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1st Canadian Parachute Battalion in the Ardennes A Personal Account

23 December 1944 to 26 February 1945

R.F. Anderson

23 December 1944

With the approach of Christmas, about 50 percent of the Battalion have been issued leave passes, and there is something of a festive "air" in the attitude of the troops. For myself, I have made arrangements to spend the holidays with the Austin Family in Hove, and I have been looking forward to that visit with some anticipation.

At about 2:00 pm I am told by runner from Headquarters, that all leave passes are cancelled. I am to convey this to all in the Platoon. Further, I am told that there is to be a "mass meeting" of

all Battalion Officers and Senior NCOs in the Main Drill Hall immediately.

As near as memory can recall, General Gale and many other Senior Division Officers took the stage, and I seem to recall that it was the General who told the assembly that he was sorry that immediate action had to be taken in the cancellation of leaves, but he had been in personal touch with Field Marshal Montgomery, who advised that the military situation in the Ardennes was critical. The German Army under Von Rundstedt had mounted a massive surprise counterattack, mainly on the American Sector, and if not stopped, they could be in Paris within a few days.



*Captain Sam McGowan and CSM John Kemp
in the Ardennes, January 1945.*

The General imparted the information that General Eisenhower had turned the entire front over to Field Marshal Montgomery, with a free hand to employ all troops necessary, and to stop the German advance and stabilize the Front. It seems that one of the first orders of Montgomery was to call on the 6th Airborne Division to be sent into action as quickly as possible, either by air drop, or in the event of bad weather, by sea.

The decision is made later in the day to proceed with advance troops by sea, and at once. The weather over Belgium is closed in fog, and the Met people saw little hope for clearing for some days. The Camp is closed tight for security, and when the information is passed down, it was received with understandable disappointment. The immediate task is to equip all ranks for immediate action, like ammunition, grenades and everything required to step into a frontal

position within hours. Through the night there were constant meetings with the CO and officers, to go through all the routines for battle.

24 December 1944

The Battalion has moved in the early morning hours to an embarkation port on the Channel, and we boarded a variety of ships. "B" Company was transported on a troop-carrying vessel which once in mid-Channel provided one of the roughest voyages on record. Many men were sick below decks, which in the closed space made things very messy and smelly. The only rations are COMPO, but most of the troops passed them up. I do not recall the landing place in France, but it was a quick dockside transfer to trucks, and a fast overland trip to a town in Belgium called "Rumes." The Company set up in the town, we are short of information, except to be advised that we are close to the action, and we must be prepared to move out at any moment.

25 December 1944.

Christmas Day in Rumes, very short of information, no plan, not enough time to organize any partying. The men are disappointed and restless, it seems like the old army game of "hurry up and wait," eating COMPO rations, or whatever can be scrounged locally, but not a "great" way to spend Christmas. What spoils the whole day is the uncertainty of the whole situation. It does not follow normal training, or operations, where we have firm information and objectives. We can only guess that some discussion is taking place at a higher level, on where we are to go, and in what specific role. In this situation all kinds of rumours are flying and as time goes by, it becomes difficult to "keep a lid" on everything.

26 December 1944

Boxing Day, just like the day before, except there is the first clear indication that we will be moving out. We have been housed in a small school auditorium, very cramped quarters, with section piled against section. In any case, I have been given orders for all ranks to prime grenades, load ammunition, and do a complete ammunition check, for immediate action.

While standing at the top end of the room, on a small 12" platform, I recall hearing the distinctive "ping" of a striker hitting a grenade primer, and the handle flying. At the same time, I heard Sergeant Hill, in charge of No.5 Section, call "grenade." I think I yelled get down, or something, but I do recall throwing myself on the floor, at the side of the stage, then in three seconds, the 36 grenade went off, throwing up clouds of plaster, dust, and of course, fragments of the casing. Getting up quickly, I found I had escaped cuts. This is the second experience for me with this kind of accident, only I recalled that the last time, I did get an ass full of shrapnel, which the nurses in Base Hospital had fun pulling out of me.

In any case, as the dust settled, and my wits returned, I first heard the cry of the wounded and with some help, I discovered that Sergeant Hill was the worst hit. He lost an eye, probably for the reason that he stood next to the grenade, with a hand over part of his face, which did not protect him. About six other men are wounded, but none fatally, but all will have to be hospitalized with fragments.

