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"Backdoor to War"

A Canadian Infantryman at Hochwald and Xanten, February-March 1945

Hugh McVicar

Hugh McVicar was born in 1914 in Guelph, Ontario and graduated from Parkdale Collegiate in Toronto in late 1933. After a year at Toronto Normal School and work at a variety of occupations he joined Swift Canadian Company as a salesman. Married, with a young child and approaching 30 years of age, joining the army was "the farthest thing from his mind." He was called up under the National Reserves Mobilization Act (NRMA) in March 1944 and immediately agreed to accept general service, meaning service overseas.

As a bookkeeper he was assigned to the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps but as a driver not a clerk. After boot camp at the CNE in Toronto and basic training at Cornwall he was sent to Red Deer, Alberta for advanced training on trucks. On arrival in England in December 1944 he passed another medical and discovered that he was now Private McVicar, infantryman.

The "reinforcement crisis" of 1944 had caught up with me. It was brought on, above all, by infantry casualties in Italy and Normandy. In view of the much larger need, the little matter of my veins and my vision could now be overlooked.

From what I had learned of a general reluctance among enlisted men to join Infantry, I suppose I too should have been reluctant. I was not. I had never been exactly thrilled by the prospect of me – "driver" – sitting high in the cab of a 30- or 60-hundredweight, navigating strange country roads, a target for the enemy or "fifth column" snipers lurking back of the front. And if, in the middle of nowhere, mechanical trouble developed? I'd be hopeless. No, headed now for the Infantry, I felt a strange sense of relief. I'd be more self-reliant. Besides, they gave you a shovel, didn't they? To me an infantryman's slit trench seemed like a "better 'ole" (World War One expression) than the cab of a truck. Ah, well, innocence is bliss. My training at Aldershot was compressed into eight weeks, with time out for a lonely Christmas in London and Brighton.

Eight days later, February 21, I was at the "Front." It had taken one long truck-ride – through Antwerp, through southern Holland, through Nijmegen, through Cleve – Welcome (?) to Germany – finally arriving in a field where pup-tents had been set up somewhere near the village of Louisendorf. Night had arrived, but artificial moonlight illuminated the area. Artillery shells whooshed ominously overhead, in both directions. The occasional "whump" of mortars could be heard up ahead. We bedded down in the tents and, believe it or not, slept.

That day when I first joined the Essex Scottish and became a member of "Charlie" Company – February 21, 1945 – was the same day when "Charlie" received a new company commander. His name was Frederick Albert (Fred) Tilston. Up till then he'd been Captain Tilston, regimental adjutant, assistant to the Commanding Officer in administrative duties. Now he was "C" Company's MAJOR Tilston. I remember how tall and straight he stood, talking to our 13 Platoon officer (Darrach or Derick or Derek? – never saw it spelled out) –

apparently unconcerned by mortar bombs lobbed our way by the enemy from not far ahead. I was concerned. I thought some of them came perilously close. I remember, in the early morning of February 28, his serving me – one of many that he served – a tot of rum. He did it as man to man, almost as a form of communion, almost as if he was saying: “Tomorrow, men, we have a big day ahead of us. The Hochwald. Let’s do what we have to do. Let’s do it together.”

“Tomorrow” was March 1, 1945. That was the day when Major Fred Tilston led “C” Company into that heavily defended forest. By his super-heroic acts he won the highest honour that Canada or the British Empire can confer “For Valour” – the Victoria Cross. That was his last day in action. A remarkable story. And well known. There is no need to repeat it here.

Fred Tilston died September 23, 1992 at age 86. He had missed that year’s Essex Scottish reunion. At previous reunions I couldn’t help noticing that he seemed to be the most popular person there. By then he was Honourary Colonel. Everyone wanted to talk to him. I talked to him too. Chances are I was the only veteran there who had served under Major Tilston through the nine days of his company command.

