

CANADA AND THE LIBERATION OF THE NETHERLANDS, MAY 1945

by Lance Goddard

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Reviewed by Tom Douglas

No one is as capable of gratitude as one who has emerged from the kingdom of night.

– Elie Wiesel

Lance Goddard, by using this quotation from the world-renowned novelist and Holocaust survivor at the start of this highly readable book, succinctly answers the question that puzzles many Canadians, including even some of the veterans who were there: “Why do the people of Holland hold us in such high regard?”

The explanation is expanded upon in the foreword to the book by author and military historian Major-General Richard Rohmer, who saw action with the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) during the Liberation of the Netherlands. Rohmer states: “The bravery and sacrifice of Canadian soldiers and airmen during the hard-fought battle for the liberation of the Netherlands is the stuff of legend and cause for eternal gratitude on the part of the people of the Netherlands.”

Having thus set out the premise for his book, Goddard launches into a compelling account of life in Holland just prior to the Nazi occupation. In a first chapter, entitled *Darkness*, the author sets the stage for the heartbreaking events to follow. He reminds us that the Netherlands had been neutral during the First World War and its citizens believed Adolf Hitler’s promise that they would be allowed the same status in the imminent conflict. Thus, their token armed forces were little more than a minor nuisance when the Nazi hordes stormed across the Dutch border in May 1940.

Goddard is, by profession, a television producer and this becomes quickly apparent through his use of a terse, descriptive third person narrative interspersed

with short interviews with Dutch survivors of the invasion and the occupation. He uses this commentary/eyewitness style throughout, in later chapters adding the voices of Canadian army and air force veterans who offer a lively account of the campaign to liberate the beleaguered country. In fact, the book reads like an illustrated script of a documentary – and this impression is borne out by the fact that the author indeed has a DVD for sale with the same title.

This ‘docu-narrative’ style does not take away from the enjoyment of reading Goddard’s book. On the contrary, the short bursts of ‘voice/over’ commentary followed by first-person interviews move the story along at a brisk pace. Goddard is by no means the first author to use the technique of interspersing an account of a battle or war with individual reminiscences, but his filmmaking background helps bring all the elements together in a highly informative and spellbinding manner.

The author has not written a definitive military account of the Liberation of the Netherlands, and he makes no pretence of having written for the military scholar. The book is obviously meant to appeal to a far wider audience. The maps are easy to comprehend – a boon to those readers unskilled in military cartography. The folksy ramblings by Dutch civilians and Canadian veterans alike lack the precision of a situation report or a military retrospective. But for the lay reader, as well as the serious student of Canada’s military history, this book provides a useful way to get a quick understanding of the events surrounding the Liberation of the Netherlands.

The accounts by Dutch citizens who were actually present during the period range from the amusing to the macabre. On the one hand, you have Henry and Corrie Schogt good-naturedly finishing each other’s sentences and kibitzing over whether to refer to Dutch freedom fighters as the Underground or the Resistance. You have Elly Dull quoting Churchill, in referring to the forceful Queen Wilhelmina when she attended meetings of his War Cabinet while exiled in Great Britain: “There is only one man in this room, and that’s the Queen of the Netherlands.” At the other end of the emotional spectrum, there are bitter accounts of Nazi atrocities, like Jack Heidema’s angry outburst: “Hunger is a terrible weapon, and the Germans



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deliberately did this to the Dutch, there was no mistake. They deliberately starved the people, thousands died from hunger. I saw people collapse right in the street, buckle to their knees and die on the sidewalk.”

In fact, the accounts of Nazi cruelty and the numerous photos of people eating out of garbage cans or lying dead in an alleyway begin to overwhelm the reader after a while. There is a temptation to say: “Okay, I get your point. Now let’s move on.” It’s a defensive callousness born out of the shocking and almost impossible to accept realization that a nation of otherwise intelligent and civilized people could be brainwashed into committing, or at least condoning, such horrible atrocities against fellow human beings. Like it or not, it is a cautionary tale that bears repeating – especially given today’s headlines about the abuse of detainees at Baghdad’s Abu Ghraib prison and the rumoured relocation of terrorist suspects to countries where torture is considered a legitimate means of extracting information.

The book’s strong suit is its ability to transport the reader back to the dark days of the Nazi occupation of Holland where one experiences myriad emotions of deprivation, despair, defiance, flickering hope and, finally, liberation. In reading the accounts of the horrible treatment of the country’s Jewish population – many of whom had naively fled Germany to avoid persecution there – the reader is overcome by a feeling of outrage. This anger is directed, not only at the brutality of the Nazis, but also at the rest of the world for allowing such unspeakable acts to happen.

As the action switches to the slow and steady advance of the Canadians against hard-bitten German troops fighting desperately to thwart the Allied invasion of their country, a sense of pride – a trait too often lacking in Canadians when it comes to the accomplishments of our country’s armed forces – begins to take hold. We agonize over accounts of brave young Canadians paying the supreme sacrifice. We chuckle along with the veterans when they relate some of the funny incidents that are part of any battle scene. And we feel the elation of the Dutch people as the first Canadian soldiers arrive to rid their villages and hamlets of the hated Nazis.

There are several oversights in the book that could have been avoided. For instance, although there is mention of Andrew Irwin of the Royal Canadian

Navy (RCN) in a “Special Thanks” section at the end of the book, an account of the contribution of this too-often-overlooked branch of the Canadian Forces is sadly missing. Even Major-General Rohmer in his foreword talks about “the bravery and sacrifice of Canadian soldiers and airmen,” with no mention of sailors. And yet, the RCN played a relatively small but crucial role in the Battle of the Scheldt and other engagements. As an example, the Naval Museum of Manitoba’s website www.naval-museum.mb.ca mentions that the 29th Canadian Motor Torpedo Boat Flotilla was instructed, at all costs, to stop any E-Boats or R-Boats in the area of the Hook of Holland. “At all costs” included either injury or death to a number of MTB crewmembers.

Then, too, the author had an opportunity to expand on the exploits of the three Canadians who received the Victoria Cross during the Netherlands campaign: Sergeant Aubrey Cosens of the Queen’s Own Rifles, Major Frederick A. Tilston of the Essex Scottish Regiment and Corporal Frederick G. Topham of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion. If it was a space restriction that prevented a more detailed account of the heroics of these three men, this could have been solved by eliminating a number of photographs of villages, towns and cities of the Netherlands as they look today, since these illustrations have no relevance to the narrative.

For that matter, a more judicious use of photographs throughout the book would have been welcome. For an author whose main medium is the video documentary, it is puzzling that he includes dozens of photos that are so small one needs a magnifying glass to get the full effect. It would have been much wiser to select fewer photographs and blow them up to dramatic proportions.

But these are minor issues. They certainly do not take away from the fact that Goddard has created a time capsule of memories of an important period in world history. He has also produced an engaging account of a Canadian military exercise that ranks right up there with Vimy Ridge and D-Day when it comes to taking pride in the accomplishments of Canada’s fighting forces.

Tom Douglas is the author of three books on the Second World War and producer of the documentary, *The Tulip and the Maple Leaf*.