The Medics and half the Company came to see what the commotion was, but in retrospect, it is truly remarkable that half the Platoon were not killed outright. In the midst of all this confusion we move out, board trucks, obviously to take a place in the line somewhere, again we have no hard information.

5 January 1944

After a long move, up through nameless towns and various stops along the way, it now appears we are well out front somewhere, and "B" Company is located in a place called "Tavi Farm." The Sections however, are all out front, on what has become known as "Blueberry Hill." The weather is incredibly bad, below zero, high winds, drifting snow and already deep snow on ground. The orders are to dig in and take strong defensive positions, and naturally we are not equipped for this kind of exercise. We do not have the "tools" or the gear. Some men have tried to blow holes in the ground with explosives, others are simply digging trenches in the snow and covering with gas caps. We are bound to have health problems, especially with frozen feet.

Some men have obtained burlap sacking and this is wrapped around normal boots, that is what I have done, only after I have managed to freeze my left foot.

What is possibly worse is that we are not too much informed as to where we are and what is around us. The only "hard" information is that our Division is holding a line against advancing armour, who will try and cross the last barrier at "Namur," which would then give the Germans a clear run to Paris. This, to say the least, is not heartwarming news. We are essentially shock troops, lightly equipped and armed, hardly in a position to stop a massed armour attack. However it has been impressed on us that our orders are to stand and fight at all costs. It is a "do or die" effort, and we cannot count on any support. Some five days later, still on the "Hill," we find ourselves in the worst situation we have ever experienced, during the entire war. The men are hungry, cold and frozen, and for my part, moving around from Section to Section has been a painful experience. My one foot is frozen for sure, but I dare not remove the boot and wrapping. There is almost no communication with Battalion or Company, and it continues to stay below zero degrees. The Sections have established listening posts, well out in front, and in blowing snow, the only way to visit with the men at night is to locate them by compass.

One night a shot is heard out front, and I crawled out of my hole, picked up a runner, and tried to determine what was going on. Finally after pushing through the snow drifts, I found three men dug into a hole in the ground, covered with a ground sheet, and upon looking in, saw that one man shot himself through the lower leg. He told me he had been cleaning his rifle, but at 3:00 a.m. in the morning, under such conditions, it is clearly a self-inflicted wound. Eventually, we had the man carried out and sent back to Company, and I suspect there will be an enquiry, but that will have to wait.

Thinking later on the subject, I could well imagine a man becoming fed up with conditions, taking any risks to get to shelter, even a barn and some straw. Again the worst is that I have no information, no communication at higher level, and as far as we know the threat is still present of a breakthrough.

10 January 1945

We have been moved out, thank the Lord. Orders have been given to attack a town called "Roy." I feel there was some cheering among the men, because at the end of the line there is always the hope of shelter and perhaps even a warm fire somewhere.

The attack went in as planned but most of the Germans have cleared out. All we have done is to take a few prisoners, but best of all, we have holed up in a farmhouse and some men start to scrounge for food and some kind of stoves. The Belgian people still on the farm are not too kindly disposed to us. I have no idea if this is the case with all Belgians, but I am reminded of stories my father told of his first war, and some bad experiences with the Belgians. But I should not rush to judgement, just a few days here to clean up, get warm and I think our spirits will return. I have still no idea what the general situation is, even where the rest of the Company and Battalion is holed up, or how anyone else fared in the last week or ten days. This is really annoying and very much contrary to normal experience in the Battalion, where the principle has always been to keep everyone "in the picture."

12 January 1945

I have been called to Company Headquarters, where the CO has instructed me to gather five selected men from the Platoon, which will form part of a larger Battalion group, and we are to witness the laying out of some 37 Belgian bodies, who have been murdered by the German troops.

It appears that these bodies were discovered by our troops, quite by accident, in the cellar of a garage. The German troops apparently interrogated them all, men, women and children, then threw them into the cellar through a hole in the floor, where they then threw grenades on top of them.

The bodies are terribly mutilated, but part of the observation is to witness the extraction of the bodies and to witness the identification by family and friends. Naturally, the scene was highly emotional, bodies are not a new experience, but to see young children blown apart in this way, for no apparent reason, is something not easily

forgotten. The Brigadier was on hand with our Intelligence people from Brigade, and I was told that the incident was the work of the SS and 14th Panzer Grenadiers. I think the inference was that we were to remember these units for the future.

