

2011

An “Eternal Memorial for Canadian Heroes”: The Dutch Town of Putte Commemorates the Essex Scottish Regiment

Andrew Horrall
ahorrall@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh>

Recommended Citation

Horrall, Andrew "An “Eternal Memorial for Canadian Heroes”: The Dutch Town of Putte Commemorates the Essex Scottish Regiment." Canadian Military History 20, 3 (2011)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

An “Eternal Memorial for Canadian Heroes”

The Dutch Town of Putte Commemorates the Essex Scottish Regiment

Andrew Horrall

C.P. Stacey’s official history, *The Victory Campaign*, records the events of October 1944 at the Belgian-Dutch border town of Putte with this sentence; “on the 5th Putte fell to the Essex Scottish after stiff fighting and our troops crossed the Netherlands frontier.”¹ Equally brief passages in war diaries, contemporary reports, unit histories and memoirs document a short skirmish that has not been, and does not deserve to be, inscribed alongside Vimy, Dieppe and Ortona in the nation’s memory. Nevertheless, a china plate that the mayor of Putte presented to Prime Minister Mackenzie King in 1947 contrasts in striking and significant ways with “national” commemorative activities. These large scale memorials and ceremonies have been extensively studied, while Putte’s modest gesture points to a relatively unexplored period at war’s end when Europeans expressed deep personal thanks directly to their liberators. This aspect of the plate’s meaning and importance has been lost over the intervening years, but like similar objects in Canadian collections, the plate retains the power to greatly enhance our understanding of the Second World War’s impact and immediate aftermath.

The Essex Scottish Regiment mobilized at Windsor, Ontario in

Abstract: Twelve members of the Essex Scottish Regiment were killed at the Belgian-Dutch border town of Putte on 5 October 1944 in one of the Scheldt campaign’s opening engagements. Three years later, as Prime Minister Mackenzie King passed through Putte at the start of his first official visit to the Netherlands, the town presented him with a china plate bearing the names of the men who had died there. Putte’s modest, heartfelt gesture was the first official tribute that Canada’s leader received on Dutch soil, and provides insights into little-explored ways in which the Second World War continues to be commemorated.

September 1939, arrived in England the following summer and lost almost three quarters of its strength during the raid on Dieppe on 19 August 1942. After rebuilding in England, the regiment returned to France in July 1944 and took part in some of the Normandy campaign’s heaviest fighting. The regiment returned to Dieppe on 1 September 1944, by which point only seven veterans of the 1942 raid remained.² Residents poured into the streets, as Canadian troops held a memorial service and march-past, which reflected a growing sense that victory was at hand. Paris had already been freed. Brussels fell on 3 September and

the Germans abandoned Antwerp, Europe’s largest and busiest port on the 4th, convincing many Dutch that their liberation was imminent. On the following morning national flags and orange banners were unfurled throughout Holland; workers stayed home to welcome the Allied troops, and panicked Nazi occupiers prepared to flee. But the Allies stopped at Antwerp, and the premature Dutch national euphoria became known as *Dolle Dinsdag*, or Mad Tuesday.³

Though the Belgian underground had prevented the destruction of Antwerp’s port, the Allies were unable to advance further as the Germans retained control of the Scheldt River, which flows from the city in a broad one-hundred kilometre northwesterly sweep to the North Sea.⁴ The estuary was heavily mined, while much of the reclaimed farmland to the southwest had been purposely flooded. The northeast bank was dominated by the well-defended Walcheren Island. Faced with the formidable challenge of opening the river, British Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery advocated for a swift, war-ending push to the northeast, into Germany’s industrial heartland. This was Operation Market Garden, the airborne assault on the bridges



Library and Archives Canada (LAC) PA 168683



LAC PA 137920

Top: Soldiers of the Essex Scottish Regiment occupy a fort in Antwerp's docks, 30 September 1944.

Above: Dutch girls give an enthusiastic reception to soldiers of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division following the liberation of Beveland, October 1944.

that crossed the rivers of Holland, which would begin on 17 September.

Meanwhile, the Essex Scottish reached the Belgian seaside resort of Ostend on 8 September, and settled into positions on Antwerp's northern edge overlooking the fortified town of Merxem a week later. By this time, the Allies were focussed on Market Garden, so the minimally supplied Canadian units in Antwerp were ordered to hold the well entrenched Germans in check. Thus began what *Toronto Star* correspondent Ross Munro called a "weird war," in which central Antwerp seemed unaware of the patrolling, skirmishing and intermittent shelling in the suburbs.⁵ Regiments like the Essex Scottish benefitted from this relative lull by sending large numbers of men on leave, turning Antwerp into a "Canadian town" where the liberators were feted with drinks and previously unavailable foods.⁶ But the men were acutely aware that the war lay at the tram line's end. They drank heavily as discipline and morale ebbed.⁷

On 27 September, two days after Market Garden's failure, Montgomery announced that opening Antwerp's port was now "absolutely essential before we can advance deep into Germany."⁸ This was the signal for the brilliant young Canadian Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds, commander of II Canadian Corps and temporarily in command of the First Canadian Army, to implement his plan for simultaneously capturing both banks of the Scheldt. Walcheren's massive centuries-old dykes and the heavily fortified coastal artillery ruled out a maritime invasion, forcing Simonds to conclude that the battle-weary Canadian infantry would have to capture the town of Woensdrecht before forcing its way along the causeway that ran from the town to Walcheren.⁹

On 2 October the Essex Scottish moved north from Antwerp, relieved that they had "finally succeeded in

getting off our backsides” and into the street-to-street fight for Merxem which lay at the base of the road to Woensdrecht.¹⁰ Casualties were light because the town was defended by troops recuperating from stomach wounds or digestive troubles. The men of the Essex Scottish were contemptuous of this “Stomach Ulcer battalion...who, having built many of the fortifications around Antwerp, were abandoned by the Nazis and told to defend what they had made. They were a uniformly miserable type and were only too glad to give in when rooted out of their positions.”¹¹ By nightfall on 3 October, the regiment was bedded down on Merxem’s northern edge.

