

Pursuit

The letters of Captain Harold MacDonald, North Shore Regiment, from Normandy to the Scheldt

Captain Harold MacDonald with M.A. MacDonald

Harold S. MacDonald was starting out in business in Saint John when the Second World War began in September 1939. He immediately enlisted as a private and after officer training at Brockville was posted as a lieutenant to his native province's North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment, with which he served to the end of the war. After the war, he returned to a successful business career in Saint John until killed in an automobile accident on 11 November 1984.



Normandy, from the frequently overlooked horror of the capture of the Channel ports of Boulogne and Calais by the Canadians through to the end of the waterlogged Scheldt campaign.

This article continues the series of letters written by Harold to his wife Marjorie in Saint John, New Brunswick, during his sojourn as an infantry officer with the North Shores in the campaign in Northwest Europe, 1944-45. The first installment, "In the Heat of Battle," published in the Spring 2002 issue of CMH, related Harold's often trenchant observations in letters stemming from the Normandy campaign, from his own landing on 27 June to the climactic struggle around Falaise in August. The following letters chronicle Harold's experiences in the fighting that came after

Throughout his service in Europe, MacDonald maintained a steady flow of letters to his wife Marjorie, a reporter with the Saint John Evening Times-Globe. As a journalist (and indeed a future historian) Marjorie wanted as frank and honest an account of his experiences as was possible and frequently sent questions to Hal requesting further information or clarification of certain points. No doubt this, along with Hal's own innate capabilities as an observer and writer, helped produce a remarkable series of letters that are full of rich detail and fascinating insights into the demanding life of a front-line Canadian infantry officer in Northwest Europe during the Second World War, with its terrible ingredients of excitement, fear, frustration, irritation, horror, thrill, and, all too often, death.

Cameron Pulsifer, Canadian War Museum

For nearly three months after the D-Day landing of 6 June 1944, the Allied forces fought a series of savage battles in Normandy. They had to break through the massed German army which was determined to drive them back into the sea and then to trap the bulk of the retreating Germans in the Falaise Pocket. The cost of the Normandy campaign was heavy, with 18,444 Canadians killed or wounded, most of them infantry.¹

The task of the Allied armies from 21 August onward was to pursue and complete the destruction of the German forces as they retreated across France and the Low Countries. The 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, of which the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment was a part, had been ordered to push on to the Seine, to cross it near Rouen, and then to drive north and secure the chain of coastal ports including Boulogne and Calais. With them was Captain



Captain Harold S. (Hal) MacDonald photographed in Nijmegen during the winter of 1944-45.

Harold S. (Hal) MacDonald in command of the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment's Support Company, a unit consisting of specialized arms such as three-inch mortars, 6-pounder anti-tank guns, and Bren-gun carriers. Hal had kept up a steady flow of informative and often harrowing accounts of his life in the Normandy campaign in letters to his wife Marjorie in Saint John. Similar accounts were to continue in letters Hal wrote to Marjorie during the pursuit to the Channel Ports and the Scheldt.

From Elbeuf on the Seine, about 12 kilometres south of Rouen, on 28 August, MacDonald described the scene on their arrival the previous day in a small French town in the middle of a pitch-dark night. (He did not identify the town but possibly it was Orival, which was only a few kilometres north of Elbeuf.) "I pulled my jeep off to one side of the village square," he wrote. "People grouped around, kissing us, offering milk, cider and eggs, giving us positions and numbers of Huns. Three dead Jerries about two feet away. They stayed too long – a lesson in not to tarry when retreating!"

They had lost a carrier and three men, blown up by a mine, and MacDonald's left hand, wounded by shrapnel in Normandy, was still hurting. But there had been, his account continued:

only one shell in our area. They say this is normal war and our first two months were abnormal, but we were just green enough and inexperienced that we took it in our stride, and either became accustomed to it or else went nuts. This now becomes, for us, more a game of chance and tactics than the previous slaughter and holding onto a strip of ground in face of stupendous opposition.

My carrier platoon cleared a village yesterday and were given a royal welcome by the French civilians. Took a few Huns and brought back an American flyer who had baled out eight days ago and been in hiding. Was he ever glad to see Canadians.

Majority of the French are very co-operative now that they know we are definitely established and we are really being welcomed as liberators. Village church bells rung, milk etc. being distributed and many 'Mercis'.

Bob Ross, the Adjutant, is beginning to show the strain and we are coaxing him to get out for a few days. Have offered to do best I can to take his place and also run the company. There are so few of us left who can keep cool and think clearly; we simply must put everything, every ounce of reserve, to get this thing over with. Sometimes I think we're crazy – really don't know...

Yesterday a bloke came around collecting votes on N.B. election. Cripes, a few hours after fighting our way up to here and they're after ballots. Not many voted. Surely to God those back home can look after that end of things.

