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Profiles of Valour: Roger Schjerlderup

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Roger Schjelderup

T. Robert Fowler

On 11 April 1945, the Minister of National Defence for the Army received an unusual top secret cable from Canadian Military Headquarters in London:

CAPT (A/MAJ) VILHELM ROGER SCHJELDERUP MC AND SGT ARMANDO GRI MM RECOMMENDED BY DMI TROOPERS¹ FOR AWARDS: BAR TO MC AND MENTION-IN-DESPATCHES RESPECTIVELY FOR ESCAPE FROM ENEMY CAPTIVITY. REQUEST YOU SUBMIT FOR HIS MAJESTY'S APPROVAL. NO CITATIONS AVAILABLE.

Such a request, with no citation justifying the recommendation, was most unusual. How could Andrew McNaughton judge the merit of this recommendation? He could only accept the request, with the understanding that details of the escape could not be revealed for security reasons. Thus, Captain Roger Schjelderup MC and Sergeant Armando Gri MM received decorations, the details of which were never made public, for a dramatic escape requiring extraordinary inner strength. And with this, Roger Schjelderup, DSO, MC and Bar, CD, became one of the most decorated Canadian soldiers of the Second World War with respect to immediate awards.²

Roger Schjelderup was born in Smithers, B.C. but raised at Courtenay on Vancouver Island where he developed a love of the outdoors, particularly skiing and mountain climbing. He entered the University of British Columbia in



Major Roger Schjelderup, DSO, MC and Bar, 1945.

September 1939 just as war broke out. As the war progressed and the Army mobilized, he felt he had to get involved. In August 1941, he left his studies to join the Army and by December had qualified as a second lieutenant in The Canadian Scottish Regiment.

Schjelderup sailed overseas in June 1942 and in early 1944 was selected to be in the assault force for the invasion of France. Leading a platoon of "C" Company of the 1st Battalion, The Canadian Scottish Regiment, he landed on the extreme western flank of Juno Beach on 6 June 1944. Despite being wounded in the shoulder, he led his men in an aggressive advance to reach the battalion's designated

objectives six miles inland by the end of D-Day. He later commented that "we had unlimited confidence...we had this tremendous sense of mission and we were going to make our objective."³ For his actions this day, he received his first Military Cross.

Upon returning to the Regiment in July, Schjelderup was appointed acting captain and participated in the advance from Normandy to the Dutch border. Thus, on 6 October, Captain Schjelderup found himself in command of "C" Company when the battalion was ordered to attack across the Leopold Canal to capture Oosthoek as part of the plan to eliminate the German bridgehead blocking the Scheldt estuary. The attack was fiercely opposed and, by nightfall, the Canadians had gained only a narrow

bridgehead, with some units out of contact with each other.

At 0300 hours on 7 October the Germans launched a determined counterattack which fell hardest on "C" Company, overrunning two platoons despite determined resistance. In confused fighting, Company Headquarters suddenly found itself surrounded in the house in which they were sheltering. Under Captain Schjelderup and Company Sergeant-Major "Will" Berry, the Headquarters men resisted enemy attacks for two and a half hours, during which time Captain Schjelderup received a painful chest wound from a grenade fragment. However, with "the enemy throwing grenades in through the windows and pouring machine-gun fire through the doors...with the building in flames there was nothing for the survivors but to surrender."⁴

The Germans had achieved tactical surprise in their counterattack and a potential disaster loomed if they could reach the canal, splitting the shallow bridgehead in two. The determined defence of Company Headquarters was significant as it allowed time for a counterattack to be mounted by The Royal Winnipeg Rifles, eventually restoring the position. For his role in this action, Lieutenant (Acting Captain) Schjelderup was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (Immediate), a decoration rarely awarded to such a junior ranking officer.

Before any rescue of the Canadians was possible, the Germans quickly assembled their new prisoners and led them away from the scene of the fighting. These men of the Canadian Scottish could feel some grim satisfaction from the delay and casualties inflicted on the enemy; but the final outcome of the early morning of 7 October must have been depressing. They were first taken northwards to the German divisional headquarters in the town of Oostburg in the heart of the Scheldt pocket. Here they were interrogated, with the Germans particularly interested in knowing the location of the 8th and 9th Brigades. As one ploy, the Germans attempted to disorient Captain Schjelderup by awakening him in the middle of the night and asking, in clear English, if he was from the 9th Brigade.⁵

