fire "which has been very heavy and concentrated in the battalion position all day."

Aubrey did not see any real action but we used to get shelled quite often.

According to the RHLI official history, "Semper Paratus" ('Always Ready', the regimental motto), Higgins was killed on the same day the RHLI experienced the first attack on the Western Front by German remote-controlled robot tanks (above). Packing about 850 pounds (385 kg) of explosives, these small unmanned tanks, known as "beetles", emerged from a smoke screen and sped towards the Canadian positions. All but one were destroyed by tanks and artillery, exploding with a huge blast when

hit. No casualties were recorded but one man was killed by shell fire while examining the wreckage of the machines. (The War Diary has July 31 as the date of this attack.)

We were at Verriers for nine days, *under constant mortar and shell fire*, and were replaced by the South Saskatchewan Regiment (Aug. 3 and 4). *On the 4th, German planes bombed and strafed RHLI positions but the Diary does not record casualties.*

I carried a PIAT (Projector, Infantry, Anti-Tank), a weapon that could penetrate six inches of steel, but you had to be at close range. When the RHLI were attacked when



they captured Verriers, two of the boys each got a tank, which were right in front of us all the time we were there, with the dead crew members lying on the ground where they jumped out. They didn't smell too good in that hot weather.

(Left: A PIAT anti-tank weapon. Weighing about 33 pounds, or 15 kg, loaded, it had an effective range of 105 meters, or 115 yards)

On our way shortly after we left, I got tangled up in some telephone wire and had to run to catch up with our company, which was B Company, 11 platoon.

The Germans had a cross roads taped (*i.e. targeted*) and shelled it quite often, so we didn't waste any time getting past there. We crossed under the barrels of some of our heavy artillery guns, which were being fired. After a while we got to the place where we were to stop. There were a lot of big bomb craters, which our planes had made. I was so hot that night that my nose bled a little. We lay on the ground with our heads in the helmets and went to sleep. My hair was still wet in the morning.

OPERATION TOTALIZE, Aug 7-10, 1944

At a terrible cost, the Canadians and British were doing the (controversial) job that Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery, the head of Allied operations in Europe, had set out for them: pinning down the German forces opposing them in the Caen area, thereby weakening the enemy defences facing the Americans to the south. A rumour had it that the 4th Brigade was the "sacrifice brigade, while the next major Canadian attack, set for Aug.8, was being compared to "The Charge of the Light Brigade."

Operation Totalize, a daring night armoured attack along the Caen-Falaise road,, was designed to break through to Falaise and, with the Americans, form a pincer to trap thousands of retreating Germans in the so-called Falaise Pocket. By this time, the 1st Canadian Army comprised not only Canadians but British troops and a Polish armoured division, all under command of Canadian General Henry Crerar.

Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds, who was to direct the attack, feared large casualties against the dug-in Germans and also wanted the infantry to keep up with the tanks and half -tracks. He came up with an ingenious idea.

Commandeering a large number of under-used Priest self-propelled artillery, he had them stripped of their guns – or ‘defrocked’, as the men put it – and had armour plating added. Each would hold about a dozen soldiers in relative safety, at least from small arms fire. A field workshop code-named Kangaroo managed to build 76 of these carriers in just four days. The name kangaroo stuck, not only because of the machines’ origin but because they carried soldiers in a “pouch.” The Kangaroo (above) is considered to be the first true armoured personnel carrier.



On Aug. 6, we trained to ride in half-tracks, a machine with wheels on the front and tracks on the rear. About 10 men sat on the floor and your head was below the sides, which were made of steel about 1/2 to 3/4 of an inch (13 to 19 mm) thick. (Left: A half-track. Maximum speed 42 mph/68 kph).



(Left: A half-track. Maximum speed 42 mph/68 kph).

The next day we went to the marshalling area. Tanks arrived, Bren gun carriers, self-propelled heavy artillery, all kinds of guns. The tanks had big drums in front that had numerous short pieces of chain

attached to them to explode mines before the tanks ran over them. When they started they set the drums in action to beat the ground.

The dust and noise was terrific as the columns formed up behind Verriers Ridge, out of sight of the Germans, but hardly inconspicuous.

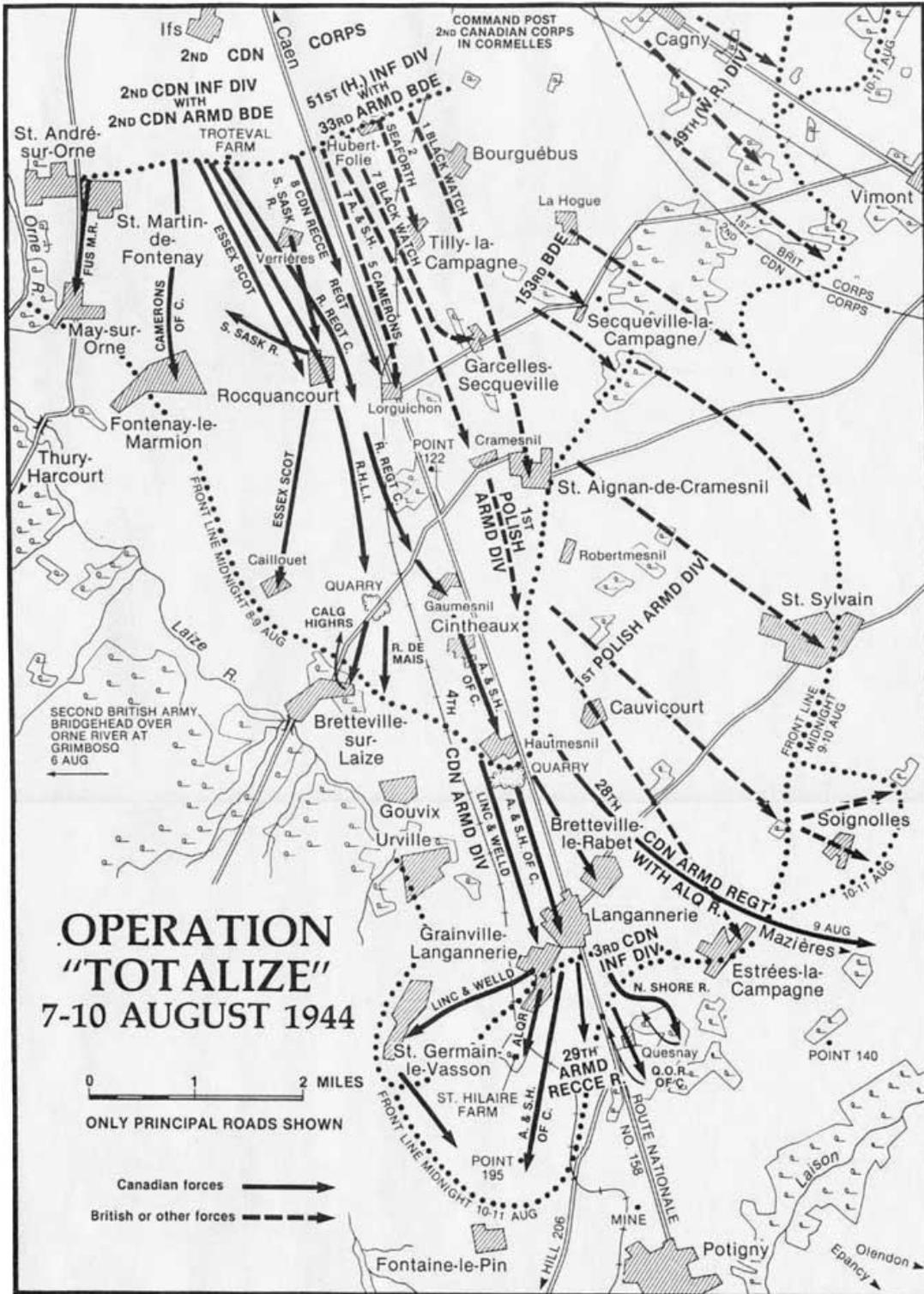
We were there all the afternoon. Before midnight, the air force (1,000 RAF bombers) bombed the enemy for some time and after that the artillery bombarded them for a quite a while. Then the big tanks started to advance, four abreast, to explode the mines and they stretched or laid white tape on both sides of the way. The other tanks started next and the 4th brigade followed.