He was hoping to get a letter that night from his wife, Marjorie,

'cause your letters are so very morale-lifting....I sorta like having two jobs. Keeps

one really busy and therefore happy. A lot of old learning has come into use and find I have a large knowledge of military stuff.

Wonder how long we'll be able to go on like this. Of course as long as we're driving and driving we don't mind so much the return fire. It's when one is waiting and waiting that nerves get tense. Noel [Humphrys] is here beside me. We have a scheme worked out now whereby on next action he handles the wireless and reports, etc. and I handle my company and act as adjutant to the Colonel. When we consolidate Noel will look after getting vehicles up and I'll handle Bn administration. Figure between us we can handle the whole job Bob Ross was worrying himself sick over and also distribute the work with clear minds, and thus give Bob a break when he does come in.

At 0730 hours on 30 August, the regiment crossed the Seine and moved some 48 kilometres on to a position northeast of Rouen. As the enemy retreated headlong to the north and east towards positions they reckoned to be more defensible, the Canadians advanced a further 61 kilometres to Neufchatel and then on to Tréport.² MacDonald continued:

Am a grouchy and sleepy dope...Due to having just 1 1/2 hours sleep last night & very busy. I am dog tired. Tonight I have the 2.00 to 4.00 shift. Noel made me unaccountably cross when he just came in & woke me up to take my turn. Will I ever get caught up. The pressure lamp is on the blink & we only have the flickering light of a lantern (stable variety).

Had three letters yesterday. Would love to give you all details of our days but that is impossible. You just can't imagine the elated feeling we have to be first in these villages and have people embracing us and thanking us. It's pitiable. One wants to laugh and then one wants to cry. Our vehicles are smothered with flowers of all kinds. They tear them out of their gardens to throw to us. They come running across open fields to stand on road & clap & wave. They pull out tricolors (so long hidden away) & unfurl them & salute them. Prac[tically] every vehicle we have has at least one tricolor flying from it.

Yesterday made a flying patrol to check on a couple of bridges & we entered the town so fast we scared the people. They thought at first it was Huns but when the light of realization dawned our welcome was terrific. Got to bridges just in time. The Hun had dammed the stream & it was a matter of minutes till the road would have been flooded. Civilians broke the dam & cleared the debris. They are of invaluable aid in keeping tabs on movements of the Hun. Find now that when the French Resistance find we are coming they capture all prisoners they can & so spoil our sport. The country is beautiful.

By 4 September, they had advanced another 130 kilometres, having crossed the River Somme and moved on to the outskirts of Boulogne, where they were able to get a glimpse of the Channel. Hal wrote the following day: "Seems like ages since I last wrote, though it was only a few days ago....The Adjutant returned Sunday and none too soon 'cause the two jobs were beginning to tell on me. Can't keep up day and night forever." He was getting high praise for the job, however, which helped.

And so our chase of the Hun continues, practically day and night. Marvellous administration to maintain lines of communication over such long moves. We're sleeping, when we do get a chance, on top of the ground and not underground....England is now appreciating the Cdns. – they say the flying bombs are prac[tically] non-existent. We've cleaned out a number of sites. Such a different type of warfare from those two awful months. Now it's not too bad, but nerves are still taut and I find myself short tempered and easily irritated. The Doc and Adjt say I have every reason to be that way – but I don't think so.

By 7 September they were advancing east of Boulogne. Unit morale was low after camping in an orchard during a night of heavy rain. MacDonald found a garage and set up Company headquarters there, his letters reflecting the mounting strain:

At least it's dry. Feel disgruntled. All papers and radio sound so optimistic. After what we saw last week I wonder if it won't be longer



Photo by Donald I. Grant, NAC PA 174461

An officer from the North Shore Regiment, along with a cameraman, watch the bombing of La Trésorerie by RAF medium bombers, 14 September 1944.

than a few weeks. Brad just came in to report on a patrol – he's soaking wet. This morning in the downpour while trying to get breakfast, Dickie [Knowles] started imagining himself in a dry home, with a tablecloth & eggs & bacon etc. We hushed him up. Not much new – mud and muck as per usual standards of war. Main thing is, shouldn't be too long before we're together.

The next day, 8 September, the Air Force had been bombing an enemy position,

an obnoxious spot – thorn in our side. Only thing is that when we see the Yanks overhead we yearn for a deep hole. Once bitten twice shy, & twice bitten, damn scared. ...The Yanks did it again, but not to us.

After writing you yesterday went back to Div. HQ to an Officers' Shop recently set up. Bought some pips, gloves and a heck of a good trench coat, only 2/17. Very reasonable, a good fit and dark, with leather buttons re-inforced and a high belt. Just the style I've always looked for and never found. Then I also got a brand new uniform – a nice soft one and a good fit. Got my flashes and patches on it – now all I need is a wound stripe and a new pair of boots. All in all morale is high.

