

***“A LITTLE BRIDGE TOO FAR”***  
**REMEMBRANCE IN RHA**

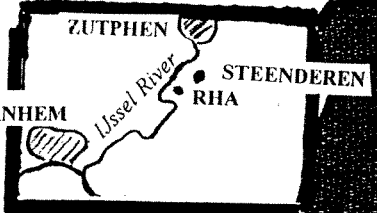
by

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*The "Achterhoek"*



**THE NETHERLANDS**

## A LITTLE BRIDGE TOO FAR

### Remembrance in Rha

#### **The IJssel valley.**

Just east of the city of Arnhem the Rhine river splits for the second time after entering the Netherlands from Germany, flowing in a north-westerly direction. The first time is east of Nijmegen and the Waal, the largest arm, flows westward by that city. The Rhine continues north-westward until the IJssel leaves just before Arnhem on its way north. Then the Rhine also turns westward to flow toward the Dutch coast.

The IJssel has a wide valley all to itself. The undivided Rhine used to follow it many centuries ago, when the level of the oceans was lower. The sediments at its mouth created Doggers Bank in the North Sea. Now the IJssel is the smallest of the Rhine branches but also the most beautiful, especially where it skirts the hills of the Veluwe, an area north of Arnhem. The mouth of the IJssel is at Lake IJssel, the former Zuiderzee. There is plenty of history to the old towns along the river, as Arnhem, Doesburg, Bronkhorst, Zutphen, Deventer, Zwolle and Kampen all were members of the Hanseatic trading league in the Middle Ages.

#### **Where is Rha?**

Situated in a large bend of the meandering IJssel north of Doesburg are two villages on the east bank of the river, Olburgen and Rha. Rha is the smallest of the two. It is like so many hamlets in the IJssel valley of bygone days. There was a windmill, a blacksmith shop, a carpenter shop, a small store, a bakery, a school and some farms. In Rha the buildings are clustered together because the village is built on an old, sandy river dune, a little higher than the surrounding pastureland which used to get flooded quite regularly in springtime.

#### **The Rha Monument.**

In this village, on May 4, 2001, a monument was unveiled to honor six fallen soldiers of the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada, an infantry regiment (Two more names were added to the monument in the winter of 2003). These men were killed in an attempt to liberate Rha on April 6 1945. The idea for the monument came from the village itself and in this endeavor the inhabitants were vigorously supported by the people of Olburgen and of Steenderen, a town east of Rha and the center of the municipality to which all three belong. It only took a year to bring the idea into reality! What truly surprised the people in a wonderful way was that twenty eight relatives of four of these soldiers came to Rha for the unveiling of the monument in 2001. The local committee in charge of erecting the stone also took on the task of finding host families for most of the guests. Both Canadians and Dutch were delighted with the whole event. Complete strangers became good, close friends in a very short time.

### **The Q O R in the “Back Corner.”**

The third division of the Canadian army re-entered the Netherlands on April 1 in 1945 near the town of 's Heerenberg, just north of Emmerich, after crossing the Rhine in Germany. The Allies were in a hurry to get the war over with. Soon the British and the Americans were deep into the heart of enemy territory.

The Canadians proceeded on the left flank of the Allied advance to liberate some obscure areas in the eastern Netherlands, more or less forgotten by the Allied Press. Even the sad official telegrams received by the next of kin of those who died in battle in that area often announced “Killed in Germany.” The name of the area the Canadians came to first was the Achterhoek or “Back Corner.” Three Canadian Divisions and two British ones liberated the region. Fourth Canadian Division followed the British across the border at Dinxperlo, Second Division followed a bit to the west and liberated Doetinchem, Third Division covered the left flank and followed an old road from Emmerich to Zutphen. The Queen’s Own Rifles of the Eighth Brigade of the Third Division were given the task to proceed toward the banks of the IJssel. As the Ninth Brigade proceeded towards Zutphen, 20 k m north of Rha, where the battle began on the fourth of April, the Eighth had halted east of Doesburg, ready to attack that town. But Zutphen proved to be tougher than expected and on April 5 the divisional command ordered the North Shore Regiment (N B) and Le regiment de la Chaudiere to go to Zutphen as well, leaving Doesburg occupied by the enemy. The Q O R were left to guard the river. The regiment moved up to Steenderen, which had already been liberated and where medium heavy artillery had been set up to pound Zutphen. The regiment then went on towards Rha in an attempt to clear the bend in the IJssel river.

### **Some problems.**

Charles C. Martin , in his book, *Battle Diary*, begins his chapter “The Bridge at Rha and Its Buildings” (page 134) by writing: “The unusualness of this battle might have been a consequence of the complete changeover of our men and leaders.”

This changeover meant that a number of officers were new and the thirty reinforcements among the riflemen were mostly inexperienced recruits. Such changeovers were common at that time in the Canadian army, due to the long campaign in Germany in February and March, which had led to many casualties and the postponement of many leaves. Martin is critical of the approach that was followed in the attack at Rha. Rather than throw everything into a direct assault on the village (as had been done before in similar situations,) the place was approached in a textbook manner, more or less on three sides. D Company from the north, B Company from the south and A and C Companies from the east.