The 4th Brigade was tasked with leading the first phase of the attack, with the RHLI assigned to the centre position, between the Essex Scottish and the Royal Regiment of Canada. The objectives were a quarry and a low hill near a small airfield.

Tracer fire and ‘artificial moonlight’, helped to lead the columns through dust, darkness and smoke.

(Below: Forming up for Operation Totalize)





We went quite a while and then the (*half-track*) we were travelling in stopped. I don't know what happened to it. I don't know if it was knocked out or if a track came off, but we had to get off. I heard a corporal yell to catch the following one, and that "the Germans aren't fooling." So my partner and I caught the next one, which belonged to D Company. It was very uncomfortable as had to sit on the legs of other men.

Bert Lawrence, of Ottawa, who as in the nearby 8th Reconnaissance Regiment, called it "one of the craziest nights I can recall. ('Caen 1944' by Henry Maule). The countryside was as dry as a bone and the bombing and rolling barrage, flail tanks and the combat itself created an enormous dust. ...The battlefield became almost opaque. There was quite a bit of basically undirected small arms fire and mortar fire in the air and although this caused some casualties it did not stop our forward movement. My own column simply kept grinding along."

The RHLI, too, was met by mainly small arms fire, although two Kangaroos were disabled when they fell into bomb craters. The column, though, veered too far to the left and instead of bypassing the German-held village of Rocquancourt it hit it dead on, and a German anti-tank gun began firing on the columns from point blank range. After some difficulty, the columns got moving again, with the RHLI driving straight through the village, much to the surprise of itself, the German defenders and the South Saskatchewan Regiment following the advance on foot. (Abridged from 'No Holding Back; Operation Totalize' by Brian A. Reid.)

It was daylight (Aug. 8) when D Company got to their objective. *When the mist lifted, the Germans mounted a fierce counter-attack with tanks and self-propelled guns, but were repelled. The RHLI was five miles (8 km) behind enemy lines at a cost of just one killed and 13 wounded. About 35 prisoners were taken.*

My partner's name was Pete Collins, from somewhere in Ontario, just a young fellow about 21 years old. We did not know where our B Company was until one of the men brought down four or five prisoners, so we went back with him over a level piece of ground. I remember there was an old Fordson tractor there that looked like it hadn't been used for some time.

A little farther on and we came to the other men digging in. They told us to dig in quick because they expected the Germans to make a counter-attack.

There was nice loamy soil, so we thought we could soon dig a trench but we soon struck plaster and had to pick it all to loosen it. Then we got shelled, and had to get down as low as we could. I swore there were Germans coming in out of a field of oats in front of us. But after a while I heard the other men start to dig again so we got up and could see no Germans and started to dig again and finish the trench.

About two hours after, we noticed a shell about 20 feet (*6 metres*) ahead of the trench and a little bit to the side that had not exploded. It was about 4 inches (*10 cm*) in diameter and about 3-feet (*91 cm*) long. When it hit the ground it made pieces of mud and little stones fly around us. Anyway it was a lot better than Germans jumping over our trench.

The next day, we moved to another area (*Bretteville*) and that time we were a reserve company. When the other companies took their objectives we were to pass through them and take the forward position. (*A company normally had 150-200 men, broken into 3 platoons*). While waiting in a ditch to start our advance (*towards the objective, the village of Clair Tizon*) we were shelled quite heavily.



The advance started at 0730 on Aug. 12. All was quiet as the Rileys passed the village of Barbery. "The men were sodden with sweat and chaff, and pollen clung to their trousers as they walked resolutely towards the woods," the regimental history records. "C Company ... was first to take fire from machine guns in a copse on the left. Then all the rifle companies were enveloped in a storm of bullets and shrapnel.

Lyle Doering, the battalion intelligence officer, called it 'the most intense mortaring and shelling the unit ever witnessed.' Then German infantry and tanks attacked. *"They were fanatical devils," recalled C Company's senior officer, Major Joe Pigott. "There was hand-to-hand fighting as these fellows came running out of their slits, firing rifles and grenades." The War Diary dryly records of the action that "the battalion dug in and resisted counter-attacks."*

When we started, I was on the extreme end of the line in ripe wheat, which was up to our shoulders and we had to keep a few feet apart and make a left wheel.

My partner, Pete Collins, who was carrying the Bren gun (*example pictured*), got very tired, so I took it for a while. We came upon a few who were wounded, and two or three who were killed, to get to our position, which was the other side of a sunken road at the edge of a field. One of our tanks was sitting on the road just behind us but there were some bushes and a tree or two between us where we started to dig in.

Pete went over to an apple tree about 50 or 60 yards (metres) out in the field, *about 600 yards (metres) beyond Barbery*, where two or three other fellows had started to dig a slit trench, and brought back some apples. We each ate one, and then I said we'd better get to work digging as we don't know what's going to happen.

The RHLI history takes up the story: A private in B Company paused from his labour long enough to glance towards the woods. "Sir, are those our tanks over there?" he yelled to his commander. "Of course they are," (Major Hugh) Welch replied, not bothering to look up. "Jesus, they don't look like it to me." Welch straightened. "No, they sure don't," he said, and every man dropped into his half-scraped hole.

We just got down about a foot when I heard an "88" shell explode.

There was a gap in the bushes, which was an entry into this field, and up beyond where we had come down a little while ago. I saw this big Tiger tank coming, and one of our tanks which was parked in the gap was wasn't long moving out of sight.

We had to watch for infantry coming in behind the tanks. I don't know how many tanks there were, but things were pretty scary for a while. *(Private Kerr once said the ground was shaking so much he thought tanks were rolling over the RHLI positions).*

The attack was on our right flank. We stayed down as low as we could but had to look up quite often to see what was going on. Then a shell knocked down a tall slim tree and spoiled the view for us. Some German prisoners were howling after they were caught under their own shelling.

After a few minutes, there was a loud explosion right over our heads and my shoulder and neck stung. My partner called out for help, but he only had a little cut under his left eye. He was so scared he got up and was going to go somewhere. But I grabbed him and pulled him down and said "Where are you going?"

Then I noticed I had no rifle if the infantry came in, so I got some magazines in order for the Bren gun, which Pete had again. The tank that was right behind us got hit by a shell from the tank which I had seen at first. Our tank, which had rubber tracks, was burning. It was only about 20 or 25 feet (6 or 8 metres) behind us.

Two fellows from our section got hit. One fellow was killed, and the other laid on the ground for some time before the stretchers bearers could get him and I don't suppose he survived. I helped bury the other fellow. They were only about 10 yards (metres) from our trench. I think it was the same shell that hit us and my rifle.

The company had been attacked by a fearsome Tiger tank, with its huge 88mm gun, and two Panther tanks, which joined in to spray the position with machine gun fire. The tanks, supported by infantry, were all out of PIAT range. The RHLI was in bad shape by late afternoon. A shell had even scored a direct hit on the battalion headquarters, wounding the five occupants. As dusk fell, the tanks moved in closer, apparently preparing to finish off the battered battalion. Then suddenly, they stopped and turned around. Private Kerr had survived, but 20 of his comrades had been killed and 100 wounded. Recalling the experience years later, he described how he coped with the prospect of death. He just told himself: "To hell with it."

Later that day we were getting ready to move to another location when someone picked up a piece of my rifle. It was 6 or 8 inches (15 to 20 cm) long, the end of the barrel, and it had the bayonet on it. We never found the rest of the rifle.



Left: The standard-issue Lee-Enfield bolt-action .303 rifle. Introduced in 1895, they were accurate, simple and reliable. While single-shot, with a 10-round magazine, a well-trained soldier could squeeze off 20 or even 30 shots per minute. Used by Canadian Rangers militia in the North until 2018.



Above: The Tiger tank, with its massive 88mm (3.5 inch) gun, was one of the most-feared weapons in the German arsenal. It was far superior to anything the Allies had until close to the end of the war. Allied gunners were often amazed to see their shells simply bouncing off the 57-ton Tiger's 110mm (4.3 inch) front armour. The Tiger could fire a one-ton shell nearly a mile, while most allied tanks had to be within a few hundred yards (metres) to have any chance of knocking out one of these behemoths.