Then, a day later: "At above pt. was called away and didn't return till dark & then was too late to write or even read. The local farmers are now bringing their horses out of hiding. The Hun confiscated every available means of transport and the locals hid their horses in the woods to save them." He had been talking to one of the refugees from Boulogne, a grey-haired, beautiful woman of about forty, whose doctor husband had taken sick and died. "[S]he is alone here as a refugee. These people have suffered and now the towns the Huns occupy are in dire straits for food and clothing."

He reminisces about the past, then wonders how many changes Marjorie will notice:

Don't think I've changed much. Yes, older and more mature and a few grim memories but I have pushed them far, far back in my mind....My gosh this is a funny war. We go through periods of heavy fighting & then it slackens down to almost a rest area atmosphere with exception of a few shells. Well, I'm not complaining at all....Won't be too long now – so much to say & do, so much lost time to make up....

The Doc and I were talking a few minutes ago and discussing our short tempers and lack of patience. Have decided that the only

way to reclaim our own fairly even tempers is to be back with our wives. That's a lot of truth too.

By 12 September the regiment had come to a halt to the northeast of Boulogne, about six kilometres inland from the coastal village of Wimereux. Just to the north of the near-by village of Wimille was a heavily defended German hill position, one of the outworks of the Boulogne fortress, known as La Trésorerie. It held three massive 30.5 cm (12-inch) coastal guns, which would be the North Shores' objective in the coming attack. MacDonald wrote after the regiment halted:

Just sitting here on a doorstep watching our Typhoons do a job on — [Hal's omission – the attack was on La Trésorerie]. We have a lot of respect for them and they – the Typhies [the British Hawker Typhoon fighter-bombers] – seldom make mistakes. The farm we are in now is quite large but the Old Boy is almost pro-Nazi. He showed definite dislike to our occupying his place and tried to extract ridiculous prices for his eggs, etc. When I came in yesterday had my French-speaking driver say "My captain is going to occupy your farm as a HQ. He wants your basement unlocked." I stood behind looking very grim. We got the

basement and parts of the outbuildings. We used to be very polite & request, but if they show no appreciation, well, then we have no alternative. We're not fooling at all.

Got a marvellous sleep last night. Got about a foot of straw on the floor....You know I miss being a platoon commander and the peculiar thrill of patrols and reces. Stupid, of course.

"Gave Jerry a breakfast of mortar shells this morn," he reported on 14 September. "Had to get up early ourselves but it's worth while if we can make him suffer. I've always had ideas of using Supporting Arms in various ways and now we are putting them to use." Two days later he was sitting in a basement doorway and swatting hornets, one of which had just stung him. "Seems funny we're sitting around shirtless and absorbing the sun and getting our clothes washed – and the Hun a few hundred yards away. Some of them have come through to us & are glad to talk & rather surprised to find us in their backyards. But the backbone of their army are so stupidly stubborn – such unnecessary waste of life. However, they've asked for it, and they'll get it. In fact they're getting part of it now from the Typhoons."

Operation Wellhit, the ground assault on Boulogne, began on 17 September. The North Shores took three days to subdue their own

One of three large coastal guns, of about 16-inch calibre, found intact at Le Trésorerie, 19 September 1944.



Photo by Donald I. Grant, NAC PA 174409



Major-General D.C. Spry, General Officer Commanding, 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, Brigadier K.G. Blackader, commander of 8th Brigade and Captain Osborne, ADC, look at the emplacement of the 12-inch gun pointing towards England from La Trésorerie.

objective, La Trésorerie, of which MacDonald wrote on 19 September:

Am physically and mentally tired out – exhausted. Tonight ends 3rd day and night of a battle. We are the victors but still have some posts to winkle out. We have knocked out a high hill, the strongest position we've ever hit – 75 yd. long pillboxes or forts housing huge channel guns & hundreds & hundreds of men. So heavy that our shells bounced off them & a 500 lb. bomb just dug earth away from the side. Prisoners told us our 3" mortar shells hitting them sounded like grenades.

It started Sunday [the 17th] with a large scale air attack. We worked two coys up the hill over 1,000 yds. to the edge of woods and forts under the bombing & barrage & supporting fire. Got regular Hell as soon as the Hun recovered. All the forts are inter-supporting & we got huge bathtub naval shells back. However, today the whole hill is ours & we go on.

Am now sitting in a cellar & getting a cup of tea. Personal angle? Well, Sunday I started off with the Col., then I cut across country to a main road in order to get Pioneers mine sweeping a route for Carriers, Mortars and

A/Tank guns through a regular network of mines & booby traps. Got tied down with airbursts & stopped to dress casualties. Then thought I'd better go up to the top & recce the jobs for my stuff. Got up O.K. but then we started getting it. Three of us were in a German sentry box made of concrete & the [Rifle] Coy I was with were in a trench alongside & under the rd about 75 yds from the one huge Fort & 25 yds from a machine gun nest. Every move brought fire & it was pretty terrible for awhile. Frankly I was really scared & we all did a bit of praying. Got the casualties in the trench & some died there. The men are marvellous – full of guts. I can't begin to quote the instances of outstanding bravery – hundreds of them. Th[at]'s what made us stick there – just the courage of those men hanging on like ants hanging onto a huge barrel.