Late on 8 October, the Canadians began the long trek towards a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany. Under a strong guard, they were first

marched to the port of Breskens where a ferry took them across the Scheldt estuary to Walcheren Island. Conditions were miserable, with each man receiving only three bowls of thin soup during the first six days of captivity. However, one incident illustrated their continuing spirit of defiance:

while the prisoners were huddled together on the square at Goes, and the guards did not know just what to do, a few civilians gathered to witness the scene. Then from the crowd came a young Dutch girl with a basket of fruit for the prisoners. She pushed into the close group and Captain Schjelderup seized the opportunity to pass her a slip of paper containing his name and rank. She was a member of the Dutch Underground and had come to the group for just that purpose. From her the message eventually reached Brigadier F.N. Cabeldu, DSO, [commander of 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade] thus informing him that the men were still alive.⁶

By this time, evacuation by land from Walcheren Island was almost impossible as the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division, 30 miles to the east, had cut almost all road exits. The men were therefore taken to the town of Middelburg and placed in the cold and filthy hold of a canal barge, along with other Canadian prisoners. Three of these were seriously wounded and, when a German hospital ship pulled alongside, Captain Schjelderup attempted to get help for them. However, every time he "climbed the ladder to put his head above the deck and request treatment, he was greeted by obscenities and a loaded rifle. No compassion was shown."⁷

The barge finally left Middelburg and made its way up the coast to the Rhine estuary and the port of Dordrecht, south of Rotterdam. After three days' delay, they were loaded into a train waiting to take them to Hamburg. However, on arriving in the city of Utrecht, 50 kilometres to the northeast, a Dutch rail strike caused the train to be shunted onto a siding. They remained there for six more days, with only one serving of soup daily, very little straw to sleep on, no blankets and no water:

The box car to which they were assigned was to become another torture chamber. The cold was intense and penetrated to every corner of the car. Only a thin layer of straw covered the steel floor. Doors were of steel and were securely locked. The wooden walls were of two-inch planking.⁸

Under these conditions, the health of the prisoners deteriorated, some becoming so weak that they could hardly stand.⁹ Captain Schjelderup in particular had shown some signs of illness even at the start of the attack across the Leopold Canal and his health now worsened. A number of men decided they must escape before being taken to Germany or they would die from either exposure or starvation. Sergeant Armando Gri had had the presence of mind when he was captured to drop a small penknife down one leg of his army trousers. Here, the knife had lodged where the pant leg tucked into his anklet, and had thus escaped detection. This was now used as a cutting tool to slowly chisel an escape door in the wooden wall, using a pencil to hide the fresh cuts.

Late on the evening of 23 October, the train finally built up steam and began to move out of Utrecht. The prisoners knew they would have to make their move. The escape hatch was kicked out and ten men wriggled out in quick succession. From the pitch black of the car interior, they faced an equally dark night. Leaping off the moving train into unseen terrain became the first test of their determination to escape. They were lucky, however, hitting a bridge embankment of fine gravel that nicely cushioned their landing.¹⁰ They then separated into pre-arranged groups with the simple plan of moving towards the sound of artillery, far to the south.

Captain Schjelderup, with Captain Brownridge, Royal Canadian Artillery, and Private Trainor of the Essex Scottish, moved off quickly to get as far away from the railway as possible before daylight. At about 0300 hours, however, they blundered into a fortified German camp where they were challenged by the sentries. They managed to avoid capture but could not get clear of the area by dawn and had to spend the entire day lying motionless in a thicket. With dusk, they attempted to get to a nearby road but found they had to pass through two sets of double apron barbed wire fence. Despite taking precautions in crawling through, they were surprised by an enemy patrol. Captain Schjelderup and Trainor froze behind some trees and eluded capture but Brownridge was spotted in the open. The Germans pounced on him and "beat him to a pulp with the butts of their Schmeissers."

After the Germans had dragged Brownridge away, the two Canadians finally managed to get clear of the area. By now weak with cold and hunger, they decided to seek help from a local resident. They were fortunate. At dawn, they came across a farm which was selling black market milk and the owners were sympathetic. The Dutch brought them inside and gave them warm drinks while contacting the Resistance. At the same time, the Dutch were understandably cautious as the Gestapo had been using *agents provocateurs* to infiltrate Resistance groups. The Canadians were therefore taken to the isolated ruins of an old castle nearby for their identity to be verified.

Representatives of the local organization soon arrived and interrogated the exhausted, dirty Canadians for over an hour. The interrogation was led by a Canadian airman, Sergeant Bob Porter of 419 Squadron, who had been shot down on a bombing mission against the Ruhr some time earlier. Porter was also from Vancouver and questioned Captain Schjelderup in detail about the city. If Porter had raised any suspicions, the Resistance fighters would have shot the escapers immediately.¹¹ Happily for everyone, the Canadians passed the test, although Schjelderup did not immediately respond well due to his illness.