The men brimmed with confidence as they set out on the road to Woensdrecht at 0800 hours the following morning. Warm sunshine bathed a landscape of low-lying polders hemmed by dykes and causeways that hold back the North Sea. It would be hard to imagine

terrain less suitable for a land assault; the earthen dyke banks and small groups of trees provided the only meagre cover, while the Germans had flooded many of the polders, forcing the Canadians to advance atop the narrow dykes, which had been strewn with mines and roadblocks. One soldier characterised it as “squirt-gun territory,” adding that “it’s a straight infantry job working through this tough district where it’s practically impossible to employ armour, and where it’s difficult to get a good artillery observation post.”¹²

Despite their defensive advantages, the Germans were forced back by the attackers’ speed and strength. Growing Canadian confidence was reinforced by a steady stream of prisoners who proved to be a mix of hardened troops and “youthful, embryonic marines, transferred to infantry only after the fall of Brussels and showing no liking for army life.”¹³ Canadian staff officers boasted that the men could

barely keep pace with the retreat, though correspondents reported more ominously that elite units were being rushed into positions behind these disheartened troops.¹⁴

Belgian civilians flooded into the streets of towns and hamlets, flashing Churchillian Victory signs, waving hand-made British and Canadian flags, clambering on vehicles and showering their liberators with kisses, food and alcohol. These rapturous celebrations slowed the advance, but the mostly unilingual Canadians, who had struggled to converse with civilians in “sledge hammer” French since Normandy, found that many Flemish people spoke passable English.¹⁵

By mid-afternoon the Essex Scottish had advanced approximately ten kilometres and established their headquarters in the town of Stabroek, while four kilometres to the south-east, the 4th Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery, set up its guns near the town of Cappellen. The day’s



Map drawn by Mike Bechthold ©2011

overriding sense of ease and elation was tempered by patrol reports that the Germans were reinforcing positions at Putte “a long, skinny town,” whose only distinguishing feature was that the Belgian-Dutch border cut it in half. Divisional and brigade headquarters were unfazed, believing that Putte’s defences were meant only to slow the advance.¹⁶

In a sombre omen for the day’s actions, it was cloudy and cold as the Essex Scottish set out at dawn on 5 October. “B” Company advanced straight up the road to Putte, flanked by “A” and “C” Companies which moved across soggy open country to the west. Defensive fire intensified as “B” Company neared Putte, where they encountered 14 members of the Belgian resistance, who informed them about the German positions and stayed to fight. The last vestiges of Canadian levity disappeared at about mid-morning, when “B” Company entered the town to find “a hard crust of enemy on all sides”

entrenched along the main road in a series of machine gun nests. Snipers pinned the flanking companies in the fields.¹⁷ In the *Toronto Star’s* words, the Germans had begun “making the supreme effort to deprive the allies of the use of the great port of Antwerp as long as possible.”¹⁸

The Canadians advanced from gun pit to gun pit amid German shells and mortars. As they neared the town centre, the 4th Field Regiment’s forward observation officer, Captain Ted Adams and wireless operator, Bombardier Ernie Hodgkinson, clambered up the church tower to direct their guns.¹⁹ By mid-afternoon, “B” Company was “holding on desperately” to the crossroads, before a determined German counterattack drove them out of town, stranding Adams and Hodgkinson in the aerie from which they continued guiding the artillery.²⁰ At five in the evening “D” Company charged into Putte and, when tanks could not move up, the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry

consolidated the position.²¹ Putte was free. Belgian and Dutch civilians swarmed into the streets to thank their exhausted liberators. The price had been high; about two-thirds of “B” Company’s 150 or so men were casualties. Twelve Canadians were dead, along with three *resistants*.²² The town had been physically smashed.

Canadian newspapers briefly trumpeted the place where the nation’s forces had first entered the Netherlands, causing one wit to send this quip to the *Toronto Star*: “The Canadian Forces have reached Putte. But they won’t stay Putte.”²³ He was right. On the bright sunny morning following the battle, the Essex Scottish began clearing the fields to the east of town, while other units pressed north towards Woensdrecht. The war became grimmer with these first footsteps on Dutch soil, because by deliberately flooding the country’s agricultural heart, the Germans had caused acute food shortages.²⁴ Troops were shocked by

A 25-pounder on the bank of the Scheldt River north of Antwerp fires in support of the Canadian advance, 2 October 1944.





A line of Sherman tanks from the Fort Garry Horse sit outside of Putte on 6 October 1944.

the sight of malnourished children and as one veteran remembered, it "was like crossing from daylight into darkness....Until we crossed into Holland, we had never seen starvation."²⁵

The action at Putte was indistinguishable from many of the war's other small battles. Canadian forces suffered significant casualties in a swift, violent fight for a town with no great strategic importance. When it was over, the Canadian dead were buried under wooden crosses in Putte's churchyard, while the survivors enjoyed the townspeople's gratitude. Adams and Hodgkinson earned, respectively, the Military Cross and Military Medal for their *sang froid*. Much deadlier Scheldt battles soon pushed Putte from public memory, though Canadian units continued using the town as a rest centre.²⁶

But that was not the end of the story for either soldiers or civilians. Over the past three decades scholars have explored how communities mourned and commemorated the dead, positing that the huge losses of life in the First World War led to the "invention" of dominant traditions in the inter-war years. These formalized commemoration around physical sites like Imperial War Graves Commission cemeteries and ritualized observances like Remembrance Day ceremonies. A widespread commemorative urge also saw memorials alluding to classical and mythic martial triumph, Christian martyrdom and resurrection, and romanticized notions of Mother Canada erected in public buildings, churches, parks and town squares across the country. Similar monuments were just as ubiquitous in the European

nations that had fought the war. The important common element to the majority of these sites is that they commemorate the communities that erected them, or the localities in which they stand.²⁷

After 1945 though, commemorative activities in Canada and Western Europe diverged significantly. Existing Canadian cenotaphs were rededicated to include the recent war, while commemorative programs focused on reintegrating veterans into civilian life. By contrast, countries like France, Belgium and Holland that had suffered "unprecedented military defeat, humiliating occupation and liberation by foreign armies...a triple demonstration of national impotence" used physical memorials to promote idealised notions of wartime political consensus and resistance.²⁸ European political leaders felt that



Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies Air Photo Collection 0197-4029

such occupation myths were crucial for rebuilding post-war states. But because these nations' armed forces had played so little part in the war – the Dutch had fought for only five days – post-1945 commemorative activities also emphasized close ties to their liberators as psychological and physical bulwarks of security.²⁹

Nevertheless, relatively little is known about how Europeans commemorated their liberators after the first euphoric flush of freedom gave way to the pressing preoccupations of rebuilding lives and nations. The greatest challenge to commemorating people from outside one's community is that the relationship between liberator and local inhabitant was typically fleeting and anonymous. Troops rarely stayed long in liberated areas and language impeded communication. Contemporary observers noted that during and immediately after the Scheldt battles, Belgian and Dutch civilians reached out spontaneously by placing flowers on Canadian graves. At least one veteran retained vivid images of a woman who walked out on the dykes "every day, regardless of the shelling, she'd go there and tended the graves of our dead. White crosses were put there with the names on them. So it was quite dramatic."³⁰ Such gestures were extremely risky personal commemorations of strangers who had died liberating people and places they had barely known.