Got word back to Bn of location & at dark – or near 10 p.m. I got all set & two of us sneaked out & down through the minefield & back to Bn. God was with us then 'cause we just got on the other slope & the Hun again gave the area a raking. Got back to Bn & Col. & I bunked together. My Gosh but he was glad to see me – acted just like a father. Got a raking too – he sd not to take

Photo by Donald I. Grant, NAC PA 167978

any more chances. Heck, I thought my stuff would be up – rather disconcerting to be on a spot – three of us in the sentry box & not be able to get out & my Coy behind somewhere.

Saw my favourite in the Coy burned to death. Bob [Davidson] was a pte. when I took over the carriers & I kept promoting him. He was a sgt. & a grand boy. I can't get him out of my mind – keep seeing him every place I go. Yes we expect & accept casualties but they are hard to take.

Bn. was hit that morning. Lucky again though. Now all goes well & a feeling of a job well done. Some funny stories emerging. For instance, the second before the shell hit Bn, a runner came to the door and sd. "Here's a box your CSM sent down." Just then he was blown into the room from the blast. The box was a package of nuts from Aunt Eliz & Uncle Harry – rather a rush delivery.

Then too, one Coy had half a fort but Jerry had the other. The dynamo controlling the lights was in the Hun end. They had to keep the dynamo going & our lads had radio & lights & were sitting there plotting the next move. Then a formal surrender being made – white flag & everything & some sod fired to the flank & some confusion & our boys turning the Germans' guns on them. We cry & laugh & we're all slaphappy. Have been offered a Rifle Coy. Means a majority, but I know & the Col. knows I can do more for the Bn. & war effort by using my knowledge of Support Coy to best advantage. Shall let you know what happens.

Much later, in a letter of 18 February 1945, Hal added more detail to his description of these events, in response to questions from Marjorie. About proceeding up the hill at La Trésorerie, he wrote:

...eager to have my Sp. Coy. platoons tie in properly, I kept a bound ahead preparing a way. Would have been fine, too, if two Flame Carriers hadn't gone up on mines. That scene demoralized a lot. Had to do a lot of talking that day. Then went up on foot to the top to forward Rifle Company to check up & got pinned down and cut off & found myself in a strange Company & the Coy Cmdr a

casualty & also the two officers. That, Angel, was a damn unpleasant few hrs, believe me. Issued, or rather made suggestions & saw they were carried out & then returned thru the minefields to Bn to look after my own Company. I could only do that a couple of times & then I would be a battle exhaustion case.

However, I was not with my own Coy & actually had no right up there, as none of my Coy got near the place – if they had been able to move up it would've been perfect. C'est la guerre or somepin.

These understated accounts in fact describe Hal's taking command of a company whose commander and second-in-command had both become battle casualties and the second operation for which MacDonald was recommended for a decoration.³

From Boulogne on 22 September 1944, Hal continued to write of the action there including the taking of the towns of Wimille and Wimerieux:

Now have my HQ in a concrete blockhouse. Feel very tired. Watching young Bob Davidson & others die last Sunday seemed to knock me for a loop & it's taking a while for me to get over it. Then had another bit of a do & and all in all need some rest. We have finally cleaned up here & will no doubt be moving on.

Since our big attack Sunday, which ended on Monday...we have taken another heavily defended town [Wimille] and then on to the main coastal town [Wimerieux]. Just cleaned it up this morning. It was a popular summer resort & is now studded with huge pillboxes & hundreds of guns. Have lost some fine men but effort has been worthwhile. We all feel the same way.

It's been a tough grind & our Bn has done seemingly superhuman work. The Hun had enough food, ammunition & weapons to hold off for months & it was only sheer guts & tenacity that took these places. Thank God Monty put us on the beach in Normandy & not on this front. It would be humanly impossible to get in. Anyone who ever said the West Wall was a myth is a candidate for an asylum. My Heavens, it's unbelievable –

the strongpoints, the supplies & resources & the guns they swung on us."

MacDonald confirmed that he had turned down command of the Rifle Company, with its promotion to the rank of major. His reasons included the fact that he had not done much infantry work for some time and it would take a lot of effort to take on a new company, especially now when he was mentally and physically exhausted. Also, he now had the reorganized Support Company working well and making worthwhile contributions. The Colonel's response was that he had more than earned a promotion, "but, frankly, Hal, I'm darn glad you said no."

A comment in a letter from Marjorie prompted him to revert, briefly, to the Normandy campaign: "Yes, we (Cdn. & Brit.) were underplayed in the Caen-Falaise show, but records & those in the know, know that we deserve the credit, and we ourselves know the role we played & its importance. Though, frankly, 'twas no picnic to be faced by 5 Panzer Divs trying to crack us. Those were grim days."