This introduction is leading toward an account of one of my own battle experiences. By rights it should be about my part in that first-of-March attack on the Hochwald. (Some call it “Hochwald Forest,” but “Hochwald” itself means “High Forest.”) I refrain for one big reason. Besides outstanding heroism that day, there was also – and I had close contact with it – the exact opposite. It might later have come to court-martial but – for lack of witnesses, I suspect – it did not. Several weeks later our platoon officer (wounded in the Hochwald) returned very briefly during a rest period. Long enough to ask me personally: What happened? I deflected the question by saying that my side-kick and I (on the PIAT) – in all the confusion of our platoon being pinned down by our own artillery barrage falling short – had got mixed in with another company. Which was true. But not the whole truth. Here is what happened.

For protection from that barrage, my No. 2 man on the PIAT joined others in what seemed almost a made-to-order bunker. When the barrage was lifting, he refused to advance with me. Trying to persuade him (in vain) to join me in finding our scattered



*Hugh McVicar with two Staphorst schoolgirls,
16 August 1945.*

platoon used up precious time. We lost contact with our platoon and our company. I had the PIAT. He had my bombs. Without him my weapon was useless. My personal story of that day is one of frustration. Not one I wish to relate.

As a result of what happened that day in the Hochwald, Tilston lost both legs and the use of one eye. When the smoke cleared, out of his company of perhaps 130, one officer remained fit for further combat (Captain Charles Gatton), and 26 men. I was one of them. 13 Platoon’s Lieutenant Derick had been wounded; Sergeant Cadman killed. In the close fighting, besides killed and wounded, some had been taken prisoner. For those left to fight another day, it was a very sobering experience.

Figuratively speaking, we spent the following five days licking our wounds. We wondered how much longer this kind of combat

could last. Or how much longer WE could last. Restoring our ranks was Priority No. 1. The new arrivals took a look at an old geezer like me (age 31) and assumed that I was probably one of the originals. If there was a happier note, for me it had to do with a change of weapons. Major Doug MacIntyre, on loan to us from "A" Company, advised me to turn in my PIAT for a 2-inch mortar. Of late there hadn't been too many enemy tanks around, he said. I was more than willing. For one thing, the mortar was ten pounds lighter.

During those five days – more precisely, for the next two weeks – my (till then) No. 2 buddy on the PIAT went on L.O.B. (leave off battle). That was customary reward for sustained periods of action. For him it was overdue. (His behaviour of March 1 – had it been a case of battle fatigue? Or the insidious, common superstition attached to "just one more go"?) Whatever. When he returned from leave, he transferred to a regiment that came from his own home town.

Before reproducing my one-and-only LONG and, at the same time, DETAILED account of my part in one particular action, let me remind you diaries were forbidden and strict censorship had been set up for all outgoing mail. Those enemy eyes and ears could be anywhere, we were told. Plus the danger of being taken prisoner. Soldiers could not tell the folks back home what was happening to them in the field until 14 days had passed.

* * * * *

Xanten lies on the west bank of the Rhine, east of the Hochwald, 30 miles southeast of Holland's Nijmegen, 18 miles southeast of Cleve (Kleve). The over-all operation to take it was code-named Blockbuster II. Xanten represented the enemy's last escape-route in our sector to evacuate his men and equipment across the Rhine. He defended that route tenaciously. Funnelling through that restricted area were all kinds of ammunition. He used them. Easier to use, in some ways, than transport across the river. Thus we come to the seventh of March.

Beginning here, much of what I will have to say consists of quotations from letters that I wrote back home. Remember that, in those letters, details of actual events had to observe the required two-weeks delay.

By the evening of March 7 we had completed our preliminary move through the Hochwald in the direction of Xanten...Our billets for a short night's rest were to be a group of farm buildings, still occupied by a family of some nationality other than German. The teen-age girl of the family made herself pleasantly useful by distributing hot drinks. The officers installed themselves in the house and the rest of us prepared to bed down in the stables, scrounging what we could to contribute to our warmth.