14 January 1945

We have been moved again, this time much closer to the action. We will occupy a town called "Rochefort," a fairly large town, and we will be relieving some American troops that have been badly shot up since Christmas. They are under strength and require rest and reinforcement. The town has just been taken and the situation out front is still not stabilized and the enemy strength is not known.

We have set the platoon up in houses in the town, with perimeter protection. I find that our Platoon will be in reserve in the town, while other elements of the Battalion will be dug in. This is not a bad situation at all, except that I have been told that all patrols will be drawn from the reserve platoon.

Once again for a period of a week, the situation is not known. It still remains very cold, with lots of snow around. The rumours are going around that the Brigade and Division have been in some very heavy fighting, even hand-to-hand combat, somewhere on our flanks, but for us it has been very quiet. (It was later confirmed that the Division had been involved in serious fighting, with very heavy casualties.)

In the town of Rochefort, where we are set up, it has been apparent from the day we arrived to relieve the Americans, that this sector was perhaps one of the first hit in the German advance on Christmas Eve. The Americans were completely taken by surprise, run over with heavy armour, and some of our troops and the citizens have spent days hauling American bodies on Ox Carts to grave registration points. It was an odd sight to see frozen bodies, stripped of boots, stacked like cordwood, with perhaps 20 bodies to a cart load. It would be interesting to know the full story of just what took place here.

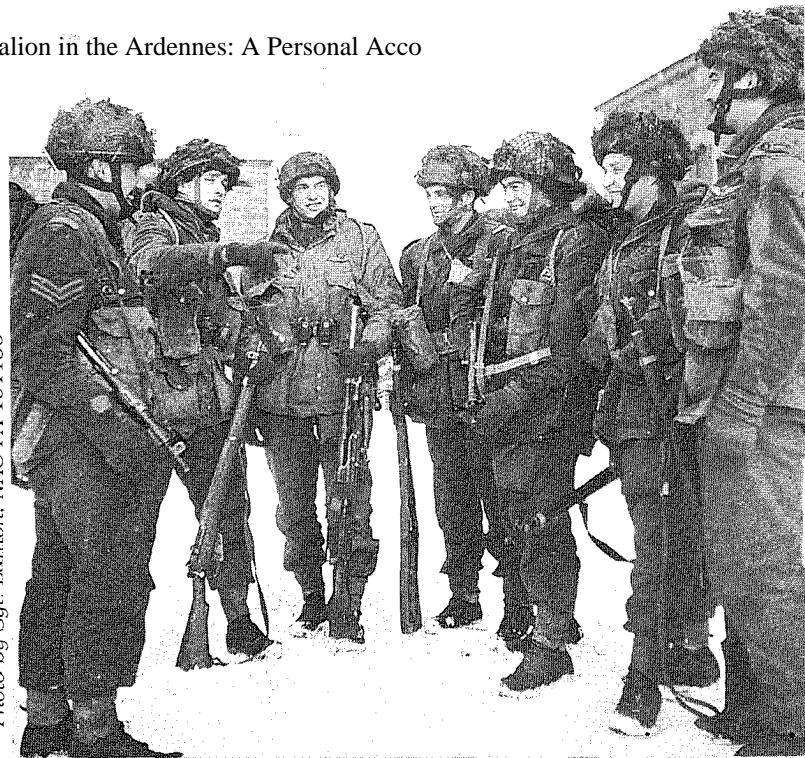
One of the points that has been impressed on us from the day we arrived, and more so in this location, is that German troops in a special

company, speaking perfect English and wearing American uniforms, have been driving jeeps into the lines, netting information, doing sabotage and generally raising hell. All our outposts and patrols have been warned to change "passwords," but not to accept even that, and to question Americans about baseball, movies, and some of the more current slang expressions. There is clear evidence that a number of these units have been identified, and the very thoughts of these men loose in our rear areas is extremely upsetting.