On 24 September MacDonald had returned to the affairs of the moment:

Another Sunday. Am sitting in a small wooden dugout seven feet underground; there are two windows near the roof, really quite cosy. Eight of us sleeping in here. Thank Heavens the Germans made thorough dugouts & made homes of them. A very dreary day, strong wind & rain & lots of mud. In passing through a Hun position t'other day I grabbed a pr. of rubber boots. Got them out this morning & b'gosh they're not only different sizes but different shapes – anyway I have them on & that's the main thing.

Had blackberry pie last night. We have always had a bit of trouble with rations as my Coy is so often split up, so now have our Coy cooker up & it helps us a lot. The cook is an enterprising lad. The other day he made an oven out of a 3" mortar box, & pie plates from the sides of hardtack tins. The pies weren't too bad but the oven was too hot and the crust was just scorched. Hey, I'm looking forward to some mail today. Haven't had any for three or four days now and miss them so much. You know I woke up this morning & my first thought was 'Wouldn't it be grand to wake up & be greeted with 'Armistice.' A dream perhaps & yet I wonder how much longer they can

Canadian soldiers observe the fighting towards Wimereux while standing beside the wreckage of German fortified buildings, 21 September 1944.



Photo by Donald I. Grant, NAC PA 167979

Personnel from the North Shore Regiment examine a German cross-Channel gun at Sangatte, France, 26 September 1944.

stand up to the ever-increasing pressure. Even the prisoners don't know.

I see the Cdn Gov't will have decided, in 10 days' time, who will enter the Pacific War, whether seasoned Overseas Army or Zombies on Home Defense. Logically, who should? The Gov't is asking for a lot of grief from men and officers who have been away from home for years & through extremely tough fighting. Would take a court martial first rather than do someone else's share of the thing.

There was no time to rest after the fall of Boulogne and the Canadians moved along the coast to their next major objective, Calais. Here, on 25 September, the North Shores opened an attack on Sangatte, part of the western fortifications of Calais, which held a battery of three gigantic 406 mm guns. "A" and "B" Companies were assigned the task of capturing the defensive works on the ridge top, then, with "D" Company, to secure the actual gun emplacements on the seaward slope below. MacDonald's Support Company was not involved in this assault. Rather, the prime support here came from elements of the British 79th Armoured Division, popularly known as the "Funnies," with its specialist armoured vehicles such as Flails, Crocodiles, and the new Congas – tanks with flexible hoses that blew out liquid explosives.

A flying armoured column of the 79th (British) Armoured Division being briefed before the attack on Boulogne. Visible are a Sherman tank and a Churchill Crocodile flame-throwing tank.



Photo by Donald I. Grant, NAC PA 176982

Photo by Donald I. Grant, NAC PA 133143



By the morning of the 26th, the entire battery was in the North Shore's hands. Hal MacDonald had begun a letter on that surrender day in good spirits, reporting that he had:

Just finished another good haul. A bad 24 hrs in heavy rain but today is a beautiful day and all is rosy.

Must tell you something – am now my normal self. Since last Sunday – 9 days ago – I have just been going on nerve. An awful feeling to feel yourself cracking & see others who have gone through just as much & they're in perfect health. A guy just can't let himself go, no matter how tired he may be....



Photo by Donald I. Grant, NAC PA 133136

The tallest man in the German army (7'3") being examined by Private J.W. Butler of the North Shore Regiment, Sangatte, France, 26 September 1944.

Yesterday morning I was with the Col. & still stupidly dazed. 'Twasn't till Warren Harvey & I started on a job that I seemed to get a new strength. The heavy buzzing has died down in the head so all is well – frankly I am quite happy, but I miss you so very much. Everyday is the question 'How much longer can Germany hold out?' Our officer P.O.W.'s are quite nice lads, especially the M.O.

The Col. & I were there for the formal surrender. Hey, we got the tallest man in the German Army, 7' 3". We got his picture. He'd been in the States & S. America & spoke a bit of English. 'Twas a beautiful sight this morning. We drove the Jeep to within 1,000 yds of the position, everything a sea of mud, a burning Jeep & Carrier on one side & a mass of bomb craters. Then walked on the cleared lane through the mine field and up to the top of the hills. Then over the hill & looking down on sand dunes & immense shell & bomb craters and the Hun positions with white flags flying.

The letter breaks here, then concludes abruptly: "Just had some bad news, evidently a Jeep hit a mine & we lost some of our best officers. Not confirmed yet. An awful shock. Will tell you more later. A severe shock. All my love & give me strength & courage."

The successful operation allowed sightseers from sections of the unit who had not been immediately involved to go forward to inspect the new capture – with tragic results. An incoming jeep struck a mine, killing its occupants: the second-in-command, Major John Carson; the commander of the headquarters company, Captain Noel Humphrys; the regimental sergeant major, Webb MacRae; and the driver, Corporal John Parker. The adjutant, Captain Bob Ross, was so severely injured that he had to be invalided back to England.⁴

Three days later, after the badly hit regiment had been moved back a few kilometres to the French village of Boursin for rest and re-equipment, MacDonald was able to fill in the details.