There was one last little ceremony before retiring, and that involved being called into the house to meet our new platoon officer, a Lieut. Moore. He was fair and somewhat short, but as he talked to us, in the glow of a lamp, of the job we had to do the following day, he impressed me as a man who would know how to handle his men and himself in battle. The effect was dissipated just a little, however, by his last remark. He said that they didn't really expect that opposition, the following day, would be too heavy. It was a bit too reminiscent of what we had been told (NOT by Tilston) on the eve of the Hochwald.

And so to sleep. But not much. My stomach was churning and I couldn't be sure whether it was because of fear or something I'd eaten. I had heard several fellows complaining of the effects of "fresh-killed pork."

It wasn't only a case of fresh-killed pork – our cooks had really done themselves proud lately, living "off the land," so to speak. It was also a case of pork-on-the-hoof that some of us would have LIKED to kill. Sharing our accommodation in the stables that night was a litter of pigs. Throughout the night they competed for the best positions next to their mother. In the process they did an awful lot of squealing.

In the early hours of the following morning, after we had marched to approximately what was to be the starting-line for our attack, I had a most strenuous bout of diarrhea.

It's at this point that I would pause to observe that when one writes home from the front to a wife, a mother and a sister (and, in the present case, to a daughter, too) he is inclined to pass over quickly – perhaps entirely – some of the vulgarities of army life...So it's at this point that I should warn you that I am going to be vulgar. There should be at least one episode that is distinctly indecent in every story of life in the army; otherwise the picture is not true.

Now, take this episode as an example and my use of the word "diarrhea." I can just hear the comment that the term would draw from one of my pals in the platoon: "Diarrhea – hell! Why don'tcha just say that you were scared shitless?"

Maybe I should. It was a common expression of the times.

Anyway, if you have a mind to, you can picture me there in the dewy darkness before the dawn, stripping myself of my gear and the usual portions of clothing, in what seemed to me like a prolonged struggle to rid myself of the cramps. And at any moment would come the signal for the Company to move off on its rendezvous with the enemy. What a revolting situation that was!

And what a spot for those around me, waiting for the same signal, to kid the pants off me (to use an appropriate expression) about my discomfiture! But nobody said a word. They were all too busy with their own thoughts and their own worries to be concerned about my predicament.

Backtracking about 36 hours... From the Regimental History of the Essex Scottish:

On 6 March the Commanding Officer was flown over the Battalion's next objective, the ancient Roman town of Xanten. The following day a move was completed to a concentration area on the far side of the Hochwald. Orders and preliminary reconnaissance lasted until nightfall. The Battalion objectives were the north-west suburbs of Xanten. The RHLI [Royal Hamilton Light Infantry] were to attack simultaneously on the right, and on the left 43rd British Division was directed into the town with the main road as its axis. At half-past five in the morning (of March 8) the attack went in with "B" and "A" Companies leading followed by "C" and "D."

My own additional comment: The terrain was flat and the ground was wet and soft. For that reason there was no possibility of tank support. We were on our own. Again. Now back to my letter. Instead of "half-past five in the morning," as in the quote, my narrative begins – the way I remembered it – at 4:30.

We are all lined up at the "starting-line" for our attack on Xanten. It is 4:30 in the morning – damp – and, but for the floodlights cutting paths of shimmering light over our heads toward the objective, it would be very dark. Our platoon's particular job is to capture certain ground and houses in the outskirts of town, 1500 yards away. That's a long way to go for an attack – from the starting line to the objective. A fine rain is settling on me as I squat on my weapons, keeping clear of the wet ground. I'm sleepy. Was up at 2:30. There, the forward company is on its feet and moving. Now it's our turn. Allez-ooop!

As I walk, the rain falls on my glasses and fogs my vision. Over this barbed-wire fence, across

an open field – another fence. A ditch, filled with water. Cleared that one – just! But my shovel, sten gun and mortar didn't help. Darn this rain anyway – wish I could see properly. Always HAVE been leery of this sort of situation.

