Following in the Footsteps of Métis Soldiers in the Second World War

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This booklet chronicles the experiences of Cathy Littlejohn King and May Henderson, who wanted to follow in the footsteps of Métis soldiers who served during World War II. They joined the University of Saskatchewan Alumni Association World War II Memorial Tour in April/May 2013. They started their journey in London, and followed the path of our soldiers.

Both Cathy and May hope that by sharing their experience, others will understand and know more about the sacrifices made by Canadian soldiers, sailors, airmen, and service women who served during WWII, many of whom were Métis.

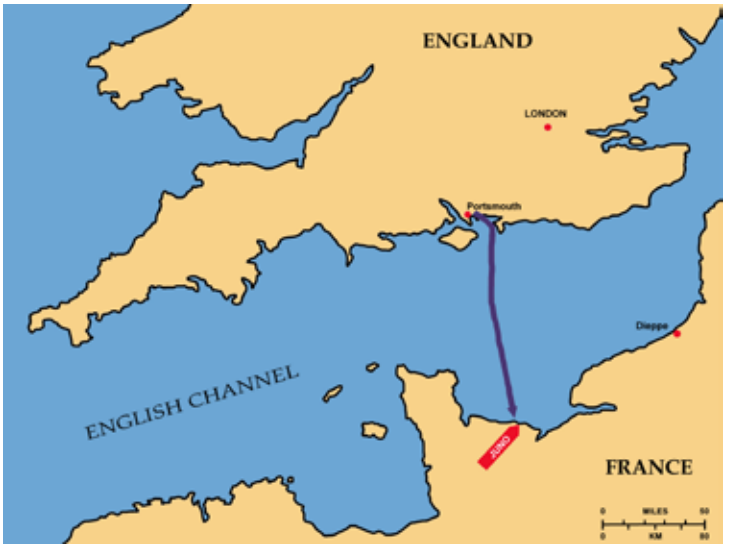
For additional photos and a digital version of this booklet, visit:
http://www.metismuseum.ca/browse/index.php/1291.

We boarded the ferry at Portsmouth, England. It was a shiny new ship with dining rooms, lunch counters, shops, and lots of room for children to run, and for us to stretch our legs. It was nothing like the HMS Belfast which we had toured at dock in London. The Belfast was one of the ships that had been in the convoy on D-Day. It bombarded the shore, covering our troops as they left the landing craft and headed towards the beach. The Belfast gave us a good idea of the close quarters and discomfort of Second World War ships. We assembled tightly in the gun turret, and listened to a newsreel of the actual sights and sounds experienced by the men who worked on this ship. With the sensation of being on a metallic vessel, of shooting and being shot at and the acrid smell of gun smoke, oil, and metal, we had a very real and unpleasant experience!

Top: Ferry from Portsmouth, England to France. Bottom: HMS Belfast.

Left: Bunker built by Germans on the coast facing the English Channel. Right: Front view of the bunker.

The route to France on D-Day was one of the longest distances between England and the French coast. The Nazis had fortified all the beaches—planted mines, erected barbed wire fences, built bunkers armed with big guns, and connected underground tunnels which allowed them to "hit and run" Allied troops as they landed on the beaches.



Canadian 3rd Division route to Juno Beach.

These beaches were death traps for the Allied troops coming from the sea. The Allies decided the best point to attack the German forces in France was at the beaches of Normandy, far from the British coast. This was a much more difficult approach because it was a longer trip for the convoy, and the attack depended on surprise. The longer the convoy was on the water, the more likely it would be detected.

Part of the plan to make the invasion a success was the destruction of bridges and roads which the Germans would use to bring troops to fight the soldiers as they landed. The night before the invasion, gliders and aircrafts dropped Allied paratroopers behind enemy lines to destroy these key resources. These men were essential to the success of the invasion. Field Marshall Montgomery said of paratroopers, the men who landed behind enemy lines on the night of June 5, 1944:

Pegasus Bridge crossing the Caen Canal.

