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How the War Ended

Lieutenant-Colonel L.M. Sebert

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, I thought it might be of interest to share how one Canadian unit spent the last few minutes of the war and the first few hours of the peace. The Squadron of which I speak was "B" Squadron, Royal Canadian Dragoons, an armoured car unit.

Since about the middle of April I had been the acting commander of "B" Squadron. Our job at the time was following the Germans on our front as they retreated into the Naval Base at Wilhelmshaven. Our daily performance, on both sides, was right out of the training manuals: they were practising "fire and fall back" while we were using the "advance to contact" routine. There were few heroics on either side but we did keep pushing them to prevent their blowing up bridges or creating other obstacles. We were confident that they were not going to make a determined stand until they reached the permanent defences around Wilhelmshaven which lay about 15 miles ahead.

The fateful moment, at least for me, was just before dark on May 4th. Major Guy Savard, our regimental second-in-command, came up to our position with the exciting news that the war would end on the next day, May 5th, at 10:00 am. (The official end of the war was, as everyone knows, May 8th, but for the Canadian Army it ended with the ceasefire of May 5th.)

I had heard stories of the end of the 1914-18 war on

November 11th when, at 11:00 am, all guns fell silent and the weary soldiers on both sides came out of the trenches to fraternize and celebrate. I can only say it was considerably different on May 5th, 1945. For one thing, the guns did not just fall silent. Some units way off to our left kept up a lively fire well after 10:00 am. Either they did not get the word, or they were settling old scores. It suddenly occurred to me that the Germans immediately ahead of us might not have received the good news. It seemed sensible, therefore, to establish contact to ensure they knew the war was over.

So, under the protection of a rather large white flag, three of us started down the road toward enemy territory. There was my second-in-command, Captain Eric Falkner, our Dutch liaison officer, Willem deBee (who spoke both English and German) and myself. After walking for about 10 minutes a German officer stepped out of the hedge at the side of the road and asked, in German, what our little parade was all about. He was an older man, in his mid-40s, and a major in rank. He said he had heard nothing about a ceasefire.

He then said that there was an airfield not too far distant with good communications. He suggested that we all go there to see if our news could be confirmed. I offered to go back and get a vehicle, but he said that as he knew where all the land mines were perhaps he should drive. I found this



Lou Sebert, in 1965



Willem deBee, (left) the Dutch liaison officer who accompanied Captain Sebert into Wilhelmshaven. On the right is Lieutenant Harry Walker, a troop leader in "B" Squadron. Photo taken in 1945.

argument to be very persuasive.

Off we went in his staff car to the airfield only to find that it was being evacuated, and the remaining personnel were completely out of touch. The only thing left to do, according to my new German acquaintance, was to go into Wilhelmshaven ourselves. Eric Falkner stayed at the airfield for lunch while deBee, myself and several German officers set off in the staff car. It was truly one of the most memorable trips I have ever made. Sure enough, we eventually went through a line of bunkers, and then into the heart of the city.

The landward defence of Wilhelmshaven was controlled from an enormous underground

headquarters. We went in through an opening in the metres-thick concrete and down a stairway into the depths. We first went through a large room where about 20 female soldiers were working at telephone switchboards. They were understandably intrigued by the arrival of two "Tommys" (Willi was wearing a Canadian uniform). We were then ushered into the Commander's office. He was tall and very soldierly in appearance. Our conversation was in English and German with Willi doing the translating. Willi was understandably nervous and on occasion would speak to me in German and the Commander in English. But we established that the ceasefire was legitimate, but all front-line units would remain in their present positions until the more formal armistice was declared. The Commander asked where my unit was located so it could be used as a liaison point.

The return to "B" Squadron, which was in the town of Bockhorn, was uneventful. Late that afternoon a message was received from the regiment that some German officers would be coming to Bockhorn to meet with some of our senior people. This meeting was followed by other meetings the next day, each more senior than the one before. Very quickly I was reduced from VIP status to that of a "bit-player."

On Armistice Day I was informed that the four RCD squadrons were to assemble at Regimental Headquarters some 30 miles to the rear. During the final weeks of the war our squadrons had been widely separated, and for administrative convenience it made sense to group them in one location. We turned our "front line" position over to a Fourth Division armoured regiment. The CO of the regiment seemed to resent, at least a little, the RCDs basking in the glory of victory while his boys had done much of the heavy lifting. After all, it was his regiment that had punched the hole in the German line, some 100 miles back, that had let us through to make what turned out to be our last run of the war.

Lou Sebert served in the Royal Canadian Dragoons during the war. He transferred to the Engineers in 1947 and retired a Lieutenant-Colonel. He lives in Ottawa today.