I can't believe it even now. Though the Col. & I attended the funeral that evening at dusk



Photo by Donald I. Grant, NAC PA 133139

Personnel from the North Shore Regiment advancing on a German bunker, Sangatte, France 26 September 1944.

– a full moon beaming down & the parting words of the Padre 'With the going down of the sun and in the morning we shall remember them'. The worst blow a Bn could suffer – all key men. However it means that we few old remaining officers have a bigger score to settle, to do our share in making certain their sacrifice was not in vain.

The inevitable happened. I had to go in as adjutant. We were able to carry on & though I think we're all slightly nuts we have drawn together & I'm getting marvellous cooperation from all. Rest is only a word now. Seems odd, only that morning Noel and I had stood on the ridge (scene of our latest victory) and looked at the white cliffs of Dover – and now! Letters are on their way to the next of kin.

By 30 September, he reported: "Have been on duty now for almost 72 hours 'cause I wanted to keep control of things, however now I have things in hand I'll go easier on the body & mind & work in duty officers.....Gosh, every day we miss those guys more & more." The German cross-channel batteries at Cap Gris Nez fell to the 9th Brigade on that day, and the surrender of Calais occurred on 1 October. At Boursin, the North Shores at last got reinforcements. Among them was Major Neil Gordon, late a company commander with the Queen's Own Rifles, who

became Lieutenant-Colonel Anderson's second-in-command.

MacDonald's next letter bore some news that had recently arrived about another Allied operation. Although he did not name it, this was in fact Market Garden, British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's major airborne and ground assault at Arnhem, Holland, by which he hoped to seize the river and canal crossings into Germany. Had it been successful, this strike could have significantly shortened the war. The operation failed, however, and Market Garden, launched on 17 September, had to be aborted by 26 September.

Meanwhile, as early as 4 September, the British had captured Antwerp, which, with a capacity of 40,000 tons of cargo a day, was the greatest port in western Europe. However, with the Scheldt Estuary, the 96 kilometre long sea approach to city, still in German hands, the Allies could not capitalize on the port's huge capacity for receiving supplies. In fact, General Crerar and First Canadian Army had been assigned the task of clearing the Germans from the Scheldt while they were still engaged in the fighting at Boulogne. Other priorities intervened, however, and Montgomery's calculated gamble that the seizure of the bridges over the Rhine would pay greater dividends, meant that the Germans in



Buffalo amphibious vehicles carrying members of the North Shore Regiment across the Scheldt Estuary enroute to the Canadian bridgehead in the Breskens pocket. To the left can be seen the smoke generated to screen the passage from the German gun batteries on Walcheren Island, 11 October 1944.

Photo by
Donald I.
Grant, N.S.
PA 13843

the Scheldt had time to strengthen their defences. This would have major repercussions for the Canadians, condemning them to a long, miserable and bloody struggle. As yet unaware of the consequences for himself and his comrades, MacDonald reported the news: "The boys of the Airborne Division have had a 'tough' show. It's hard to have to withdraw & have the feeling of a job not completed. However the reports claim it was 80 to 85% successful in its ultimate objectives." Returning to more mundane matters, however, he replies to questions from Marjorie:

Now I must answer – I wear a beret. Have, or had, a 'boughten' one, but, ahem, 'lost it'. Now I wear the issue. Really very comfortable & far ahead of the old Field Service Cap. Matter of fact, most of us wear only the Berets. Carry our Helmets just in case our friends the Yanks give us the bombs again.

Can feel a slackening of discipline in Bn since we lost our RSM – he was known and admired throughout the Division. Speaking of Battle Dress, it's the most comfortable of all and the high boots are the best boot ever issued. It's unfortunate they are stopping production. Aside from the extra leather involved, they did away with Anklets – which were extremely comfortable & very practical.

Early in October the unit was ordered into Belgium to take part in the crossing of the Leopold Canal. For this operation the North Shores would be under the command of 7th Brigade, and their role would be to man folding assault boats and ferry the 7th Brigade troops across the canal in the face of constant and heavy German fire. They were then to keep the attack troops supplied, and to act as their reinforcements. After this demanding activity, the

regiment returned to 8th Brigade command and went back through Belgium and on to Holland, where, by 10 October, it had moved into a concentration area at Terneuzen, on the southern shore of the Scheldt River. Here they were ordered to prepare for another water crossing, this time in Buffaloes, large armoured tracked amphibious vehicles, much preferable to the flimsy folding assault boats used in their previous venture.