"What manner of men are these who wear the Red Beret? They are in fact men apart every man an Emperor."

Lloyd Adams was one of these men. He was one of the first Métis to die in the D-Day attack, and was a trainer with the 1st Canadian Paratroop Battalion.

We followed in the footsteps of the soldiers who landed at Juno Beach. Edward King, one of the Métis soldiers from Meadow Lake, published his memoirs and described the D-Day landing, describing exactly how it was for the young Métis soldiers. It helped us to understand what the young men were doing on this very important day. Going to Juno Beach helped us to understand what the young Métis men went through. When we entered the Juno Beach Interpretive Centre, we were squeezed into a small room. It was pitch black and we were in a room full of strangers. Then lights flashed and the walls lit up with pictures of rolling waves and grey skies. We were transported into an imaginary landing craft. We had the perspective of the Métis soldiers serving in the Canadian Army. They huddled in the landing crafts waiting for the front wall to drop for them to emerge into the water and push forward onto the beaches. The Germans fired on them as they left the security of their crafts.

Juno Beach, 2013.

Some of the soldiers never made it to the beaches. Some drowned, their bodies washed ashore with the tide. They were the first to go to their graves. They never had the opportunity to become the men they were meant to be. Their comrades had to leave them to the watery graves and push forward into withering shell and machine gun fire. The footsteps of many of these obedient, determined young men led them to death and ultimately to graves inland.
For those who lived, there was no glory in the deaths of their buddies. It was pure slaughter. Those who were left were trained to press on. They scurried up the bank, their feet sinking in the sand, their bodies dragged down by the weight of their gear. How hard it must have been to lift their reluctant sodden feet? How easy it would have been to lie down with their fallen comrades on the beach? It took courage to go on. It took blind trust in those who sent them and in those serving with them. Home was so far away.

As the battle wore, on the casualties mounted. Officers fell to have their places filled by their Second in Command. They too, often went down to be replaced by the next in line. The graves were filled with the men who led and those who followed.

The deaths and the cemeteries brought the reality of the war to us. The number of casualties was obvious by the number of Canadian War Cemeteries dotting the French countryside. We had the names of Métis soldiers who rest in each of the cemeteries we visited. We looked at

Cemetery with rows of Canadian tombstones.

the rows and rows of tombstones with Canadian maple leaves—so many 18 and 19 year-olds; so many young lives lost. As we looked for gravestones with Métis names, May Henderson said, "It feels like I know them. There are so many familiar names." We acknowledged them on behalf of the people back home. May acknowledged them as part of the Métis Nation, placing a Métis sash pin beside the maple leaf. We took a picture of each grave for their families back home.

The Canadian soldiers who survived to fight their way off the beaches came ashore. Their objective was the city of Caen. The Canadian troops, including the Regina Rifles Regiment, proceeded beyond the villages on the coast and into the countryside. The real horror of war was conveyed to us at the Abbaye d'Ardenne, the Chateau d'Audrieu, and the rolling countryside of Normandy. On June 8, 1944, the Canadian Army met the enemy—the 12th SS Panzer Division Hitlerjugend, a fierce Waffen-SS armored division manned by Hitler Youth fanatics. Many of our soldiers were taken prisoner. The Germans took our men, lined them in a row and executed them. We visited the memorial to the men murdered in the Canada Garden at the Abbaye d'Ardenne. Huge pictures of each of the murdered soldiers are projected on the walls of the garden. A small shrine encourages people to leave an offering for the dead. The names of the fallen are not forgotten. A local town has a monument to the Winnipeg Rifles soldiers murdered on this day. Their names are there forever. These deaths were deliberate murders committed in contravention to the Geneva Convention which is an international agreement on the appropriate treatment of prisoners.

Mural with faces of Canadian Soldiers murdered at Abbaye d'Ardenne.

