

YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW: HOLLAND LIBERATION CELEBRANTS VIEW THE CANADIAN FORCES FROM THREE PERSPECTIVES

by Tom Douglas

Like many Canadian veterans who have come within a heartbeat of making the supreme sacrifice in a combat situation, Gordon Webb of Ottawa is a master of the understatement. For instance, when asked what his most hazardous experience had been during the Second World War, the ex-Pathfinder pilot allowed as how losing all four engines on a bombing raid over Essen, Germany had been “rather harrowing.”

Webb, a flight lieutenant at the time, explained that he was the ‘old man’ of the crew at 19 ½ and had to make the excruciating decision to order his men to prepare to bail out when the multiple engine failure occurred. They faced almost certain death. If they survived the bombs cascading out of other Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) bombers above them and the flak pock marking the night sky from German anti-aircraft batteries, they might have been torn limb from limb by the angry citizens of Essen when they reached the ground.

Displaying an easy grin that complemented his cavalier attitude about the predicament he and his comrades had been in more than 60 years ago, Webb explained why he was still around to tell the story. “Just before giving the command to bail out, I conferred with my flight engineer and we determined that our inner starboard engine had been hit by flak and the propeller was bent, sending a horrendous vibration throughout the aircraft that had shut down the other three engines. With nothing to lose, we made a successful attempt to shut that one down and restart the others.”

Once more, understatement came into play when the 82-year-old ex-Pathfinder wrapped up his account of the event: “So we banked and came in over the target again, dropped our load and got home a bit late for dinner that night.”

Offhanded irony came to the fore again when Webb was asked what he thought of today’s Canadian Forces (CF). “I don’t think you could say that our military have been over-treated,” is the way he put it, underlining his comment with another huge grin. “Between wars, the military sort of gets short shrift. The politicians put the welfare of their armed forces on the back burner when they feel they aren’t needed. But as soon as there’s an idea that another war is coming along, then, okay, they start to think that they’d better do something. But by then it’s almost too late.”

Webb cited a couple of examples. “Look how long it takes to get equipped. Take the current helicopter situation. We’re going to be way down the road when we finally get the new ones. And we really should have a replacement for the C-130 *Hercules*. We need a bigger airplane so that we don’t have to go to Russia or the Ukraine to rent one. That really bothered me when that happened.”

For Gordon Webb, service to his country was a family tradition. His father served in the First World War and was wounded three times – the last time at Vimy Ridge. Gordon’s older brother joined the Royal Canadian Navy in 1939. Another brother served in the Royal Canadian Army and a third with the Canadian Merchant Navy.

Webb stayed with the RCAF at the end of hostilities, served in the Korean War and ended his career with the rank of wing commander. He has nothing but praise for the people who came after him and are currently serving in the Canadian Forces.

“They’re bright; they really are,” he said. “I spoke to quite a number of them at the mess the other night (at a veterans-only party thrown by Canadian military personnel serving in Holland). Every one of them I met impressed me. I guess we were like that. I don’t know – but all of them seemed so keen, and so aware of the importance of what they’re doing.”

One of those bright young individuals was Master Corporal (MCpl) Rod Verkoeyen, command chief clerk at Canadian Forces Information Operations Group in Ottawa, whose selection as a participant in the Liberation of the Netherlands ceremonies had a very special meaning.

“The Canadian Army liberated Holland when my father was 10 years old,” said Verkoeyen following a ceremony at the Reichswald Forest Military Cemetery near Kleve, Germany. The burial grounds contain the bodies of some 700 Canadian airmen who served with the RCAF and the Royal Air Force during the Second World War.

“My father still has nightmares of the Nazis taking people from his village and shooting them,” Verkoeyen continued. “He will always be grateful to Canada for saving the lives of so many of his countrymen. In fact, joining the Canadian Army is my way of repaying Canada for rescuing our family from almost certain death.”

VIEWS AND OPINIONS

Verkoeyen senior left Holland in 1948 for a new life in Canada. Settling in Windsor, Ontario, he joined the Essex Scottish, now the Essex Kent Regiment. His unit was preparing to deploy to Korea when that war ended.

