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Kurt Loeb

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"The Boys of Summer"

A Personal Account of the Canadian Berlin Battalion, June-July 1945

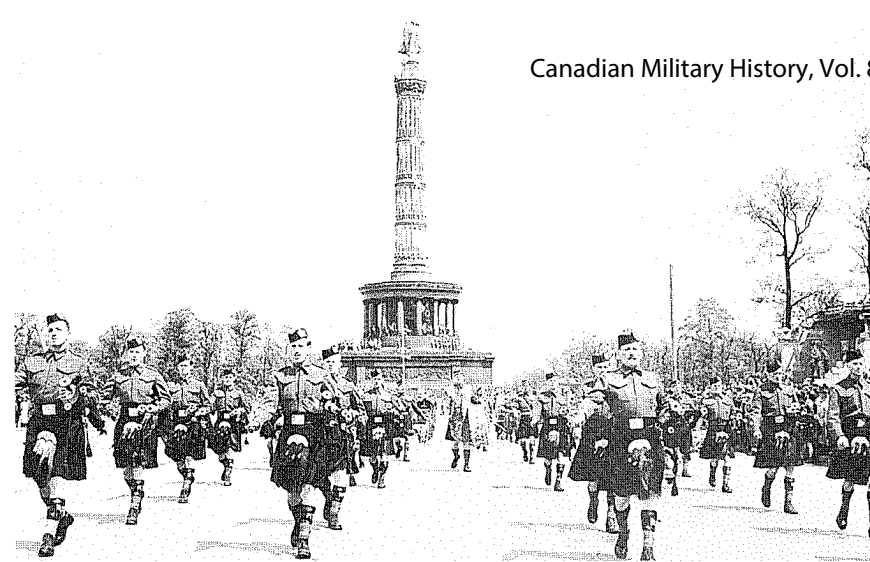
Kurt Loeb

At the end of June 1945, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders of Canada underwent a strange metamorphosis. We became, temporarily, the Canadian Berlin Battalion, to represent Canada at the impending Potsdam Conference, convened to celebrate the Allied victory. Canadians are obsessed with a sense of fairness which must, at all times, be all-inclusive. In the 1990s this has become somewhat paranoiac, but it showed itself at the middle of the century. To complement our strength, we had additional companies supplied to us from Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal and the Loyal Edmonton Regiment. Thus we represented Canada, if not from coast to coast, at least from the Gaspé to the Rocky Mountains.

The months preceding Potsdam offer some crowded pages in the history books. For us the end of the war did not wind down or peter out, as wars are supposed to do. In late February and early March we were engaged in the Battle of the Hochwald, part of the Siegfried Line of fortifications the Nazis had erected against the French in the 1930s, hardly expecting that Canadian forces would be engaged there. It is unlikely that many German soldiers could have located Canada on a world map. Casualties at the Hochwald were heavy, at a time when the outcome of the war was no longer in doubt. Six weeks later, 14 April, our Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Frederick Ernest Wigle, was killed in action at Friesoythe. It was a traumatic event, occurring just two days after the death of the American President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. We live in an iconoclastic age, and if the late President is no longer regarded as a demigod, he was nonetheless one of the architects of the Allied victory being celebrated.

We had returned to Holland when word reached us about our new assignment, which we rightly considered a singular honour. Many Argylls were entitled to leave in the UK, but some, including myself, thought it more exciting to view history in the making. We declined to take furlough and took a chance on sightseeing, souvenirs and an opportunity gloat at the shattered remains of the capital of the Thousand Year Reich, which fell 988 years short of its designated life. In mathematical terms, the British and American forces were each represented by a division, and Canada, on a proportional basis, was given a battalion-size contingent. The Russians, who occupied the entire eastern portion of Berlin, had more troops, of course – but then they had conquered the city, suffering terrible casualties.