We started walking and went about a mile and stopped for a while. We were being shelled and the shrapnel was hitting the ground all around us. Then we got word to go back to clear a village that was surrounded, and we had to take the prisoners out of the houses. We finished just before dark, *with about 50 POWs rounded up*, and started to dig trenches for the night. The next morning (*Aug. 14*) we were told we were going to be at this position for some time, so we dug our trenches a little deeper.

A little later we got word to move, *to the hamlet of Tournebu, where another 40 Germans surrendered without a fight.*

The day was getting hotter as we walked and every fellow was tired. After about an hour, we were about to go by a bunch of British soldiers who were located off the side of the road. So Pete, my partner, stopped to see if he could get some water from them but we all kept going and walking pretty fast and he couldn't catch up to us.

I was carrying the Bren gun and my shoulder got pretty sore where I was wounded the day before and a fellow by the name of Jack Chew carried it for me for a while. (*Chew was a scout, a specially trained soldier who operated largely behind enemy lines, usually in a pair, gathering information and sniping*).

We finally reached a small village called Gouvix. Everybody was tired. Some fellows had their pants off, and I had changed my socks on my blistered feet, the first time I had my boots off for four or five days.

Pretty soon some big RAF bombers were flying low just above, to bomb the Germans. We thought it was great. Then a second wave came and then a third, which started to bomb too close for comfort. We could feel the concussion and we scattered and ran down the road (I did not feel my blistered feet) to a wooded area and got under a bridge over a brook of fast-running water, which was up over our knees. Every once in a while a big plane would fly over.

When things quieted down we started back to our equipment, when a truck came along and picked us up. I didn't think it had been so far. I took my t-shirt off and showed the stretcher bearers and it was full of little holes and my back had quite a number of flesh wounds. Also my shoulder and upper left arm.

The first-aid fellows said that I had better go and see the MO (medical officer), whose office was in a barn, but he was not there. I guess he was helping wounded artillery fellows who were caught in the bombing. Some Polish tanks that were with us were also bombed.



While several RHLI vehicles were destroyed, no serious casualties were recorded. Overall, though, 112 Allied troops were killed, 376 were wounded and 142 were posted as missing. About 265 vehicles, 30 artillery guns and two tanks were destroyed.

(Left: the best known photo of the so-called 'blue on blue' incident).

About a half an hour later I went down again and the doctor was there and patched me up and said he would send me out for a few days to a field dressing station. I used to go for hot compresses every morning. The back

of my neck was the worst and was getting sorer and finally became a boil. After a few days I was sent to CBRG (Canadian Base Reinforcement Group) where new fellows came before they were sent to the front line and other guys like me would be going back. My neck was very sore and I would go on sick parade every morning to get treatment. I was on light duty

After two or three days two fellows came by wearing uniforms with RHLI on their shoulders, Roy Beamer and Frank Chenier. They were us in Newfoundland so I was very glad to see them. They were going to the front line for the first time. That evening my name was called out to go back up. My neck had a big boil on it and I

would have kicked about going but I decided to go with the two fellows. We left the next morning but we were two or three days before we caught up with the regiment.

In the meantime, on Aug. 15, the Canadian First Army had taken Falaise. With Allied armies converging from north, south and west, the retreating Germans were forced into a “pocket” between Falaise and Argentan. This area was less than 15 miles (24 km) wide, with the only exit to the east.

For the next four days, Allied bombers rained hell on the crowded, shrinking pocket, wrecking hundreds of vehicles, killing 10,000 to 15,000 Germans and taking 40,000 to 50,000 prisoners. It is estimated that 20,000 to 50,000 escaped.

The RHLI War Diary for Aug. 21 records a unit strength of 38 officers and 630 “other ranks.” On a lighter note, the entry for Aug. 24 records that headquarters staff enjoyed a roast chicken provided by “the lady of the farmhouse”.

On the 29th, though, it is recorded that “During the day, the men had no food and heavy rain caused considerable inconvenience.

On Aug. 30, after a number of skirmishes, the RHLI crossed the Seine River at with the rest of the Second Division at Elbeuf and set off north on the road to Dieppe where, in 1942, the Canadian Army - and the RHLI - experienced the worst military disaster in Canadian history.



On the 31st the Diary reports a “tremendous welcome” by the people of Rouen, who lined the route and threw flowers into passing vehicles. Unit strength that day was 618 officers and men.

Right: Members of the RHLI meet up with U.S. soldiers in Elbeuf. Both Canadians were killed later in the war.

The next day we got to Dieppe, where we moved into a building with a steel roof.

Recent weeks had been bad enough for the Canadian Army. Between July 21 and August 30, the Canadians had suffered 3,000 killed and 7,000 wounded. On top of this, more than 1,500 exhaustion cases and been evacuated. Dieppe was another matter. Of the 4,963 Canadian troops that landed in the raid that day in August two years earlier, 3,367 were casualties, including 916 killed and 1,946 taken prisoner. Of the dead, 197 were from the RHLI, while about 300 were taken prisoner.

The next morning I went on sick parade and they put a poultice on my boil. Chenier and I walked down to the beach to where the raid had taken place in 1942. My neck felt much better next morning. The poultice did its job.

Sept. 3 was the fifth anniversary of the British declaration of the war. Memorial services were held in the Canadian cemetery, attended by the raid survivors, and that afternoon all units of 2nd Division marched past, six abreast, before General (*Harry*) Crerar accompanied by the mayor of the town.

Below, men of the RHLI at graves of those killed in 1942.



Another day of rest followed and then the division was off again along the coast, across the Somme, where the Canadians had fought and died in World War One, toward the Belgian border. When I was wounded I was in No.11 Platoon, but now with Beamer and Chenier I was in No.12. Five days after leaving Dieppe we were in Belgium. It was quite easy clearing the area around Ostend.

THE BATTLE OF THE SCHELDT

The Canadian Army took the port of Ostend on Sept. 9 with little trouble, but damaged facilities limited its usefulness to the Allies as they pushed closer to Germany. The big prize was the big port of Antwerp. The British Army had captured the port on Sept. 4, and its facilities were relatively intact. The problem was that Antwerp, on the River Scheldt, was 100 km (62 miles) from the sea, and approaches to the port were controlled and heavily defended by the Germans dug in on Walcheren Island (now part of the mainland) and in the Breskens Pocket, both in the Netherlands. The task of was given to the Canadian Army.

In the meantime, the RHLI relieved the Lake Superior Regiment just outside Bruges. One day when we were advancing up a highway we came to a place where the Germans had felled trees over the road to slow down the advance. The trees were booby trapped and there were a few snipers around, so we got in a ditch and one of our tanks pulled them out of the way.

The night after Bruges was taken, our regiment moved into a castle (*Male Castle, left*). We each carried a woolen blanket, so Roy Beamer and I put one on the hardwood floor to lie down on and the other one over us. It was a pretty hard bed but we had a good sleep. By the way, if a fellow was killed he would be rolled in the blanket before burial. Next morning we rode with the unit in the 4th artillery regiment back to France, handy Dunkirk. There was a garrison at Bergues where a reported 300 German troops under an SS lieutenant defended the land approach to Dunkirk. The old fortress had a 20-foot wall and a lot of mines around it, also wire.

The attack was set to take place at 4:30 a.m. A platoon of engineers was to cut holes in the wire and lift the mines and blow the wall. Our company carried ladders for scaling. It was going to be a costly operation if the Germans decided to fight it out. They had lit large petrol fires as soon as it was dark that prevented the engineers from doing their job. "Immediately, our approach was light as day, and their enfiladed fire raked the front. Casualties were heavy, and only by crawling on one's gut did most of us manage to withdraw." (Officer quoted by George Blackburn, 'Guns of Victory').

I wondered how that place would be taken.

I remember a French woman in the morning milking her cow and giving us a drink of warm milk.



In the end, new orders were received and Bergues was left to the French Resistance.

The RHLI and Essex Scottish took over the port area of Antwerp on Sept.9 but fighting continued in and around the city.