### **The Q O R are getting ready.**

In the afternoon of April 3 and the morning of April 4 the men of the Q O R had a chance to rest in Laagkeppel, east of Doesburg. In the afternoon of April 4, with C and D companies in the lead, they set out along the IJssel in the direction of Steenderen. Each company had as its target a farm or small group of farms in the area. B Company, on the way to Zwarte Schaar on the banks of the IJssel and D Company to Hoefken, further east, experienced no difficulties. C and A Companies, on the way to Rodenburg and Eekhoorn/Grote Wei farms respectively further north were bothered by a self propelled 75 mm gun (sturmgeschutz), which fired from across the IJssel river. A Company was plagued by mortar fire from Rha as well as they came close to that village. Near farms Eekhoorn and Grote Wei are about six hundred meters east of Rha, a number of men were wounded. On the way to those two farms A Company crossed the Grote Beek, a large brook which had its bridges blown. One of those bridges must be the one mentioned by Martin in his book. But it was not across the IJssel and not really much of an obstacle. During the night that followed, gunfire from across the river continued sporadically, causing no casualties.

### **The battle begins.**

D Company moved up north-west through Steenderen, turned left at the end of an old river arm, near the Bronkhorst windmill, south-westward and ended up north of Rha at the Emmer, a large old farmhouse, without any trouble. Rifleman J. William Ross, who served with the mortar platoon of D Company, makes the following detailed notes about his experience during that and the next few days in his unpublished manuscript, *The Memoirs of Rifleman Bill Ross* (pages not numbered):

We proceeded on a small road in the direction of some farmhouses, stopped short of the first one and waited while the officer in charge and several riflemen approached the farm to seek information. He gave orders to move up cautiously to the buildings and take up positions. We set up our mortars and then one of the carriers and half a platoon of riflemen approached the 2<sup>nd</sup> farmhouse [‘t Huis Weerd, owned by A P Vlemingh] and took positions. We were informed the Germans occupied the 3<sup>rd</sup> farmhouse [owned by the “brothers” Vlemingh] and the village lay beyond. We ranged in on the 3<sup>rd</sup> house and fired a few [mortar] bombs to prepare our mortar base and confirm the range of our potential targets. Things were quiet the first night. ---.About noon the next day [April 5] the riflemen of C company came across the farmers fields in single battle order to take up positions in front of us when suddenly a German machine gun opened up and the riflemen dived for cover. Captain Pickup yelled for covering mortar fire as Dick Grey and I responded. Dick fired mortar #2 and I fired mortar #1. The rest of our crew prepared and carried the bombs to us as we fired at will. Fortunately the machine gunners had put their heads down and stopped covering the fields where we were located. We must have been on target as the riflemen were able to move forward without further incident and took up positions for an upcoming attack. During all our firing the Germans ranged in on us with their medium artillery [most likely from across the IJssel] and sent a number of shells in our direction. They landed close enough that I had to dive for cover. Fortunately, no one was hit in that exchange.

That evening [April 5] another battle took place.[It was the prelude to the major attack on Rha that night]. The Germans sent a volley of tracer fire [from heavy machine guns] at the carrier section in farmhouse # 2. The barn was set on fire and the carrier and carrier boys were silhouetted by the flames. They scrambled for safety and managed to get to our farmhouse where we all stood to in event of further action. The next morning [April 6] a German sniper put a shot through the kitchen window. I ran and got my rifle and climbed up into the attic to see if I could return the compliments but he had taken off hurriedly.

That day [actually the night before] the regiment made an all around attack to try and liberate Rha. The riflemen attacked from water filled trenches and muddy fields under very duress conditions and managed to penetrate to the center of the village. Another attack was planned for the next day but orders came through that our regiment should join up with the others of Eighth Brigade who were liberating Zutphen. The Royal Canadian Dragoons took over our positions. ['t Huis Weerd remained in Canadian hands].

The Royal Canadian Dragoons were at that time serving as a Reconnaissance Regiment under direct command from First Canadian Corps. Their home base was Petawawa, Ontario. The Q O R served in Second Canadian Corps.

#### **B Company attacks.**

Meanwhile, in the afternoon of April 5, platoons from B Company had moved up from Zwarte Schaar along the IJssel river to position themselves south of Rha. Near the farm Pipelure Eleven and Twelve Platoons came under heavy small arms fire. Their commander, Lieutenant John Gordon Kavanagh received a direct hit from a "Panzerfaust", an enemy bazooka, and was killed instantly. The two platoons then withdrew under covering brengun fire from Tenth Platoon, led by Sergeant Ken Scott. Four riflemen had been wounded.

#### **A Company attacks.**

In the evening of April 5 the platoons from A Company, led by Nine, started out from the farms Eekhoorn and Grote Wei. In response to German mortar shells, six pounders of the Q O R had set a couple of the farms in the eastern end of Rha on fire and there was plenty of light for an attack which began in earnest in the late evening. The platoons moved first in the direction of the farm 't Huis Weerd and then turned south to Rha, following the many enemy trenches in that area. (They had actually been dug by Dutch forced labor.)

When Rha was reached Eighth platoon led off into the hamlet near the windmill. The *Q O R War Diary* calls the resistance "furious". One of the first casualties was Rifleman H F Goldsmith from Oshawa. He was badly hit by several machine gun bullets and died two days later. (His name and that of M Duralia were added to the Rha monument in 2003).