Almost immediately after the war such individual, emotional tributes were superseded by formal, national commemoration. Most importantly, countries like Canada exhumed the dead from the scattered graveyards in which they had been hastily buried and reinterred them within the precincts of Commonwealth war cemeteries. Doing so reasserted a First World War decision that the dead should lie amongst their comrades, rather than where they had been killed.³¹ As a result,



LAC PA 177677

Dutch women place flowers on the graves of Canadian soldiers during the initial commemorative service at Bergen-op-Zoom Canadian War Cemetery, 5 May 1946.

less than a year after the German capitulation, the cemetery at Bergen-op-Zoom, where many of Canada's dead from the Scheldt campaign had been reburied, had become the centre of remembrance activities in Holland. In the spring of 1946, Pierre Dupuy, Canada's ambassador to The Hague, organized a commemorative religious service and wreath-laying at the cemetery. Prince Bernhard, who had commanded Holland's small London-based military force, represented his country, while he and Dupuy asked Ottawa to send an equally senior representative. Despite their request, a lowly Canadian brigadier looked on as hundreds of Dutch children placed flowers on the graves, and many more civilians turned out to personally thank their liberators.³² Six months later the Dutch government tacitly endorsed cemeteries as the main locus for commemorative activities, by establishing the Netherlands War Graves Commission as a national partner to the Commonwealth

body. Over the coming decades, Dutch royals, masses of civilians and Canadian officials gathered in one of several cemeteries to commemorate the Liberation.³³

All of this was new in the Netherlands, which had remained neutral during the First World War and had last fought in the Napoleonic age. Unlike most Europeans, the Dutch were unfamiliar with military medals, parades, monuments and ceremonies, while their austere world-view disdained glorifying personal deeds. In the 18 months after the war the Dutch government took a *dirigiste* approach to commemoration by creating an aesthetic standard for memorials that banned allusions to martial prowess, or listing individuals. Monuments that contravened these rules were demolished.

Some people favoured less constrained approaches to commemorating their liberators. Immediately after the war, the Dutch cabinet fiercely debated

decorating the Allied soldiers who had freed the country, when similar awards were not planned for the country's own troops.³⁴ The issue was resolved by September, when the Dutch government asked Ottawa for permission to distribute a Netherlands War Service Cross to all Canadian military personnel who had contributed to the Liberation. Canadian political and military leaders weighed the idea until early winter, when they rejected it on the grounds that it would be too difficult to identify the approximately 300,000 eligible men and women.³⁵ Meanwhile, the Dutch government invited citizens to record direct personal messages of thanks for their Canadian liberators in a national commemorative album. On the first anniversary of Liberation the album, containing signatures from the Royal Family and 40,000 others, was entrusted to Canadian diplomats for shipment to Ottawa. There the Dutch ambassador intended to present it to the prime minister with an explicit request that it be added to Canada's memorial collection. Unfortunately, the album was lost in transit and never recovered, despite an exhaustive military court of enquiry.³⁶

At the same time, a host of extra-governmental commemorative initiatives were launched. For instance, the Canadian-Netherlands Committee was formed immediately after the Liberation to create "a commemorative gift which could be kept by each individual recipient and which would give expression to the admiration and gratitude of the Dutch."³⁷ Working with Canadian Army public relations officials, the committee produced *Holland and the Canadians*, a heavily-illustrated book that was distributed free to Canadian veterans. By the time it appeared in mid-1946, 5,000 members of the Netherlands-Canada Society were learning about Canada through a

monthly magazine that the Canadian embassy helped produce.³⁸

Meanwhile, Canadian troops became impatient with the speed of repatriation – 70,000 remained in Holland at the end of November 1945. They enjoyed a friendly and thankful but unequal and sometimes tense relationship with the Dutch. Liberation had removed the threat of starvation, but supplies of all kinds were scarce and Canadians had access to food, cigarettes and consumer goods, while Dutch women were attracted to the tough, well-muscled soldiers. Some Dutch people begged or offered favours for food, while some Canadians made huge profits trading everything from typewriters and socks, to cigarettes and potatoes on the black market. Many Canadians were billeted with Dutch families, while interactions between civilians and soldiers were facilitated by organizations like the Entertainment Committee of the Netherlands, which was founded in Amsterdam just after the Liberation with the aim of pairing every Canadian with French or English-speaking Dutch hosts for the Committee's regular social functions. Branches soon opened wherever Canadians were stationed. Travel around the country was also eased by the civilian bus system that the Canadian military operated until the end of 1945 to replace Holland's shattered national rail network.³⁹

Ongoing close association led towns and localities across the country to directly thank Canadians. Among such commemorations, the town of Eelde presented a gold medal to the New Brunswick Hussars in 1945, Leeuwarden gave "two beautiful old plates of Friesian chinaware" to the Canadian embassy in 1946, the Hooeven Police Society rechristened a hiking trail after General Harry Crerar, while a maple tree honouring Canada, dubbed the "Tree of Liberty" was planted in The Hague in July 1946, a decade before

Holland's national war memorial was unveiled in that city.⁴⁰ Streets and squares throughout the country were renamed for the liberating forces.

