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Eugene Colson and the Liberation of the Port of Antwerp

Shelagh Whitaker

In September 1944 a unique alliance of Canadian infantrymen with Belgian resistance fighters joined forces to liberate the port of Antwerp. It was the key, as many see it, to victory.

In September 1994, the Governor General of Canada honoured this collaboration and the one man responsible for the Belgian participation in it, Colonel Eugene Colson of Antwerp, with the Meritorious Service Medal. Rarely have such medals been given to non-Canadians.

This extraordinary union goes back five decades to an association—and a friendship—that developed between the commanding officer of the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, Lieutenant-Colonel Denis Whitaker, DSO, and sea captain Colson, codenamed “Harry,” who was the Belgian Secret Army Commander of the Underground in the Antwerp dock area.

Colson’s mission had been initiated earlier in the war when the head of the Belgian Secret Army, Lieutenant Urbain Reniers, appointed him to develop a plan to prevent the Germans from destroying the essential installations of Antwerp harbour.

Colonel Colson organized a force of 600 dock workers as the nucleus of his underground harbour unit. With an area of some 40 square kilometres to protect, his force was specifically trained to capture and hold key strategic positions of the harbour against German sabotage until the Allies arrived.

September 4th, 1944 saw the long-awaited arrival of Allied liberators. After a lightning

drive from the Seine, British troops of General Brian Horrocks’ 11th Armoured Division (30 British Corps) under Major-General Pip Roberts captured the city of Antwerp.

One fact in early September of 1944 seemed more evident to the Belgian Underground than to Field Marshal Montgomery was that at this point in the war the full use of Antwerp’s harbour installations was essential for victory. In their drive for the Rhine, the Allied armies had outstripped their supply lines. The resulting logistical famine left them unable to maintain momentum.

Despite this shortage, Roberts had only been given the mandate to secure the docks, but not the bridges over the Albert Canal—the vital access route needed to cut off the 15th German Army, then escaping across the River Scheldt and east on the South Beveland Peninsula.

Colson’s men had, meanwhile, captured the Groenendaal Laan Bridge—the last bridge across the Albert Canal to Merxem. Without specific orders, General Roberts did not exploit this achievement and the enemy gained control of the canal. When 11th Armoured Division was ordered to withdraw on 6 September, the dock area was only partly secured. The Germans still held the area beyond the Albert Canal and had detonated all bridges across it. Colson and his men were left to fight alone, with only small arms, in the struggle against huge odds to hold the docks.

Their achievements were stunning, particularly as they had had little support from the British. During those 13 days before

Second Canadian Division arrived, the men of the Secret Army under "Harry" doggedly pursued their objective of preventing the Germans from demolishing the port installations. They slept only in snatches, patrolling the docks around the clock and relying heavily on their one advantage: familiarity with every metre of the ground they defended.

"The area was vast and we were few," Colson recalled. "We were continually harassed by the enemy trying to regain control of the port and destroy whatever equipment they could recapture."

A group of 21 men was sent to Merxem to protect the hydro station which supplied power for the harbour facilities. Another section set up a defensive position at Kruischans Lock, which controlled the flow of water to the harbour.

Number 12 Sluiskens Lock, two kilometres further north along the Scheldt, also had to be defended against German sabotage. This lock controlled the water levels in the low ground encompassing the port to the north and east. The Germans were able to reopen this gate and flood a large area within the harbour.

They also counterattacked Colson's unit holding the Merxem hydro station and killed the 21 defenders. Despite these setbacks, "Harry" and his troops were able to hold the other vital positions in Antwerp Harbour. The Belgians hung on against repeated



"Harry"
Colonel Eugene Colson

counterattacks until help arrived in the form of Canada's Second Infantry Division.

Second Division comprised the 4th Brigade (Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, Royal Regiment of Canada, and Essex Scottish Regiment); 5th Brigade (The Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) of Canada, The Calgary Highlanders and Le Régiment de Maisonneuve); and 6th Brigade (Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal, The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders of Canada and The South Saskatchewan Regiment).

On 16 September 1944, the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry war diary noted the assignment: "RHLI took over from the Royal Welch Fusiliers in Antwerp Harbour. Our role was to guard the docks and port facilities of the Port of Antwerp. Strength of the battalion 35 officers and 724 other ranks. Lt-Col W. Denis Whitaker returned to the unit and took over command after several weeks of convalescing in England from wounds received in Verson."

The Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, known familiarly as the Rileys, were alone on the docks, spread thinly on a line some 12 kilometres from Groenendaal Laan Bridge through Kruischans Lock to

a point just south of the village of Oorderen. The Essex Scottish overlooked the suburbs of Merxem and Eekeren where the Germans were still strongly entrenched. A few kilometres to the east, the Royal Regiment of Canada was assigned the task of defending the Albert Canal.

All Canadian units found that their first major problem was the extreme shortage of supplies; weapons and ammunition in particular. Montgomery had given the main priority for supplies to Operation Market Garden at Arnhem. The Canadian Army, languishing on the left flank and lowest in priority of all the Allied armies, has since been described as the "Cinderella Army."