### **The attack fails.**

Towards midnight two sections of Seventh Platoon were taken to a farm owned by Mr. J. Berendsen, toward the east end of Rha. Once there they were soon counter attacked from trenches nearby and cut off. After a fight of an hour or so one or two brengun carriers got through, drove up to the farm and picked up the survivors. A Company withdrew back to the Eekhoorn farm. Seventh platoon suffered, according to the *War Diary*, five killed and six missing. The "missing" had fallen into enemy hands. Actually, four men were killed outright in the barn of the Berendsen farm and they were buried in front of the house by the enemy. They were Riflemen J E Aiken, T E C Crawford, M J McKenna and G C Woodruff. Riflemen M Duralia and D N Patience were among the wounded and fell into enemy hands. Max Duralia was liberated again and taken to England on April 19 where he died in hospital on April 27. Donald Patience was likely wounded again when he came back into allied hands and died in Nijmegen Jonkerbosch hospital. He was buried in the hospital garden on April 19.

Major Hogarth was wounded in the arm and had to leave the regiment for treatment.

### **After the battle.**

The next morning, April 6, C Company moved up to the Eekhoorn farm as A Company withdrew for a break to rest and re-equip. Meanwhile Rha was heavily shelled by six pounder guns, 24 pounders, tanks and mortars. On the seventh of April the Q O R began to move up toward Zutphen, leaving the artillery in Steenderen to continue bombarding Rha from close range. There was not much left of the village after that. Even so the enemy did not leave Rha until April 16, when they were in danger of being cut off, as the Canadian First and Fifth divisions had crossed the IJssel north of Zutphen and at Westervoort near Arnhem respectively on April 12. The people of Rha had been forcibly evacuated across the IJssel on April 6 and 7. On their return on April 17 they found their village destroyed. Fortunately none of them had been killed. The Berendsen home could be fixed during the summer of 1945, but the barn in the back had to be torn down and was rebuilt some years later.

### **Fifty-six years later.**

In the fall of 1999 your writer received a call from a Dutch Canadian friend. "Henk, did you know that the Q O R are going to Zutphen next spring?" he asked. I was quite excited as I had hoped for years that Canadian veterans would return to the city I knew so well and where I had attended highschool. In 1995 about a dozen men from the Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders had been there. That regiment of the Ninth Brigade of the Third Division had liberated the Dykman family in Leesten, about five kilometers from Zutphen center. There they lost eleven men on April 4 1945. Four more were killed in the city on April 7.

In April of 2000 Freka Krooshof from "Welcome Again Veterans", in charge of arranging the visit of the veterans to Zutphen called me. She was quite worried. "The Q O R have their own program and they want to do our program as well. Even a young person would drop from fatigue after all that", she said. She had a phone number of a Q O R official in Toronto and I had a conversation with him. As we talked he realized they would have to scale back some of the activities.

"But even so you must go to Rha" I told him. "That is where you fought and where some of your men died. Not in Zutphen."

Well, because of the very busy schedule the visit could not be fitted in. When I got to Zutphen and talked to the folks there, I heard the same message: "There is no time for Rha."

I was disappointed so when I was told that on May 6<sup>th</sup> of 2000 there was a huge party in the village of Rha to celebrate the restoration of the local windmill, I went there rather than go to the official ceremonies at Groesbeek Canadian cemetery.

### **The celebrations in Rha.**

What a feast it was. The weather was fantastic and the restored mill looked great. One of the speakers on this occasion was Paul Kok, the chairperson of the Steenderen Historical Society. When he came down to have a better look at the turning of the majestic arms of the windmill, I grabbed his hand.

"Paul, I'm sure you know that some Canadians were killed here in Rha in April 1945."

"Oh yes, I sure do."

"Well, I have here a paper with a little bit of history of the regiment they served with and a list of the names of those killed in Rha."

"How interesting. We have no idea who they were. Let me get somebody who was here during the fighting. He would like to see those names as well, I am sure."

So I also met Jan Horstink, who later chaired the Rha Monument Committee. He was bubbling with enthusiasm and we quickly got into a very animated discussion. In the end a small group of local people decided to look into the possibilities of having the fallen Canadians properly commemorated in the village. I suggested a plaque in their memory on the outside of the newly restored windmill.

### **No grave for Lt.Kavanagh.**

A few days later I went to the Groesbeek to see if men who had died in Rha were buried in that Canadian cemetery and was very surprised to see that Lt. Kavanagh's name was listed on a wall with the names of missing soldiers. There was no grave for him. And no information about him in the cemetery register. What happened? The *Q O R War Diary* was very clear on how, when and where he died. During the year that followed I corresponded with Wim Felix, who became the secretary of the Rha Monument Committee. He did some research in the Steenderen Municipal Archives, which had been moved to a provincial building in Arnhem. They found in the papers two contradictory items regarding Kavanagh. The first document said that he had been moved to Holten Canadian cemetery as an unknown soldier early in 1946. The second paper stated that the Ministry of War in the Hague had paid 60.- guilders to Steenderen for the moving of the remains of an unknown British soldier to the Steenderen cemetery, also in 1946. In addition, there was a document related to the finding of clothing in the field where Kavanagh had been killed as well as the finding of what was likely Kavanagh's identification "tag" nearby. Upon my request for information the Commonwealth War Graves Commission told me that the dental records of the unknown soldier in Steenderen did not match those of Kavanagh.



