



Monthly Article

June 2013

The Cape Breton Highlanders Remember May

Though not a big event in Canada, the month of May holds great significance for our Island's Infantry Regiment. For the Cape Breton Highlanders, the last action of World War II was the liberation of the town of Delfzijl, in the north-east corner of The Netherlands. The regiment had previously fought its way up the coast of Italy, as part of the British 8th Army and when the enemy had been driven out of Italy, the Highlanders landed in France in mid-February 1945. By 5 March, the CBH had arrived in Belgium, and on 24 March was placed on 48-hours to move (which was effected some 3 days later, and the Unit arrived near Nijmegen, in Holland.) On 3 April 1945, the 11th Canadian Infantry Brigade (11 CIB), consisting of the Cape Breton Highlanders, The Perth Regiment, and The Irish Regiment of Canada, rejoined the rest of 5th Canadian Armoured Division (5 CAD) and moved to the attack, with 11 CIB tasked to clear the enemy in the vicinity of the Neder Rhine. Following routine patrolling and light resistance, with few casualties, the CBH was, by 15 April, on the move again and 2 days later, the town of Barneveld was liberated and in CBH hands. On 28 April, the Brigade was in a concentration area, just west of Delfzijl, in northeast Holland, with responsibility for its capture. There were some 1500 German military in and around the town and they were well protected by mines, wire, and enormous concrete bunkers (The Breed of Manly Men, 1994); these bunkers, incidentally, were still intact, when we visited in 2005. On 29 April 1945, the Cape Breton highlanders moved off again, and light engagements netted the unit over 200 prisoners. On 1 May, however, the serious battle began and by all accounts it was a fierce one. At its end, some 48 hours later, the CBH had taken 1700 prisoners, a large number of weapons and ammunition, and the Delfzijl Harbour, which had been prepared for demolition was intact and in Allied hands. Casualties were heavy, as the Highlanders had 2 officers and 18 soldiers killed; 3 officers and 50 soldiers wounded. In a few days' time hostilities had ended and World War II was over. The Dutch people, who had suffered greatly under close to 6 years of occupation were ecstatic, and to this day have remained thankful for Canada's participation in their liberation.

The year 2005, was one of great significance to the Dutch people, as it marked the 60th Anniversary of the end of World War II. Canada also declared it the Year of the Veteran and numerous ceremonies marked the event both in Canada and in Holland. In the spring of 2005, the writer had the pleasure of being part of a delegation of veterans and friends of The Cape Breton Highlanders who spent a couple of weeks in Delfzijl and were treated with the utmost hospitality by its and nearby residents as part of their commemoration ceremonies (the Dutch commemorate the end of World War II, each May, with various ceremonies and events). We were afforded the

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opportunity to participate in these remembrance activities and a couple of these should be mentioned. At Holten Cemetery, where some 1400 Canadians are buried (including the Cape Breton Highlanders killed in action in the Liberation of Holland), a joint Dutch/Canadian elaborate ceremony was held, which was a fitting tribute to our fallen comrades, from many Canadian regiments. It was also there that we learned each Christmas Eve, Dutch schoolchildren place small candles at the grave of each soldier. (incidentally, the *clip* is available on *youtube*, entitled: *1400 Candles in 2010*, and it's worthwhile viewing), a fine example of the appreciation, held by the Dutch, of the sacrifice Canadians paid in liberating The Netherlands from over five years of extremely cruel and exploitative Nazi occupation. The other event was one of a more enjoyable nature, as the Cape Breton Highlanders Association presented a plaque to the Lord Mayor of the Municipality of Delfzijl (as an aside, we presented it on a Sunday afternoon, and by the next day it was hanging in a prominent place at the Municipal Centre).



The presentation to the Lord Mayor, by the writer (then president of the CBH Association) and Ted Slaney (who had been in the battle for the liberation of Delfzijl, as a Sgt in the Anti-tank Platoon. The plaque reads;

***To Commemorate the Liberation of the Town of Delfzijl, May 1945
The Cape Breton Highlanders 5th Canadian Armoured Division***
(at the bottom is a reproduction of the CBH Cap Badge, and *Tac Sign*)

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As a bit of a postscript to the Delfzijl liberation, (and, technically, against orders of the day), the Cape Breton Highlanders did manage to also *liberate* a couple of very impressive mementoes, which were brought home to Canada: one, a large wooden eagle, which stood on the front wall of the hated German SS Headquarters, and has for the past 67 or so years been proudly displayed in the Sydney Garrison Officers' Mess at Victoria Park, (see below).



The other item is a large Nazi German flag, which was also (apparently) hanging on the same building as the eagle. It has found a home in the Warrant Officers and Sergeants' Mess, at Victoria Park.

Ian Macintyre
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