17 January 1945

I have been ordered to take out a patrol tonight, a fighting patrol of 30 men, and I have the pick of who I want with me. Our task will be

Photo by Sgt. Lattion, NAC PA 191136



Personnel of 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion are briefed (top) and then set out on a patrol (right), near Roy, Belgium, 13 January 1945. At right are (l. to r.) Ptes. E.C. Blaise, H.L. Anderson, R.C. Feralick, N. Cahute, L.L. Gagnier, D. Hockin and Sgt. T.H. Pasquill.



Photo by Sgt. Lattion, NAC PA 130727

to exit through our perimeter in one direction, make contact with the enemy in the next little town about four miles distant, determine if it is defended, and by how many. We are to fight if discovered, bring back prisoners, and return through another part of our lines just before first light.

We set out at 0300 hours, faces blackened, all loose gear either removed or tied down, main

equipment is weapons and grenades. We pass out through the lines of No.6 Platoon who have been alerted to us, then it is a matter of taking cover and following the map route of the railway line and ditches. At about 0440 hours we are at the edge of a small town. It is dead quiet. I split the group in half, working the rear yards, both sides of the street. We only have about 30 minutes to work. On re-assembling, I find that the town is very lightly defended. No contact is made, but

German troops have been observed in the houses and in the trenches protecting the area. Rather than get into a fight for a prisoner, I could see time running out, so I made some sketch notes, then started back to our lines.

Getting back to our own lines is far more difficult than I anticipated, since I have been directed to follow a different route on the return that will take us through British Lines. After groping around in the dark, and with dawn approaching, we finally stumbled into a British outpost, and a nervous challenge; we were let through and back to our own area.

The men all are exhausted, more from continuous nervous tension than the crawling and walking around. In any case everyone hit the sack about 0630 hours, right after having a little food and the traditional shot of rum, which is given to all partols on return. I have to stick around for HQ de-briefing by the CO and Intelligence people. What information I have is recorded on maps. It is all very sketchy and I



have no idea what use it might be, but it seemed to me that if we had orders, we could move the Battalion forward and take the town without too much trouble. but perhaps it all forms part of a larger picture which I would have no knowledge of. Still at this late date, it seems impossible to get anyone to convey a clear outline of what we are doing, where we have been, and more important, what the overall situation is with the British and Americans.

20 January 1945

Following several short moves by vehicles and on foot through small town in Belgium, and without encountering serious opposition, we are finally told that we will be moving to Holland on the Maas river, to a rest area. We will be moved in American army trucks and better late than never, we are all issued with our first pair of rubber boots. What a God send these would have been a few weeks ago.

22 January 1945

The Battalion seems to be settled into an area surrounding a large town called "Roggles." Our Platoon area is a small farm community by the name of "Berrick." Now for the first time since Christmas, by running into some Americans and British, we are beginning to put together a picture of what has happened. It seems clear that there was in fact a disaster to the Americans in the Ardennes. There is no doubt that for a period of a week or more, there was a slim line holding Von Rundstedt's armour from breaking out right to the coast. But at this date, it seems clear that the enemy armour has run out of gas and been badly shot up by combined forces and the front is again stabilized. It seems that during the period that we were dug in on "Blueberry Hill," the British units of our Division, and some of our Brigade, plus the 101st American Airborne, were struggling to hold a town called "Bastogne," which was the key point to the whole battle. (While the bulk of the credit for the holding action in the Ardennes has quite properly been given to the Americans, it has later been acknowledged that

Sergeants J.A. Anderson and L.G.S. Warnock, Kolkhagen, Germany, April 1945.

the 6th Airborne, and other units should have shared in some of the credit.)

Our present position is in a farmhouse, right on the bank of the Maas river, We have relieved an American battalion who have been told to move out, and it seemed to me that they were both exhausted and at about half strength. Surveying my Platoon position, I found that the Germans are dug-in right across the river, and from the maps I discover that we are about eight miles from the German border. Two things were evident, first the Germans are perhaps as exhausted as we are, and secondly, they are prepared to make a full stand along this wide river, which is a considerable barrier.

This is hardly a rest area, but it is warm and we can get hot food. The only excitement is the odd shell coming from the other side of the river, and a little sniper fire. We have established strong points on the river bank, but we are manning them lightly, so that the men have as much warmth and cover under roof, as possible.

