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A Canadian on Horseback

9 July 1944 Memorialized in Bronze

Mary Mackie

Canadian and British troops liberated Caen after 33 days of the bloodiest battles of the Normandy campaign. A small but dramatic ceremony in the main square marked the historic first raising of the French flag. But a Canadian artillery officer on horseback made the moment symbolically Canadian too.

Although Caen was one of the D-Day objectives, the Germans also recognized it as pivotal to their defence against the Allied invasion forces. Three German armoured divisions were put into action merely to hold the line.

Air bombardment and land artillery had devastated the ancient city, preceding the drive that saw troops of 3rd Canadian Infantry Division enter the town. The battered townspeople, 3,000 of whom had been living in the *Abbaye aux Hommes* for the previous month, extended a heartfelt welcome to the khaki-clad men from overseas who had ousted the German S.S. troops. In the Cathedral Square, a small detachment of French and British soldiers — all wearing British battle dress — lined up at the base of the flagstaff, close by the tomb of William the Conqueror. The ceremony of raising the first flag was led by a chieftain of the French underground in Caen. Many wept as the red, white and blue Tricolore of France was raised, with General Charles de Gaulle's Cross of Lorraine on its white stripe.

The soldiers, including *les Forces Françaises de l'Interieur*, presented arms. A few of the several hundred people began to sing *la Marseillaise*. An alert newsman held

up a microphone, saying their voices would be re-broadcast to fellow Frenchmen. Men, women, and children sang out with full hearts.

Suddenly, onto this solemn scene burst a horse clattering over a heap of rubble and into the Cathedral square. Her rider, a startled Canadian artillery officer, covered his embarrassment by pulling up short and snapping a salute to the flag. News photographers caught the image.

The rider, Captain Ralph Mackern Sketch, was Commanding Officer of Item Troop, 100th Battery, 4th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment of the Royal Canadian Artillery, 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, which landed on Juno Beach on 6 June. Sketch wrote many years later of how he obtained the magnificent chestnut mare. The Germans were so overwhelmed that many survivors fled, leaving behind hundreds of artillery horses in the fields beyond the beaches. Even in 1944, German infantry divisions relied upon horsedrawn transport because of the shortage of gasoline. As a result, Canadian soldiers were trading off horses to French farmers in return for a chicken or a dozen eggs.

Sketch, a lifelong horseman, invoked the privileges of rank. This meant that his batman-driver assumed the extra duty as groom when Sketch claimed a horse, saddlery, and a supply of grain. Her life began with a new name: Lady Item.

When Item Troop entered Caen, they established headquarters in a battered convent. After getting their guns in action,



Captain Ralph Sketch and Lady Item in Caen, 9 July 1944.

(NAC PA 138273)

they had expected to stay a while. However, an immediate order came to move across the Orne River.

The unexpected order caught the C.O. with his second-in-command away in his jeep scouting for wine. Captain Sketch promptly saddled up Lady Item and galloped off in search of his scout car. Lady Item was no

slouch. She jumped fallen telegraph poles and climbed mounds of rubble before she rushed clattering into the flag-raising ceremony.

Canada was fortunate in two ways. First, that press photographers sent the spirited image of the Canadian on horseback to flash its own symbolism around the world.



Ralph Sketch and "The Salute" at Legion Hall, Pender Island.

(Courtesy of the Victoria Times-Colonist)

Canadians had been among the first overseas troops to arrive in England in 1939. They went into battle in Hong Kong and Dieppe, in Italy and now France, but all too often their part in the Grand Alliance was overshadowed. On 9 July 1944 in Caen, Captain Sketch and Lady Item gave the world a Canadian image worth a thousand words. Secondly, when Ralph Sketch, forty years later, had become an internationally-recognized equestrian sculptor in bronze, he re-created that moment in a miniature statue for his second-in-command and longtime friend, H. Gerald MacAdam, Croix de Guerre, of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. This memento was known to the Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation, which commissioned a larger version, titled "The Salute," to become part of a permanent Canadian memorial in France.

Sketch sculptures commemorate many aspects of Canadian history: the wounded

Montcalm riding to aid, William Lyon Mackenzie racing to escape capture, Louis Riel inciting resistance, an outrider of the Northwest Mounted Police, Sir James Douglas, and many more, all on horseback. The horse for its own sake was so dear to Sketch that he chose to sculpt Alfred alone after General Brock's death. His most poignant bronze, "The Last of the Gun Team, 1918," depicts a frightened horse symbolic of those who served for hundreds of years in peace and war. This statuette is at the Camp Petawawa Headquarters of the 2nd Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery.

The permanent site of Lady Item's historic moment is a part of *Le Mémorial* founded in 1988 by Caen's mayor as a Museum of Peace. It was when *Le Mémorial* launched a fund-raising drive for an exhibition they titled "The Canadians to the Rescue" that the Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation

was formed. Their immediate results were Canada's commemoration of both Vimy's 75th and Dieppe's 50th anniversaries at *Le Mémorial*. The long-term goal is to create a place of continuing study with a documentation base to preserve valuable information on Canada's role in World War Two. Canadians are creating a Garden of Peace at *Le Mémorial* and will place a plaque on the *Place de l'Ancienne Boucherie*.

On 10 July 1994, to mark the 50th anniversary of Caen's liberation, Canadians will dedicate Ralph Sketch's gift: the one-third lifesize bronze statue of "The Salute," at the *Musée Mémorial de la bataille de Normandie* in Bayeux. Rare in any artist's life is the opportunity to be both sculptor and sculpted.

"The Salute" was the focal point of Pender Island's 1992 Royal Canadian Legion Remembrance Service. It was then taken to the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. In February 1994 it was taken to France in a Canadian Armed Forces aircraft.

Canadians will return in force for 50th anniversary ceremonies on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, July 8, 9, and 10, 1994. A 200-strong Canadian Forces guard of honour, colour party and band will also attend.

If fate had not stepped in again, Ralph Sketch would also have been there to unveil his sculpture. But sadly, on 28 September 1993, Sketch and his wife Marion died together in a fire which consumed their Pender Island home. His bright image of the Canadian on horseback, however, is forever part of the memories of Canada to remain in France with the 100,000 other Canadians who went to Europe's rescue, never to return.

SOURCES

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Mary Mackie, a resident of Pender Island, B.C., has an avid interest in Canadian military history, especially as it relates to the Dieppe raid.