

Handout Group #5: The Liberators

Introduction

The events of the past have a direct impact on the world we know today. The warm relationship that exists between Canada and the Netherlands can be traced back to difficult days at the end of the Second World War when Canada played a key role in liberating the people of the Netherlands.



Occupied Europe

The Second World War influenced the lives of countless millions of people, including those who left home to fight in uniform and those who endured great suffering when the fighting took place in their homeland. In Europe, country after country had fallen to the advances of the German Army. By mid-1940, much of the west of the continent, including the Netherlands, was under German control. On June 6, 1944, the Allied forces embarked on the struggle to liberate "Fortress Europe" from the west with the greatest combined military operation in history: D-Day. The Allies would soon advance north and east out of France, but the Netherlands, with its challenging terrain of canals, dykes and floodlands, coupled with the determined German occupiers, would prove to be a punishing place to battle.

The Battle of the Scheldt

In the months following D-Day, the Allies needed a reliable way to keep war supplies flowing to their forces on the European continent. To do this, they required a good seaport. The Belgian port of Antwerp was captured almost intact but it lay almost 80 kilometres from the sea and was accessible only by a long estuary where the shores were controlled by German forces. Much of this coastal area was Dutch and, in the fall of 1944, the First Canadian Army led the way in fierce combat under harsh conditions to clear the German occupiers from the shores of the Scheldt and open the waterway to vital shipping. More than 6,000 Canadian soldiers were killed, wounded or captured in this gruelling but victorious campaign that became a key step in the liberation of northwest Europe and the end of the war.

The Netherlands' "Hunger Winter"

In the fall of 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 Western Europe. The German resistance was fierce, however, and the bold offensive failed.

This would mean many more months of suffering for the Netherlands, which had already endured years of German occupation. The "Hunger Winter" of 1944-45 was a terrible time for the Dutch people. Food supplies were exhausted; many people were reduced to eating tulip bulbs trying to survive. Fuel had run out and transportation was non-existent. By 1945, the official daily ration per person in the Netherlands was only 320 calories, about an eighth of the daily needs of an average adult. Thousands of Dutch men, women, and children perished of starvation and cold.

Canal by Canal, House by House

After three months of holding the front line in the Netherlands, the Canadians joined the final push to liberate the country. In February 1945, the First Canadian Army joined the Allies in a fierce push through mud and flooded ground to drive the Germans eastward out of the Netherlands and back across the Rhine.

In early April, the First Canadian Army (consisting of about 200,000 Canadians by this time, with tens of thousands more soldiers from other countries under its command) turned its attention north to clear the Germans from the northeast of the country. Often aided by information provided by Dutch resistance fighters, Canadian troops rapidly moved across the Netherlands, recapturing canals and farmland as they drove for the North Sea. Canadians also began to advance in the western Netherlands, which contained the major cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague.

Canadian forces were prepared to continue their push in the west of the country, however, there were concerns this would prompt the now-desperate Germans to breach all the dykes and flood the country. To ease the pressure, and allow for a truce in late April, the Canadian advance in the western Netherlands came to a temporary halt. This allowed relief supplies to reach Dutch citizens who had almost reached the end of their endurance. To show their appreciation to the Canadians who air-dropped food during this time, many Dutch people painted, "Thank you, Canadians!" on their rooftops.

Through the hard work, courage and great sacrifices of Canadian and other Allied soldiers, the remaining German forces in the country surrendered on May 5, 1945, finally liberating all of the Netherlands. All German forces in Europe would surrender May 7, 1945. The next day was declared Victory in Europe (V-E) Day, marking the official end the Second World War in Europe.

A Joyous Welcome

The Dutch people cheered Canadian troops as one town after another was liberated. This was a memorable time for the people of the Netherlands. Recalled one Dutch civilian who was a teenager at the time of the Canadian liberation of The Hague: "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."

The Legacy

More than 7,600 Canadians gave their lives for freedom in the Netherlands.