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# Pilgrimage to Holland

## George Blackburn

*May 2005 marked the 60th Anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Europe. A large number of Canadian veterans travelled to Holland to mark the occasion, remember the good times and honour their comrades who never made it home. Among the many returning veterans was George Blackburn who served as a FOO (forward observation officer) with 4th Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery throughout the course of the campaign in Northwest Europe. Blackburn has written an award-winning trilogy about his wartime experiences, The Guns of Normandy (1995), The Guns of Victory (1996) and Where the Hell are the Guns? (1997). The following article is excerpted from a letter sent to Terry Copp in June 2005.*

This was a memorable, emotional pilgrimage! Abiding impressions of my pilgrimage (before and during) are so numerous and, in most instances, so blurred by emotion, they are only now, after almost three weeks, coming into focus, and reappearing as significant, memorable events.

To my astonishment, the whole press corps turned up for the Groesbeek Mill ceremony and, though it is hard to believe, the Groesbeek people (without knowing this would occur) organized such a very impressive ceremony. I'll never forget the large crowd, almost filling the square (that was open space back in 1944-45 and had to be crossed with caution because of periodic shelling and mortaring). Two scarlet-coated RCMP constables flanked the plaques. The bugler high up on the balcony skirt, around the lower part of the Mill, sounded the Last Post. Lieutenant-General Charles Belzile, the chief of the Canadian official delegation placed a wreath beneath the brass plaques that the old wartime mill owner and I – hand in hand – had unveiled by removing a faded wartime (1944) Canada Christmas mailbag found somewhere. The beautiful concert-choir singing the Dutch and Canadian anthems. Padre Thuring (chairman of the Groesbeek Committee) who had, just the day before, been decorated with Holland's highest honour, by his Queen) breaking down and sobbing. The 24 stalwart young Canadian paratroopers providing a smart honour guard – their presence putting the seal and approval of Canada on the modest, but

significant, memorial. I was asked to speak for 10 minutes – a truly great honour, I thought, following the mayor. The ceremony lasted less than an hour, but was very impressive, followed by a huge sit-down lunch for veterans and guests in a grand hall in Groesbeek.

Little Groesbeek will, I hope, benefit from additional Canadian visitors over the years. The area, which was the "Nijmegen Salient," is now the most tourist-oriented region of Holland, possessing hills of remarkable height – one of which I'd used in the snows of 1944-45, but which I hadn't time to revisit this time.

As we made our way here and there, Mel Squizzato (who'd served with me as my signaller all the way through the Rhineland, and across the Rhine to the Twente Canal) and I shared many memories. We visited the pigpen on the Goch-Calcar road, and I found the spot further on (though the topography of the house and its outbuildings had changed) where I'd broken up in a hole by myself. By choice, I visited this spot alone.

At the Twente Canal house (currently being renovated back to its summer hotel status of 1945, by a young couple) a Canadian tour bus had arranged to meet me, after a moving ceremony at Holten cemetery. They asked me to give them a rundown of what happened (as described in my chapter "Overrun") using the actual landscape. I was just getting into the story



Photos by Christopher Evans



**Top left:** George Blackburn speaking at the Groesbeek Mill ceremony.

**Left and Above:** The windmill at Groesbeek that served as Blackburn's observation post in 1945.

(standing with Mel, on a low patio, just against the base of the tower we'd been shot out of on 4 April 1945) when around the corner of the house appeared an older woman who cried out, "Do you remember me?" Well, the crowd roared with laughter as I stared at her in astonishment, wondering, "Is it possible she was the woman, who in the morning, suggested I take what I wanted from the wine cellar?" On going down to peer closely at her face, I asked – "Should I know you?" She replied, "I was the one-year-old baby crying in the basement with my mother that night." She'd driven all the way from the Hague area to have tea with me.

We were treated as VIPs at the Westerbork Concentration Camp Memorial centre, and had tea in the Railway Station in Groningen when we traveled north via Kampen where I wanted to see briefly Aafke Kok, widow of the couple with whom I billeted after the war, all summer.

My friends Peter Peart and Michael Paré, who insisted on flying over with me and looking after me (as driver and navigator) were unbelievably caring and helpful. But on the day of the 2 ½ hour parade of veterans and vehicles (300 Second World War vehicles) in Apeldoorn, that brought out 300,000 or more Dutch people along the route, Mel Squissato and I chose to walk the whole way. For much of the way it poured rain, and once hailed heavily, but no one left, but cheered even harder. Each time I caught Mel's eyes he was crying, and that would set me off. Once a tiny baby was held up to me by her mother, waving her little hand. When I kissed the tiny fist, her mother burst into tears. It's one thing to watch it on TV – it's quite another to walk slowly between long lines of cheering, clapping men, women and children. Near the end, we were each handed a glass of beer – even as it teemed rain at that moment!

Arriving an hour early at least, at the Holten Cemetery, there was time to get to know people (vets and their spouses sitting around and about), and once it became known the author of the *Guns* books was there, until the ceremony began, people came in droves to shake my hand and thank me for "telling it like it was!" It was

so wonderful! Then the ceremony was simply splendid, capped off with thousands of red paper poppies showering from a helicopter hovering in the sky, as little children deposited a tulip-bloom on each and every grave, and a band reverently played, from some far off spot, "Oh God our help in ages past..."