My efforts to get in touch with Kavanagh's relatives have been unsuccessful. What I believe has happened to this lieutenant ( the last officer of the Q O R to die in battle in W W II) is that at least most of his body was taken to Holten in the spring of 1946 and buried there and his grave is listed as that of an unknown soldier. Later that year more of Kavanagh's clothing and his I D tag were found and taken to the Steenderen Municipal Archives, which were later moved to Arnhem. There may have been some more body parts involved, but if so, I have no idea what has happened to them.

In Groesbeek I did find the grave of Donald Patience. Later in this story we will hear about a Dutch eyewitness who is sure she saw him and Max Duralia before they were taken away, most likely to an enemy field hospital on the west side of the IJssel. How, where and when he died and was taken to Groesbeek, I don't know. The Common Wealth War Graves Commission states that he died in Nijmegen Jonkerbosch hospital on the 19<sup>th</sup> of April. That leads me to think he was wounded again when he came back into Allied hands.

### **The Rha Monument Committee.**

Early in October of 2000 I got a letter from Jan Horstink. He had wasted no time at all. A monument committee had been set up, consisting of Jan as chairperson, Wim Felix as secretary and Gerrit Tijkken as treasurer. The latter two live in Steenderen. Sometime later Erica Schut and Geert Postma, both from Rha, were added. A bank account had been opened, publicity had been started and the committee had decided not to place a plaque but to erect a monument along the main road through the village, to be unveiled on May 4 2001.

I was delighted and responded "I will try to contact some relatives of these fallen soldiers, but don't get your hopes up too much. It won't be easy."

Well, I was wrong. I wrote to three newspapers and they published my request for information on Remembrance Day. Within two weeks I realized there would be at least twenty relatives of three of the six fallen soldiers (we then knew about) coming to Rha. Wow! "Watch out, there is going to be another invasion," I wrote the committee. They were surprised, but pleasantly so. And they did a great job finding hosts, arranging some bus tours, pick ups at Schiphol airport and other things. Indeed, this Monument Committee did a wonderful job all around.

### **Who were all these relatives?**

The oldest of the men who were killed at Rha was Ted Crawford, the eldest in a large family. He was married and it was his daughter, Joan who called me up after the Northern Times in Kapuskasing published my request. She was in tears. She had been to her Dad's grave in Holten before, but she wanted badly to see the place where he was killed. She came to Rha with her husband Allan and in the company of a sister, Francis Boudreau, and Ted's youngest brother, Leo, who brought his wife Joyce. A number of nieces and nephews also came, most with spouse. A sister of Ted's widow Edmee, Mrs. Babe Richards, came with her son Chuck. Edmee herself was too ill to travel.

Joe McKenna was also the eldest brother in a large family. His mother died in childbirth and the family was a close knit one, living on a farm near Montague, P E I. The newspaper there

published my request and the island newspaper in Charlottetown picked it up as well, so my letter went all over P E I. Three sisters of Joe came to Rha. The oldest was Mary Henneberry, who came with her daughter Theresa. The other two were Laura Brazel, accompanied by her husband Yuzzy and Evelyn McAliney, accompanied by her husband Peter and her two sons, Peter James and Miles.

Three brothers, nephews of Donald Patience came as well, Paul, Bruce and Ross Matthewson. One of them had seen my notice in the Toronto Sun.

Ten days before I was ready to leave for the Netherlands in 2001, I got a call from Glen Aiken.

“I saw your request on the Q O R web site. I am a nephew of Jimmy Aiken, who was killed in Rha. In my uncles papers is a photo of his first grave. There are four crosses on that grave. One has his name. Would you like to see that picture?”

Would I ever! I visited with Glen in Mississauga the next day. The photo was incredible, the names on the crosses very clear: Aiken, Crawford, McKenna and Woodruff. No mistake about it. And Glen also managed to go over to Rha in time for the unveiling. He brought this teenage son Steve with him.

It had already been dawning on me during my correspondence with Wim Felix that George Clifford Woodruff had also been killed at Rha. But, likely due to an administrative error, the date of his death was listed in the Steenderen municipal papers as April 17 and that date had also been put on the gravestone. Veterans of the Q O R had told me that on April 17 "Cliff" was definitely no longer with the regiment. That he was listed in Steenderen on the same paper with the others killed on April 6 was seen as significant. Anyway, the Aiken' photo was proof that Cliff died on the Berendsen farm.

Because of this confusion I did not include Cliff's name in my efforts to contact relatives via newspapers in the fall of 2000. Later I made three attempts to contact relatives by writing to two Toronto papers, in late winter of 2001 and around November 11 of 2001 and 2002, but they did not cooperate. Nothing was printed as far as I know. Anyway, there were no relatives of Cliff Woodruff in Rha in May of 2001.

### **Sunday afternoon April 29, 2001.**

On the farm of Jan Horstink, the Grote Wei, across the way from the Eekhoorn, relatives of three fallen soldiers met with the Mayor of Steenderen, the Rha monument committee members and local survivors of the battle at Berendsen farm, on April 29 2001. About forty people had lunch together in the old cattle barn turned into a modern fruit sorting center. After lunch we went around the circle, everyone introducing him or herself, if possible in English, otherwise in Dutch. The Mayor of Steenderen, Mr Appeldoorn, bid everyone welcome and received several gifts from the Canadians.