Before long, this impetus reached across the ocean to encompass the Canadians who wanted to see where their sons and daughters had died. Prior to 1939, families had visited First World War battlefields and cemeteries on organized "pilgrimages" and self-guided tours. Such trips became more common after 1945 as the Canadian economy boomed, making international travel ever more accessible. To assist these travellers, the Netherlands War Graves Commission matched them with Dutch families who opened their homes as a way of personally recognizing the sacrifices that strangers had made in liberating their localities.⁴¹

This interplay between national, local and "personal" commemorative impulses makes the battle of Putte interesting because in November 1947 its citizens were the first Dutch people to salute their liberators in the presence of Prime Minister Mackenzie King, Canada's wartime leader. King had first travelled to Europe after the war to attend the 1946 Paris peace negotiations accompanied by the young diplomat Charles Ritchie who bristled at working for an old man who was "principally concerned with petty fiddle-faddle about his personal arrangements."⁴² Such sentiments might have held true the following November, when King embarked on a valedictory European tour. He attended Princess Elizabeth's wedding in London and received the Order of Merit, which he accepted as a collective commemoration of the sacrifices of individual Canadians.⁴³

From London, he set out for the continent believing that he saw "Providence smiling upon us as we go on our mission of international friendship to the peoples of Europe."⁴⁴ Despite repeated invitations since



The mayor of Putte (left) presents the Delft china plate honouring the 12 men of the Essex Scottish Regiment killed in the liberation of their village to Prime Minister Mackenzie King, 12 November 1947.

1945, King had not yet visited Belgium or the Netherlands. He arrived in Brussels on 10 November to accept an honorary degree from the city's Université Libre on behalf, as he put it, "of the people of Canada and as a sign of the abiding friendship and good will between our countries." On the following morning King took part in Belgium's national Remembrance Day ceremony, telling his royal hosts at dinner that night that he accepted that country's honours on behalf of Canada's armed forces.⁴⁵ He received a second degree on the 12th, proclaiming to the University of Louvain that the honour attested to the "place her (Canada's) sons held in the hearts and minds of the people of this land in their struggle for freedom," and insisting he would

"do my utmost to have the people of Canada appreciate something of what I was feeling."⁴⁶ King repeatedly declared that he accepted these ostensibly personal honours to commemorate the sacrifices of individual Canadians.

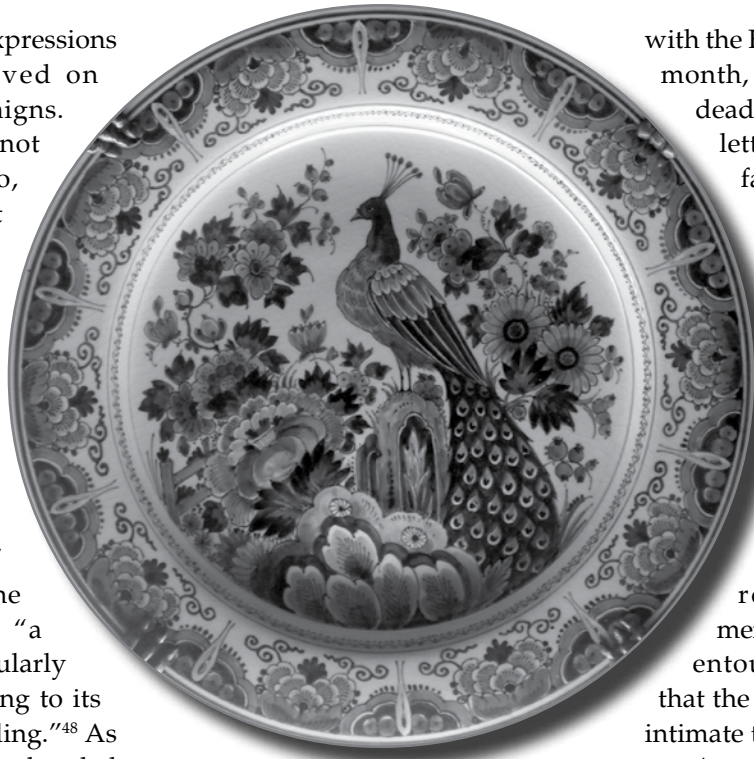
Immediately following the ceremony at Louvain, King left by car for The Hague, passing through Antwerp and then tracing the route the Essex Scottish had marched three years earlier. Accompanying journalists noted the continuing personal relationship between locals and their liberators evident as people spontaneously stood to attention as they recognized the Canadian flag affixed to the hood of King's passing car. At five in the evening the small convoy reached Putte, where an

arch had been erected over the road, declaring that 12 Canadian soldiers had lost their lives liberating the town. King alighted to be greeted by representatives of the Dutch royal family, the government and Putte's mayor.⁴⁷ The mayor made a short speech before presenting King with a Delft china plate, to the back of which had been affixed a lion-shaped silver plaque bearing the inscription "Eternal memorial for Canadian heroes" and the names of the men who had died there.

The gift perplexed King who was accustomed to receiving honours on Canada's behalf. But he was unsure how to respond to a whistle-stop ceremony in a foreign town during which local dignitaries presented him with an object that most closely

resembled the mundane expressions of civic pride he received on domestic political campaigns. Moreover, the plate did not bear King's name and so, unlike with his recent personal honours, his diary entry was an unemotional account of receiving "a very fine china plate, on the reverse side of which, on a silver plaque, were inscribed the names of the men who gave their lives to liberate that community." Still, he recorded that the roadside reception was "a very touching sight, particularly as the evening was drawing to its close and daylight was fading."⁴⁸ As the brief ceremony ended, he handed the plate to an aide before driving ten kilometres further north to the cemetery at Bergen-op-Zoom where the men identified on the Putte plate are buried. The formality of national commemoration was reasserted within that officially sanctioned space in the pitch dark as King laid a wreath honouring Canada's sacrifice.