There is something wonderfully revealing in the names of the two divisions cited. The British troops were members of Field Marshal Montgomery's 7th Armoured Division, the "Desert Rats," who had fought Rommel, and had thereby laid the foundation, quite unwittingly, for a vast array of Hollywood films. The Americans featured General George Patton's "Hell on Wheels" Division, famous both for the general's personal conduct and their easy crossing of the Rhine at Remagen. The latter was facilitated by the strange forgetfulness of its German defenders, who neglected to blow up the bridge. Of course, in the long run, an extra delay of a few days would not have mattered. Perhaps we can read too much into these sobriquets, but it should be mentioned that the British term was clearly self-deprecating, almost tongue-in-cheek, whereas the American one reflected an extremely boastful attitude. But,



▲ Photo by Bdr. Foote, NAC PA 130018 ▼ Photo by M.M. Dean, NAC PA 160945



Above left: The Pipes & Drums of the the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders on parade in Berlin, 20 July 1945.

Photo by M.M. Dean, NAC PA 160956

Above right: The Canadian Berlin Battalion included representatives from three regiments. Pictured in front the battalion HQ are (l. to r.): Fusilier Desfossés, Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal; Pte. Bob Jane, Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders; and Pte. Max DeForest, Loyal Edmonton Regiment.

Left: The Canadian Berlin Battalion being reviewed on the occasion of the raising of the Union Jack over the heart of Berlin, 6 July 1945.



psychological analysis lies beyond the scope of this report.

This is a brief background account to the conference to be held. Our role was purely symbolic, we had no specific military duties, and there were no incidents of German resistance or suicide missions. Troops evacuated by our Medical Officer generally suffered, not from shrapnel, but from VD. It seems that non-fraternization regulations were not rigidly enforced. I will touch, very briefly, on some of the events and observations that stick in my mind after well over half a century, and describe just two in a little more detail, for they reveal a slight shift in attitudes after the horrors of war.

I recall, on the way to Berlin, spending a night in Hannover and hearing the still-shocked inhabitants relate how their city, relatively untouched through six years of war, was totally devastated in a 24-hour period of day and night

bombing. In Hannover we also met some American troops [not Berlin-bound], who, in a friendly gesture gave us some Coca-Cola and some doughnuts from one of their doughnut-making machines! The latter was as surprising as the German armour-piercing 88s had been.

I remember crossing the first Russian checkpoint, set up on the Autobahn west of Berlin. This was before the invention of the Cold War, and our crossing was pleasant and friendly. RSM Pete McGinlay and I preceded the Regiment into Berlin, to arrange accommodation in an erstwhile old Folks' Home, quite undamaged. [An historical footnote: In our countries, the west end of any city is the "good" part of town, where the elegant homes stand, for the prevailing winds carry the unpleasant industrial and sewage stench eastward to the tenements of the poor]. Thus our sector, in the extreme southwest corner of the city, was in "relatively" good condition.

The troops that had captured the city were moved eastward, by the Russian command, to fight against Japan in the continuation of the war. In the end, with the dropping of two atomic bombs, their services were not required, and many western experts today claim that the very deployment of these troops expedited the dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki – the Americans were very anxious not to have the Russians participate in the war against Japan. [As I said above, the Cold War had not yet commenced]!. The dramatic end to the Japanese conflict did solve a dilemma for many of us: whether or not to enlist for service in the east and the Pacific War. That term, Pacific War, must be the most sardonic oxymoron in the language.

The troops who moved out of 'our' building to accommodate us were Mongolians, and that presented a minor problem. Many of them were not used to modern facilities, and each room in the improvised barracks featured human excrement in the corners.

Power does corrupt, for I also recall the satisfaction with which I entered each remaining apartment building in our sector and told every woman to report, with brush and pail, to the building in question. They did a splendid job cleaning up.