When the warm formalities were over, the three "girls of Rha" told their story. They were Bep Berendsen, who was twenty years old in 1945 and two daughters, Leila and Annie of a neighbor

family, the Reewinkels, which had also found shelter in the Berendsen vegetable cellar during the battle. These two girls were fourteen and twelve years old at that time.

The Reewinkel women told how they had been in the barn of their own farm in the afternoon of April 5 until the gunfire became quite intense and better shelter was needed. The parents decided to go to the Berendsens, because there was a safe cellar there. The family, including a baby, managed to crawl through a trench to get there. The noise of the battle was incredible. They settled into what became a very crowded cellar, for the night. The firing got closer and closer, until after midnight they heard footsteps overhead.

Father Berendsen said, "That is not the enemy."

Soon after two men came down the narrow cellar steps in the darkness, one supporting the other. A Canadian soldier with a leg wound more or less carried a buddy with a head wound. He managed to make father Berendsen understand that he needed help in bandaging the other man's head. Then they had to find a way for him to lay down in the crowd and the man's wounded head ended up in Leila's lap. She cradled it for the rest of the night. That soldier did not speak, but the other one kept trying to encourage him nevertheless, urging him to pray.

The baby cried a lot. Mother Reewinkel said: "It's good that everybody knows there are children down here."

The battle raged on overhead. Finally they heard the roar of an engine. A vehicle came up and drove away again a little later.

Shortly after that they heard shouting upstairs: "Nicht schiessen, nicht schiessen," (Don't shoot, don't shoot!)

It could have been Canadians giving themselves up or enemy soldiers who had returned and were under fire from their comrades. The shooting finally stopped. In the stillness an enemy soldier cried continually for his mother. The enemies were mostly boys, often no more than sixteen years old.

### **The Canadians are gone.**

When daylight came the family was ordered to come upstairs by enemy soldiers who had retaken the building. Father Berendsen went up first. A pistol was drawn and put on his chest.

"Where are your weapons?"

"We have no weapons."

The whole family was then ordered to leave the farm. The wounded Canadians were left behind. On the way out they went through the cattle barn and there they saw four dead Canadian soldiers. One was seen lying near the door to the living quarters. Another behind the cows near a small window (his papers indicate that it was Crawford). One lay in front of the cows, a cow rope still in

his hand. The fourth was seen near the back door (his papers indicate that it was Mc Kenna).

The two families went their different ways. Most of the Rha population sheltered in the large oven of a nearby brick factory the following night. They were ordered to evacuate across the IJssel. They went to the river via Olburgen. There Bep Berendsen saw some enemy soldiers guarding prisoners of war. One was lying on a cart with his head bandaged, another limped beside it.

“Our Canadians,” the Berendsens said to each other.

That same day they got across the river and found shelter in the village of Eerbeek further along where they stayed for more than a week.

After the three women told their story, there in the barn of the Horstinks, lots of questions from the Canadian relatives were asked about what it was like in Rha during the battle and before and how the people rebuilt their village. The three nephews of Donald Patience asked if anyone had any idea who that incredibly loyal wounded friend of Donald's might have been and where and when their uncle might have died, but in spite of much research by the committee no one could give them satisfactory answers. Actually, it turned out later that Donald was the helpful soldier with a leg wound and Max Duralia, a young recruit, suffered the head wound.

#### **At the Berendsen house.**

Late in the afternoon on that Sunday the group of relatives and friends walked to the old Berendsen farm in Rha. It was now a modern house, owned by Dick and Jolande Smit. The couple was very pleased to receive the crowd, especially the Canadians. They also acted as hosts for two of the relatives. The Smits showed their house to everybody. In the cellar, still very much the same as it was in 1945, we saw a rough cross etched in a cement wall. It had been made by the soldier with a wounded leg. In front of the house in a pasture was the spot where the four Canadians had lain buried. Bep Berendsen knew exactly where it had been. She had looked after that big grave very faithfully until the bodies had been moved by Canadian service men to Holten in 1946.

#### **Holten Canadian cemetery.**

In the morning of May 4 2001 we first set out for the village of Holten. In the Canadian cemetery there four of Rha's fallen soldiers were buried. We were a bit worried. Actually, very worried. Every year there is a ceremony in Holten on the morning of May 4 to commemorate the fallen Canadians buried there, but in 2001 that ceremony was canceled. The reason was a Foot and Mouth disease epidemic and the great fear the officials had that visitors would spread it to the deer population in the forested area around the cemetery. So it was officially closed to the public. I had received the news about this some weeks before and some of the relatives and I had contacted the Dutch Ambassador in Canada and the Canadian Ambassador in The Hague to see if an exception could be made. Approaches to the Dutch Minister of Agriculture had also been made from both countries. A Dutch friend of mine had actually managed to speak to the minister himself and when I arrived in the Netherlands he was quite hopeful.

We arrived early, about 9:30 in the morning. After about twenty minutes a gentleman appeared and asked how many Canadians were on board. Twenty four, it turned out. The rest of us were Dutch hosts. He then suggested to some folk who had arrived by car to go into the bus as well. There was enough space for them. Then he told us to proceed. The bus went through a disinfection procedure on the outside. After that we carried on to the cemetery itself. When we left the bus we found we were the only persons there. No one else had been allowed in. The relatives were deeply moved as they visited the graves and were very, very grateful to the Dutch Minister of Agriculture.

