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Leesten, 50 Years Later

Henk Dykman

Early in June of 1993 I attended the reunion of the first battalion of the Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders, the infantry regiment which liberated the Dykman family in Leesten, the Netherlands, on April 4, 1945 (see *Canadian Military History* pp.20-35 of Volume 4, No 1, Spring 1995).

The reunion was held in Cornwall, Ontario and I used the occasion to visit Frank Periard and his wife Fleurette in nearby Alexandria. With the help of a very cooperative Cornwall daily newspaper I had gotten in touch with Frank, the youngest brother of Corporal Aimé Pascal Periard, who died in battle about 300 yards from my home on the afternoon of April 4, 1945. Frank turned out to be the only surviving member of the Herminie Periard family. Frank is convinced that his parents who died in their fifties never got over their grief. "They were never the same again", he said.

"Frank, would you like to come to Holland with me to visit the spot where your brother died?" I asked him, after we had got acquainted and had been talking for some time. "When are we going?" he responded without hesitation. He looked a bit disappointed when I said that I could not make the trip till the end of April 1994.

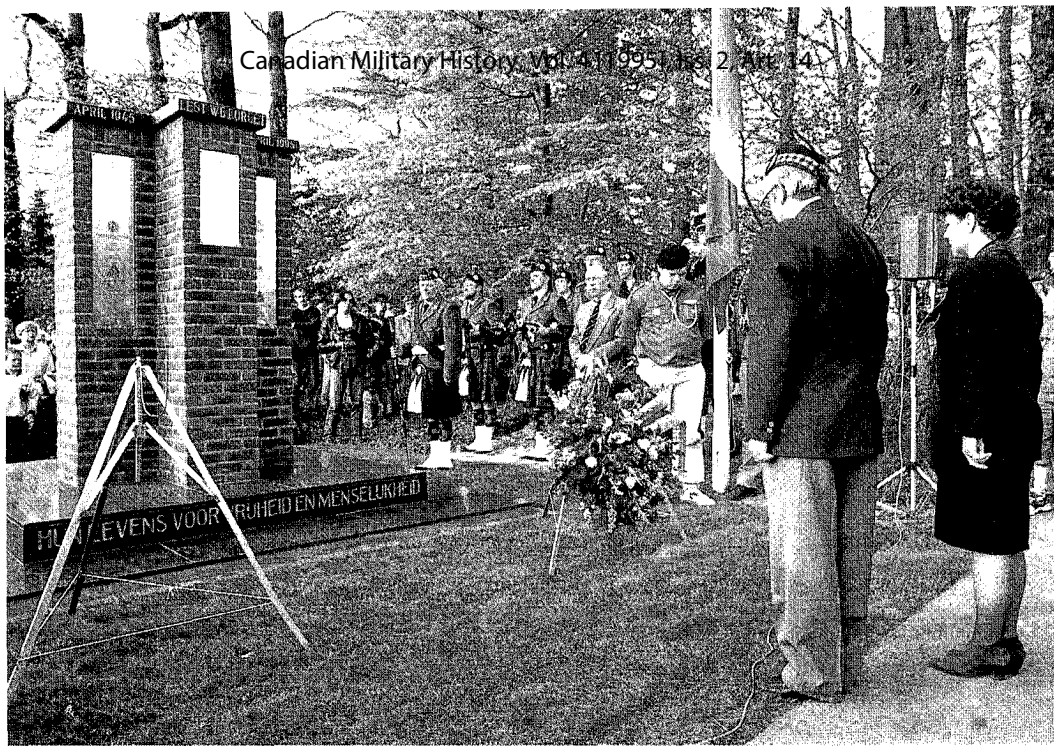
On the afternoon of May 4th of that year (Dutch Remembrance Day), Frank and Fleurette, with six members of the original Dykman family, a handful of Warnsveld dignitaries (Leesten was part of that towns' municipality in 1945) and local friends from the area, about 40 of us, started walking in a silent vigil for Aimé. We began at the farm Het Hekkeler, where "C" Company of the Glens (SD&G Highlanders) had jumped from their trucks long before dawn on April 4, 1945. They had probably been able to get some sleep in the farms nearby, till they were ordered to advance

northward late in the morning. At the farm Het Loo they came under small arms fire. After a supportive artillery barrage they attacked. Aimé, was soon hit by a bullet and died about 100 yards north of Het Loo.

At Het Loo I explained to the group how the battle had gone. Walking along after that we could see a white cross from some distance, about four feet high. It had been placed for this occasion on the spot where Aimé died 49 years before. Friends from the nearby psychiatric hospital "Het Groot Graffel" had taken care of that. All quiet conversation stopped as we arrived. Frank and Fleurette took flowers they had brought and put them on the cross. I read Psalm 23, then we fell silent for a full minute. Frank struggled with his emotions as he attempted to thank all those who had come to honour his brother and the two comrades killed so long ago. It was a deeply meaningful afternoon for every one of us.

A few days later Frank and I visited with the mayor of Warnsveld, A.M.E. van Vugt-Toonen. We had a specific proposal for her. We suggested that a small plaque or monument be placed at the edge of the hospital grounds, near the teacherage, for the commemoration of the three Glens killed and the brave act of Dr. P. van Bork, superintendent of "Het Groot Graffel," on April 4, 1945. The mayor was new to Warnsveld, but Frank's story about his brother impressed her and she thought it was an excellent idea. She promised she would raise it with other dignitaries and with the hospital.