Between September 18 and 21, control of Oorderen and Wilmarsdonck, hamlets surrounded by fields that had been partially flooded when the Germans opened nearby locks, seesawed back and forth. During the fight, a pattern developed whereby Oorderen changed hands daily. Daylight hours saw the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry control its streets, but with sunset they were forced out by the Germans. In keeping with the bizarre nature of the streetcar war, both sides frequented the same small tavern – the Germans taking over the seats around the innkeeper's tables after darkness. 'The innkeeper thought it was a great joke,' Sergeant Gordon Booker later recalled. (Mark Zuehlke, 'Terrible Victory')

On one occasion, some Germans arrived at the pub early. One Canadian from B Company was killed and several wounded in the hand-to-hand fighting that ensued.

On Sept. 23, the Diary records, Company B commander Huck Welch (a former star football player with the Hamilton Tigers), reported that Oorderen was finally in RHLI hands. The RHLI, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Denis Whitaker (former quarterback for the Hamilton Tigers), was then ordered to take the heavily defended enemy positions in the rail yards north of Oorderen, at Merksem.

One day, B Company was to send a patrol a short distance forward to the small town of Oorderen (*since demolished to extend Antwerp airport*), so our platoon sent two sections along, our section and another one. We went through the small town and tried to go up to the railroad where the Germans were dug in among the boxcars and open ground with areas that were flooded on both sides. We did not get far that day so we went back to the lock section again.

Next day we went back again, but our section were giving them cover. We were laying on top of an air raid shelter. There was a row of houses right behind us. The shelter was a mound of mud with an entrance beside us.

We were laying on the side of the houses and just peeking over the top when a small bomb landed in front of us and the blast sent the earth flying in our faces. There was a lot of smoke but no one got hurt. The patrol got a little farther than the last time, but they withdrew and went back to the company again.

A day or two later (*Sept. 24*) we tried again and in three sections. Our section, about five men and an officer, Lieutenant (Hugh) Cairns, made it up to the yard, close to the station. The officer threw a couple of grenades in the opening of the dugout.

There must have been an "L" in it as four Germans came out with their hands up. They were kind of dazed but we got them going in a short while.

We had to run back across the open road, and the Germans on the railroad were firing at us. We were in a straight line with the prisoners in the middle and I guess they didn't want to shoot their own men as we got back without anybody getting hit.

The War Diary reports that Cairns (right) had been burned by a phosphorous grenade that blew up prematurely in the attack and was evacuated.

The Diary also noted that the pillbox had been responsible for preventing any of the RHLI's armed vehicles from using that area.

Cairns may have had an extra reason for his bravery that day; his brother had been killed in action just weeks earlier during the fighting in France.



The Diary also missed an important detail. According to a "dispatch" reported in a local Ontario newspaper in October 1944, the men in Cairns patrol discovered that the Nazis had a small chicken ranch just outside the pillbox, so the day's bag of prisoners included not only four German soldiers but 10 chickens.

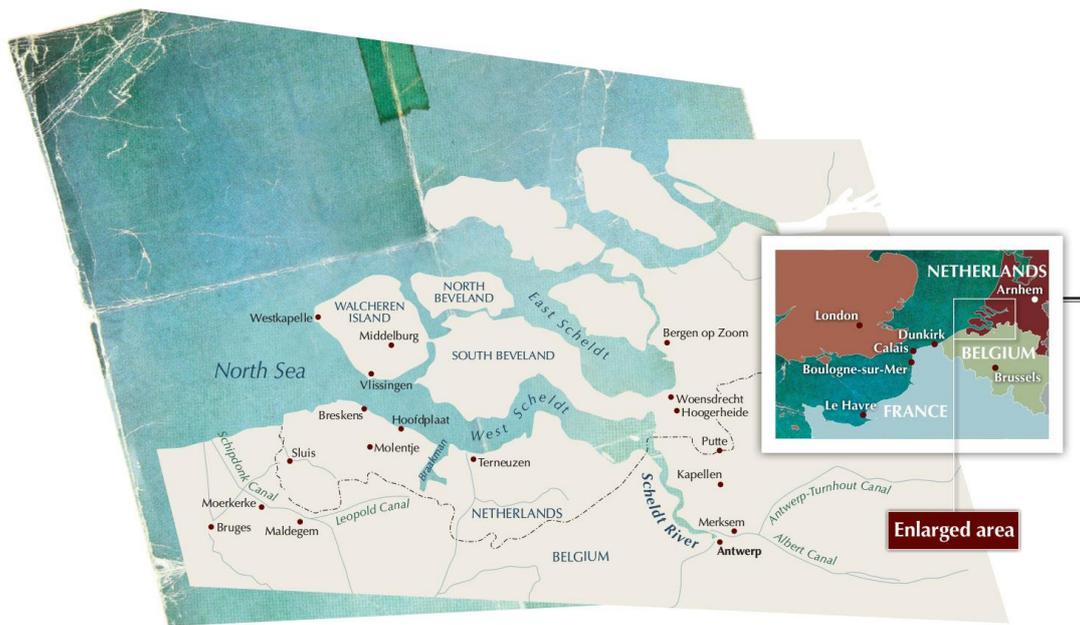
'The chickens were lugged in a sack across 600 yards of open country and under enemy fire, proving that Canadians permit no obstacle to stand in the way of their enjoyment of a chicken dinner.' (Veterans Affairs Website)

Hugh Cairns himself was killed in the Netherlands just over three weeks later, on Oct. 17, 1944. He was 28.

On Oct. 3, the push north of Oorderen began. The army moved some heavy artillery up behind us, also some anti-aircraft guns, and they made quite a noise so the Germans would think the attack would come from where we were. But the attack started from our left by the C Company and part of our B Company.

The artillery started to shell the enemy (before dawn) and kept moving to the right, and the infantry advanced right behind where the artillery was moving. We also fired our rifles and Bren guns. That surprised the Germans, and the success signal was given at 6:30 am.

C Company, which had attacked with faces blackened and in stocking feet, killed or wounded 30 Germans and captured 80, while suffering four killed and 30 wounded. Two members of B Company, which had been clearing out snipers during the C Company advance, were killed and eight wounded after they stumbled onto mines while withdrawing.



The next day our company moved to where the attack had started at a point where a highway and the railway crossed. They were built up because it was low country. The Germans had built machine gun nests up high enough to see over the railroad if you stood on a box, but a member of the Bren carrier platoon warned us not to look over because one of their men got shot in the ear by a sniper.

I wanted to see over but I just jumped to see what was on the other side. I guess there was an old fort that we were supposed to take out the next day. That night we were to do guard duty on the other side, so after dark Roy Beamer and I went to the other side of the highway. We had no idea what it was like but we found the some kind of old machine gun nest, so we occupied it.

I think Beamer had his nap first and I stood guard but I almost fell asleep standing up. I did not dare to lean against anything. There was a gatepost down behind us and I kept looking at it. I thought it was a German at first. After a while I heard a rustle on the railroad. It would go a little bit and stop and after a while I would hear it again. Finally, I decided it was only a rabbit.

We moved to another position the next morning. I guess the Germans had moved out of the old fort. We found more trees felled across the road and they were booby trapped and snipers handy, but the tanks cleared the trees. We were moving towards Putte. *It was there, on Oct. 6, that the RHLI entered the Netherlands and the Brabant region of dunes, heath, woods, marshes and farms.*

I forget where we stopped but that night our platoon went out on patrol. One section went up a side road where there was a knocked-out German tank, and our section and another one turned off in a field and started crawling along in what I guess was a turnip patch. We were quite close to a building where we could hear a German cough once in a while.

The patrol that went up by the tank got a grenade tossed at them and one fellow got quite a wound on his arm. They blamed us, but we had not tossed any grenade.

It was very early in the morning and there was a whisper to everyone in line, starting at the front, asking what the time was and the fellow ahead of me asked me the question and I could see my watch in the dark and I sent word back up the line and word came back to start crawling back.

The Germans knew there were was a little activity going on so they fired a few shots. A young fellow with running shoes on that were too big for his feet lost them but he kept running in his sock feet.

Mistakes, sometimes tragic, were often made on patrols. Private Kerr once recounted that he was on a patrol one night when what appeared to be an enemy patrol was spotted approaching on a country road. Taking to the bushes, one of the patrol team grabbed a grenade and pulled the pin – just as the “patrol” turned into a horse. The pin was frantically re-inserted into the grenade. Safe enough, unless the handle is released, but tricky in the dark.