### **Gathering at the new monument.**

At about 17:00 hours on May 4, 2001, everybody began to arrive at the site of the new monument. One of the committee members, Erica Schut, with her husband, had donated the land on which the granite stone had been erected. It was surrounded by a circle of six young maple trees. A small circular hedge had been planted between the trees and three benches had been donated, so people could reflect quietly at the site. In a meadow nearby a large tent had been erected and that was most welcome. A chilly evening wind made it rather unpleasant to be outside. In the tent a very fine supper was served to the gathered community.

After the dishes had been cleared from the tables the official speeches began. Local dignitaries and committee members welcomed everybody, spoke of the details involved in getting the job done and their delight that the evening had come with so many Canadians present.

### **A father who did not return.**

Mrs Joan Crawford-Barrer, Ted Crawford's daughter spoke on behalf of all relatives present at Rha or still overseas. She expressed her gratitude to the community of Rha for the monument and the warm welcome they had experienced. Then she spoke about her father:

War. What does war mean to me? War means a loving father, who took me everywhere he could. A father who laughed, loved and lived his life to the fullest. A father who never came back. --- He was a very active man --- he was the president of his local union, he was a hockey coach --- he was a Knight of Columbus and he played the tuba in the Kapuskasing band. I still remember him playing guitar and singing --- He was the joy of our lives!

Joan then reminded all present about the suffering of the local community, in Steenderen municipality, during the years of occupation. She named two local men in their early thirties, J W Agterkamp and H W Besselink, who were executed early during the war for helping a British pilot, Richard Pape, to escape. One also had left a wife and young children.

"I empathize with you so much," Joan said.

She also mentioned the children who had died at Baak, in the northern region of Steenderen municipality, While they were cheering the Canadians upon their arrival, an enemy shell had landed in the crowd.

Toward the end of her speech she said, "After my father's death, my mother was allowed to have the inscription of her choice engraved on his head stone and the words she chose were:

*One of the best this world contained.*

*Always remembered by Edmee, Joan and Bobby.*

I am sure that Aiken, Kavanagh, McKenna, Woodruff and Patience were also the best this world contained."

She ended with:

Canadians everywhere hold the Dutch very close to their hearts. You are known the world over as a very gracious and giving people. Be proud, hold your heads high and know that in return you are very much loved and respected. Again we thank you for your generosity, your caring, your friendship and your love. We will never forget you.

### **Gerrit Jan van 't Holt.**

The next speaker was the chairperson of the Dutch organization Welcome Again Veterans. Gerrit Jan, as the principal of Holten Elementary School, had started many years before with organizing visits from his schoolchildren to the Canadian graves and later became the driving force behind his welcoming veterans group. He had decided to ask the official Canadian delegation who would normally be present at a Holten cemetery ceremony on May 4 to come to Rha, because this year it had been cancelled. He spoke to a group of gathered children from local schools and explained to them how important it was that young people remember the sacrifices of the Canadians in World War II and honor their dead. The children would later participate in the ceremony at the monument by each placing a tulip in the metal frame of a large maple leaf.

### **Unveiling the Monument.**

At about 19:30 hours the people in the tent began to move quietly towards the monument itself. There were no speeches there as we stood quietly, about four hundred persons, shivering in the chilly wind, listening to the mournful music of the Steenderen band and a single piper. The cover was silently removed from the stone and we read the names. At 20:00 hours the last post sounded and for two minutes the world stood still. We knew that the whole country had fallen silent around us to once more remember the millions who had perished in that most awful of all wars. And we remembered in particular these Canadian men whose blood had soaked the ground, so near.

After the reveille had sounded, wreaths and flowers were laid at the foot of the stone. Dignitaries representing the Canadian Government and the Canadian Legion came first. The Queen's Own were represented by a friend, Jacqueline Witkamp from Zutphen, who placed a wreath in their name. Many others came forward, Canadian and Dutch, to bring flowers as an expression of their promise not to forget. "Dying for freedom is not the worst that could happen. Being forgotten is," are the words carved at the bottom of the handsome granite stone.

### **Saying Goodbye.**

At noon, on Sunday May 6 2001 Canadians and Dutch gathered in the tent for the last time to say

goodbye. But for many not forever. The Dutch hosts were invited to come to Canada if at all possible. There were hugs and kisses, there were tears, as is appropriate at the parting of friends. Farewell speeches made during brunch made the atmosphere comfortable. During one of them, one of the Committee members spoke about "a little *Bridge Too Far*<sup>1</sup>."

"As in Arnhem", he said, "Rha was not liberated. Here the people had to wait for the enemy to finally withdraw. That is all the more reason to honor those who died trying to free us. In Arnhem the British paratroopers have a monument which is very popular among tourists from many nations. We will maintain our monument here for our fallen Canadians and I believe many people will come here too to remember."

At 14:00 hours a little band began to play and we danced. A young man approached me and introduced himself as Karl Lusink, a local historian.

"Did you realize that a Q O R soldier, Rifleman Harold Francis Goldsmith, died from wounds on April 8 at a field hospital in 's Heerenberg? He must have been wounded here."

"Oh dear. We may have missed somebody on the monument. I will tell the committee. We will certainly look into it," I responded.