Ah, there's our artillery barrage starting up. Not falling short this time. (A reference to the Hochwald.) Another fence and another ditch. O.K. so far. Might be a good show after all. Ditch again. Nope, didn't THINK I'd clear that one. Soaked to the knees. Open fields! Where'll I find cover in open fields, if I need it?

From the War Diary of the Essex Scottish:

The artillery barrage started at 0530 hours and came down perfectly – like all hell breaking loose.

My own comment: After the Hochwald I had acquired a new No. 2 man, this time on the mortar. Not really new. He had already been wounded twice. Never got to know his first name. In the army that was common... Now back to my letter:

I give up trying to see our line as a whole – instead, keep my eyes on Pate, my No. 2 on the mortar. His vision will have to do for us both. Good barrage this time – the creeping type, of course. Trouble with barrage: Jerry knows our infantry keeps just so far behind, and places his mortar fire accordingly. Here it comes now. I duck – it wasn't much – and then go on. Must have been close though – mud spattered on my specs. Vision worse than ever now.

Where's Pate? There he is. What's he doing back there? I stop. Oh oh! there's the S.B. (stretcher bearer) with him. Pate's wounded.

To which I add my own comment: Incongruously, Pate, from what I could see at some distance, was laughing. Then it struck me. This was his third wound. (Third strike, you're out.) This meant he'd automatically receive his honourable discharge. Back to my letter:

I go on. Who to stick beside now? Seems to be getting lighter, but vision still no good. Another fence. Ah! there's Walker, our runner. I'll string along with him. He's another old hand at this game. Jerry mortar barrage. We hit the ground. Darn close! It lifts, and we're off again. More mud on my glasses. It's raining harder. Another barrage. Not so close. But we sprawl prostrate just the same.

Off again. There's Walker, but no one else looks familiar. "Hey Bud, what company are you?..B?" - We have gotten up with the forward company. I

yell at Walker through the din, and we edge forward more slowly, waiting for our group. Jerry mortar-bombs again. We hug the ground. Closer this time. Wow! that WAS close. Debris falls all over me. Another one. We're in for it. Another and another, and more rounds about me. I try to shrink into the mud. If the folks at home could only see now! Folks at home – praying for me in spots like this. I say a prayer of my own, and I feel better. More bombs, and I am still not hit.

Then it subsides. I lift my head just enough to watch for Walker to move. He doesn't and I wait. It seems O.K. now, so I raise up on one elbow and look about. A dozen fellows lying about, some making motions indicating wounds. I get to my feet. Walker is dead. Must have been quick. Never a sound or movement.

Who is this moaning? My gosh, it's our officer. (Lieut. Moore) I see our S.B. kneeling over another, and I go over to tell him. I ask where is the rest of our platoon, and he points to a line of men on the move just ahead. I turn to catch up. The S.B. shouts back at me, waves his arm about at the men waiting for his care, and tells me to give him a hand. Well – good! At least I'll be able to see what I'm doing.

He points to another S.B. lying dead behind me, and says, "Take his helmet. You'll be safer." It's a shiny white helmet with red crosses on it, like his own. I drop my weapons and put it on, taking the dead man's scissors from his kit. I'm to cut away clothing, exposing the wounds for the S.B.'s attention. So I make for the officer first. His arm is shattered at the elbow. He points with his other hand to a wound in his groin, and grinds out, "I think I'm hit in the guts." He knows enough to lie with his knees up. Three bad wounds! I rip away the clothing. The S.B. comes and I move on to the others.

In 1966, in Ads Cemetery, Minnie took a photo of Lieut. Moore's grave with me beside it. I sent the photo to what had been his home in Shining Tree, 75 miles north of Sudbury. In my accompanying letter I mentioned my role in his last moments and my respect for him as an officer and leader. His brother sent a grateful reply. Back to my narrative:

Those who can are digging away the earth from beneath them. Others have rolled into the shell holes. I put field dressings on some. Together we patch them up somehow.