It took two days from Putte to arrive at the entrance of the South Beveland Peninsula. The next move we made was ahead a little to a place that made me think of Sandy Desert (a sandy area about 7 km or 4 miles northwest of Milford), with pine trees growing on a small hill. The ground was like the sand we used to haul for house foundations (cement).

A lance corporal took our section out one afternoon on a patrol on the sand dunes. There were woods here and there. At one open area we ran one-by-one over to the next grove. When we all got together and moved a little we got scared all of a sudden, but it was only a pheasant that we had scared, taking to the wing. After a while we drew some fire from the enemy but no one got hit. I don't know if our leader knew where we were but we were close to a house with a few hens in the yard. Anyway, we returned to our trenches on the hill.

We were at this position for two or three days. Every once in a while we would be shelled by artillery. We lost two men in our section, one from Alberta and the other from Melvern Square, N.S. named (*Douglas*) Van Buskirk (*aged 20, date of death officially listed as Oct. 28, so he appears to have died of wounds*).

On the next day we moved ahead. It must have been in the evening as it was almost daylight when we came to a brick plant, which was of course was not working, so we stayed in the kilns until daylight. *This was Hoogerheide. George Blackburn of the Royal Canadian Artillery recalled seeing these brickworks on Oct. 6: “In the deadly still fields and roads, they look sinister and forbidding, as lifeless buildings in no-man’s land always do.” (Guns of Victory, by George Blackburn)*

Then we started walking down a hill to a kind of valley which was pock- marked by gouges made by bombs. We were taking over from the Calgary Highlanders who had been counter attacked three or four times a day. The slit trenches were up on high ground and we could see the small town of Woensdrecht.

Taking Woensdrecht (shown just prior to the RHLI attack) was vital, as the town controlled land access to the South Beveland Peninsula, on the north bank of the Scheldt, and therefore Walcheren Island.



There were some German fortifications built with brick, with the top covered with earth and planted with corn. I went over to a farm yard with a few dead cattle lying around and got a bucket and some water to wash some clothes. The old farmer didn't want me to take the bucket but after I was through with it I took it back.

There was a house not far away and I went over to it. There were some of the boys gathering up some bottles of preserves and there was one bottle of yellow plums, so I grabbed it and was going to run back to my quarters but a fellow was running back and a sniper was shooting at him, so I waited a while and I ran as fast as I could over this open ground. I did not get hit and when I got to my quarters I opened the quart bottle and ate half of the contents.

We were very short-handed and that night there were only three of us in our section, where there should have been at least six or seven men. We had to do 100 percent guard duty. One of our men had joined us that day and it was the first time for him on the front line. *Casualty rates in northwest Europe were far higher than predicted, leaving the Army extremely stretched, and replacements were often poorly trained.*

On Oct. 10, the Calgary Highlanders battled fiercely with elite German paratroops for control of Hoogerheide, the village overlooking Woenstrecht. The battle raged back and forth, street by street, house by house, even floor to floor and bedroom to bedroom. Casualties mounted on both sides until the fighting ground to a stalemate, with both sides exhausted among the ruins.

Next night (*Oct 11*), Sergeant Carter of our platoon took some of us, about seven men, out on a patrol at about midnight up to the front line in German territory, *from where the War Diary notes B Company had been taking considerable machine gun fire.*

(Coordinates in the Diary show the patrol would have entered the built-up area in the centre of this map from the polders to the west and proceeded to the village of Heide. Note the sand dunes (duintjes) SW of Hoogerheide).



Major Welch wanted us to clear two buildings on the way up. We walked in an opening on one end and out the other. We did the same in the other building but didn't find any Germans. There might have been some inside but we could show no light.

We went up to the town and were standing on the sidewalk when Carter came to a fellow by the name of Bedford and asked him and I to go with him in an alley where he thought he heard snoring and told us to find the man who was sleeping.

Anyway, he left us to go back to where the other fellows were. It was so dark we couldn't see your hand in front of your eyes, so we ... got in our places again in the line. After a few minutes he came back and asked me to go with him.

There was quite a gap where there were no buildings, about I suppose, 100 yards (*metres*). We crawled up the ditch and found three or four dead Germans, so he asked me to search them to find out what (*unit*) they had belonged to but I could not find any papers. While I was searching them he was giving me cover with his revolver.

After I did about three searches I said I couldn't find anything so he said let me try, and gave me his revolver to cover him. We were getting pretty close to a building and could hear a guard coughing once in a while, so he said to me, what do you think about getting the young fellow with the Bren gun to come up and shoot up that house. I told him that if we started shooting we would not get back to our lines.

Well, he said, I am going back to get him. Well, I was up there alone and I found another dead German and thought I might get a P38 revolver off him but he had none.

So I thought, what am I doing up here all alone? So I crawled back in the ditch to where the sergeant was talking to the young fellow by the name of Phapkas, who had the same idea as I had and refused to start shooting up there.

So we started back to our lines by way of the Essex Scottish Regiment. A guard halted us by saying "Scun"; Carter answered by saying "Thorpe" in a low voice. The passwords were always a double word. The RHLI was staying one time at Scunthorpe in England.

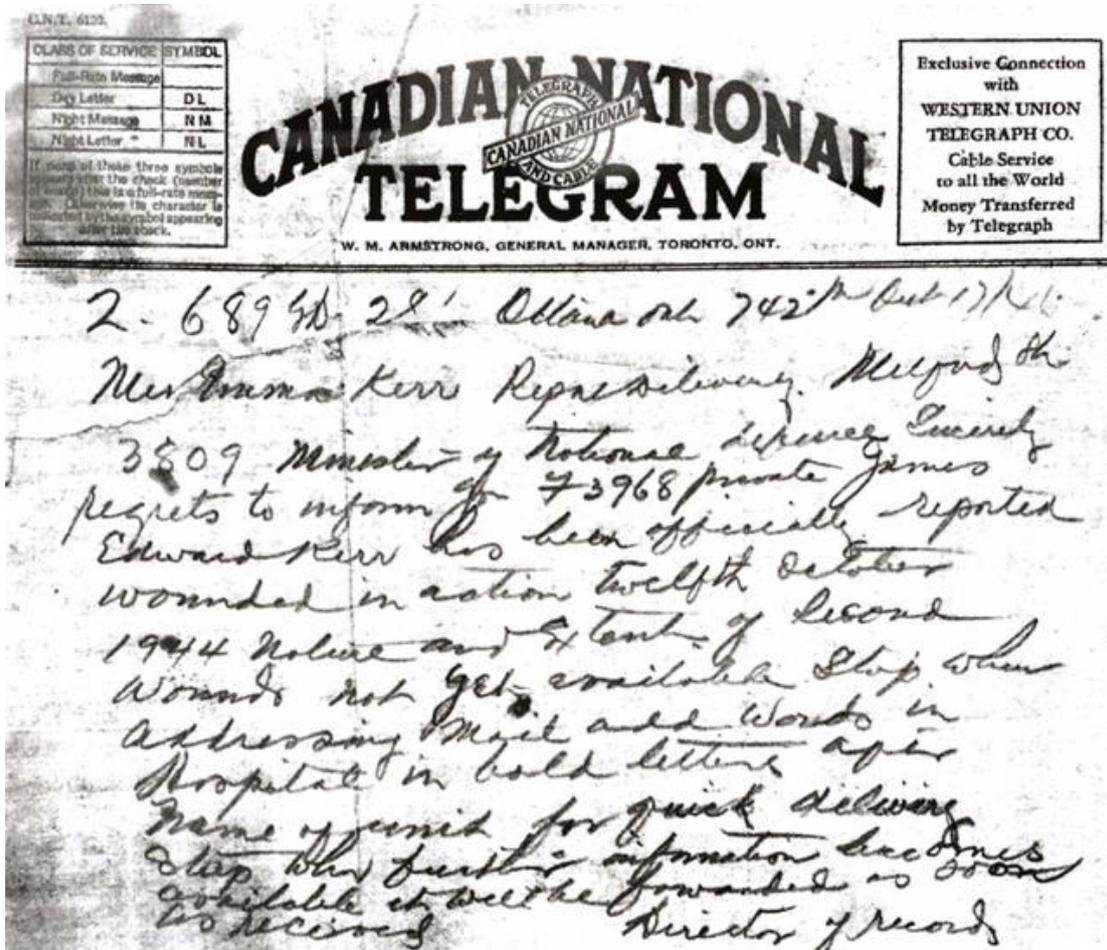
It was kind of dangerous getting back in our own lines sometimes, if some nervous fellow was on guard where we were entering. I've heard of fellows getting shot that way.