From frequent trips into the village, to visit HQ for meetings, the most noticeable change I can detect is the attitude of the people. The Dutch people are all very warm and friendly, and cannot do enough for our men, even though they have gone through some very rough times with the Germans. The difference between the attitude of the Belgians, which was almost hostile, makes us feel really welcome in Holland.

25 January 1945

No.4 Platoon has been moved from the outskirts of town, to occupy a house or large farm right on the river bank itself. This means we will be looking down the throats of the Germans every day and night. Coming with us will be a full section of snipers, the idea being that we will house these men on shift in the attic, where they can pick off the odd German across the river, as they show their heads.

The sniper section are a "keen" bunch, and it does not take very long before their activity brings down all kinds of fire from the German side in retaliation. So, instead of having a rest area, we are having to duck German sniper and

machine gun fire, day and night, with the odd mortar thrown in for good measure.

"Muscles Ballinger" is one of the "nuts" in our attic, and he is so excited by the whole exercise that he will not come down for meals, or even to wash up. He is having a personal battle going. If I had a choice, I think I would ship them all back to Headquarters. The exchange of fire has reached the point that we have to crouch down to the ground to make it out to the "Backhouse," about one hundred yards from the main building, and the Germans have even got wind of this and keep putting a few rounds through the roof, just for fun and games.

29 January 1945

Patrols from both sides are doing some river crossings in boats, and probing defences almost every night, with little or no success on either side. Someone at Battalion or Brigade level has suggested that perhaps a two-man patrol might find a route across the main bridge, a steel girder structure which was blown by the Germans and lays in a tangled mess in the main river.

Company has selected Captain Sam McGowan and I to make the try at a patrol, the main objective is to see if some girders in the main channel are attached enough to carry men across. The crossing is to be attempted at 0300 hours, and we are to be equipped with climbing ropes, white camouflage smocks, folding ladders and grappling hooks. If we make it across we are to probe the German defences without detection if possible.

Personally, I have been on many patrols, but this is something else again, and I am as nervous as hell. The main comfort to me personally is that Sam McGowan will be with me, and he is the best man I know to be with in any kind of situation. At about 0200 hours, we had some fine food in the mess with CSM John Kemp, and several others to see us off. We have rubber shoes for climbing, we are carrying the smocks since the white will show up too starkly in the river, but not on the other side.

We went through our defence position at the bridge, one of our Company platoons guarding

this point. Lots of hand shaking and good wishes all round. Started across on the girders, not too bad on our side, but getting close to mid-river the water is running fast and we are spending too much time looking for foot-holds that will lead to other sections. After about an hour we finally found a solution to the puzzle, and by climbing and jumping a few feet from girder to girder, we got within 50 feet of the German side. Sam McGowan caught up with me and we agreed to wait 15 minutes to see if we had been detected, since we have been making some kind of noise. We started to put on our white smocks. Sam got his on OK, but in getting mine untangled with the ropes etc., it fell out of my hands and into the river below. This is a real mess but after a quiet discussion with Sam, we decided to push on. We got to the far side just before dawn, we stayed concealed, and marked a few German positions, especially a mortar set-up, then we decided to head back and mark the route for future use. We have to move fast since we do not want to be spotted on the bridge when daylight comes. It was a much faster trip back, and I'm afraid we were not as careful about noise. In any case, we reached our positions about daylight, and we were greeted, then we walked back to Headquarters for debriefing. We had a hot meal, and a shot of rum. We have shown the marked route, and the "Old Man" is happy as hell and he cannot wait to report to Division.

Got back to the platoon, completely exhausted, more relief from nerves and tension but I fell into a deep sleep. Woke about 1500 hours with the field phone ringing in my ears. It is a message from the CO with word that beginning tonight, it will be my responsibility to take patrols from the Company across the bridge, a new group every night, until we are stopped or detected by the enemy. After supper, I decided that I might as well move my bed roll and gear down with No.6 Platoon at the bridge, it will save time while we are going through this exercise.

In the following week, many patrols were taken across the river, but as time wore on, the Germans got wise and started to cover the bridge with heavy machine gun fire, and while we had the range and positions of mortar and machine guns, we could not bring it to a halt, so the crossings were abandoned. If the objective is to obtain a firm position on the far side it is now

clear that it will take a major assault, not all of which can go over via the bridge route.