The Scheldt Campaign, a month-long battle, was conducted under totally miserable conditions over flat, wet country criss-crossed by 15 foot high dykes continually swept by enemy machine gun, mortar, and artillery fire, under a constantly cold, sleety rain. Allied casualties in this operation amounted to more than 12,000, more than half Canadian and mostly infantry. Canadian war correspondent, Ross Munro, has described the Scheldt as the worst battleground of the Western Campaign.⁵

It was not until early November, several weeks after the events occurred, that MacDonald wrote about these battles. The fact that he occupied the time-consuming position of regimental adjutant meant that his letters were more infrequent. Also, because he was no longer in the front line of battle, they tended to be more general. As he wrote on 14 October: "This adjutant job isn't to my liking at all, but the Col. told me today that he hated to put me in a job I disliked but felt it was absolutely necessary." He was, he added, usually "a couple of hundred yards behind the attacking Coys & I miss (sometimes) the peculiar thrill of contact. I do miss the minute to minute tension of Carrier Platoon work but would almost say I've enough memories stored up now – as the Old Maid said "I've had my moments" He then went on to describe his present situation:

Our ops room is set up in the cellar of a little house in the land of wooden shoes. We can trace the progress of the past 4 months by various types of houses. The greater part of France we had shell broken and bullet splintered thick walled houses with extremely strong cellars (former wine cellars) but greater part of buildings evacuated. Then there was a country that was definitely cleaner, brighter & less noisy – that was the stage of comparative quiet & part of the chase. Now back to our devastated homes. These houses are remarkably tidy, floor wax is evident and walls & ceilings are gloss enamelled. Some are evacuated & occupied only by the chickens. Our present small cellar is occupied not only by our night shift but also by two old ladies, 1 boy and 1 old man. They are refugees from a nearby now derelict town and will not be evacuated any further. A number have left this whole area.

On 20 October, in the middle of the Scheldt operation, he wrote from Schoondijk:

Yesterday was hellish – haven't closed my eyes for 48 hours & I'm ashamed to say how long since I've had my clothes off. I did

change my socks the other day but it doesn't do much good, they are always wet & cold. My Gosh I bet there'll be a lot of bad feet before we finish this operation...Heavens I'm tired, not particularly physically but just completely tired out...

We heard [Minister of National Defence, J.L.] Ralston was over here. Not he, nor any of the others would come to see us. We haven't seen a single important personage over here, always in the so-called danger zone & therefore practically out of bounds to visitors. All the good things & entertainments etc. go to the boys who always have a roof over their heads, a change of clothes, an opportunity to walk out, to keep clean. Oh well it takes all kinds to make an army.

At 3 a.m. on 22 October Hal reported comparative calm, "though far from silent, with batteries of art[illery] pounding away. The mud is still heavy but for some unknown reason it didn't rain." He had just seen a list of officers made immediately before Caen fell and noted: "There are now five of those left with us here."

The next day, 23 October, they were in a prosperous farm, with a large barn filled with some 25 refugees. They had two rooms in the

Soldiers from the North Shore Regiment march past a dyke, 11 October 1944.



house, one for their ops room and a second where four of them slept. Everything was clean and neat, with glossy cream woodwork and tiled floors in the house, shed, creamery, and storeroom.

They used to leave their clogs at the door & pad around in sock feet, but with our advent, and the tracked mud in the hall, they now drop their clogs just outside the door they enter....

One Coy today liberated a Cdn. Flying Officer and an Amer[ican] Sgt. Air Gunner. Past while they've been living with Dutch in a windmill. The Yank did all the blowing about what he'd done – my Heavens they bore me. The Cdn. was quiet & very excited over the whole thing. They went back to town this p.m. to thank their friends & say "Dank U!"

On 24 October when unit headquarters was a few hundred yards from the battle, he wrote again:

with Jerry playing around with mortars & shells. Funniest thing was to find a sniper busily at work from practically our back yard. He isn't working now.

Just now we are on top of the Hun, but my Gawd we see terrific sights and yet we're so hardened to them – Horses tangled in wire & starving, animals badly wounded & necessitating shooting. Dead Huns in the ditches, groups of once well-kept farms now a mass of burnt-out rubble. Yes, what we're fighting for is always clear in our minds.

The Battle of the Scheldt ended for the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Infantry Divisions on 2 November. After an ordeal of intense action with accompanying heavy casualties, in conditions that kept them constantly cold, muddy and soaked to the skin, they at last got a badly-needed break. The whole 3rd Canadian Division – some 15,000 men – was invited by the Burgomaster of Ghent to spend nearly a week in that Belgian city as guests of its grateful citizens. The men were royally treated, welcomed by cheering, flag-waving crowds, and billeted in private homes whose owners could not do enough for them. Contrary to the fears expressed by some superior officers, the troops' behaviour was, on the whole, exemplary. At the same time,

the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division got a rest in the areas of Antwerp and Brussels. MacDonald wrote from Ghent on 5 November: "Hey, now have my office in Bn. Hdq. in a large office bldg. in the centre of town. The outfit has had some relaxation. This little break has been no rest for administration guys though, more work than ever. We billeted the men in homes & they had a swell time – lots to drink, lots of women & what not. But the 2 i/c and I stayed in the main office bldg & I was working day & night. The men stop for a rest but Admin increases, if anything." He did, however, find time to report on some exotic entertainment and floor shows offered at the nearby cafés.

