



The Liberation of Belgium



Tens of thousands of Canadian service members played an important role in the Liberation of Belgium during the Second World War. Our brave soldiers, sailors and aviators helped the Allied forces defeat the Germans and restore peace and freedom to the country after more than four years of harsh enemy occupation.

FORTRESS EUROPE

The bitter Second World War broke out in September 1939. In the spring of 1940, Germany invaded its neighbouring countries to the west and Belgium would be one of the nations that were soon conquered. Indeed, much of Europe would come under German control in the opening years of the conflict.

Belgium would suffer greatly under enemy occupation. Basic rights were suspended and many civilians were forced into working on German projects. Tragically, tens of thousands of members of the country's Jewish population would also lose their lives in the Holocaust.

The Germans knew that the Allies would eventually try to come ashore in Western Europe to liberate its people. As part of the enemy military strategy, a series of strong defensive positions were built along the coastline of the continent to create what came to be known as "Fortress Europe." The Germans watched from behind their formidable lines of beach obstacles, gun positions, minefields, concrete emplacements and barbed wire, waiting for the Allies to make their move.

After some smaller raids to test enemy defenses and gather intelligence—most notably the Canadian attack at Dieppe, France, in 1942—the Allies landed on the beaches of Normandy on D-Day, 6 June 1944. It was the opening move to free Europe from the west, and Belgium would soon see the results.

THE CANADIANS BREAK OUT

After bitter fighting in Normandy in the months following D-Day, the embattled Germans finally began to fall back. Our troops broke out north and east against the enemy forces who were now rapidly retreating. The First Canadian Army was tasked with securing the ports along the English Channel as they pushed their way up through coastal France to Belgium, and then into the Netherlands on their way to Germany itself.

The Canadian advance held extra importance because the Allies were in major need of a port that could be used by large transport ships. The Allied forces were still largely relying on the vulnerable temporary harbour facilities they had constructed along the Normandy beaches to supply their armies. Making sure that the vital flow of soldiers, ammunition and supplies could continue to reach the front lines was a matter of great importance.

INTO BELGIUM

By early September of 1944, the First Canadian Army—with some British, Polish and other troops also under their command—had liberated much of the French coast northeast of Normandy. As the Canadians swept forward, they cut off a number of fortified seaside towns, leaving these isolated strongholds in enemy hands while most of the German forces continued retreating. Clearing these heavily defended positions would take great effort in the following weeks. Our troops also encountered abandoned

V-1 “Buzz Bomb” launch sites aimed at southeast England. Knocking these terrifying aerial weapons out of action was a great relief to the British people, and gave the Canadians much satisfaction.

It seemed the German resistance was faltering in places and Allied hopes were high for a quick end to the war. Brussels, the capital of Belgium, was liberated by British forces in the first days of September. The 4th Canadian Armoured Division crossed into Belgium on September 6 and fought their way across the Ypres and Passchendaele region, where Canadian troops had also seen heavy action a generation earlier during the First World War. The 2nd Canadian Infantry Division, moving along the coast, also pushed across the Belgian border to capture the port town of Ostend by September 9.

Some Belgian villages were empty of the enemy when Canadian soldiers arrived, while others had to be fought for in what were usually brief but costly affairs. Large parts of western Belgium were quickly liberated as the Germans marshalled their defences in certain key areas. This phase of the liberation was not always rapid, however. The battle to cross the Ghent Canal, for example, was a bitter one.

THE BATTLE OF THE SCHELDT

The first ports liberated in Northwest Europe in the summer of 1944 were either too small or too damaged to solve the Allies’ supply problems. Antwerp, a major port in Belgium, was taken relatively undamaged in early September. The problem was that in order to reach Antwerp from the open sea, Allied transport ships would have to travel about 80 kilometres along the West Scheldt estuary. This long, narrow waterway ran through parts of Belgium and the Netherlands that were still controlled by the Germans, making it impossible to reach the port safely.

With the failure of the ambitious Operation Market-Garden in the Netherlands in the latter half of September 1944, the

Allies realized that the war in Europe would not be ending that year. This hard reality meant they would have to dig in for the long haul—and made obtaining a usable port even more critical. The vital task of clearing the enemy from the Scheldt so the Allies could use the sprawling shipping facilities of Antwerp would largely fall to the First Canadian Army.

An initial attempt by the First Canadian Army to push the enemy back across the Leopold and Dérivation de la Lys Canals and enter the Breskens pocket was unsuccessful. However, the drive to clear portions of Belgian and Dutch territory on the southern shores of the Scheldt west of Antwerp was more successful. Still, the fierce resistance that was encountered made it clear that capturing the Scheldt was going to be a bloody effort.

The Battle of the Scheldt began in earnest on 2 October 1944. Much of the fighting would take place over flat and often flooded terrain that offered little cover for the advancing Canadians. Mud that stuck to soldiers and machines, the many dikes and canals that had to be crossed, and an entrenched, battle-hardened enemy made the struggle to clear the area a mighty effort. Indeed, some of the toughest fighting of the entire war would be to cross the wet, ditched terrain around the Leopold Canal in northwest Belgium—a bitter objective that was finally achieved in the second week of October.

Despite the many challenges, the Allies persevered in fierce combat that would rage for weeks in the fall of 1944. The last portions of Belgian territory held by enemy troops during the Battle of the Scheldt were liberated on November 3. By November 8, the last German troops in Dutch territory along the Scheldt were also forced to surrender. The Scheldt estuary was then cleared of German sea mines and by late November, Antwerp was finally opened to Allied shipping. Fittingly, the first Allied transport ship to arrive was the Canadian-built freighter *SS Cataraqui*.

Allied amphibious vehicles in action near Terneuzen, Belgium, during the Battle of the Scheldt.
Photo: Library and Archives Canada PA-136754



SACRIFICE

Victory in Belgium came at a high cost. More than 6,000 Canadian soldiers would become casualties during the Battle of the Scheldt and more than 800 of our service members are buried in Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries in the country. They made the ultimate sacrifice to help free the Belgian people.

Our brave troops who fought in the Liberation of Belgium were among the more than one million Canadians who served in uniform during the Second World War. Sadly, over 45,000 of them would lose their lives. Many others would return home with injuries to body and mind that they would bear for the rest of their lives.

LEGACY

Canada's impressive efforts in the Second World War remain a point of great national pride, even many decades later. Our Veterans would tell the story of entire Belgian towns coming out to joyously greet their Canadian liberators, showering them with flowers as they passed through in dogged pursuit of the Germans.

The soldiers who helped free Belgium were true heroes, but these heroes were also regular people. They were individuals who stepped forward to put their lives on the line to defend the human rights of others and defeat the forces of tyranny. Our country and the world owe an everlasting debt of gratitude to these courageous Canadians who achieved so much and sacrificed so heavily.

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, military conflict 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 Liberation of Belgium, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada website at veterans.gc.ca or call **1-866-522-2122** toll free.

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