### **Back in Canada.**

When I came back to Guelph I wrote to the National Archives in Ottawa and they were able to help in Goldsmith's case, because they had medical records of his wounding. He had been hit late in the evening of April 5, 1945, was operated on April 6 but died early in the morning of April 8. The Rha Monument Committee decided to have Goldsmith's name added to the monument in the winter of 2003. They asked me to try to get in touch with his relatives and invite them to Rha, but this time I was not successful. I wrote twice to the Toronto Star, for Remembrance day of 2001 and 2002, but the letters were not published and I got no response from relatives.

### **Captain Craig Cameron**

Sometime during 2002 I was contacted by Captain Craig Cameron, the present Chaplain of the Queen's Own Rifles. He turned out to be a most helpful gentleman, very curious about all the fuss in Rha. I explained to him what had happened there and he was impressed. I asked him if he could help with finding relatives of Kavanagh, Goldsmith and Woodruff and he promised to try.

On November 30 2002 I got an e-mail from Cameron with the following information:

---With regard to Rfn George C. Woodruff, I went to the little town of Vernonville (near Cobourg) last week on my way back from Cornwall. I found two grave markers from Woodruffs. There had been a funeral so I asked one of the local fellows if he knew if there were any of this family around. He then directed me to

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<sup>1</sup> This book about the Battle of Arnhem, *Bridge Too Far: the Classic History of the Greatest Airborne Battle of World War II*, was written by Cornelius Ryan and published in 1974. It was followed in 1977 by the movie, *A Bridge Too Far*, directed by Richard Attenborough.

the oldest man in town. In turn, this gentleman called the woman who does the cemetery book keeping. There were recent burials (1992 and 1994) and she had been in touch with Woodruffs who were related and had purchased a lot there. He called me with the names and here they are: Albert Woodruff --- George Woodruff --- Blain Woodruff.

Cameron included the addresses and phone numbers of Albert and George in his e-mail so I called.

At Albert's there was no answer. I moved on to George. Well, George was fascinated. He and Blain are brothers, nephews of George Clifford and both were very interested to hear about what had happened to their uncle Cliff. I referred them to Wim Felix in Steenderen and with Wim the two brothers developed a wonderful relationship. They were in Rha with their wives in 2003, in Normandy and Rha in June of 2004 and Wim and a friend, Emmy Stegeman, visited them in Canada in August and September 2004. Wim and Emmy also went to visit Joan Crawford- Barrer in Kapuskasing. Joan and her husband Alan had been staying with Emmy in 2001.

About Lt. Kavanagh, Craig Cameron mailed me a photocopy of an ad in a Toronto newspaper of 1945:

Lieut. John Gordon Kavanagh, 24, of the Queen's Own Rifles, was killed in Germany on April 6, according to information received by his mother, Mrs. Cora Kavanagh, 12 Sandford Ave. Son of the late John Kavanagh of Toronto, he enlisted in the Q O R in 1940 and went overseas as a private in August of the next year. He returned to Canada in October 1943 and was commissioned at Brockville in 1944. He returned overseas in September of that year.

Born in Toronto, he attended Leslie Street Public School and Riverdale Collegiate, where he was active in sports. He was a member of Woodgreen United Church. In June 1943 Lieut. Kavanagh was married to Jean Hadderton of Toronto, who went overseas with the Red Cross and is still in London. Lieut. Kavanagh is also survived by two brothers, Frank and Robert, and a sister, Mrs. Mabel Young, all of Toronto.

In response to my letter of November 2001 the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa told me in February 2002 that Emily Jean Kavanaugh(!) (Nee Haddleton) served with the Canadian Red Cross Corps and that I might try to contact them at their National Office in Ottawa with possible information about where she might be or what might have happened to her, but they decided they could not cooperate in the matter.

Via the internet I found that there were 74 Kananagh addresses in Toronto alone. I tried the "Franks" and "Roberts" and a few more, without any results. I found five Haddleton addresses, but did not get any helpful information about Jean.

Craig Cameron noted that Harold Goldsmith parents were Leonard Roy and Violet Alice



Goldsmith from Oshawa. He gave me a few phone numbers to call in Oshawa, Whitby and Ajax, but none got me any more information about the rifleman. However, the National Archives provided me with photocopies of Harold's medical records and the story of his death became quite clear. He received his first shot of morphine around 11:00 p m on April 5, after having been severely wounded by several machine gun bullets in his abdomen. On April 7 he was operated on in a field hospital at 's Heerenberg but quickly weakened further and he died early in the morning on April 8.

I did find out that someone in Saskatchewan had tried to obtain a photo from Harold's gravestone, but was not successful in contacting that person. The e-mail address was no longer being used.

Finally Craig Cameron informed me on November 30, 2002, that the plans for a trip of the Q O R to Normandie and the Netherlands had not yet been completed, but that the Q O R were aware that the people of Rha would love to see them there. Eventually the Q O R traveled to Normandie for the opening of the Juno Beach Center on June 6, 2003, and later went to Zutphen and a bus full of people from that tour came to the Rha monument on June 13 including five W W II Q O R veterans.

#### **Rifleman Max Duralia.**

On February 16 of 2003 I got another e-mail from Craig Cameron:

Henk, I just received 2 e-mails from a man with reference to his uncle who died serving with the Q O R in W W II. He....sent me portions of the service record and apparently his uncle, Rfn Max Duralia died on April 27, 1945, in England. He was wounded on the night of 5/6 April (presumably at Rha) and then taken prisoner. Duralia was somehow recaptured----- taken to England on 19 April and died there in 27 April. Can Max's name still be added to the monument?