The S.B. moves further up the field now, calling back to stay and, if the fellows need help, to help them, while he looks for more casualties. "Hail a Red Cross jeep, too." Soon he disappears in the mist. I watch the road, over to my right, for a jeep. None comes. A sniper spots our

cluster of men, and we hear the whine of bullets. I scoop a shallow trench with my shovel and crawl in. Good thing he's at a distance.

Still no jeep, and our officer needs a stretcher in a hurry. I wipe most of the smudge from my glasses and curse the rain and the poor visibility. Better go over to the road myself, and look for a jeep. But will that sniper honour my Red Cross helmet? What a target it makes! Well, well! Here comes a corporal leading a file of about twenty prisoners from the farm buildings to my left. Must have given up easily. I join them – the sniper will lay off now – and we reach the road.

There's a jeep in the ditch up ahead. Quickly I make for it. No driver, so I climb in and examine the controls to drive it myself. The driver appears from nowhere and swears at me for trying to steal it. I explain, and he jumps in, wheels about, and stalls. There's a man badly wounded on the other side of the road, with his chum beside him, gesticulating wildly. We must change our plans, load him onto a stretcher, and back to the R.A.P. [Regimental Aid Post].

Arrived there, I seek out our own M.O. [Captain C.A. Richardson] and report. "Our officer is wounded badly. Can we have a jeep?" We can, and off we go. But we come across other wounded with arms upstretched toward us, and we must pick them up. The jeep's stretchers are soon filled and back it goes, leaving me to search for my own wounded. Darn this mist, and the sameness of these fields! Where are they?

Now the sniper picks me out, and I dodge quickly about the fields, looking. He comes close, and I jump for a shell hole. On again. No sign of anybody, so the returning jeep churns by me through the mud, the driver making a search of his own. No luck, so he comes back to me. I take off my glasses, but it is no better. I climb on – there are three of us – and we drive further forward. A nice target we make! The sniper opens up with a machine gun, firing tracers. He WOULD fire tracers now, wouldn't he! Knowing the Red Cross has no weapons. (Tracers give away his own position.) The dirty – -! Our driver spurts like mad for the shelter of a big, earth-covered mound of marigolds, the other S.B. and myself trying to shrink into nothingness where we cling to the jeep. Thank heavens for the sniper's distance and our speed.

Now from the lea of the mound we can see my men – the walking wounded coming towards us, and we venture forth, spurring the jeep on to the spot they left. The officer (Mr. Moore) is lying with one knee still up. He is dead. Four dead altogether in that one spot. We pick up the wounded still lying there, and the fellow with the unnatural bend in his leg must just grit his teeth and bear it while we roll him on the stretcher. Back to the R.A.P. speeds the jeep, and I chase after the walking wounded. They have

run into the sniper's fire, back by the mound. We help each other along to its shelter, as fast as we can go.

One of that group was O'Toole. He was a fun-guy in our platoon. He was still a member of 13 Platoon when the war was over and the Essex Scottish were briefly stationed at Neuenburg in Germany, not far from the easternmost point of our advance. Our company had been formed up along the roadway in platoons. Along came a visiting N.C.O. who spoke a few words. Had there been any commendable action, he asked, by one of our comrades in combat, that somebody would like to report? Stunned silence. (We had not been warned.) Then one man spoke up. It was O'Toole. He looked back at me, to his right. He was serious this time. "How about you, Mac – at Xanten?" Stunned silence on MY part. The N.C.O. moved on. But I have always felt good about it that – more than two months after the event – O'Toole remembered...My narrative again:

Another jeep comes snorting out to meet us, but upon arrival it stalls, and refuses to buck out of its ruts. I push and pull amidst a new flurry of bullets, but "no go." The sniper gives his attention to traffic on the road for a change, and the first jeep returns to pick up the worst of the wounded. The rest walk. Another try at the bogged-down jeep, but our efforts only attract the sniper again. Heck with it, and we strike out on foot for the R.A.P. As I see safety in sight at last, that scared feeling really comes over me, and I race across the field from the sniper's last fling, as fast as weary limbs, mud-encrusted pants and boots will let me.