Can you imagine the feelings of Mel Squizzato (see pages 411-427, *Guns of Victory*) and me, as we climbed the winding stairs in the tower of the Twente Canal house (now being renovated

back to its summer-hotel condition of 1945 by a young couple who had us all for tea on 4 May) and looked out towards the copse where,

**Below left:** Veterans, dignitaries, Dutch and Canadian citizens gather at the Holten Canadian War Cemetery for a Ceremony of Remembrance on 4 May 2005. More than 5,000 people attended the event, among the dignitaries was General Ray Henault, Chief of NATO Military Committee (front row, third from left).

**Below right:** Dutch school children place fresh flowers on the graves of fallen Canadian soldiers at the Ceremony of Remembrance at the Holten Canadian War Cemetery.

**Bottom:** A Dutch military helicopter drops poppies on the people gathered at the Holten Canadian War Cemetery.



CF Photo IS2005-8021[1]



Photos by Warrant Officer Peter Veldhuizen, Canadian Forces Combat Camera



CF Photo IS2005-8034[2]

CF Photo IS2005-8073[1]



**Above:** Canadian Veteran, Sam Wormington, from Kamloops, BC, waves to Dutch citizens during the Veterans Parade in Apeldoorn.

**Below and right:** Canadian Veterans are thanked by Dutch citizens for liberating their country during the Second World War. The streets of Apeldoorn, the Netherlands, were filled with thousands of people for the Veterans Parade on 4 May 2005, to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Netherlands by the Canadians and the end of the Second World War.

Photos by Warrant Officer Peter Veldhuizen,  
Canadian Forces Combat Camera



CF Photo IS2005-8058[1]

CF Photo IS2005-8071[1]



on 4 April 1945, stood the tank that swung its gun around and got off at least two rounds (fortunately solid-shot) beneath our feet before we could skitter down the winding staircase? The fact that I came within a split second of shooting him in the face in the dark at the entrance to the cellarway (still there) overwhelmed me at one point of this memorable visit. I know I wasn't acting or speaking rationally for much of the time. The young couple who have purchased the house (that had been used for years – at least since 1969 when Grace and I visited it with the police chief of Zutphen – as a halfway house for juvenile delinquents) are restoring it to its summer-hotel condition of 1945 (before our shells smashed its front doorway side very badly), served a gracious tea party for us all in their current living quarters. Though of short duration, it was truly unforgettable in all respects. I was so uptight, though, I scarcely recall where Peter Peart and Michael Paré were during the visit. Dear Mel and I hugged at the top landing of the stairway as we remembered. What a man he was, and will always be, in my eyes. I could never forget his gallantry, insisting on coming out of safe hiding to share the chances of that night with me – during which a piece of shell fragment sliced across the back of his neck as he lay on the rubble of brick, glass and plaster shards on the floor beside the radio.

Not the least of these astonishing moments was the one involving Andy Turner (see especially my notes re: Andy, pages 363-467) at the huge Groesbeek Cemetery assembly building just before the start of the great ceremony, involving thousands. The public address system called “Gnr Andrew Turner, please report to the contact table” (at the head of the great hall jammed with milling people). When he got there, he was left speechless – there stood his two sisters who had not spoken to him for 60 years, ever since their brother Frank was killed in this area. (Andy later explained, as best he could, the problem was they believe he should have been with brother Frank, instead of being away in Antwerp on illicit leave, when Frank was wounded. The fact that Frank, serving with the infantry, was wounded at a water-surrounded outpost, from which he couldn't be evacuated until after darkness came, allowing him to die after getting to the Casualty Clearing Station, never occurred to the sisters, who were also poorly served by bitter anti-Semitism aroused by Andy, post-war, marrying Peggy, a Jew.) Anyway, here they were hugging Andy and

then me and Mel, bubbling with happiness. Andy, there and then (and forever more, I think) attributed this family reunion-of-forgiveness to brother Frank lying out there in the cemetery. As he said, Frank finally decided: “Enough is enough!” Andy remained in an emotionally-high state, long after the sisters pulled out for Amsterdam and their flight to Hungary, their original homeland – a visit decided on after deciding to fly from Canada for this meeting with brothers alive and dead.

When, in the long history of journalism, did a speaker at any event ever become the recipient of an expensively-boxed (with two brandy glasses) bottle of liquor (Chivas Regal) from a journalist among the large contingent of journalists assembled for the event? I would venture to say never!

But it did happen to me, moments before I was to make a brief speech and, hand-in-hand with wartime owner, Jan Jochims, then unveil two plaques (one in English and one in Dutch) on the towering windmill in Groesbeek, Holland on 7 May 2005. And it was presented, almost with apologies, by Tom Douglas, accredited journalist for the Sun newspapers of Canada, accompanying the official party of Canadian veterans, anticipating that Jan and I would want to mark the occasion, perhaps after climbing to the historic cupola of the Mill (suggested by the press corps, but declined by the emotionally-overtaxed elderly pair who, five days before, had that five-story climb of steep board stairs and ladders). Following the ceremony, we were required at the sit-down luncheon reception for veterans and guests attending. Thus the grand toast had to wait until the next evening, when the whole of the Groesbeek Committee, that organized the memorable affair, assembled at Kees Hopmans' (the man who flew over to Ottawa last November to ensure the plaques got to Holland safely) to say goodbye to the five Canadians in our party. The first to drink a toast from the glasses of Chivas Regal were Jan and me. And Tom was appropriately remembered in my toast. The committee was not only charmed, but suitably impressed when they learned the origin of the bottle.

As I began this, I end marvelling at the extraordinary dimensions of this pilgrimage, the likes of which I'll never experience again.