The Resistance now arranged to hide each escaper with a local family. Because Schjelderup's illness was so advanced, he was taken to the house of the leader of the Resistance, Hermannus Rakers. Harboring an escaped Allied soldier was extremely dangerous for any Dutch family, all members of whom would be either shot or sent to a concentration camp if found out. However, Rakers' house would be the safest for the sick Canadian since he was the local chief of police in the village of Groenikan and would therefore be the least likely to come under German suspicion.

Rakers knew who among the local people were reliable and where scarce food and supplies could be found. His first action was to summon a doctor who diagnosed pneumonia. Bob Porter and Mrs. Rakers attempted to care for Captain Schjelderup, changing his bedclothes and bathing him as his fever raged. However, Schjelderup's health continued to worsen, even with improved conditions, and he developed pleurisy, an inflammation of the lungs. A trained nurse finally had to be brought in, under the noses of the



The escapers at Rakers' house. Left to right: Captain Schjelderup, Private Briere, Hermannus Rakers, his wife, an unknown female, Company Sergeant-Major Berry, an unknown person, Bob Porter.

(Photo courtesy of Mrs. H. Rakers)



The escapers, on the morning of 23 December 1944, when they left Rakers' home to travel south. Left to right, back row: Private Trainor, Private Swartz, Company Sergeant-Major Berry, Captain Schjelderup. Front row: Bob Porter, Private Briere and Sergeant Gri.

(Photo courtesy of Bob Porter)

Germans, to provide more care. At one point, they believed their patient would not survive and gloomily discussed how they should dispose of his body.¹² However, Schjelderup's will to live eventually overcame the crisis and he began to recover.

During this period, Schjelderup was able to receive visitors. At least six of the 10 men who had escaped from the train had reached a haven with the Resistance in the area. They were all given civilian clothes and identity cards with false Dutch names and occupations. Those who could not speak Dutch claimed to be deaf and dumb and, under these guises, learned to travel outside without arousing suspicion.

However, shortages of food, clothing and all types of supplies were becoming acute throughout Holland, and electricity was cut off in most cities.

In addition, the Gestapo was becoming more determined in hunting down the Dutch Resistance. Thus, on 19 December, while Rakers and the Canadians were discussing plans for Christmas, a Resistance courier arrived with the message that the Canadians must prepare to leave to try to cross over to the Allied lines.

Early on 23 December, five other Canadians who had escaped from the train, including CSM Berry and Sergeant Gri, were all brought together at Rakers' house. They were given bicycles and, with two Dutch guides, started off in groups of two or three for the 30 kilometre trip to Amerongen. Despite the risks of harbouring the escapers, Hermannus and his wife regretted their departure. The Rakers had become fond of their guests and did not like the plan, believing that the group was too large to succeed without detection. Mrs. Rakers later wrote: "We had a tree

and a rabbit in the barn. That Christmas was the saddest of my life. Only the rabbit was lucky because we didn't eat him. That empty house was terrible.¹³

Rakers was right to have concerns as to the success of the escapers in reaching the Allied lines. They now faced the challenge of crossing the Neder Rijn River, passing through the German front line positions, and then crossing the flooded lowland between the Neder Rijn and Waal Rivers. At the western end of this area, where the neck was the narrowest between Opheusden and Dodewaard, the Dutch Resistance had organized an escape line late in 1944 for British paratroops who had survived the disaster at Arnhem. However, the Germans were aware of this covert activity, especially following the failure of a major escape attempt, code-named "Pegasus III," in October.

After cycling about 20 kilometres, the escapers were handed over to a new guide, Adrian Maijers,¹⁴ who was in charge of the final phase of the operation. Introducing himself as "Dirk" for security reasons, he led them to the town of Amerongen which was to act as an assembly area. Captain Schjelderup and Bob Porter were hidden at the home of Chris Cornelisse, a member of the local Resistance who had been active in harbouring young Dutch people, Allied airmen and, most recently, British paratroops from the Arnhem drop.¹⁵ Here they remained through a quiet Christmas and New Years. The Dutch were in no mood for festivities while the brutal German occupation continued and the country bordered on starvation. Bob Porter described an unusual New Year's Eve, marked only by anticipation of their forthcoming escape to freedom: "We sat up until twelve o'clock, listening to buzz bombs going over to England and then wished each other a Happy New Year."¹⁶

On 2 January, the signal finally came to make their move. Leaving in the late afternoon, the Canadians travelled south of Opheusden to an abandoned brickyard. Here they were joined by other escapers until the group totalled 19. With nightfall, they started out again, travelling to a canal bridge where a British patrol was to take them to safety.