Since roughly 7,000 Canadians had been killed liberating the Netherlands, it is understandable that King did not immediately recognize the significance of a plate that named a handful of men who had died in a long-forgotten battle at an otherwise inconsequential crossroads. But the plate demonstrated that the 12 men were deeply important to the people of Putte, because they had died liberating their home. This might never have been acknowledged by Canadian officials, if not for Captain Joseph Cardy, an Anglican curate from Toronto who had joined the Chaplain Corps in 1942 and been posted to the Essex Scottish the



following April. Cardy shared the men's danger. He was never far from the front as Canadians learned in September 1944, when the *Toronto Star* described him clambering up a captured German bunker near Ostend to run his personal Union Jack up the flagpole.⁴⁹ Cardy had entered Putte

with the Essex Scottish the following month, buried all but one of the dead in its churchyard, written letters of condolence to their families and helped disburse their estates. Cardy did not see the 1947 roadside ceremony, though. He had stayed in the army after being awarded the Military Cross in 1945 and was stationed at Camp Borden, Ontario. He almost certainly read about the plate in one of the brief Canadian newspaper reports, but unlike any member of the prime minister's entourage, Cardy understood that the plate was a significant and intimate tribute to his comrades.⁵⁰

An examination of the men's military service files allows us to glimpse what Cardy knew about them. They had all been born in Canada, hailed from urban and rural parts of five provinces and ranged in age from 19 to 36. Four were married, while one was divorced. Ten were Protestant and two Catholic. The least educated had achieved grade two, while none had completed high school. One had joined in 1939, but most had spent less than two years in uniform. None had taken part in the Dieppe raid or risen higher than lance corporal. Only two had been charged with minor military offences and none was ever decorated for conspicuous service. In other words, any



Top: The Putte Delft china plate is now on display at Laurier House in Ottawa. (Photo by author)

Bottom: Chaplain Joseph Cardy (left) offers a cigarette to a private of the Essex Scottish. Cardy convinced Prime Minister Mackenzie King to inform the families of the men killed at Putte about the town's tribute.



Looking north along the main road through Putte as it appeared in 2007. The Belgian-Dutch border crosses the middle of the photo and is marked by the flags on the right. The Essex Scottish advanced up this street clearing German machine gun nests before entering the Netherlands at the intersection. The street entering from the left is Canadalaan, "Canada Avenue."

one of them could have illustrated the average Canadian soldier. Their heroism was not embedded in individual deeds, but in having died on military service, which Canada had recognized by interring them among their comrades at Bergen-op-Zoom. At the same time, Cardy perceived that by dying together, these otherwise unexceptional men had imprinted themselves lastingly on a small town that they had seen at most for a few terrifying hours, and where they had been buried for over a year. They were:

Private Alfred Hiram Balson, a 20-year-old machinist with "above-average ability" from Weston, Ontario, who enlisted in February 1943. A shoulder wound in late July 1944 kept him out of the line for three weeks.⁵¹

Private Howard Dean Chamberlain, a "very quiet and unassuming" bespectacled 35-year-old farmer, truck driver and mechanic from Peterborough,

Ontario, who enlisted in June 1942 and married six months later.⁵²

Private Richard Alfred Cline, a "frank and pleasant" 21-year-old warehouse worker from Saint John, NB. He was a keen athlete who left school when his father abandoned the family, and attested in January 1943. He survived a head wound about a month before he was killed.⁵³

Lance Corporal John William Cook, an "easygoing, confident" but "quick-tempered" machinist from Toronto, who enlisted at age 18 in March 1943 hoping to be a paratrooper. His youth, nervous stutter and nail-biting convinced the army that he was unsuitable for the airborne, so they assigned him to an "experimental ski troop" in Saskatchewan. He married his long-time sweetheart just six months before he died.⁵⁴

Lance Corporal Robert James Crooke, known as "Chick," was a

24-year-old Great Lakes mariner from Port McNicoll, Ontario. He was a "good infantry man" who left school in grade nine after playing "hookey now and again," and enlisted in May 1942. Chaplain Cardy was especially close to Crooke; saying private prayers over his grave and letting his parents know that their son had been killed while approaching Putte.⁵⁵

Private James William Fradgley, a 22-year-old "quiet, reserved and agreeable" labourer from London, Ontario who enlisted in February 1942. He was a natural mechanic with a passion for cars. His parents visited his grave in 1954.⁵⁶

Lance Corporal John Edward Leclair, a 36-year-old stevedore from Saint John, New Brunswick who enlisted in October 1939. Having quit school at age ten, he was only marginally suitable for overseas service and left five young children.⁵⁷

Ottawa,
January 16, 1948.

Dear
I should like to let you know of an unusual tribute that has been paid to the memory of your and of his comrades in the Essex Scottish who, with him, gallantly gave their lives in the battle for the liberation of Holland in 1944.

At the time of my visit to the Netherlands in November last, I was presented, at the Village of Putte, near the Netherlands border, with a Delft blue plate, on the back of which is a silver shield with the inscription: "Eternal memorial for Canadian heroes, Putte, Netherlands, 5/10/44".

The names of your comrades who fell with him are inscribed on the plate. It is my intention to see that this memorial plate becomes a permanent possession of our Nation.

I hope that you, as the sense of loss, in this expression, of their heroic sacrifice and his comrades for their heroic sacrifice Village of Putte in Holland, of their heartfelt gratitude to your and his comrades for their heroic sacrifice in the cause of freedom.

Yours very sincerely,

(sgt) W.L. Mackenzie King.

The above letter was sent to:
Mrs. Helen J. Mitchell
24 Falbot St South
Simcoe, Ont

Wife of B. 126413 Pte Berkley Mitchell (deceased)



Private William Murray Majury, a 26-year-old from Amaranth, Manitoba who had worked as a mechanic on an RCAF base for six months before attesting in November 1943.⁵⁸

Private Berkley Mitchell, a "cheerful and well-adjusted" 32-year-old farmer from Jarvis, Ontario who attested in September 1943 and married two months later. Mitchell was declared missing in action on 27 August 1944. When

Top right: Private Berkley Mitchell, a 32-year-old farmer from Walpole County, Ontario, was killed on 5 October 1944 at Putte. Canadian Virtual War Memorial

Top left: Prime Minister Mackenzie King's letter to the families of the men killed at Putte. A copy was placed on each man's service file. LAC RG24 vol.26627

Above right: Private Mitchell's original grave marker in Bergen-op-Zoom Canadian War Cemetery. The markers on the men's graves in Putte's churchyard would have been very similar. LAC RG24 vol.26627

his family continued receiving letters from him, they contacted the army which announced apologetically on 20 September that he was, in fact, alive. He was killed two weeks later.⁵⁹

Lance Corporal George Earle Patterson came from Beach

Corner, near Edmonton and could not wait to go to war. He was a "bright and wide awake soldier" flagged at attestation as a future NCO. He had only just turned 20 when he was killed, even though he had been in uniform since 1941. Almost exactly one month before his death the army had

discovered that he had added two years to his age at attestation. But because trained soldiers were desperately needed and Patterson was now old enough to fight, military authorities had simply written the correct birth date in his service file.⁶⁰