For the rest of the day I was under the direction of the M.O. as long as he wanted me. I helped bring casualties off the jeeps into the R.A.P. One of the casualties was our own S.B. who had later suffered a bullet wound in the flesh of his leg. I was sick at the thought that, if I had been able to see properly and found our officer in time, we might have saved him. But the S.B. ruled that out. The officer had been wounded too badly, especially in the abdomen.

Later in the day I went forward with the jeeps, and was left off at "B" Company H.Q., whence I walked over to "C" Company H.Q. There was quite a mix-up forward, with companies and regiments all mixed together, but our own objectives were taken. I went down into the cellar, found a soft spot in the corner under the stairs, curled up and tried to sleep. It was a troubled sleep that I finally had, with a crazy hodge-podge of dreams about the day's doings. I had had no dinner, yet when I heard supper called, I just wasn't interested.

Late in May of 1945, the war now three weeks in the past, writing home, I included these afterthoughts about Xanten:

I have at least one comfortable thought to take with me out of this war – the knowledge that I saved one poor guy's life. I'll never know who he was. When I went out with the Red Cross jeep with the driver and another stretcher-bearer to look for casualties in the field, we were machine-gunned, as I told you. Finally we got to the spot where the casualties in my platoon had originally been, before they moved off, the least-wounded helping the worst.

There were five still sprawled upon the ground and, while the jeep churned through the mud in a circle about them, I jumped off and ran from one to the other of those I wasn't sure of, just to make doubly sure they were dead. They all LOOKED dead and, what with the hail of lead that was coming our way, the two in the jeep, impatient to get going, shouted, "Come on, they're kaput." But just then I'd discovered that the last man – a chap from another company – though motionless and chalky-grey like the rest, on closer observation, was barely conscious.

We soon brought him back to complete consciousness when we had to transfer him to a stretcher, hurrying so as not to offer a stationary target any longer than we could help. I'm afraid that the pain in his broken leg was pretty awful. He would soon have died of exposure, had he been left.

Our platoon soon learned that we were leaderless again. What had happened at the Hochwald had now been repeated at Xanten in reverse. This time our sergeant had been wounded and our officer killed.

Xanten marked the end of an 18-day period during which – in three separate engagements, beginning with the one which necessitated a quick draft of reinforcements, myself included – the Essex Scottish lost 29 officers and 476 other ranks. This does not include isolated casualties between engagements. I was beginning to see all too clearly what lay behind the moroseness that I had detected in some of my more experienced comrades – like my former No.2 man on the PIAT (and others) – the war-weariness that can bring on deep depression in a man's spirit in a few short weeks – the feeling that time is running out. The "percentage" is against you. A sense of inevitability.

Summing up Xanten historically: We – when I say "we" I include the Essex Scottish and all



Canadian scout cars enter Xanten through an old gate tower, 9 March 1945.

(Photo by Ken Bell, NAC PA 145747)

other units involved in that forward thrust of the 8th of March – had now overcome, at Xanten the last German stronghold on the west bank of the Rhine in our sector. The next stage for the Canadian Army would be crossing the Rhine, turning north, and clearing eastern Holland of the enemy from south to north. Of the approximately 28 men who constituted 13 Platoon right after I joined it February 21, I was now one of six remaining. All the others presently in 13 Platoon were acquisitions more recent than myself. According to the regiment's War Diary, our casualties at Xanten (unspecified as to their nature) were eight officers and 111 other ranks.

It had not been exactly what you would expect to be a slackening-off period as the war in Europe was about to enter its final two months.

Hugh D. McVicar served in the Essex Scottish Regiment in 1945. After the war he returned to his position as Office Manager with Swift Canada. This article is excerpted from his manuscript *Backdoor to War*. Mr. McVicar has also written *Private's Progress: Impressions of 1945*. *Canadian Military History* will carry other excerpts from these memoirs in future issues.