*Hoogerheide
(top) and
Woensdrecht
(bottom) after
liberation on
Oct. 24, 1944.*



In mid-October 1944, Mrs Emma Kerr of Milford, Nova Scotia, received a telegram: "The Minister of National Defence sincerely regrets to inform you F3968 Private James Edward Kerr has been officially reported wounded in action twelfth October, 1944. Nature and extent of wounds not yet available...when further information becomes available it will be forwarded as soon as received."



2-689 40-28' Ottawa on 742 Oct 17/44
 Mrs Emma Kerr Representing. Myself the
 3509 Minister of National Defence sincerely
 regrets to inform you F3968 private James
 Edward Kerr has been officially reported
 wounded in action twelfth October
 1944 Nature and extent of wounds
 not yet available Stop when
 addressing myit and words in
 hospital in bold letters after
 name of unit for quick delivery
 Stop when further information becomes
 available it will be forwarded as soon
 as received Director of records

It was some time before the family received more news.

On the next afternoon, we got word to advance towards the place that we were on the patrol last night. This was just a platoon. We got the idea that one of our sections (part of a platoon) was pinned down somewhere and we were going to try and rescue the boys. (*The War Diary records that the Company was to attack a sunken road.*)

We were running over this field when something hit my right foot just ahead of the ankle bone. It felt just felt like a stone and I ran a few yards farther on and was waiting for a fellow to crawl through a hole in the fence, but I decided to go back and I added a little limp when I ran. I came to the section that I thought that we were going to try to rescue at a former German machine nest and the corporal said to me, "What the hell is the matter with you?" and I said "I got hit".

There were two or three steps just behind them that led to a place with a board bed, so I sat down and they cut the boot laces and took off my boot and the blood was pouring out. They put a field dressing on the wound. Then I started getting a little weak so I wiggled back a little to lean against the wall. Then one of the boys came in with a bottle of water and when I drank a little, it brightened me up.

We had to stay there for 20 minutes or half an hour until some of the others fellows that I had started with were coming back. I put my arms around the shoulders of two fellows, one on each side of me, and we moved back to another one of those shelters as we were being shelled.

There were three or four other fellows in it, and two young fellows were bomb wacky. When the bombs were coming they were crying and would try to crawl under anything, such as a chair. But I knew we were safe enough unless we got a direct hit. I was sitting on a bed much the same as the one we had left and I was quite happy because I knew that I was going out of action.

When things quieted down a little a big fellow carried me on his back down a kind of a canyon, which was all sand, to company headquarters. We were only there about five minutes when the Jeep came in and took three of us out. One fellow was from PEI and I think his name was Corporal Dawson or Lawson and the other fellow was the one from our section that had just joined up a couple a days ago. I didn't know where he got his wound, but Dawson got a bullet in his neck.

The Jeep driver drove right to Antwerp to a hospital (Canadian). When we got there it was dark, and I was taken to a ward by two German POWS who were stretcher bearers. The other two fellows were taken to some other part of the hospital and I have never seen or heard of them again. That was on Oct. 12, 1944.

Next day the POW came and took me for an X-ray and after, took me back to my bed. (*Private Kerr recalled in later years that POWs would sometimes say: "Why are you fighting us? We should be on the same side, fighting the Russians."*)

Then on the next day they come back to an operating room and after the operation on my foot, took me back again to my bed. After a while I noticed that I had a cast on my leg from my toes to my knee. The fellow in the next bed told me I would likely be going back to Canada, when the surgeon who happened to be making his rounds heard him and told me I wouldn't be going that far but I would be going to the U.K. He also told me that he took out a piece of steel from my foot, also a piece of bone.

I was at that hospital for four or five days. I think the surgeon's name was Major Murray. Sometimes the windows would rattle from the bombs exploding in the city, a little too close for comfort.

One evening they took some of the patients to the airport to fly to England. I think there were three planeloads, maybe more.

We landed at an airport in Swindon and we stayed at a civilian hospital that night. Next day they took us back the airport and flew us to a Canadian hospital in Horley, (*from about Oct. 17 to Jan. 10.*). That is where Gatwick airport is.

Next day I was taken for an X-ray on my wound. The following morning I was taken for another X-ray and the next morning I was taken again and my cast was taken off and another X-ray taken. I was then taken for another operation. Capt. William Bugg from London, Ontario, was the surgeon and he wanted to make sure every piece of steel and bone had been cleaned out of the wound.

There were, I think, 20 beds on each side of the ward. All the beds were occupied and there were three or four in the centre in the aisle. This was the ward for the arm and leg wounds and I was No. 3 bed. There was a young fellow on the other side of the room with both arms off sitting in a chair reading a book and he had a long knitting needle in his mouth to turn the pages. They had put a new cast on my leg from my toes to my knee and I used to hop on my left leg when I went to the bathroom. I think there were 24 wards total.

About a week later one night they pushed in a stretcher with a fellow on it who had been with us in Newfoundland, Archie Barrington. The next day I hopped up to see him about halfway up the ward on the opposite side. He was wounded in the groin and could not sit up so he asked me to write a letter for him to his home in Hamilton, Ontario, so I obliged.

In bed No. 1 was a young fellow from western Canada by the name of Andy Trophenenko who was bedfast. The second bed at one time was occupied by a fellow by the name of Pettis from Parrsboro, N.S. In the bed on the side, a fellow from Havelock, Ontario. I forget his name now.

After a month or so the medical officer told me I could travel around in a wheelchair or crutches. One day after that I hopped out to the washroom. I waited for another guy to come in and I asked him to bring a wheelchair in because when I came down by the office and I did not want the MO to see me hopping back.

I can only remember the names of two nursing sisters, Sister Kane and Sister Hanna. On the other side of the ward opposite me a young fellow named Barkhouse who was a little saucy. I suppose he was not too comfortable as he had his two legs tied up in traction. His home was in Berwick, N.S. I think I saw his name a year or two ago in the "Last Post" (death notice) section in the Legion magazine.

There was a movie shown in different wards once in a while and I used to hop to see it if it was in a ward not too far away. I used to read the newspapers every day to find out how the war was going and I read books a lot of the time. The lights were lit at 6 o'clock in the morning and turned off at 10 p.m. Most books I could read in a day.

About the first of December they took off the cast. George Edwards from Salmon Arm, British Columbia, had an invitation out for Christmas dinner and could invite two others, so he invited me and a young Indian to go along. The host picked us up at the hospital and took us to his home and drove us back later in the afternoon.

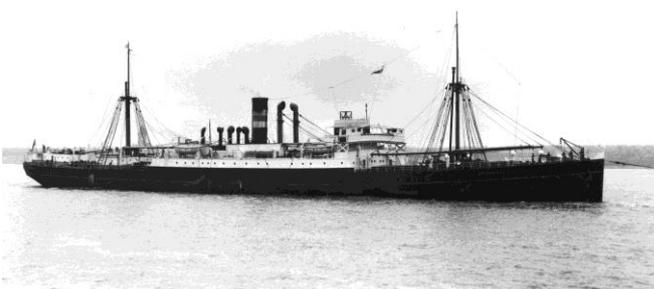
Barrington was getting more mobile so one day we got passes to go to town. We had the hospital blues (pants) on so had to get our tunics to wear, or maybe our greatcoats. We caught a bus. We were over in town for a few hours before we got back to the hospital. On January 15 I was sent to a convalescent hospital in Colchester and stayed there just a month and was then sent to a convalescent depot in Farnborough.

We got some physiotherapy and exercise of all kinds. While I was there I received a letter from a man in London whose son had been in Halifax in the British navy and had been entertained by (*sister*) Nellie's church. She had sent him my address. So he invited me to visit him and his wife.