Private Charles Herbert “Charlie” Reid, a 26-year-old “well-knit” athletic man who liked outdoor activities and played the fiddle. He had drifted east from Saskatchewan after his marriage collapsed. He operated a crane in a Hamilton steel mill, loved heavy machinery and attested in September 1943 hoping to drive a tank.⁶¹

Private Russell Richard Soble, a 19-year-old carpenter’s helper from Ameliasburg, Ontario. He attested in January 1942, was judged “an able and efficient soldier” and trained as a motorcyclist.⁶²

Though very little distinguishes these men from thousands of others who fought for Canada, Cardy had known them as individuals and felt that Putte’s tribute deserved to be recognized. Therefore, at the start of December he sent a letter to Mackenzie King via Army Headquarters asking the prime minister to write directly to the family of each soldier named on the plate.⁶³ The adjutant-general heartily concurred, advising King’s private secretary that “such a gesture on the part of the Prime Minister would be gratefully received by the next of kin as a memento of the supreme sacrifice made by their loved ones.”⁶⁴ King agreed, and on 16 January 1948 wrote the families, telling them about “an unusual tribute...by the people of the village of Putte, in Holland, of their heartfelt gratitude to your _____ and his comrades for their heroic sacrifice in the cause of freedom.”⁶⁵ Copies of the correspondence generated by Cardy’s request were also placed on each man’s service file, although

there is no indication of the families’ reactions.

King’s letter also announced his “intention to see that this memorial plate becomes a permanent possession of our nation,” acknowledging for the first time that it had a place in national commemoration. But the letter had been prepared by aides and signed by King on a day that he struggled with a massive backlog of work, dictated a speech for the upcoming Liberal leadership convention, attended a wedding and received various political supporters.⁶⁶ The plate’s subsequent fate reflects King’s fleeting attention. It is displayed amid his massive accumulation of personal possessions at Ottawa’s Laurier House, the national historic site that was home to King and his predecessor Sir Wilfrid Laurier. It would be unjust and melodramatic to argue that the plate has languished, or to deny that it is a “permanent possession” of Canada, but its physical location reflects the ongoing difficulty in understanding its meaning and

The inscription on the memorial to the men of the Essex Scottish Regiment killed in and around Putte in October 1944 reads: Across the frontiers of countries | Across the frontier of fear | Across the frontier of occupation | Across the frontier of life | Led their path to our freedom.

Photo by J.A. Robertson



value. In contrast to the military and religious symbolism embedded in permanent, immutable marble and granite memorials, the Delft plate is a type of fragile household pottery almost exclusively identified with the woman's sphere of home and hearth, rather than transcendent male ideals of martial sacrifice. It also resembles mass-produced Dutch tourist souvenirs. And finally, it is a political keepsake; a quality emphasized by the huge variety of objects amid which it is displayed. This contrasts starkly with the international decorations and honorary degrees that prime ministers traditionally receive to reflect noble concepts.

The intervening years have compounded this difficulty by obscuring the men's names, their connections to one another, and to the town they liberated. Putte does not hold a place in the Canadian public memory, leaving little impetus to trace the ways in which it has been commemorated. The silver plaque is affixed to the back of the plate, meaning that when it is displayed, the dedication and the men's names are not visible. Though the men served in a single regiment, they hailed from disparate parts of a vast country and are buried in three different sections of the Bergen-op-Zoom cemetery. Their military service files are preserved in the National Capital Region, geographically close to the plate, but they are part of an alphabetically



Prime Minister Stephen Harper pays his respects during a May 2010 visit to the Bergen-op-Zoom Canadian War Cemetery in the Netherlands

arranged collection of 44,000 similar files. The plate is even more physically isolated from the battle site and the Essex Scottish Regiment, whose independent identity disappeared in a 1954 amalgamation with the Kent Regiment. As a result, there is very little chance that historians will ever compile a "group portrait" of Putte, similar to the recent studies that have traced relationships between individuals, communities and iconic battles.⁶⁷

The men on the plate were only retrieved from anonymity because Putte's tribute was impromptu, but not unplanned. Though the 12 men were reinterred at Bergen-op-Zoom in early 1946, the townspeople must have recorded the names on the crosses that had stood in their churchyard for over a year. There is

no evidence that Putte's officials contacted Mackenzie King's office directly, but they must have had enough warning of when he would cross the frontier to commission the plate and erect the arch. Organizing such a project could not have been simple in a country with centralized government control over commemoration, in a country still devastated by war and struggling with the earliest stages of reconstruction.⁶⁸ The citizens' effort indicated their profound need to ally themselves with their liberators. And, given the other ways in which the Dutch had hoped to connect directly with individual Canadians, the people of Putte likely expected that King would tell the

men's families about this tribute, and place the plate within the national collection. Chaplain Cardy, who had accompanied these men as they fought across Europe, made the prime minister briefly perceive this intention.

As the generation that fought the Second World War ages, commemorative activities have begun re-emphasizing this evanescent earlier focus on individuals and localities in "modest, but significant memorial" celebrations in which Europeans salute the foreign troops they remember from long-ago.⁶⁹ This includes Putte, which unveiled a brick memorial on the 50th anniversary of its liberation in 1994. It lists 24 Canadians — those named on the plate along with 12 who died near the town in the weeks after

the liberation.⁷⁰ Commemorative activities sponsored by the Canadian government also attempt to convey intimate feelings of terror and joy, struggle and liberation through reminiscences, march-pasts and personal encounters with veterans. This trend reached its apogee in May 2010 when Prime Minister Stephen Harper celebrated the 65th anniversary of the liberation of the Netherlands at Bergen-op-Zoom amid Dutch officials, veterans, and Canadian and Dutch school children.⁷¹

The internet is an ever more important commemorative site because it enables individuals to discover and celebrate their forebears' service, and to make virtual links between public memorials and the most intimate, privately held keepsakes. This has the potential to make objects like the Putte plate increasingly important in shaping Canadians' understanding of the Second World War. However, these types of objects that are undoubtedly held in public and private collections across Canada, have rarely if ever played that role because technology alone cannot reconnect them with the individuals and events they commemorate. As an example, among the most important internet tools is the *Canadian Virtual War Memorial*, a government-sponsored resource that includes basic information about every Canadian man and woman who died on active service. The memorial was initially populated with data from the *Books of Remembrance* and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Families are encouraged to augment the site by posting photographs and documents to "bring a face to another name in the registry and honour the memory" of their forebears. Relatives of William Majury and Berkley Mitchell, who are listed on the Putte plate, have added mementoes to their profiles.⁷² Both families are actively interested

in their predecessors' war service, though neither seems aware of the tribute that Putte once reached out to pay to them.