Back in Guelph two months later I received a letter from Warnsveld. Mr. W. W. Hopperus Buma, the ex-mayor of the town, wrote that he had been asked by mayor van Vugt to chair a committee of five persons for erecting a monument for the commemoration of Dr. van Bork's bravery and



Lloyd Crate and Mayor van Vugt laying a wreath at the Warnsveld Monument.

(Photos by Veldhuis, Warnsveld)

to honour all the Allied soldiers killed in battle for the liberation of the municipality of Warnsveld. It was hoped that this monument would be unveiled in May of 1995, at the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe and in the presence of many Canadian veterans and relatives of those who died. "How many Canadians died here in 1945?" Mr. Buma asked in the letter, "about 20?" I answered him he had better count on at least 25. We started looking for books and documents. By February 1995 we had found 33 Canadian soldiers and one Englishmen from six regiments killed in or very near the municipality from April 2 to April 6, 1945. There were that many! At the end of October 1994 I wrote a letter to a Belleville, Ontario daily newspaper, asking the editor to publish a little note with my name, address and telephone number, asking relatives or friends of private Norman Hannan to contact me. I was pretty sure by then that Norman Hannan, who had lived in Belleville for some time and was married there, was the third soldier killed near my home on April 4, 1945. The newspaper kindly obliged and I received a couple of letters from relatives and friends, with interesting information. One person enclosed a nice photograph of young Norman.

In January 1995 I received a letter from Mrs. Marjorie Kleinsteuber of Horseheads, NY, USA. She had been very surprised to read a newspaper clipping with my note about her former husband Norman Hannan, given to her by her sister-in-

law. I phoned her right away and within two weeks it was all arranged. Marjorie and her present husband Ron would come to the unveiling of the monument. They would receive some financial help for this trip from Warnsveld.

In that town the monument committee did an excellent publicity job under the leadership of Mr. Henk Mulder, and as the village got excited about the coming visit of the Canadian veterans the citizens opened their purses. F 20,000 (guilders) was collected from private donors, F10,000 was given by industry and institutions. When the monument was ready for the unveiling, it was practically paid for! And what a beautiful structure it turned out to be, made from hand shaped bricks by the local "Dijkman" (!) construction firm, carrying three brass plates with the 34 names engraved.

May 1st, 1995 was the big day. At 7 pm five busses had appeared with 250 veterans, spouses and friends. Many dignitaries had arrived. Over 1,000 local people came as well, from Leesten, Warnsveld and Zutphen and points beyond, far more than had been expected. From Apeldoorn came the 48th Highlanders of Holland, a Dutch pipeband modelled after the band of the 48th Highlanders of Canada. The sound system functioned very well as Mayor van Vugt made a fine speech and bid everybody welcome. Veteran Gene Mitton of the Glens, from Oshawa, and Dr. J.J. van Bork, the son of the former



Dignitaries at the unveiling of the Monument.

superintendent of "Het Groot Graffel" together unveiled the monument. Next I had the privilege of reading the names of the fallen men. Then the last post sounded and the large crowd fell silent to honour those who died 50 years before. Only the singing of the spring birds could be heard. After one minute the reveille sounded, then the two national anthems were sung. In the crowd behind me I could hear a Canadian veteran singing the Dutch national anthem with the other folk without missing a word. I was deeply moved by that.

The first wreath was laid by Mayor van Vugt and Lloyd Crate, the first Glen to enter the teacherage in 1945. The next speaker was Dr. van Bork who talked about his father's memories of the liberation. Gene Mitton spoke on behalf of all veterans to thank the town for this wonderful commemorative gesture.

Now more wreaths were laid, the first one by Frank Periard and Marjorie Kleinsteuber on behalf of all relatives of the fallen soldiers. The mayor of Zutphen laid a wreath and so did two members of the Highland Light Infantry of Canada and three of the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment. After the veterans came a long row of local people, all with flowers in their hands.

As the crowd began to disperse after the ceremony retired Major Reginald Dixon from the SD&G Highlanders shook my hand warmly. "I am very impressed with this monument, Henk" he said. "It's a wonderful thing Warnsveld did for our fallen friends". "Thank you" I said. I could say no more. If I had not been so choked up, I



Marjorie Kleinsteuber lays a wreath for her first husband, Norman Hannon.

would have told him that, second only to my wedding, this had been the best event in my life.

Eighty veterans and their spouses, of a variety of regiments, were billeted in Warnsveld for ten days in May, under the auspices of the local branch of the "Welcome Again Veterans" Organisation. These Canadian folk had a wonderful time. At the end of their stay the town held a grand farewell party for them. At that occasion Jackie and Irv Ryckman from Barrie, Ontario handed out a letter to all veterans and their hosts. They had been so impressed with the new Warnsveld monument that they proposed that the veterans and their friends in Canada should make a return gesture. As there was as yet no opportunity for people to sit down near the monument for quiet contemplation, they thought a wooden bench should be built in Canada and placed near the monument.

Back in Canada I received a letter from Irv dated August 29, 1995. Irv wrote, "At the moment we are considering bench designs and selecting wood to be used. A carver is working on a motif which we think will be appropriate. A plaque with wording in Dutch and English is being prepared. This plaque will explain the origin and purpose of the bench. Transportation to Holland has been arranged at no cost. The memorial bench should be in place in Holland in November 1995. Any remaining funds will be used for some trees and shrubs to be planted at the site."

What a wonderful way for the veterans to respond to that Warnsveld gesture of gratitude to those 34 who fell for the freedom of that town in April 1945, 17 of them in Leesten.