I was getting kind of tired with all the exercises and my foot felt better so I thought I would try for a leave but a fellow had to do a 20 mile (32 km), run and walk. This was on the 10th or 11th of April, so the weather was nice and warm. About 20 or 25 of us left after lunch one day in our shirt sleeves running. We were supposed to arrive back at 5 o'clock. A couple of sergeants went with us. We went about an hour, so the sergeants found a place with a board fence facing the street and they took us in there. We stayed there all afternoon and came running back to the campgrounds just before super time at 5 o'clock.

We all got a 14-day leave on the 13th of April, I and a fellow from Saskatchewan named Hunter got our passes to Glasgow but we stayed in London two or three days first. The night we left on the train to Scotland I happened to be standing in the doorway looking out when we passed by the station at Wigan. Nell had had sent me the address of Mrs. Fenner, whose son was in the Royal Navy and had met Nell in Halifax, so I decided I would get off the train on my way back and visit his mother.

We finally got to Glasgow and looked around the city.



(By the way, this was the place where our cattle boat (*the "Norwegian", pictured*) docked in April 1938 (*travelling with Favell Annand, Ted Couttreau "from down Yarmouth way" and Cliff Dando, a young Englishman who worked as a farmhand in the Milford area*). The cattle were

unloaded and a crew came aboard to clean up the manure and the boat left for Avonmouth right away. They swung the manure over the side into the ocean. We reached Avonmouth, which in the Bristol Channel, the next afternoon).

My partner and I booked in at a service club, this is in Glasgow. When I gave my name the fellow at the desk said "That's a good old Scottish name." We were in the city a couple of days but Hunter decided he didn't like it so he went back to London.

I stayed two or three more days and looked at a few historic places and then decided to go to Wigan, which was a small town, and found the home of Mrs. Fenner. She was quite an old lady who sat in her rocking chair with a shawl over her shoulders. She was living with her daughter, Florrie, whose husband was in the British Army and I never met him. They had a daughter about 10 years old. I forget her name.

They had been bombed out of their home in Liverpool. There were two sisters who lived next door, Edna and Florence Fairclough, and Florrie introduced me to them. They worked somewhere in town. Lawson was Florrie's name. They used me the very best. Mrs. Fenner was a jolly old lady.

I stayed there a couple of days and then went back to London and met my friend and we looked around the city until our leaves were over, and it was the last time I ever saw him.

I was to report to Camp Whitley. When I went to a bus stop to take me there I met Aubrey McKenna from Milford. We had a little talk until I had to go. After a few days there most of the personnel were moving to Lewes farther south.

After the rest of the men at the camp left about 20 of us stayed to look after the camp until some other Regiment came and moved in. After a week or so a unit of the tank corps came and occupied the camp. I met some of the men, and one of them was Borden Bezanson from Lunenburg who was with us in Newfoundland. I don't think he had been over to the war yet.

After a few more days we were sent to Lewes for training to go back over to the continent. We slept in a marquee and used our ground sheet and a blanket and stretched out on the ground next to one another.

Lloyd Johnson was next to me on my left. Lloyd was from Upper Stewiacke and I had never met him before. We came to be good friends and now he lives in Brookfield, moving there after the war.

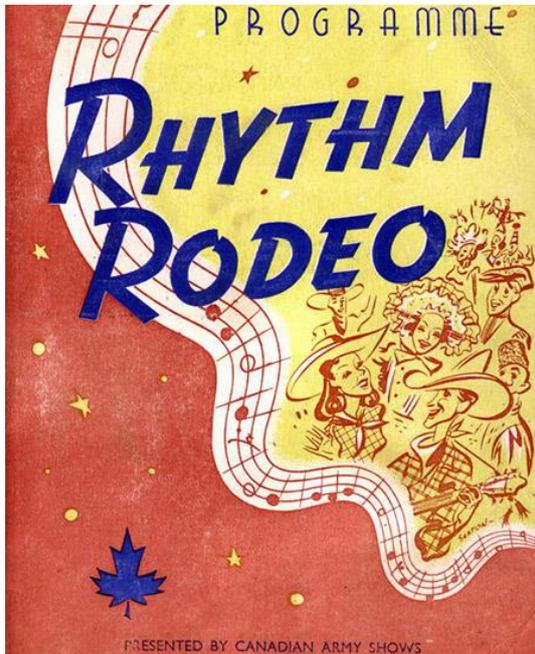
We used to walk about 2 miles (3.2 km) miles every weekend to Hassock to catch the train to Brighton and if we had no passes we would sleep on the train, which was backed up at the station and did not pull out until 7:30 a.m. The cars were a great place to sleep. You could stretch out on the seat. One night we had to walk almost to the front as there was a soldier in every car and compartment. I suppose they were mostly Canadians.

Next morning we would walk down to the waterfront, which was about 1/4 of a mile away, for breakfast at a service club, which was in a part of a big hotel. There were a lot of big hotels on the street facing the beach but most were closed in wartime. One weekend I met Pete Collins, who was my buddy at the Falaise Gap, at Brighton.

We were only at Lewes for a few weeks and were doing little training, when the war ended on May 7 (1945). We went to Brighton on VE day. There was a lot people there and the sidewalks were crowded and everybody was very happy.

After the war ended we were at Lewes for about two weeks. They did not know what to do with us, so they sent about a dozen men to the ordinance corps, and another bunch to another outfit. I and some other fellows were sent to the "Canadian Army Show" (which entertained the troops).

The Army Show I was sent to was in Guildford, and I was put to work in the kitchen of the sergeants and sergeant-majors. Roy Drolet from Manatoulin Island, Ontario,



was the cook and there were two fellows who waited on the tables. Two other fellows washed dishes. I was fireman and washed pots and pans. One of the dishwashers was Don Thomas from Mossbank, or Palmer, Saskatchewan. After a few weeks one of the waiters went on leave, so I was asked to take his job. Each waiter got a pound extra pay a month. It was quite a walk to the dining room and I carried three dinner plates at one time.

Any time a sergeant was a little late, the waiter from Alberta would come out to the kitchen and would always say "One more bastard just came in." We used to laugh about it.

One day the sergeant major brought his plate of dinner back and passed it to the cook Roy, and said, "There's a fly in my dinner" and asked for another plate full. Roy took the fly out and put a little dab more gravy on it and sent it back in to him. He ate it and didn't know the difference.

Don Thomas and I used to go to a nearby village every Saturday night to a dance. One night I had a dance with a girl, and after I walked home with her. Her name was Jacqueline Hart, and she lived with her mother nearby. Next night Don and I went to visit them and Don fell in love with her and started going with her steady, and they later got married.

I worked at waiting on tables for about two months. Then I got a 10-day leave and went to Bristol to visit (*Nova Scotia friend*) Cliff Dando's sister, Gwen Tiley, where we had visited in 1938. I stayed there three or four days and then went to London

I visited Madame Tussaud's museum and saw all the wax figures. Then I visited Hampton Court Palace, the grandest house of all England in the 16th century. I stayed around London and used to visit the Beaver Club in Trafalgar Square. There were always Canadians there. I visited two or three other museums.

I finally went back to the Army Show, but did not report back to the sergeants' mess to wait on tables but kind of kept out of sight.

Then they started picking fellows to work at a big show, "Rhythm Rodeo". I got a job as a stage hand along with six or seven others. The show did not start till about a month before Christmas. The purpose of the show was to amuse the soldiers who were overseas for four or five years. Some were very restless as ships were quite scarce and the guys were waiting to get back to Canada.

The performance was held in the biggest circus tent that could be obtained in England. A Bailey bridge was constructed in the centre of the tent for the band of over 30 musicians directed by Command Sergeant-Major Tony Braden who used to be with Mart Kenny's band before the war in Toronto. A revolving stage was built on a lower level to the left of the band.