The story of the Putte plate demonstrates that local, personal intimate commemorations continued as national traditions emerged at the end of the war. This was because formal ceremonies involving prime ministers and princes did not sate a widespread need for the liberated to directly thank the specific men and women who had freed them. Such expressions of personal thanks were often, like the Putte plate, modest and ephemeral, at least in part because of Europe's post-war impoverishment. Time has disconnected these items from the men and women they honoured, while the emotions they originally conveyed have been dulled, and knowledge of their existence has slipped from popular memory. This has transformed such objects from memorials into artefacts. However, as younger generations rediscover family connections to the Second World War, tributes like the Putte plate can be re-deciphered and reanimated to illuminate the service and sacrifices of individual Canadians and to provide a fuller understanding of the commemorative process.

Notes

The author would like to thank Dr. Amy Tector, Dr. Bob McIntosh and *Canadian Military History's* anonymous readers for their comments on this article. Louise Hamelin and Lorenzo Cotroneo from Laurier House generously shared information about the Putte plate.

1. C.P. Stacey, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War. Volume III, The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-west Europe, 1944-1945* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1960), p.381. The most complete description of the battle is contained in Sandy Antal and Kevin R. Shackleton, *Duty Nobly Done: the Official History of the Essex and Kent Scottish Regiment* (Windsor: Walkerville Publishing, 2006), pp.479-80
2. Doug W. McIntyre, "Pursuit to the Seine: The Essex Scottish Regiment and the Forêt de la Londe" *Canadian Military History* 7, no.1 (Winter 1998), p.72.
3. Denis and Shelagh Whitaker, *Tug of War: The Allied Victory That Opened Antwerp* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2000), pp.64-65.
4. Whitaker, pp.55-56. For the Germans' understanding of Antwerp's importance, see Terry Copp and Robert Vogel, *Maple Leaf Route: Scheldt* (Alma, Ontario: Maple Leaf Route, 1985), p.27.
5. R.W. Meanwell, *1 Battalion The Essex Scottish Regiment, 1939-1945* (Aldershot: Wellington Press, 1945), pp.1-46; Whitaker, p.126; and Ross Munro, "Crazy Antwerp War Over Kids Play in Dugouts," *Toronto Star*, 5 October 1944, p.1.
6. "Antwerp Civilians Go to War Front by Tram," *Globe and Mail*, 4 October 1944, p.3.
7. Whitaker, pp.134-35.
8. Stacey, p.379.
9. Lance Goddard, *Canada and the Liberation of the Netherlands, May 1945* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2005), p.67; Whitaker, pp.105-106; Stacey pp.363, 370-371; and W.R. Plewman, "The War Reviewed," *Toronto Star*, 5 October 1944, p.7.
10. The quote is from Essex Scottish War Diary, 2 October 1944, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG24, vol.15061; also Meanwell, pp.31-51.
11. Essex Scottish War Diary, 2 October 1944. See also Terry Copp, *The Brigade: The Fifth Canadian Infantry Brigade, 1939-1945* (Stoney Creek: Fortress, 1992), pp.135-136.
12. The quote is from "Storm Over Leopold in Pre-dawn Charge," *Toronto Star*, 6 October 1944, p.2. See also Headquarters Second Canadian Infantry Division, War Diary, 4 October 1944, LAC, RG24, vol.13751.
13. Essex Scottish War Diary, 5 October 1944. Mark Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory: First Canadian Army and the Scheldt Estuary Campaign: September 13- November 6, 1944* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2007), pp.172-173.
14. W.R. Plewman, "The War Reviewed," *Toronto Star*, 4 October 1944, p.7; and "American Tanks Have Penetrated Cologne Plain," *Toronto Star*, 5 October 1944, p.1.
15. Zuehlke, pp.173-174; Geoffrey Hayes, "Where Are Our Liberators?: The Canadian Liberation of West Brabant," *Canadian Military History* 4, no.1, (Spring 1995), p.9. For Sledge hammer French see Lieutenant-Colonel J.F.C. Pangman to Colonel Prince, 11 October 1944, appendix to the Essex Scottish War Diary, October 1944.
16. For the quote see George Blackburn, *The Guns of Victory: A Soldier's Eye View, Belgium, Holland, and Germany, 1944-45* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1996), p.53; also Headquarters Second Canadian Infantry Division War Diary, 4 October 1944, LAC, RG24, vol.13751; and Zuehlke, p.173.