1 - 12 February 1945

During this period, we have moved positions along the Maas River several times, one town or village is like another. Much patrolling on both sides, but activity is very spasmodic. Our patrols have collected a few prisoners, but not all our crossings have been successful. One thing we have found is that the Germans are better at night patrol than we are, for the reason that they have specialist groups trained and brought up to the river for this purpose.

Living during this period, we have begun to develop more of a "Barrack" routine, inspections, discipline etc. However I feel certain that the Battalion records will show that in this same quiet enemy period, we lost more men through accidents than by enemy action. Mostly accidental gun cleaning, and handling explosives, routines that were too familiar and men not thinking clearly. As an example, one day the RSM accidentally shot and killed his batman with a 45-calibre hand gun. On another day two men were killed in a billet when someone was cleaning and assembling a Sten gun. Investigation showed that the man started the bolt action with a magazine in, and he sprayed the whole room full of his buddies before he stopped.

13 February 1945.

Moved to a town called "Buggenheim," further to the rear and we are slated for a general clean up and inspection. This means a full return to "barrack" routine. There is some talk of a return to England soon, to get ready for a major assault into Germany. I think we would all welcome a trip back, even if it holds an indefinite future.

In this location we are told that a restricted number of men will be allowed an "overnight" pass to visit Brussels, Belgium. The Company is allowed 12 men, not a large delegation, but all names will be drawn from a hat. I was instructed to take the Company group in charge of the truck transport.

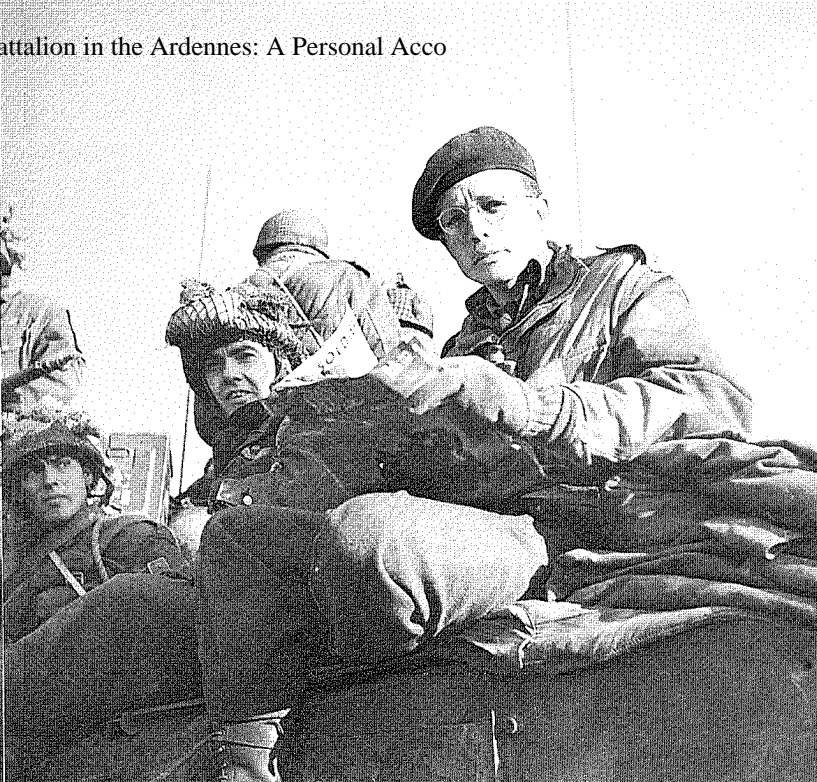


Photo by C.H. Richer, NAC PA 145971

Above left: Privates M.C. Ballance and R.S. Phillips of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion frying eggs on the exhaust on a Churchill tank; **Above right:** Personnel of the Battalion catch a rest, (l. to r.) CSM J.M. Kemp and Major S.W. Waters. Wiedensahl, Germany, 7 April 1945.

Photo by C.H. Richer, NAC PA 145926

A day and evening in Brussels is not much. We are bedded down in suburban school, but transport into the city is easy, since there is bus and street car service at the door, and there is no curfew on return times.