Berlin was smashed to an astonishing degree. It was the largest damaged European city we had seen. Amsterdam and Brussels had not been defended, nor was Paris, though we could not enter the latter. [There was a definite chain of command, or perhaps etiquette, and the fleshpots of Paris were for Americans only]. London had been damaged severely from the air and both Hamburg and Dresden had been similarly razed, but only Berlin had seen street-to-street and indeed house-to-house fighting. There had been no major metropolitan communities in the areas we had captured in France, Belgium and Holland – but Berlin had a pre-war population of over 4 million and stood as a reminder of man's overweening hubris and stupidity.

"Little Joes" of the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders pose in front of a huge portrait of "Big Joe" - Joseph Stalin in Berlin near the Brandenburg Gate. Left to right are: Ptes. G. Backer and W. Weiler, Sgt. C. Elliot and Pte. B. Barnes. 20 July 1945.

I recall that damage sometimes produced strange sights. The subways were running, and where an errant bomb had crashed through the pavement and into the tubes, the train would stop, passengers would exit to the street above, walk around the obstruction and again descend to the lower level and another train. As an aside, we did not pay. [They probably would have accepted one or two cigarettes, the then Berlin system of barter and exchange].

I recall, with less satisfaction, the sight of very young children trying to salvage some of the M & V stew, flung from our messstins, and with a good deal of satisfaction, visiting the shell of the burnt out Reichstag. Russian soldiers, standing on tables piled three and four high, were writing their own and their comrades' names in white chalk on the building's walls. When we entered, they greeted us enthusiastically, exchanged cigarettes, copied our names from our identification bracelets and added them to the growing lists. I suspect they are no longer visible.

The cessation of hostilities and the overseas vote all played a role in the British election of 1945, when the wartime Conservative/Labour [Churchill/Attlee] coalition was dissolved. The

Photo by M.M. Dean, NAC PA 160958



Letter, Corporal Kurt Loeb to his mother, 15 July 1945

Received a birthday letter...this morning which reminded me of the fact that today IS my birthday. Well, things like that don't seem to be of particular importance anymore, and the thought that this is my second birthday overseas doesn't make me particularly happy either...

When I sent my last letter to you I hadn't seen much of the city of Berlin as yet, a state of affairs which has been corrected since then....the centre of Berlin is absolutely kaput, finished, gone once and for all. All that remains is the Siegessaule, pathetically overlooking gutted and bombed buildings as well as the remains of the Tiergarten, and the Brandenburger Tor, which is somewhat worse for wear. Everything else - theatres, cafes, museums, schools, chateaux and government buildings - are reduced to rubble. In the Reichstag - a horrible mess - we met a Russian colonel, who was writing his name on the wall with a piece of chalk. That seems to be a favourite Russian past-time, every inch of space is covered that way....

The Reichskanzlei was the spot where we got some delightful souvenirs - despite the fact that the building is so badly torn apart that what few walls and floors are left will have to be torn down. Found dozens of German medals, which I sent home already. My prize souvenir catch was discovered in an office where I noticed two volumes of correspondence with the edges partially burnt. Evidently the owner had unsuccessfully tried to do away with them. My curiosity aroused, I looked at them and discovered them to be two files of correspondence of Reichminister Dr. Meissner, Sec'y of the Interior. They were dated 1939 and 1941. They contained letters from big shots such as the Nazi ambassador to Moscow - Graf von Schulenberg and from Field SS leaders, from various favours done and
j a i l .