17. 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary, 5 October 1944, LAC, RG24, vol.14096.
18. "Canadians Pour Over Leopold Isolating Foe," *Toronto Star*, 7 October 1944, p.1.
19. Whitaker, p.152.
20. Essex Scottish War Diary 5 October 1944.
21. 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary, 5 October 1944; Essex Scottish War Diary 5 October 1944; Zuehlke, pp.174-175, and Blackburn, p.53.
22. Zuehlke, p.174; Essex Scottish War Diary, 9 October 1944.
23. "A Little of Everything," *Toronto Star*, 7 October 1944, p.6.
24. John MacCormac, "Swift Allied Success Only Hope of Holland to Avert Complete Ruin," *Globe and Mail*, 7 October 1944, pp.1-2.
25. The quote is from Goddard, p.75. For the children see Pangman to Prince.
26. Blackburn, p.114.
27. Lyle Dick, "Sergeant Masumi Mitsui and the Japanese Canadian War Memorial," *Canadian Historical Journal* 91, no.3 (September 2010), pp.435-463; Paul Gough, "Canada, Conflict and Commemoration: An Appraisal of the New Canadian War Memorial in Green Park, London and a Reflection on the Official Patronage of Canadian War Art," *Canadian Military History* 5, no.1 (Spring 1996), pp.27 & 33; Denise Thomson, "National Sorrow, National Pride: Commemoration of War in Canada, 1918-1945," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 30, no.4 (1995/96), pp.5-8; and Jonathan F. Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), pp.15-44.
28. Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.2.
29. Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner and Claudio Fogu, eds. *The Politics of Memory in Post-war Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), pp.21-22.
30. Munro, "Crazy Antwerp War." For the quote see Goddard, p.79.
31. Vance, p.60.
32. Pierre Dupuy to Norman Robertson, 15 March and 6 May 1946, and copy of Dupuy's speaking notes from the ceremony, all LAC, RG25, vol.3824, file 8769-40. Also, message 18 April 1946, LAC, RG24, vol.12761, file 27/Netherlands/1.
33. W.H. Enklaar, "The Netherlands War Graves Committee," in Max Nord, ed. *Thank You, Canada* (Montreal: Stching Wereldtentoonstelling, 1967), pp.64-65; & Hayes, p.18.
34. Lagrou, pp.65-75.
35. Norman Robertson to D.C. Abbott, 19 September 1945; Abbott to Robertson, 4 October 1945; Brigadier R.E.G. Roome, 10 December 1945; and Robertson, 25 January 1946, all LAC, RG24, vol.2249, file HQC 54-27-94-56.
36. The Final Report and Finding by the Original Court of Inquiry held in connection with the loss of the Netherlands Commemorative Album, undated (likely 1946), LAC, RG24, vol.47-1, file HQC-186-46-9.
37. Norman Philips and J. Nikerk, *Holland and the Canadians* (Amsterdam: Contact, ca. 1946), unnumbered pages. The cost of providing free copies to Canadians was defrayed by sales to Dutch civilians see 18 December 1945, LAC, RG24, vol.12392, file 4/Propaganda/2.
38. H.F. Feaver, to unnamed, 12 July 1946, LAC, RG11, vol.4184, file Netherlands-Canada Monument. For the Netherlands-Canada Society 6 November and 18 December 1945, LAC, RG24, vol.12392, file 4/Propaganda/2.
39. Michel Horn, "More than Cigarettes, Sex and Chocolate: the Canadian Army in the Netherlands, 1944-1945," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 16, nos.3/4 (Fall-Winter 1981), pp.157-171. The number of Canadians in the Netherlands dropped in January to a rump of 2,000 who stayed until Canada closed its Dutch military headquarters on the 31st of May 1946. Also Captain Harold MacDonald with M.A. Macdonald, "Holland Summer: Awaiting Repatriation, May-August 1945," *Canadian Military History* 13, no.4 (Autumn 2004), pp.29-45.
40. 6 November, 20 November, 10 December, and 18 December 1945, all LAC, RG24, vol.12392, file 4/Propaganda/2. For the Friesian china see Pierre Dupuy to the Secretary of State for External Affairs, 18 April 1946, LAC, RG25, vol.3824, file 8769-40. Also K.J. Klok to Pierre DuPuy, 1 April 1948, LAC, RG25, vol.3824, file 8769-40.
41. For the First World War see Vance, p.57. W.H. Enklaar, "The Netherlands War Graves Committee;" and B.C. de Haas-Boekbinder, "Recollections of the Canadians," in Nord pp.64-65 & 147.
42. Charles Ritchie, *Diplomatic Passport: More Undiplomatic Diaries, 1946-1962* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1981), p.10.
43. Mackenzie King's Diary, LAC, 2 November 1947.
44. The quote is from King Diary, LAC, 8 November 1947. For invitations see for instance 16 & 30 October 1945, LAC, RG24, vol.12392, file 4/Propaganda/2.
45. King Diary, 11 November 1947.
46. King Diary, 12 November 1947.
47. "Mr. King Visits Graves of Canada's War Dead," *Globe and Mail*, 13 November 1947, p.17.
48. Both quotes are from King Diary, 12 November 1947.
49. Frederick Griffin, "300 Nazis Crawl Out Like Ants, Young French Girl Also in Fort," *Toronto Star*, 13 September 1944, p.13.
50. John Gardam, *Fifty Years After* (Burnstown, Ontario: General Store Publishing, 1990), pp.79-80. Cardy was appointed Chaplain General of the Forces in 1968.
51. LAC, RG24, vol.25377.
52. LAC, RG24, vol.25559.
53. LAC, RG24, vol.25601.
54. LAC, RG24, vol.25632.
55. LAC, RG24, vol.25671.
56. LAC, RG24, vol.25899.
57. LAC, RG24, vol.26336.
58. LAC, RG24, vol.26544.
59. LAC, RG24, vol.26627.
60. LAC, RG24, vol.26770.
61. LAC, RG24, vol.26876.
62. LAC, RG24, vol.27089.
63. Captain Joseph Cardy to Mackenzie King, 6 December 1947, LAC. A copy of all correspondence is found on the service files of the men named on the plate.
64. Major-General E.G. Weeks to J.W. Pickersgill, 5 January 1948, LAC. A copy of all correspondence is found on the service files of the men named on the plate.
65. King to the next-of-kin, 16 January 1948, LAC. Also King to Cardy, 16 January 1948, LAC. A copy of all correspondence is found on the service files of the men named on the plate.
66. King Diary, 16 January 1948.
67. See for instance Alex Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys: One American Town's Ultimate D-Day Sacrifice* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2004); and Serge Marc Durlinger, *Fighting from Home: The Second World War in Verdun, Quebec* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006).
68. P.W. Klein, "The Foundations of Dutch Prosperity," in Richard T. Griffiths, ed, *The Economy and Politics of the Netherlands Since 1945* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980), pp.7-10.
69. George Blackburn, "Pilgrimage to Holland," *Canadian Military History* 15, no.1 (Winter 2006), pp.92-3.
70. A photograph of the memorial appears in Antal and Shackleton, p.479; and in Terry Copp and Mike Bechthold *The Canadian Battlefields in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany* (Waterloo: LCMSDS, 2011), p.65. See also Randy Boswell, "Canadian Wartime Aircrew to be Honoured in Britain," *Ottawa Citizen*, 31 December 2010.
71. "Harper, Dutch Pay Tribute to Fallen Canadians," 6 May 2010, <<http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2010/05/06/netherlands-canada-ceremony.html>>, accessed, 4 February 2011.
72. Canadian Virtual War Memorial, <<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=collections/virtualmem>>, accessed 4 February 2011.

Andrew Horrall is a senior archivist at Library and Archives Canada and an adjunct professor of history at Carleton University. He holds a doctorate in history from the University of Cambridge and has published on cultural and military themes.