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One Family's Remembrance

A Return to Normandy

William James Booth and George Anthony Booth

The eleven months June 1994-May 1995 were an especially important and poignant time of remembrance for Canadians. These months marked the 50th anniversary of the end of the Nazi domination of Europe, and of one of the key moments in its defeat: the invasion of Normandy and the subsequent campaigns through Northwest Europe. These events were remembered in various ways. For us, the beneficiaries of their sacrifices, it was a time to hear their stories, and to awaken to the magnitude of their efforts and to what they had accomplished. It was a time to express our gratitude. For us as Canadians, it was an occasion to reflect with pride on what our country had helped to achieve and to recall the almost unimaginable efforts that the defeat of fascism had called forth from Canadians at home and overseas. For the veterans of that conflict, this was no doubt a time to be moved once again by both a sense of loss, of friends and youth, as well as by a sense of having done a needful and great thing. And lastly, for us, their children born after the war, that year of remembrance was an occasion to reflect with humility on how the lives of our parents contributed so mightily to remaking and bettering the world they bequeathed to us. These acts of remembrance, then, are as varied as the individuals, families and nations in whose fabric they are interwoven. Understandably, the media have given much prominence to state-level commemorations, to the processions of dignitaries and leaders at the numerous memorial ceremonies and to the retelling of the historical record. In the following pages, we prefer to write on a smaller scale, to recount one family's time of remembrance.

Born after the end of the war, in 1951 and 1958, we are two of Bill Booth's children. Our

father served with the 1st Battalion, Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment of Canada) from 1941 - 1946 in Canada, England and Northwest Europe. In the Spring of 1995, we accompanied him on part of the trip that was his first return in 50 years to the areas in which he had fought. In April-May of 1995, the Dutch government and a number of private bodies organized a two-week "Thank You Canada" celebration in the Netherlands. With the aid of government subsidies and the generosity and hospitality of thousands of Dutch citizens, many Canadian veterans were able to return to Europe, some for the first time since the War. For two weeks they were welcomed by Dutch communities and families, almost as if they were family members themselves. Celebrations went on around the clock, parades took place in every village and city, and the outpouring of affection and gratitude from the Dutch people to the Canadians who freed them touched the hearts of us all. While staying in Nijverdal for the festivities, our father saw first-hand the depth of gratitude the Dutch feel towards Canada, a product of a society which has and continues to view their liberation by the Canadians as a singularly important event in their history. A sign on an Amsterdam city bus set out the reason they commemorate that period with such fervour: "Fifty Years of Democracy: Thank you Liberators!"

The war had taken the Black Watch and our father from France through Belgium, Holland and into Germany. We joined him in Amsterdam on 10 May for his return to one small and, in 1944, especially hellish area of Normandy. There we followed the route taken by Canadian forces from the beaches inland as far as Falaise. While he had not taken part in the initial assault on the coast (the Black Watch arrived in Normandy on D+30, 6 July 1944 as part of 5 Brigade, 2nd Canadian



Bill Booth in uniform at the end of the war.

Infantry Division), a visit to the beaches was nevertheless important to him as a veteran and all of us as Canadians. Our two nights in the beach area at Bernieres-sur-Mer were spent at a wonderful little bed-and-breakfast, the "Maison Quebec." Quebec, as it turns out, occupies a special place in the heart of the proprietor, ever since her encounter with members of Le Regiment de la Chaudiere on 6 June 1944, who spoke to her in French saying "we have landed" and politely advised her to stay inside as the area was somewhat dangerous. The weather during our stay in Bernieres was cold and windy, not unlike the conditions that prevailed during the landings. We were struck by the vast expanse of water as we looked out into the Channel, and how exposed those in the landing craft must have felt as they bobbed in the surf on their final approach to the beaches. A number of buildings along the water's edge were familiar from photographs of the landings, and many still exhibited bullet and shrapnel damage. Plaques and memorial sites at Bernieres-sur-Mer, Courseulles-sur-Mer, and St. Aubin-sur-Mer paid quiet tribute to the heroism and sacrifice of those who began the liberation of France a half-century ago. From the coastal area we proceeded inland towards the Abbaye Ardenne. Canadians visiting this area will no doubt be struck, as we were, by the many Canadian plaques and markers to be found at even the most obscure bends on small country roads. At one turn a sign is seen inscribed with the name of the Highland Light Infantry, at another the North Shore Regiment. Fifty-one years after

the event, the memory of these and other units continues to mark the ground over which they fought. The Abbaye Ardenne, though badly damaged during the fighting that summer of 1944, remains an imposing presence on the Normandy countryside. It was there that 45 Canadian prisoners were murdered by the SS and above a side entrance lies a plaque which memorializes them.