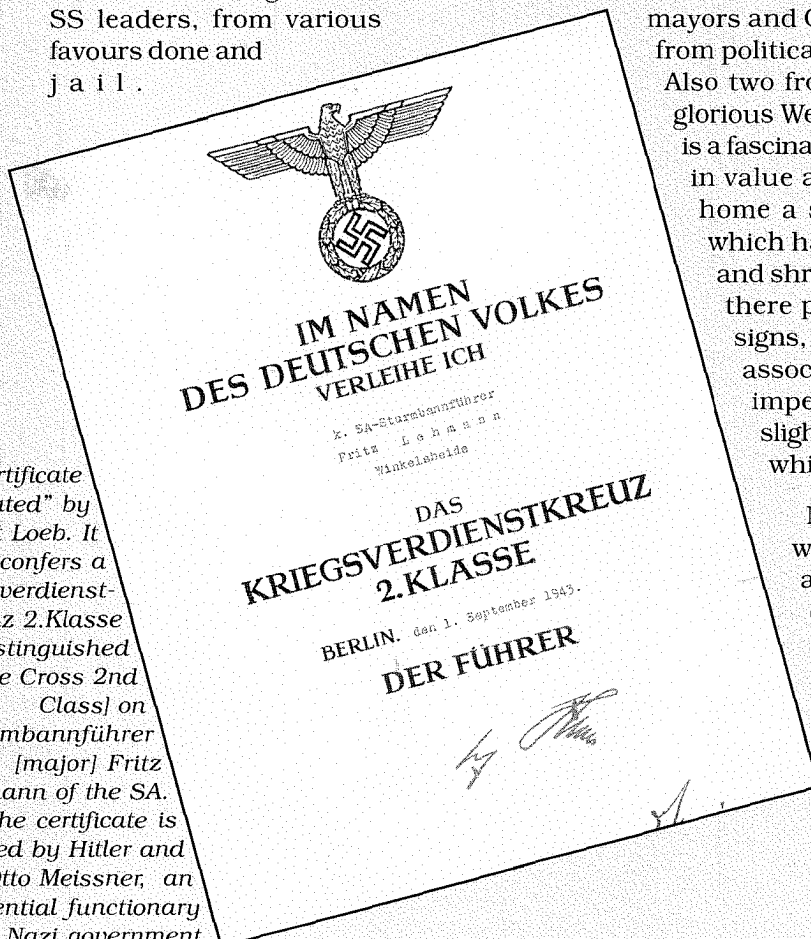
Kurt Loeb and his wife Zee in New York, 9 February 1946.

Also two from half-Jews who wanted to join the glorious Wehrmacht!!! The sons of bitches. It truly is a fascinating document, one that should increase in value and interest as time passes. Also sent home a street-sign from "Unter den Linden," which has been damaged by some bullet holes and shrapnel holes. Very rare souvenir, I guess, there probably aren't more than 10 of these signs, representing the street that was always associated with German militarism and Nazi imperialism. As you can see we are all slightly souvenir-mad, but that's half the fun while staying in Berlin....

My remaining plans for tonight are to write to Zelda [his wife] and then to find a gas-heater some place, make some hot chocolate and get the hell into bed. I hate to think of sleeping only a few hours, especially since I have such a delightfully soft mattress. Well, even that is better than sleeping a few hours on the floor.

Until next week, everyone.