Unfortunately, the patrol did not show up at the designated time and the group decided to go

forward on their own. At about 2300 hours, they ran into an enemy patrol. Although the escapers managed to evade the Germans, they lost their Dutch guides and now had no good idea of where they were. Going south to attempt to hit the River Waal, they instead ran into German positions where a machine-gun on fixed lines opened fire on them. By this time the group was hopelessly scattered as all attempted to save themselves as best as possible. Wilf Berry, wounded in the arm, and Bob Porter attempted to hide in an old shed but, with morning, were forced to surrender.

Captain Schjelderup found himself with Sergeant Gri and a British paratrooper, Private J. Hardy. After about three hours of quietly concealing themselves, they crept away from the German positions, moving across a frozen canal. Unfortunately, the ice was very weak and they broke through becoming immersed in the frigid water. Gri decided that there was no choice but to cross by breaking a path through the thin ice with his fists.

The three thus swam across to a small island where they found a weather-beaten potato shed. Crawling inside, they attempted to sleep, curled around each other to preserve some warmth. With dawn, they found the Germans occupying an occasional post only ten yards away and a permanent post 400 yards further. They lay in the shed all day and night of 3 January, under constant tension that even the frost from their breath might give them away.

The three escapers decided that they should wait until late in the day before moving on, while there was still enough light to see the obstacles in their path. So, late on 4 January, they removed their boots and socks to give themselves greater freedom of movement, slid off onto the ice of the river, and crawled slowly across, to pass over the dyke on the far side. Unfortunately, in the process, they again broke through the ice and lost one pair of boots. Since Captain Schjelderup's feet were in the worst condition, Sergeant Gri gave him his boots for him to continue.

Having passed over the dyke, they were faced with 600 yards of flooded land which was only partially frozen. The report in the Canadian Scottish War Diary describes what happened next:

At every trembling foot-step, the lee broke through again...Sergeant Gri's feet were cut and

bloody by the time the party had reached a house bounded by a farm and trees. They crouched in a cluster of trees to watch the house with cat-like eyes. No movement was discerned so they cautiously approached closer. With thumping hearts, they peered through a window into a vacant room. By now, their cold and hunger had increased greatly as their damp clothes froze to a board-like stiffness. As there were no signs that the building was, or had been, occupied by the enemy, [they] entered and found shelter from the wind.

Once inside, they threw away caution and built a fire. By now darkness had descended, making it necessary to blackout the windows. Gradually the warm fire's breath drove the ice from their veins. As their fingers thawed sufficiently they were able to undo buttons and to strip off all their clothes... When once again underwear, shirts and outer clothing were completely dried the warm men dressed happily. They were still in a precarious position but the situation now was as different from the freezing potato shed and wind-swept iced polders as day is from night.

After having no food for over 48 hours, they were now famished. Some mouldy dried beans were found in the kitchen and used to make an unpleasant-looking gruel which, in their condition, now seemed delicious. With some nourishment and warmth, their strength returned and they spent the night of 4/5 January observing gun flashes, thereby estimating the location of the friendly lines. With this information, they formed a plan for their next move and, on the early afternoon of 5 January, set out again:

With Captain Schjelderup leading Sergeant Gri, followed by Private Hardy, the three crept from the house and cautiously moved to a trail which led across this barren no man's land. They went silently from tree to tree always constantly alert. Several houses were given a searching look and declared suspicious. These were passed by. Hunger pangs soon drove the men to approach a likely-looking building in search of food. It, too, was thoroughly checked for enemy and booby traps before being entered. Inside, luck was with our men. They found plenty of cans of American "M & V," frozen apples and Dutch home-grown tobacco. First requirement filled was that of a smoke...

Approximately 500 yards distant was a house which looked to be a better place to spend the night. So they decided to go over and do just that. A more queer procession seldom filed along a pathway in no man's land. They were all dressed in dirty, tattered civilian clothes. First came Captain Schjelderup. In his left hand he

carried a precious bucket of canned Meat and Vegetable Stew garnished with tobacco leaves. A rusty hatchet was grasped tenaciously in his right hand ready for instant use. He limped painfully, sores and cuts being raw & untreated. Ten yards behind came Sergeant Armando Gri ... Every step was a trial for him as his bare feet were continually breaking ice on the road. He certainly looked the part of a refugee civilian - being dirty and tattered and cold... Trailing him by a pre-arranged ten yards and keeping a sharp lookout to the rear came Private "Scottie" Hardy... As Hardy was guarding the rear of the strange procession, he often walked backwards and sometimes tripped. Later, he was told that those wires had been to trip flares and mines but had been frozen useless.