Brussels is of course the largest and most interesting of the Continental cities we have seen. Everyone seemed to want to go his own way in the time allowed. For my part, once I found the City Centre, it immediately looked familiar to me from descriptions I had from my Mother and Father, both of whom had spent some time in the place in the first war. The city seems to be packed with troops of all nations, no evidence of war. It is obviously a leave centre and the bars and saloons are doing a great business. The other business that seems to be openly thriving is the "black market," every street corner has local people selling everything from jeeps to silk stockings. I was even offered a truck load of gas. It is an amazing transition from the battle front to see what is going on in the city.

While resting in a pub in Brussels, I accidentally met a few men from my old outfit, the 8th Squadron Engineers, who I came to England with. They were on a longer leave and we sat and talked about what had transpired

since D-Day. While they were inclined to think that I was a member of some kind of "suicide" outfit, I was more amazed to discover that the 4th Canadian Division had been badly mauled in the battle for Falaise. My old unit had lost half the Squadron, including many of my old friends. I would not have thought that an Engineer outfit would have been hit so badly, but it seems that the battle around Caen, and Falaise was badly handled, and in fact the General had been sent back to Canada. It is a sad moment for me to think of old friends killed, perhaps needlessly through bad planning or Generalship, and while my friends were consoling me for the part we had since D-Day, it seems to me that they had suffered worse casualties, but I suppose we will never know what happened.

21 February 1945

On returning from Brussels, I was having some difficulty in rounding up all the bodies I had with me, I found that at Headquarters it was confirmed that all the rumours were in fact true, that we could be returning to England. In a day or two we will move to a place called "Zeveneeken," then we leave for Ostend, Belgium, where we will go by ship back to Bulford.

26 February 1945

A fast trip back to England, nothing unusual. Ostend was a dead loss, not much to see, just transfer from trucks to ship. The only recollection is that the harbour is badly shot up, but it is handling shipping in great numbers, mostly a supply system to all the troops, possibly in the Northwest Europe sector.

26 February 1945

Back in Bulford, routine clean up, and almost all the Battalion has been granted leave passes, and back pay has been issued to all ranks. In preparing for leave, it has been made no secret that on return from leave, we will begin training at a heavy and grinding schedule to prepare for a major offensive that will mean a parachute drop on Continent, possibly into Germany. The best guess is that it will be a major crossing of the Rhine, since this is the last German line, and we are all very certain that our Battalion will have a major role in whatever is selected.

Going on leave, I don't think many of us think too much about the future, the end of the war still seems a long way off, and while we are fortunate to be out of the "Fox Hole" bit for a while, we know that we all have to make the most of the short time left, before we jump into the mess again. For me, I will be going to Coulsdon to Pauline Clarke and family for a day or two, then to Hove and Brighton to stay with Pat Austin and family; five days in all and I am really looking forward to a change of scene.

Summary of Period December 1946

Looking back on the whole Ardennes involvement, one would have to say that it was not one of the highlights of the Battalion history in the war. Certainly we did all that was asked of

troops, and perhaps we did make some contribution to the holding of the line. But in retrospect it was a time that everything seemed to be shrouded in both confusion and mystery.

One of the great advantages of the Parachute Brigade and Battalion, was that it had been a principle objective to keep the troops informed at all times, but for the whole Ardennes period nothing was passed down, and what little information that was gained was largely rumour. Even on returning to England, it had been said that the Division had taken a large role in the Ardennes offensive, with much action from other Brigades in and around "Bastogne." Frankly, I had never heard of the place, although much credit has been given to the American Airborne, who did a heroic job of holding. I strongly suspect that it may be years before we actually know what happened, and what special role we did in fact play in the scheme of things.

My recollection at this point, is that the Ardennes was not so much covered with glory, as extreme hardship, and mystery. I have come out of it all with some friends lost, but personally with a frozen foot, and I suspect I was lucky to escape with that. On the plus side of the ledger, it did give me a chance to measure the men in the Platoon. I expect I will try and transfer a few before another action, but 99 percent performed extremely well, and I have a feeling that we have been all brought closer together as a fighting unit, and I like to think it is the best in the world.

R.F. "Andy" Anderson returned home with the batttalion after the war and joined the Toronto Police in December 1945. He remained with the force for 10 years before leaving to go to university. He was appointed the first traffic engineer for the city of Scarborough and later spent 20 years working in the Mayor's office in the City of Toronto. Today he is retired and residing in Toronto.