Kurt

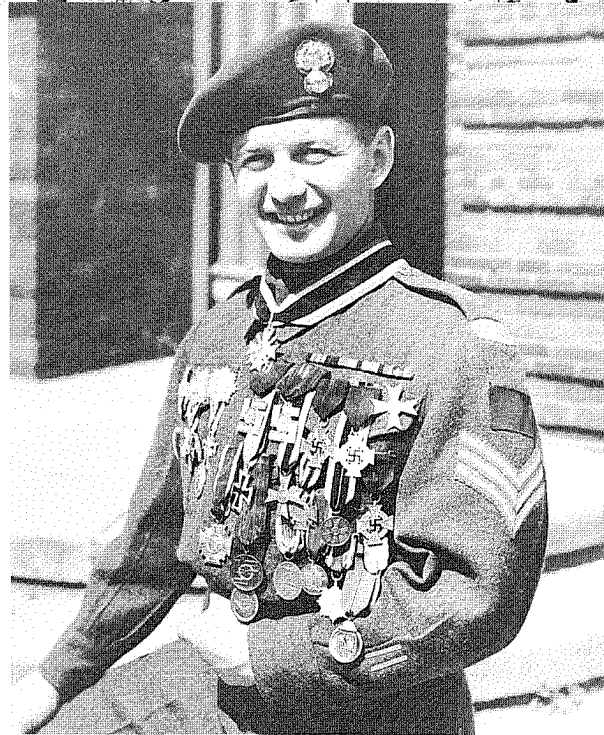


A certificate "liberated" by Kurt Loeb. It confers a Kriegsverdienstkreuz 2.Klasse [Distinguished Service Cross 2nd Class] on Sturmabführer [major] Fritz Lehmann of the SA. The certificate is signed by Hitler and Otto Meissner, an influential functionary in the Nazi government.



Above: The destruction in the centre of Berlin is readily apparent in this photo taken at Potsdam Palace, 9 July 1945. The rubble in the streets has been cleaned up, but only the gutted shells of buildings remain.

Right: Sgt. G. Durocher displaying 29 Nazi medals he "liberated" during his time in Berlin.



election had been held on 5 July, the votes not to be counted until 26 July, by which time the military overseas votes would be in. The Potsdam Conference was held from 17 July to 2 August, and thus when the festivities commenced, the election results would not be known for another nine days. Parliament had been dissolved, necessitating the attendance of both party leaders, Churchill and Attlee, at the conference. The winner, after 26 July, would remain at Potsdam as Prime Minister and head the British delegation, and the loser would return to London as leader of the opposition. Parliamentary government, when handled in a proper fashion, is both efficient and dignified.

Prussian Emperor Frederick the Great had built Château Sans Souci, where the meetings were to be held, and had given it its French name [translated as "carefree"], since he much preferred the language of his friend and mentor Voltaire to his own native German. A Canadian

angle may be added here, for when the British Empire vanquished the French one in both India and North America during the Seven Years' War, [Plains of Abraham] Frederick the Great's Prussia was allied with England. History does not repeat, but it does have some interesting angles.



The Pipe Band of the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders of Canada marching past the reviewing stand during the Victory Parade, 21 July 1945. Visible on the stand are, among others, Winston Churchill (taking salute) and B.L. Montgomery (with white belt).

*Photo by
M.M.Dean,
NAC PA
163630*

Some temporary bleachers had been built and the Canadians sat with the Desert Rats to observe the arrival of the world's VIPs. President Truman was there, FDR having passed away three months earlier. Dwight Eisenhower was present, his future presidency not yet anticipated. Also on the scene were Joseph Stalin and Marshal Zhukov and every field marshal and 5-star general of the Allied war effort. "Historic" does not seem an overblown adjective for the occasion.

Then the British delegation arrived, each huge, black limousine carrying but one delegate. The first car carried Prime Minister Winston Churchill, wearing his trade mark "siren suit," and featuring a homburg, cigar and traditional "V" salute. When he emerged and walked slowly toward the main entrance, there was complete and utter silence around us. The Desert Rats were respectfully silent, not a boo or whistle to be heard – and no applause! I was astounded. While we were in action, we knew but little of British politics though the election campaign had featured Churchill's strong attacks on Attlee's proposed "welfare state," a term not yet in use. Not more than 20 seconds passed and another