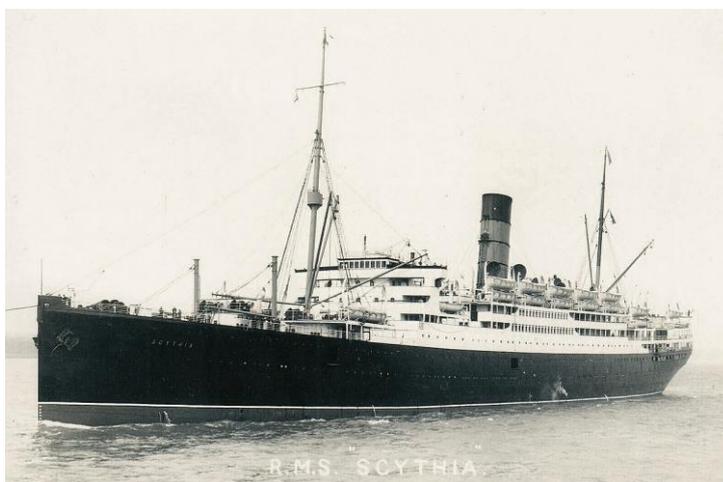
There were bucking horses, but they were big work horses. When the rider entered the ring under the bright lights some of the big horses would stand still. Then the audience would boo and laugh. Later the management got two or three smaller horses from Ireland and those animals would really buck.

There was a Holland memory where the girls danced. A big windmill was pushed on to the stage and one of the stagehands had to get inside to turn a crank to make it go. I had my turn a couple of times. (*Kerr, Pte. J.E. listed as a stagehand on the program*)

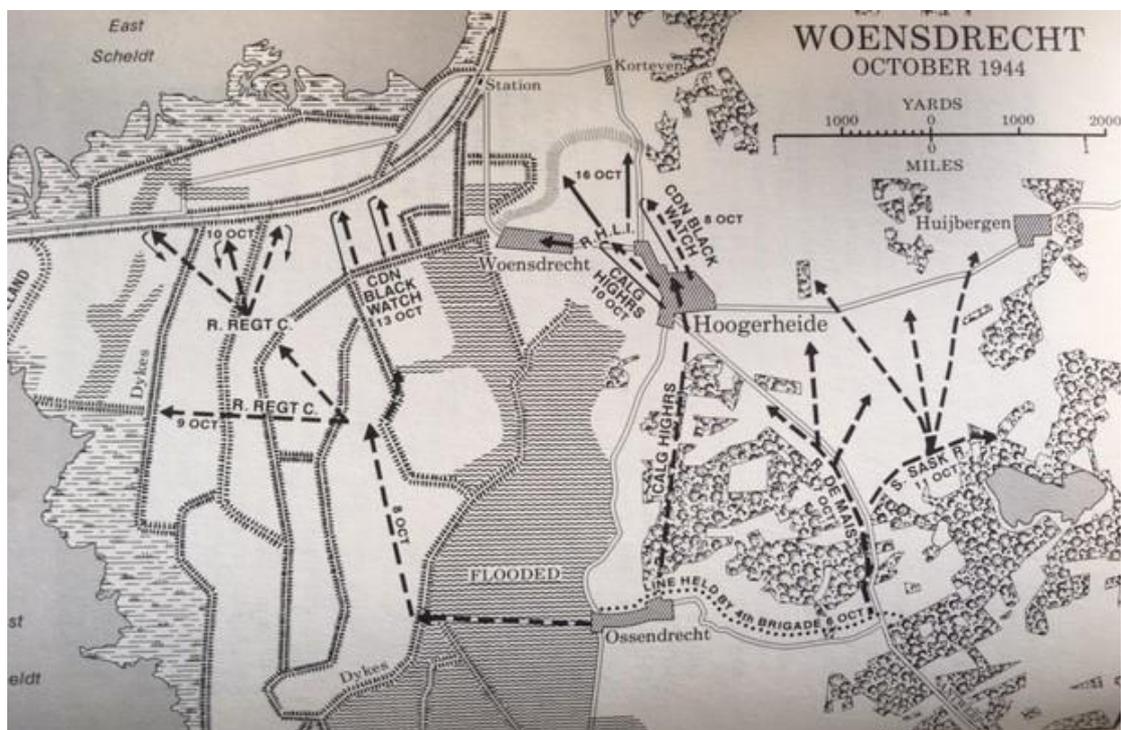
The band played the "Nutcracker Suite". Had a lot of fun, anyway. When I hear some of the pieces, I always think of the time I was there, especially the "Dance of the Flute".

In the early days of January my turn came up to go home and I and some of the boys were sent to the transit camp at Aldershot to wait for a boat to Halifax. We were there over two weeks. I was on a pass one day and I met Don Thomas, and he told me he had looked for me to stand with him when he got married but had no idea where to find me.

Private Kerr departed Liverpool aboard the Scythia (pictured) on Jan. 24, 1946 arrived at Pier 21 in Halifax on Feb, 1, along with a large number of war brides. He was discharged on March 21.



Taking Hoogerheide and Woensdrecht would prove to be costly. On Oct. 13, the day after Private Kerr was wounded, the Royal Highland Regiment (The Black Watch) tried to cut off the South Beveland Isthmus, just west of Woensdrecht, and were cut to pieces by German paratroopers dug in along the railway. The Black Watch withdrew the next day, with 56 dead, 62 wounded and 27 taken prisoner – a day to be forever remembered in Canadian military history as Black Friday.



Then it was the RHLI's turn. As recorded in the regimental history, "At 0330 hours on October 16, behind the barrage of more than a hundred field guns, the Rileys rose as one from the sodden, unharvested polders before Woensdrecht to go forward and seal off the South Beveland peninsula. They crossed the start-line, 500 yards southeast of the village in the dark. The fields heaved and trembled under the weight of exploding shells. Gunners of the Divisional artillery and six additional regiments fired on diversionary targets, enemy batteries and a 1,200-yard square about Woensdrecht. It was the best artillery support the RHLI had ever seen. The troops leaned against it, as they should, and there were very few casualties at first.

"Every 15 seconds a fiery trail from the Bofors traced the axis of the attack. The white tape stretched forward like some great, bleached attenuated snake. Nothing could fight back from the maelstrom of fire before the companies..."

The RHLI moved forward in a box formation, with D Company forward left and A Company on the right. C Company was slightly behind, straddling a road on the reverse slope. B Company, Private Kerr's, was to swing left into the village itself.

By 0500, D Company reached its objective, followed by the other companies about 40 minutes later. But by mid-morning, the inevitable counter-attacks began, and the firing grew in intensity. Before long, A Company had been overrun, and the others were barely hanging on. The Canadians, whose ranks were padded out with poorly trained troops in their first battle, were up against crack German paratroops. The situation became so desperate that C Company commander Joe Pigott, who had also taken charge of the remnants of A Company, called for artillery fire on his own position to break up the attack.

"It came over like 70 or 80 express trains pulling into Union Station at the same time," Pigott, who was wounded by German fire, recalled. RHLI Commander Denis Whitaker summed it up: "The slaughter was terrific." (Semper Paratus)

Huck Welch's B Company, meanwhile, had its hands full in the village, where the enemy was entrenched in houses and barns. After several men were lost to snipers, Welch decided to wait until daylight to continue mopping up. Sergeant Ernie Dearden of Private Kerr's former 11 Platoon, continued to lead his men until their objective was taken, despite a bullet wound in the arm and shrapnel in both legs. He fainted from loss of blood just as he reached the first aid post. His gallantry won him a Military Medal. Booby traps also caused a number of casualties.

With the German counter-attacks brought to a standstill, the Canadians were subjected to merciless artillery and mortar fire, and by nightfall the number of men still able to fight was dangerously low.

The War Diary for Oct. 17 records that "We did not have enough bodies on the ground to completely control the Woensdrecht feature and it was quite possible for the enemy to infiltrate. The enemy appeared to suffer very heavy casualties from our artillery fire which was used unsparingly but he continued to reinforce his positions....The bulk of the men in the battalion at the present time had not had very much infantry training, but had been remustered from other branches of the service."

The RHLI has 161 casualties in the first two days of the battle, 21 fatal, but the battalion held on for another five days before being relieved. More fighting followed, but on Oct. 24 the South Beveland isthmus was finally cut.

About 45,400 Canadian military personnel died in the Second World War, more than 7,600 of them in the 8-month campaign to liberate the Netherlands.

Right: A Sherman M4 tank of the Fort Garry Horse (Winnipeg) at Woensdrecht commemorates the battle for the town.