We continued on from the Abbaye towards the city of Caen. Much of the city was destroyed in July 1944, but the splendid chateau still dominates its centre. There is also an excellent museum, with exhibits covering the Occupation and the subsequent liberation of France. Outside the museum are the national gardens of the Allied powers. Canada has a beautiful garden there, with an entrance inscribed, "La Liberation vient par la Mer/Liberation Comes From the Sea." It was in Caen that the Black Watch first went into action - on 18 July with the Orne Canal crossing. Despite the city's almost total destruction by Allied bombers, Caen revealed two distinct landmarks which our father remembered as though it had been yesterday. These were the racetrack, which served as the Black Watch staging area and, still recognizable, the spot where "I" Section, Headquarters Company (our father's unit) had crossed the Orne. It was a discovery like this that we had so hoped for during our planning for this trip, and it was a wonderful experience to simply walk about this area and listen to our father's reminiscences of his first experience under fire.

The authors (Jim is on the left) with their father in the town of Vieux, near St. André-sur-Orne, in 1995.



Passing through the town of Ifs, which was briefly held by the Black Watch and Calgary Highlanders and now has a street named Rue du Royal Black Watch of Canada, we proceeded south towards St. Andre-sur-Orne, stopping to climb a piece of high ground now crowned by a reservoir, but known in July 1944 as Point 67. From atop this rise looking south you can see the villages of St. Andre and St. Martin, and just to their left a rise known as Verrieres Ridge. Looking over this land today, one is impressed by its pastoral character - gentle farmland, just as it was that summer 52 years ago. What also struck us was how small an area it is - to walk the entire area would be a relatively easy stroll for a Sunday afternoon, yet on 25 July the battle for Verrieres Ridge claimed over 300 casualties from the Black Watch, and left an indelible imprint on those who survived. The details of the Verrieres engagement have been recounted in a number of fine histories, and need not be retold here. On that day our father was dug-in on the outskirts of St. Andre. The target of heavy German mortar and artillery barrages throughout the day, "I" Section suffered a number of casualties killed and wounded. To follow our father as he sought out specific points and markers in the area, to listen to him speak of old comrades both fallen and alive, was to prove the central moment of our trip. We can only regret that this locale, the site of one of the bloodiest battles fought by Canadian forces in Europe in the Second World War, has no interpretive marker or table that would allow visitors to grasp the significance of the gentle wheat fields that they pass on the drive from Caen to Falaise. Here, as elsewhere in our father's return to this part of Europe, he was received with warm hospitality. In Vieux (a village a short distance west of the Orne River from St. Andre), where we stayed, the local cafe laid on a wonderful meal for us; and on the night of our departure, our host at the bed-and-breakfast broke out a jug of Calvados, reserved from his wedding forty years earlier, and shared it with us.

Our visit to Normandy ended to Falaise after a visit to the nearby Canadian Military Cemetery at Bretteville-sur-Laize. There many of the Canadian dead from the Normandy campaign are buried, including a good number of our father's comrades from the Black Watch. The experience of seeing this place is profoundly moving and disturbing for any visitor. And it is especially so

for those who, like our father, knew many of the dead buried there: those who grew old and those who did not meeting after half a century. For those of us born after the war, places like Bretteville make tangible the magnitude of the price paid for our freedom. But it is not, as one might expect, a locale of "unbearably nameless names" etched on identical rows of white stone. Each marker carries a personal inscription from the family, reminding us that these youths were sons, brothers or fathers, and reminding us also of the grief caused by their sacrifice. On one gravestone, the words:

D. 83009 Private
Gordon Hutton
The Black Watch
Royal Highland Regiment
of Canada
28th July 1944 Age 19
Not Only Today
But Every Day
In Silence We Remember.

We departed Falaise for S'Hertogenbosch in Holland to meet our father's friend and the Black Watch's Dutch interpreter, Eddy van de Leijgraaf, and from there we returned to Amsterdam and then home. We took back many impressions of our visit both large and small. We had come to France not as tourists or historians, but as members of a family: to see where our father had been and to share with him, as much as is possible, his recollections of those days. Many of those memories are so private, or incommunicable to those who did not experience that summer of 1944 in Normandy, that they belong only to the person who remembers or to the band of those who were there. Yet we did learn much. Of our father's memories, to be passed on within our family. Of the misery and loss that were their daily fare. Of the grief of their families. Of the purpose which brought them to these places so far from their homes, many to stay there forever. Other individuals, other families and countries found their own ways to remember, in that year of remembrance 1994-1995. This was ours.

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