“So that was the second time fate stepped in and gave me a chance to be born,” said MCpl Verkoeyen, who applied for the Holland assignment so that he could be on hand when his father returned to his homeland as a flag bearer with the Royal Canadian Legion.

“When I learned that my father was going to be over here for the ceremonies, I submitted a memo through my chain of command, which was highly supported all the way to National Defence Headquarters. The request was approved and here I am.”

At the Reichswald ceremony, about 150 CF members and a small contingent of Second World War veterans listened to General Ray Henault, chairman designate of the NATO Military Committee, as he spoke of the sacrifice of his fellow RCAF personnel and other Canadians in their efforts to defeat the Nazis. After the ceremony, Verkoeyen said it was a double honour for him to be taking part in the commemoration because of his Dutch and Canadian heritage. He is the fourth generation of Verkoeyens to serve in the regular forces, with both his grandfather and great-grandfather having been members of the Dutch armed forces.

“My father has been deeply moved by this whole experience, as I have,” said Verkoeyen. “I’m very proud and happy to serve my country and hopefully I’ll represent my Dutch heritage as well in paying respect back to the Canadian soldiers who gave their lives for my family. Every parade I’m on, every tattoo I’m doing, I’m just giving 150 per cent.”

Having heard from a member of Canada’s military from days gone by as well as from someone currently serving his country, it made sense to seek out someone who had plans to join the Canadian Forces at some point in the future. The opportunity arose at the Holten Canadian Military Cemetery where a contingent of young Canadians formed part of the gathering in their capacity as the official youth delegation on the Veterans Affairs commemorative trip to Holland.

Jeff Whelan, a student at Vimy Ridge Academy in Edmonton and a sergeant with 395 Air Cadet Squadron, hopes to get accepted to the Royal Military College and some day become a pilot. He suggested that he was still in shock at learning how young some of the veterans on the trip were when they first went into action.

“I talked to one guy who lied about his age and got into the fight when he was sixteen,” said Jeff, who was born in Winnipeg and moved with his family to St. Albert, a suburb of Edmonton, seven years ago. “What really knocked me out was that I just turned 16 myself and it’s hard to believe that someone my age would have gone to war. It makes you feel very emotional to think that people so young would give up everything to make sure that we had a better life.”

Jeff said he had had no idea what the older generation went through and wished that every young Canadian could have the experience he had in order to be able to pass on the stories and keep alive the appreciation for all the sacrifices that were made. “It’s absolutely essential for everyone to realize how great it is to be a Canadian.”

The entire Netherlands trip ran a gamut of emotions from the good-natured banter of fellow combatants who hadn’t seen each other in more than 60 years to the quiet sobs of veterans who took time out from the various commemorative ceremonies to visit the gravesites of their comrades for the first time.

Even Gordon Webb, whose wide grin and devil-may-care attitude got him a peck on the cheek from a Dutch serving girl at a social gathering after a ceremony at Apeldoorn’s Het Loo Palace, finally succumbed to the seesaw of emotions he had been experiencing all week.

“This has been quite something,” he said reflectively as he mentally reviewed all the events he had attended with his fellow vets during the Holland commemorative ceremonies. “I never realized it was such a big affair. But my overriding thought is that there has to be a better way to settle matters.”

Webb grew silent, his eyes filling with tears: “We’re remembering the people who were killed. I’m all for that; I think that’s great. But surely we don’t have to drop bombs on people to solve our problems. I was part of it, but don’t we need some space somewhere where we can get things resolved without going around killing a lot of innocent people?”

The old Pathfinder pilot paused for a moment, stifled a sob and wiped away a tear: “I hope with all my heart that this can happen.”

Tom Douglas is the author of several military books and a freelance journalist. He was selected by Veterans Affairs Canada as an official media delegate covering 60th Anniversary Ceremonies in Holland in May, commemorating the Liberation of the Netherlands and VE Day.