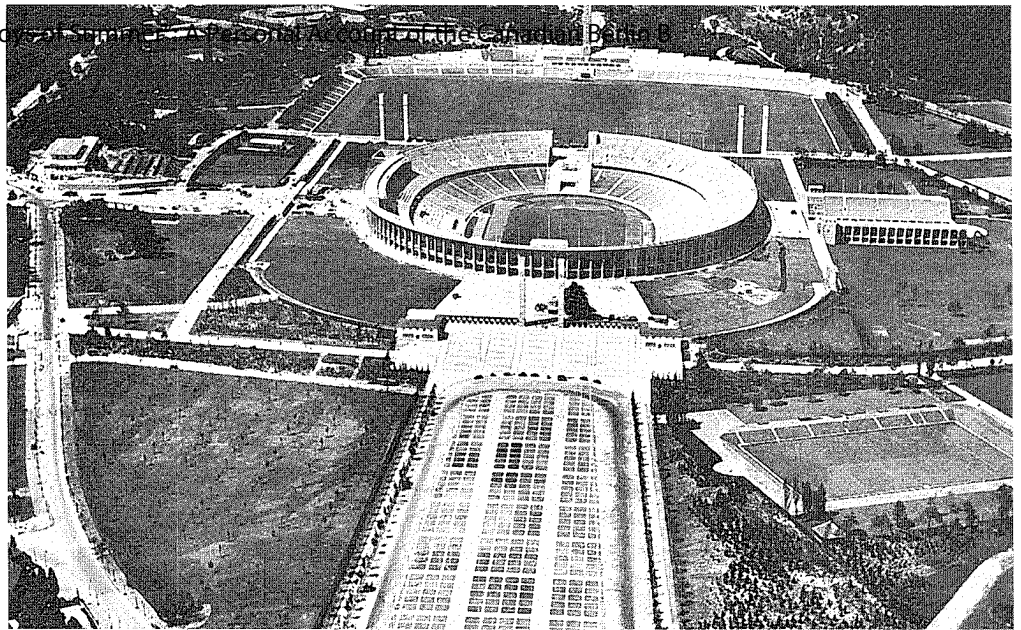
limousine drew up and discharged its passenger, Clement Attlee. He seemed surprisingly small, wearing a suit that was much too tight for him. He waved, almost hesitantly and walked briskly away – overwhelmed by the screaming, cheering ovation from the troops about us.

We needed no public opinion poll to tell us how the troops had voted, and likely the rest of the population as well. When the results were announced, as scheduled, the Desert Rats had been exactly on target. The Labour Party emerged with a majority, 8 percent or 2 million votes ahead of the Conservatives. The military voter, from wherever British troops were serving, showed an even higher percentage for Labour. It was evident that the soldiers liked Churchill, appreciated his unifying work during the war, but knew, instinctively, that this was not the man to lead them into the future. It was Attlee who remained as Prime Minister for the remaining days of the conference, and a deeply disappointed Churchill returned to London. The Canadian experience was quite different. The soldiers detested Prime Minister Mackenzie King, his prissy walk and manner of speaking and his evident discomfort at being in the company of such vulgarities. But,

Right: Two postcards brought back from Berlin by Kurt Loeb. The top one shows the Reichssportfeld (Olympic Stadium) in 1936 prior to the Berlin Olympics. The baseball game between the Canadians and Americans was played right inside the stadium. The lower postcard shows Adolf Hitler and his delegation entering the stadium during a rehearsal of the opening ceremonies for the 1936 Olympics.

and this is a big but, the country and the troops gave King's Liberals a resounding victory in our post-war election, which had been held on 11 June.

The second Berlin episode to be described, was neither political nor military, but perhaps it suggested that we were entering a new era. The Olympic Games of 1936 are well remembered, they were to be a showpiece of the new Germany. The Nazi regime had gone to great lengths to impress the world, building several facilities to house the Olympic events and athletes. Like everything else the Nazis did, it was all in bad taste and vaguely threatening. The main stadium was in fine shape, despite the few craters left by errant bombs. It had not been in use during the war years and the matted grass, weeds and corn flowers stood fully 18" high. This was the arena Hitler attended every day during the games and where he received, in a wonderful way, his comeuppance. The star of the entire 1936 Olympic Games had been Jesse Owens, a magnificent American black athlete who captured three personal gold medals, plus a fourth in a relay event. Hitler, who had made it a point to congratulate gold medal winners, purposely snubbed and ignored Jesse Owens, which, in the world's eyes, said a good deal more about the German leader than about the American athlete. In the story of the Olympic Games, 1936 still plays a pivotal role.



