

The Liberation of the Netherlands

INTRODUCTION

There have been many proud chapters in Canada's military history but one of the best known and most significant was the Liberation of the Netherlands. The Dutch people have never forgotten our brave soldiers' efforts to free their country after years of harsh German occupation during the Second World War.

OCCUPIED EUROPE

The Second World War of 1939-1945 would greatly impact the lives of countless millions of people. This included both those who would serve in uniform and civilians who had to endure great suffering when the fighting came to their homelands.

In Europe, country after country fell to the invading forces of Nazi Germany during the opening stages of the conflict. By mid-1940, much of the western portion of the continent, including the Netherlands, had been

conquered and occupied. It would take years of hard struggle for the Allies to build up their resources and turn the tide of the war. On 6 June 1944, the campaign to free "Fortress Europe" from the west finally began when Allied forces came ashore in Normandy, France, on D-Day. The liberating armies would soon advance north and east, but the Netherlands, with its challenging terrain of canals, dykes and floodlands, would prove to be a very difficult battleground.

THE BATTLE OF THE SCHELDT

In mid-September 1944, the Allies launched Operation Market-Garden, a daring land and airborne attack behind enemy lines in the eastern Netherlands. The goal was to bring the war to a rapid end by cutting in half the German positions in Northwest Europe. The German resistance was determined, however, and the bold offensive failed. It soon became apparent that the conflict would drag on.

Soldiers of the Perth Regiment on the move near the Dutch city of Arnhem on 15 April 1945. Photo: Library and Archives Canada PA-145884



To maintain pressure on the German forces, the Allies needed a reliable way to keep the flow of vital supplies moving to the front lines of Northwest Europe. This meant a large seaport would need to be taken on the continent. The major Belgian port city of Antwerp was captured almost intact in early September 1944 but there was a complicating factor. Antwerp is located some 80 kilometres from the North Sea and is accessible only by the Scheldt river—a waterway that was still in enemy hands.

Much of this portion of the Scheldt runs through the Netherlands and the First Canadian Army led the way in fierce combat to clear the Germans from its shores in the fall of 1944. Our troops would succeed in opening up the port of Antwerp to Allied shipping—a key step in the liberation of Northwest Europe—but it would come at a great cost. More than 6,000 Canadian soldiers were killed, wounded or taken prisoner in this bitter campaign.

THE “HUNGER WINTER”

With the realization that the conflict would stretch into 1945, Canadian soldiers took up positions on the Nijmegen salient in the eastern Netherlands near the German border. The Allies would make careful plans for the campaign to end the war in Europe in the new year but the delay would have serious ramifications for the Dutch people who had already endured more than four years of brutal enemy occupation.

The so-called “Hunger Winter” of 1944-1945 would be a terrible time for many in the country. Food supplies were exhausted and some people were reduced to eating tulip bulbs just to try to survive. Fuel had run out and transportation was almost non-existent. Tragically, thousands of Dutch civilians in the occupied portions of the nation would perish.

North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment soldiers cross a canal at Zutphen in the Netherlands on 7 April 1945. Photo: Library and Archives Canada PA-145100



After three months of helping hold the front line in the Netherlands, in February 1945 the First Canadian Army took part in a fierce Allied offensive through muddy and flooded ground to drive the Germans from the Nijmegen front and back across the Rhine River. The major push to finally liberate all of Northwest Europe had begun.

THE LIBERATION CAMPAIGN

In early April 1945, the First Canadian Army began to clear the Germans from the northeast portions of the Netherlands. Often aided by information provided by Dutch resistance fighters, Canadian troops advanced rapidly, recapturing communities, canals and farmland as they relentlessly pushed forward. By the middle of the month, British and Canadian forces had cleared the city of Arnhem after two days of house-by-house fighting. Only days later, they also freed Apeldoorn. They continued their advance up through places like Zwolle and Groningen towards the North Sea. The Canadians kept up the pressure, putting their lives on the line even though it was evident that the rapidly weakening enemy forces would soon have to surrender anyway. It was felt, however, that the long-suffering Dutch simply could wait for relief no longer. Canadians tried to be judicious with their use of destructive artillery fire and aerial bombing as they didn't want to badly damage the country's infrastructure and make it even harder for the local people to rebuild their lives after the war.

Ecstatic Dutch men, women and children cheered Canadian troops as one town after another was liberated. Recalled one person who was a teenager at the time, "As the (Canadian) tank came nearer...there was a big hush over all the people, and it was suddenly broken by a big scream, as if it was out of the earth. And the people climbed on the tank...and they were crying. And we were running with the tanks and the jeeps all the way into the city."

It was still a challenging and stressful campaign for our troops, however, as it was difficult to predict how the Germans would respond when the Canadians went on

the attack in an occupied town or village. Sometimes enemy forces resisted fiercely and other times they would retreat with hardly a shot being fired. This uncertainty took a psychological toll on our soldiers in the final weeks of the war as no one wanted to lose their lives when victory seemed so close at hand.

In April the Canadians had also begun to advance in the western Netherlands—a populous region containing the major cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague. Canadian troops were prepared to continue their assaults but there were serious concerns this would prompt the desperate German forces to breach all the dykes and completely flood the low-lying terrain. To help ease the pressure, a truce was arranged later in the month that saw the Allied advance there come to a temporary halt. In return, the Germans allowed relief supplies to reach the suffering Dutch citizens still trapped behind enemy lines. To show their appreciation to our forces who airdropped food and other desperately needed supplies during this time, some Dutch people painted "Thank you, Canadians!" on their rooftops.

Thanks to the hard work, courage and great sacrifices of so many Canadian and other Allied troops, enemy forces in the country surrendered on 5 May 1945, finally liberating all of the Netherlands. All German forces on the continent would unconditionally surrender on 7 May 1945, and the next day was declared Victory in Europe (V-E) Day.

SACRIFICE

The fighting in the Netherlands was often bitter but ultimately Canadian service members were able to liberate the Dutch people and help bring the Second World War to an end in Europe. This great victory, however, came at a terrible cost. More than 7,600 Canadians died in the efforts to free the country and are buried far from their homes and loved ones. Others returned home with injuries to body and mind that they would bear for the rest of their lives.

LEGACY

Great bravery and sacrifice on the battlefield were not the only help our country offered the Netherlands during the Second World War. Some members of the Dutch royal family also found sanctuary in Canada during the conflict and Princess Margriet was born in Ottawa in 1943. These powerful connections helped form warm bonds of friendship and respect between the people of Canada and the Netherlands which continue to this day. Evidence of this enduring connection may be seen in the tulips—gifts from the Dutch people—which bloom in Ottawa each spring, and in the care and attention Dutch

children give to the burial places of our war dead in their country. Even though the price was heavy, Canadians are proud to be seen as liberators in the Netherlands.

CANADA REMEMBERS PROGRAM

The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by those who have served—and continue to serve—during times of war and peace. As well, it invites Canadians to become involved in remembrance activities that will help preserve their legacy for future generations.

To learn more about Canada's role in the Second World War, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada website at veterans.gc.ca or call **1-866-522-2122** toll free.



Happy Dutch residents welcome Canadian soldiers after the liberation of the town of Zwolle on 14 April 1945. Photo: Library and Archives Canada PA-136176