Among those murdered at Abbaye d'Ardenne was Napoleon Morin from Cumberland House.

Caen was the Canadian soldiers' first major objective, and the next stop on our trip. The city is very modern because Allied bombardments during the war left much of the city in rubble. Our men had to struggle over piles of debris and fought from house to house. According to Peter Pelletier's account, "…it was still smoldering when we got there." The Canadians were there for about two weeks before being ordered to move on.

The capture of the airport near Caen was one of the most important goals of the Allied

plan. The Luftwaffe (the German Air Force) had used this airfield to launch planes to bomb London. It was critical for the Allied soldiers to take the airfield but not to destroy it because it would be an important strategic location for the Allied forces in their defence of England and the European cities retaken from the enemy. It was also critical to the bombing campaign of German targets. This was the site of intense fighting by our troops.

We followed the soldiers from Caen on their way to the Falaise Gap. On their push inland, one of the most formidable obstacles in the way was the Verrières Ridge. The Germans held this high point and slaughtered the Allied forces attempting to pass it. The Black Watch of Canada was cut down as they attempted to take the ridge—123 killed—others were wounded and taken prisoner. Standing on the top of the ridge trying to absorb the enormity of the loss of Canadian soldiers, a bronze plaque caught our eyes. We realized it was a tribute to our men. Part of Memorial read:

"Well may the wheat and sugar beet grow green and lush upon its gentle slopes for in that half-forgotten summer the best blood of Canada was freely poured out upon them."

We followed the soldiers' battle for the Channel ports. The Canadian Army had the job of opening up the ports which the Germans had controlled for four years. The ports were essential for supporting and supplying the Allied soldiers with food, clothing, ammunitions, and all the things necessary to win the war. We visited Brugge (Bruges), Boulogne-Sur-Mer, Antwerp, and Amsterdam, ports liberated by the Canadian Army.

Verrièrre Ridge, 2013.

We visited Dieppe which has particular significance for Saskatchewan Métis people. In 1942, the Allies, the vast majority of which were Canadian, attempted to land in France at Dieppe. The Germans were waiting for them. The men were cut down on the beach or were taken captive in the town. The South Saskatchewan Regiment was one of the regiments sent there. Corporal Joe Jeannotte, a Métis from Fort Qu'Appelle, earned a Military Medal for taking over and organizing his platoon after his sergeant was wounded. Jeannotte was cited for "his coolness, leadership and example," withdrawing his platoon across the ground "sustaining few casualties."

Poster remembering Operation Jubilee, Aug. 19, 1942 in Dieppe Museum

To this day, more than 70 years after the event, the people of Dieppe remember the Canadian soldiers in their museum. They are proud of the fact that when the town was liberated in 1945, the

South Saskatchewan Regiment was among the liberators, and the townspeople celebrated them with a parade.

As we travelled through the countryside, we passed by the many canals. We asked the tour guide to stop where the Canadians battled the Germans. It was important to see this spot because here Sammy Letendre, a northern Saskatchewan Métis, received a Distinguished Service Medal for his bravery.

At Adegem, Belgium the privately operated Canada-Poland Museum, commemorates the actions of the Canadian soldiers and their Polish allies in the area. According to the local people, the Canadian soldiers were called "Water Rats" for always being wet from fighting by the canals and "Lover Boys" for their attention to the local girls. In this museum, the contribution of our soldiers is presented with care and love. It was started by a man who believed that our contribution had been lost in the story of the war told by the Americans and the British.

Canal, 2013.

When we reached the Netherlands, we were surrounded by symbols of the Second World War. We travelled to Westerbork Transit Camp, a camp where Jewish families rounded up by the Nazis were sorted into groups—those to go to the work camps and those to go to the death camps.

Railway cars full of Jewish prisoners came in and left this location. This camp was liberated by the South Saskatchewan Regiment. In the beautiful wooded area of northern Holland, the Saskatchewan soldiers were among the first Allied soldiers to uncover the secret extermination plan of the Nazis. We were reminded of the evil that the soldiers were sent to fight.