In our first few days in Berlin, before the arrival of the VIPs, we had received an invitation from the Hell on Wheels Division to play a friendly baseball game. We accepted, and I was sent, for I spoke some German, to arrange the game at the Olympic facility. As an aside, it should be mentioned that baseball, in the 1940s, did not enjoy as high a profile in Canada, as it does today. There were no major league clubs, though in the post-war years, major stars emerged in the Canadian Triple A teams – Jackie Robinson in Montreal being the most noteworthy. It must also be mentioned that it is awkward playing baseball in army issue boots. Sliding into second base is well nigh impossible. American troops, with perhaps a smidgen more transport per capita, did have better sports equipment, as well as doughnuts and Coca-Cola.

Accompanied by a couple of buddies, I entered, unannounced, the office of the Olympic stadium, which held a staff of two. A female secretary was silent throughout our discussion, and the manager was an elderly, military type, equipped with a heavy cane, perhaps harking back to a First World War injury. He stood rigidly at attention which seemed proper, for I was, after all, a Canadian NCO. I told him he was to have the field mowed, or scythed, within a couple of days, with particular attention to the diamond-shaped infield, with 90-foot sides, because we were going to play a baseball game against the American division currently in Berlin.

A curious thing happened. His face assumed a look of sheer delight, perhaps mixed with a bit of nostalgia. Oh, he exclaimed, this will be the second baseball game ever played in Berlin. During the 1936 Olympics, the New York Yankees, then as now the envy of the sports world, had played a few exhibition or intra-squad games on the same field. The era of Babe Ruth had ended, he had been traded to the Boston Braves two years before. Lou Gehrig was in his prime, indeed he won another MVP award in 1936, though I do not know how the league handled the scheduling of games during the Yankees' two-week absence. Joe di Maggio was, I believe, early in his career with the team. The manager's wistful expression told me that, in his eyes, our request represented something of a return to the halcyon days of 1936. I did not bother to disabuse him of this illusion, but I believe we both knew that those days would never return.

Nine years had passed between the two games, years that remain etched in the mind of mankind as pivotal ones between good and evil. Certain names, dates and events, chosen at random, still resonate, even among those not born when they came to public attention: Anschluss, Battle of Britain, 1 September 1939, Dunkirk, Blitzkrieg, Anne Frank, Stalingrad, Himmler, Auschwitz, Rommel, 22 June 1941, Montgomery, D-Day, Appeasement, Dresden,

Dieppe, Unconditional Surrender. The list goes on apace, it is neither complete nor chronological, but no definitions are required, they have entered the language. The Nazi era and the Second World War had left a mark.

The baseball game was, of course, an anticlimax. The field had been mowed and scythed as demanded and was in reasonably good shape. I have no idea how our stadium manager had found the requisite labour, for there were no able-bodied German men in Berlin, but a good many able-bodied women. I do not remember the actual score, but the Americans won by a wide margin. It had all been in fun, for the Vince Lombardi dictum "winning is everything" applied to the war, not to a ball game. On reflection, the game had served its purpose. After a year of fighting and accepting the indignities of war, the participants had undergone another transformation, as the fighters of the Hochwald became "the boys of summer."

I travelled a good deal in Europe in the decades after the war, but I never returned to Berlin.

This article was originally published in small installments in "Albainn," a monthly newsletter of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. The letter from Kurt Loeb to his mother first appeared in *Black Yesterdays: The Argyll's War* by Robert L. Fraser (Hamilton, Ontario: Argyll Regimental Foundation, 1996).

Kurt Loeb was born in Germany in 1922 and immigrated to Canada in 1937 because "the Nazis didn't like my family." He personally petitioned the Minister of National Defence, J.L. Ralston, to overturn his "enemy alien" status and allow him to enlist in the Canadian army. This was granted and he soon found himself in action with the Argylls. Following the war he completed his Ph.D and is currently awaiting publication of "The Globe and Loeb," (Lugus Publications) a collection of letters sent by him to the *Globe and Mail* over a 40-year span.