"I set up my battalion HQ in the vacant Ford Motor factory near the docks," General Whitaker recalled. "Almost immediately, a Belgian codenamed "Harry" turned up. I was extremely encouraged to meet this obviously audacious and well-informed young macquis officer who offered his services and those of his men. A feeling of mutual respect and accord was immediately established. My briefing from Brigade about the situation had been extremely sketchy. Colson, who spoke much better English than I did French, explained in complete detail the many complications of the harbour facilities, the sluice gates and the various positions of the Germans.

"Over a couple of shots of good Canadian rum it was agreed that we would work together to accomplish our dual goal of holding the important points and driving the Germans from the areas within the harbour that they still held."

The short, stocky fighter with the hook-nose and a ready smile became a familiar sight at RHLI headquarters in the coming weeks. From 16 September to 5 October the RHLI and the Resistance under Colson were involved in daily confrontations with the enemy in the Antwerp Harbour area.

"It was a very difficult time for us, as supplies of ammunition of all types were short and very restricted," Whitaker recalled.

At one point there were only enough shells for the artillery 25-pounders to fire three rounds per day. In the face of their acute logistical shortages and the fact that enemy strength was increasing, it was initially impossible, even with the combined strength of the RHLI and the Resistance fighters, to

control the vital 40 kilometre strip of dock facilities that extended along the Scheldt. Nevertheless, both groups carried out their various tasks with zeal and determination. There were daily reconnaissance patrols and fighting patrols: defensive actions to throw back enemy attacks and offensive actions to seize enemy positions.

Colson assigned Lieutenant Karl Six to work as liaison with the RHLI. Each night, Six would cross enemy lines into Merxem. Next morning he would return to Riley headquarters with vital information concerning enemy defences and movements.

The Germans were obsessed with the urgency of destroying the harbour. The Canadian defenders and the Resistance supporters hung on to repel an enemy that was perilously close to recapturing the northern dock area. At Kruischans Lock, the RHLI created a mini-battlegroup called "Lock Force" to prevent the enemy from seizing these vital locks either by land or by sea. This unique combination of specialized units was under the command of Major Louis Froggett, DSO. It comprised 250 Rileys in addition to naval forces, searchlight batteries and ack-ack units.

Gradually, the Canadian/Belgian force consolidated and strengthened their positions. But the villages surrounding the docks—Wilmarsdonck, Oorderen, Merxem and Eekeren—still remained in German hands for some days.

On September 20th, the Resistance requested and received artillery support from a battery of the 4th Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery, which enabled them to launch a successful attack on Wilmarsdonck.

The Rileys remained on the defensive until 2 October when they finally received supplies sufficient to attack German marshalling yards north of Oorderen. In this successful assault they were supported by the Toronto Scottish medium machine guns, Bofors from the 2nd Canadian Anti-Aircraft Regiment and the full power of the 4th Field Regiment. Meanwhile, the sister battalions of 4th Brigade were advancing to Merxem, Eekeren and Starboeck.



Senior officers of the Belgian White Brigade lead a parade through the port area of Antwerp to honour their fallen comrades, October 1944. Colson is at the extreme right.

By 6 October the battalion was ordered to advance north into Holland. At the Dutch border the Resistance fighters were given orders to return to Antwerp. However, a number of them, like Eugene Colson, volunteered to join Second Canadian Infantry Division units where together they fought through the Dutch polderlands to free the approaches of the Scheldt.

Their victory was a costly one. In the months of September and October, 87 of their number were killed and 114 wounded. First Canadian Army (with British, Polish and American troops as well as units of the Royal Navy and Royal Marines under command) had 12,873 casualties in the four weeks of fighting to drive the enemy from Antwerp Harbour and in the six further weeks of bitter combat to free the Scheldt for Allied shipping. On November 28 the first Allied convoy steamed into Antwerp bringing vital shipping hundreds of miles closer to the front lines.

Since World War Two, Colonel Colson has continued to render outstanding service to Canada and Canadians in ensuring that our contribution to Belgium and the Allied cause received rightful recognition. He has been a staunch supporter to Canadian veterans as well as to the families of those men who were killed during the liberation of Antwerp.

On Remembrance Day each year he has organized a visitation and laying of a wreath on the grave of a Canadian soldier killed during the fighting around Antwerp. On each

occasion he was accompanied by Antwerp officials and members of his Resistance battalion.

In 1989, Colson was responsible for organizing the return of a group of 18 veterans and their wives as guests to Antwerp in its 45th Anniversary of Liberation. In 1991 Colonel Colson took on the additional task of becoming the unofficial representative of the veterans of the Second Canadian Infantry Division and in this capacity he has given a great deal of assistance and support to Canadian visitors to his city.

This year, Colson was the driving force which brought 25 Canadian veterans and their wives for the 50th Anniversary of Liberation as guests of the city. This group not only represented every Canadian infantry unit that fought to free Antwerp but also included representatives from the RCAF and RCA as well.

Eugene Colson's dedication to Canadians in war and peace over five decades has made him a deserving recipient of the Meritorious Service Medal.

Shelagh Whitaker is co-author with Denis Whitaker of three military histories: the Dafoe award-winning *Tug of War: The Canadian Victory that Opened Antwerp* (1984); *Rhineland: The Battle to End the War* (1989); and *Dieppe: Tragedy to Triumph* (1992).