The Dutch still remember and say, "You can never forget the cost of freedom." We were privileged to be in the Netherlands for May 5th, Dutch Liberation Day. The day before, May 4th is the Netherlands Remembrance Day. In our restaurant, we observed two minutes of silence at 8PM, on May 4. When we visited Holten Canadian War Cemetery on Liberation Day, we realized we were not the first to be there. Bouquets of yellow roses adorned all the cemetery steps and were placed between the soldiers' graves throughout the entire cemetery. This cemetery is shockingly beautiful.

Yellow roses placed at Canadian soldiers graves by Dutch people on Remembrance Day, May 4, 2013.

Here, as in every other Canadian War Cemetery, we find the graves of Saskatchewan Métis soldiers.

The Dutch say that, "You can never forget the price of freedom." Over seventy years after the Liberation, they remember on May 5 every year. Wageningen is the site of the German general Johannes Blaskowitz's surrender to the Canadian general Charles Foulkes, which ended the war in the Netherlands. Before we attended the day's official activities, we visited the Canadian War Cemetery in Groesbeek, which contains the graves of over 2,000 Canadian soldiers who fell in the Rhineland battles. The cemetery is just within the Netherlands on the border of Germany. The Canadian government decided that Canadian soldiers would not be buried on German soil. Groesbeek Cemetery was built to be the burial ground for Canadian soldiers killed in Germany during the final year of the war.

Liberation Day in the Netherlands began with a visit to Groesbeek Cemetery to recognize and honour the Métis soldiers.

The rest of the day was spent in the town of Wageningen participating in the town's Liberation Day activities. These included walking through a recreated 1945 army camp, lunch in the Civic Hall, a memorial service at the De Johannes De Doper Church, and the National Commemoration Ceremony, including the laying of wreaths, a fly past by historic planes, and the Liberation Parade of veterans.

In Amsterdam, we visited the home of Anne Frank, and heard the stories of the horror of living in Europe under Nazi control. The desperation of the Jewish community and the Dutch population by 1945

Amsterdam.

showed the important role played by the Canadian soldiers in driving the Nazis out of the Netherlands. It was pointed out to us that starvation was a real possibility for the population. People were digging up tulips bulbs to feed their children. The Dutch people remember and honour our soldiers.

The experiences in the Netherlands were inspiring. Sitting in the church in Wageningen listening to the speakers speaking in Dutch and reading the English text, the power of all we had seen and heard resulted in the following question:

How Can We Forget When Others Care So Much?

How can we forget…

When Dutch school children tend the graves of our ancestors?

How can we forget…

When the people of Belgium remember our soldiers missing in the Great War every night at the Menin Gate?

How can we forget…

When the people of the Netherlands spread bouquets of yellow roses lovingly and precisely on the steps of Holten Canadian War Cemetery on their Remembrance Day?

How can we forget…

When the people of Wageningen volunteer their time to remember our soldiers who came to their rescue?

How can we forget…

When a Belgian man, Gilbert Van Landschott single-handedly built the Canada-Poland Museum to remember the bravery and sacrifice of our men?

It was not a foreign war.

It was our war.