Max's nephew was John Mahovlich. On my request, John mailed copies of his uncle's service records to Wim Felix. Eventually we had no doubts that Max was the soldier with the head wound in the cellar of the Berendsen farm. And we assumed that Donald Patience was the one with the leg wound, who took care of Max. Max, a Serbian immigrant, had served only a couple of weeks with the Q O R before he was wounded. As a new recruit he had very likely an experienced Q O R rifleman assigned to him to make sure he would learn the skills needed to survive on the battlefield. Donald certainly was a very experienced soldier and he must have felt a lot of responsibility for the well being of Max. So when Max got wounded Donald took him to safety in the Berendsen cellar and did everything he could to help him. And when Donald heard a carrier drive up to take the survivors of the battle to safety, Donald decided to stay with Max, risking a very uncertain future. Indeed, it cost Donald his life!

I phoned Wim Felix immediately. Yes, the monument stone was still in a workshop to have the name of Rfn Goldsmith added and there was one more space available, so Max's name could go on.

### **The Q O R at Bernieres sur Mer.**

I went to the Netherlands in May ,2003, and Wim Felix and Jan Horstink invited me to come with them to Normandy from Steenderen in June . We had a wonderful trip together.

At 7:00 a m in the morning of June 6 we were with Canadian veterans and others at the Q O R monument near the beach at Bernieres. It was a beautiful morning, much quieter than on June 6 1944. At 7:15 a m the remembrance ceremony began. Padre Craig Cameron read the 60 names of the fallen Q O R, the highest number of casualties of any Canadian regiment on D-Day. Most of them fell right there on the beach. After the Last Post and Reveille a lone piper played the lament. He turned his back to us and faced the sand. It was incredibly moving.

After the ceremony we spoke to Colonel Steve Brant, who kindly provided us with tickets for the opening of the Juno Beach Center that afternoon. Then we went to the big house nearby that features prominently on several photos of the D Day landings and is known as the first house liberated by Canadians. I was introduced to a woman whose mother was in that house as a child on June 6, 1945. The Q O R D-Day veterans present were falling over themselves to try and please the lady.

### **Q O R veterans return to Rha.**

In the evening of June 13, 2003 four veterans of D Company of the Q O R returned to Rha after ~~fifty-eight years~~, in the midst of a group of other veterans and friends from a tour arranged by the Q O R. They were Sgt Charles Cadieux, 17 Platoon, Rifleman Orville Cook, Sniper Charles McNabb and Rifleman William Ross. All four remembered being in or near 't Huis Weerd. Also present were two nephews from Rifleman G. Clifford Woodruff, who died in Rha. Blain Woodruff and his wife Pamela, George Woodruff and his wife Joyce.

I had the privilege of riding with the Q O R group in their bus from Zutphen to Rha. I was staying in nearby Warnsveld and my hostess, Mrs. Lottie Jager, gave me a copy of a photo showing two vehicles of the Q O R, a carrier and a small truck on a street called Boonendaal in Warnsveld in 1945. The house where she was born was partly visible in the background. I asked the folks in the bus to pass the photo around with the question: "Do you recognize anyone on this picture?"

Charles McNabb came up to speak to me: "The driver of that carrier died only a few months ago. He picked me up after I thought I had been forgotten. Most men had already left 't Huis Weerd when he came by.

"I'm coming with you," I said.

"OK with me."

"Now, see this man in the back of the carrier? That's me!"

Well, that was something I had to tell Lottie right away. She also came to Rha that evening and she was delighted, indeed very pleased to meet Charles!

Rha's Monument Committee had prepared a reception for the group near the Rha windmill. Speakers welcoming the veterans were M. C. Geert Postma, Chairman Jan Horstink and Secretary Wim Felix. Then Bill Ross spoke on behalf of the veterans and those who had fallen.

"We veterans are now the voices of our fallen comrades," he said. "And it is so good to see how much friendship you show us and how much love for our fallen comrades. They died for your freedom. 'Greater love has no one than he who gives his life for his friends.'"

The Mayor of Steenderen was away so a representative spoke an official word of welcome. I was the last speaker, I read a psalm and said a prayer.

From the windmill we walked in silence to the Memorial stone, about 200 yards away, following the four veterans from D Company, with a drum in front. We halted, read the eight names, were silent after the Last Post, listened to the lone piper's lament and laid flowers. Schoolchildren put their flowers again in a metal frame which had the shape of a maple leaf.

After this short but very moving ceremony many of us walked on to the former Berendsen farm, the place where four men were killed and two others wounded, who died later. We were again warmly welcomed into the house. With us was Mrs. Annie Rijnsent from Zelhem. Annie was twelve years old when she sheltered in the cellar with the Berendsens while the battle raged overhead.

Then we returned to the windmill. There was so much to say!. As always at such ceremonies, the time of parting came much too soon. But many of us would see each other again

Because we are friends for life now.

#### **Canadian Ambassador visits monument.**

Later that summer Ambassador Serge April was in the area to open a Canadian pancake-house in nearby Olburgen. He insisted on visiting the monument in Rha as well. Mr. April was very much impressed and thanked Jan Horstink, Wim Felix and Gerrit Tijken, who were present, and all the people of Rha and Steenderen who had done so much to get the monument erected, on behalf of the Canadian Government, for all they had done to keep the memory of the eight fallen soldiers alive.

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