Meanwhile, 1630 hours, eyes were watching the curious parade down the road. The eyes belonged to two weather-beaten figures cramped in a slit-trench. The sergeant in the trench fingered the trigger of his Bren Gun and looked a question to his officer. "No, not yet," came the soft reply. Previously, these two had watched the trio enter its last house and come out with the baskets. A mortar task was almost called for but was decided against.

Captain Schjelderup and Sergeant Gri were allowed to pass by the outpost but Private Hardy was challenged sharply. He did not realize for a moment that he was "captured" and could only stop and stare and then scream "TOMMIES"....Several seconds elapsed before he complied with the gruffly repeated order. Then the other two were halted.

So it was over! Almost crying in relief at the changed circumstances the three were sympathetically taken to Bn HQ of the British 41st Recce Squadron. Here, they established their identity and were given a warming with tea and rum. Then quick trips to Brigade and Division HQs where they were further interrogated. With the tremendous strain finally released, all three men were in need of hospitalization. Later in the evening, this was received when they were admitted to the 17 Field Dressing Station, located on the outskirts of Nijmegen.

Captain Schjelderup was the most seriously ill having never completely regained his strength after the long months of sickness. Then too, the food in Holland had not been the best of convalescence and the "escape" had been continuously bitter cold.¹⁷

In May 1945, notice of awards of the Bar to the Military Cross to Captain Roger Schjelderup and the Distinguished Conduct Medal to Sergeant Armando Gri were published in the *Canada Gazette*.



Major Schjelderup accompanies H.R.H. The Princess Royal, Colonel-in-Chief of The Canadian Scottish Regiment, as she inspects a 100-man select guard from the Regiment, on the occasion of a farewell luncheon at Mansion House, England, 6 December 1945. (Photo courtesy of Mrs. R. Schjelderup)

Roger Schjelderup chose to remain in the Canadian Army at the end of the war. He progressed in rank, with postings that included command of the 2nd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry in August 1957, and Director of Long Range Planning in 1965. As Colonel he was Senior Military Advisor to the Canadian Defence Liaison Staff (London) in 1974 when he died suddenly of a war-related illness.

While his postwar career was distinguished, his escape in the winter of 1944/45 must have been the most challenging period of his life. Although not a religious person, he was able to derive his inner strength from strong fundamental beliefs. When asked what carried him through, he answered: "There are many things. One is natural instinct - it's a matter of straight survival. The other is esprit de corps or pride in your unit. If you are a real leader at any level, there is a strong driving force behind you — you can't let the troops down. These are very compelling forces."¹⁸ This pride, deepened by his wartime experiences, remained with Schjelderup and he followed the fortunes of The Canadian Scottish throughout his postwar years.

Notes

1. Code-name for the Director of Military Intelligence at the British War Office.

2. Military Cross (MC); Military Medal (MM); Distinguished Service Order (DSO). Commander John Blatherwick, *Canadian Army Honours -Decorations -Medals 1902-1968*. (New Westminster: FJB Air Publications, 1993). Only six Canadian soldiers received three immediate gallantry decorations in the Second World War.
3. *Calgary Herald*, 6 June 1969.
4. R.H. Roy, *Ready for the Fray* (The Canadian Scottish Regiment, 1958), p.332.
5. National Archives of Canada (NAC), Record Group (RG) 24, Volume 15040, War Diary, 1st Battalion, The Canadian Scottish Regiment, January 1945, "Two Came Back," p.2.
6. *Ibid.*, p.2.
7. *Ibid.*, p.3
8. *Ibid.*, p.3.
9. 3rd Canadian Division Intelligence Summary No. 63, 27 January 1945.
10. Communication with W. Berry, Mission, B.C., January 1996.
11. Bob Porter, *A Long Way Back*, unpublished manuscript of his wartime memoirs, 1996.
12. Porter manuscript
13. Correspondence with Mrs. H. Rakers, Zutphen, March 1996.
14. Correspondence with Dr. Esla Caspars, The Hague, May 1996.
15. Correspondence with Mrs. Nely Achterberg (Cornelisse), Amerongen, May 1996.
16. Porter manuscript.
17. NAC RG 24, Vol 15040.
18. *The Calgary Herald*, 6 June 1969.

T. Robert Fowler lives in Ottawa and is the author of *Valour in the Victory Campaign: The 3rd Canadian Infantry Division Gallantry Awards, 1945* (1995).