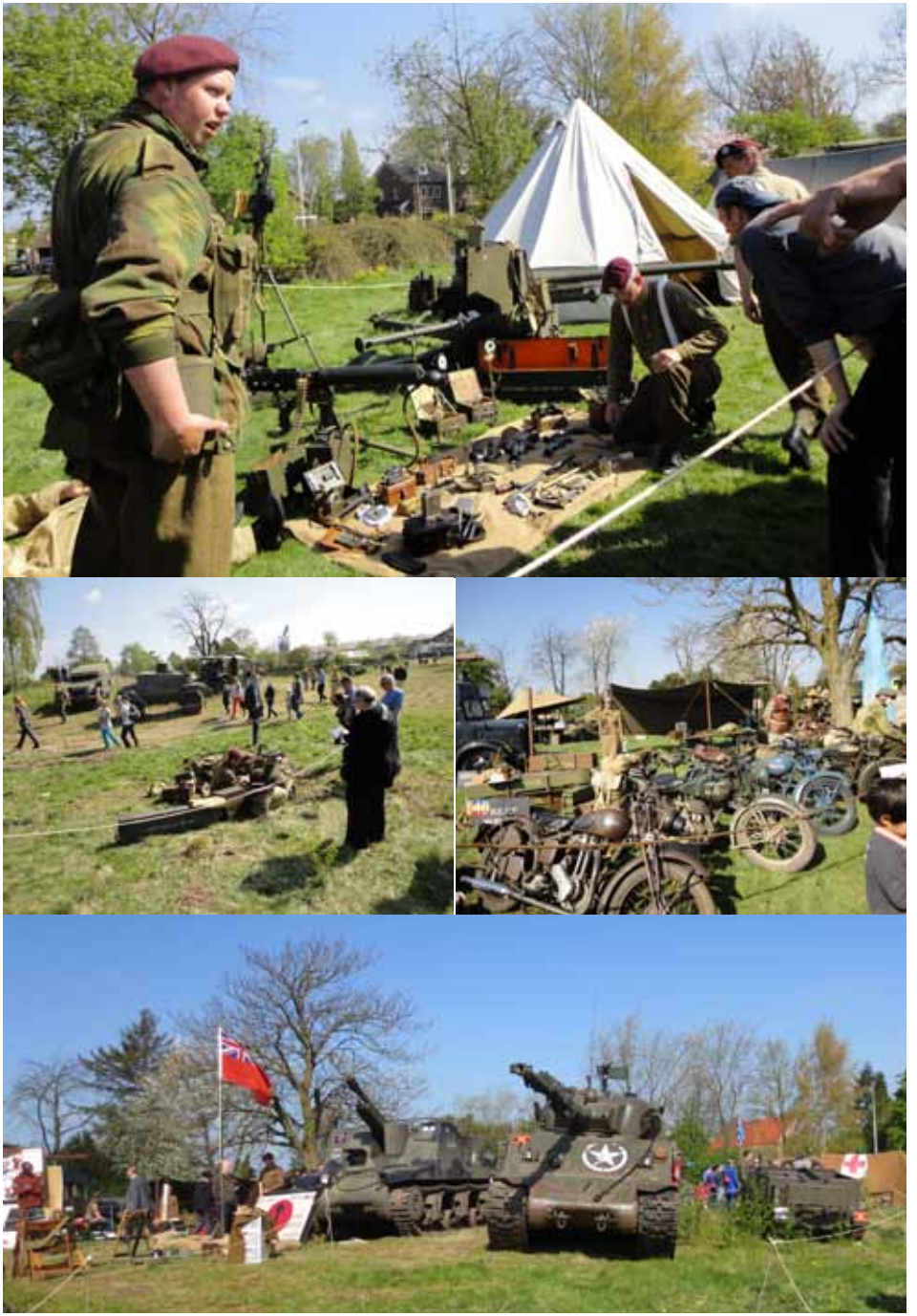
Our men brought it home in their heads, hearts and souls.

We have all been affected by their pain even if they could not speak of it.

Now, most of them have gone and we **must remember**.

How can we forget?

—Catherine Littlejohn King, 2013



Camp 1945, Wageningen, The Netherlands.

Place where the German commander surrendered to Canadian General Foulkes, May 5, 1945, liberating Holland.

Camp 1945, laundry.

Top: Street named after Canadian General Foulkes who accepted German surrender in Wageningen, the Netherlands. Children celebrating Liberation Day, May 5, 2013. Middle: Fly-By by WWII planes. Liberation Day Parade, Flags of Allied Forces. Bottom: Russian troops. Liberation Parade.

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