Despite his hectic schedule, Hal took some time to comment further on the just-finished Scheldt campaign, writing on 5 November:

Suppose you've read of the finish to our last show. We're now known as the Pick Pockets. That was a long hard grind. Went across and made our assault landing on 11 Oct & a steady diet from then on. First few days were the worst. Shan't forget the landing. We were getting it from our front and also the Flushing guns – [were] just between the two & then we had to hold a small piece of land and just keep pushing. It was some fun.

On 21 November he wrote more about the battle, describing the North Shores' role in Operation Switchback, the clearing of the Breskens Pocket, a 15 km by 35 km segment of the Scheldt estuary at its coastal outlet. "Now I can talk about the Scheldt," he began:

We landed on the northern tip & had a warm day or two. Then moved south & cleared in and around Biervliet. Rotten fighting. The Hun had every dyke covered from dyke jcts. [junctions] & had a very elaborate system of trenches. But they also had a lot of maniacal Hitler Youth who would lie in beetroot fields & snipe. The roads were flooded & the polders (country between the dykes) flooded, and axis of advance only along dykes & then one had to watch both sides. Often a gr[ou]p on one side would be pinned down and the other side move quite freely. We were certainly glad to see armour the fifth or sixth day.

On 11 November, the North Shores left the hospitality of Ghent as the First Canadian Army moved eastward to the vicinity of Nijmegen. Here they took up positions just inside the border between Holland and Germany. The regiment relieved a battalion of the 82nd U.S. Airborne Division that had been stationed there since the end of Market Garden, in an area still dotted with the wreckage of gliders and aircraft shot down in that failed enterprise. Here the North Shores would spend their sixth Christmas since leaving Canada for overseas.

In the last days of November the Allied High Command held an impressive ceremony to officially re-open the port of Antwerp to shipping. The guest list was studded with the names of



M.A. MacDonald interviewing a CWAC colonel at the Armouries in Saint John, NB, late 1944.

naval and military chiefs from almost all the Allied forces. But no representative was present from the Canadian army – which had fought so hard and at such cost to clear the vital waterway.⁶ The Canadian Army had had a tough, hard slog since their landing at Juno Beach, through the hard-fought battles against elite Panzer Divisions in Normandy, the capture of the massive gun batteries of the Channel Ports, and the bitter attritional struggle to clear the Scheldt. Indeed, their rather unglamorous role had even led to

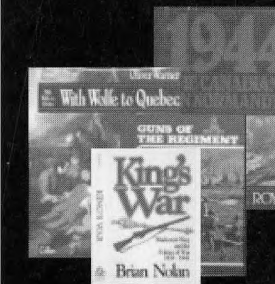
their being referred to as the "Cinderella Army."⁷ In contrast to Cinderella, however, the North Shores did not get a chance to go to the ball. But they could at least console themselves with memories of the glad welcome and warm hospitality they experienced in Ghent. Still ahead of them lay Germany itself.

Notes

1. Bill McAndrew, Bill Rawling, Michael Whitby, *Liberation: The Canadians in Europe*; (Montreal, 1995) p.14
2. The dates in this segment are from the war diary of Lieutenant-Colonel J.E. Anderson, which he began on D-Day, 6 June 1944, and kept up until VE-Day 8 May 1945. He had succeeded to the command of the North Shore (N.B.) Regiment on 11 August 1944. This diary is in the possession of the Anderson family and was kindly loaned to the author for this article.
3. The episode is described in Will R. Bird's *North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment*, (Fredericton, 1963) pp.414-415. The other occasion on which MacDonald was recommended for a decoration was at Sassy in Normandy on 14 August 1944.
4. See Bird's *North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment*, p.433. Most of the campaign narrative linking the letters in this account is based on this book or on C.P. Stacey, *Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945*, (Ottawa, 1966) pp.279-425.
5. Ross Munro, *Gauntlet to Overlord: The Story of the Canadian Army*, (Toronto, 1946) p.228
6. W. Denis & Shelagh Whitaker, *Tug of War: The Allied Victory that Opened Antwerp*, (Toronto, 1984) p.376
7. R.W. Thompson, *The Eighty-Five Days: The Story of the Scheldt*, (London, 1957) p.55.

M.A. MacDonald is author of *Fortune and La Tour: the Civil War in Acadia* (Toronto, 1983) and is a Research Associate at the New Brunswick Museum. She would like to thank Dr. William McAndrew for his invaluable advice and encouragement.

USED BOOK SALE



The Friends of the Canadian War Museum is a volunteer organization whose purpose is to provide support for the Canadian War Museum. One of their main ongoing activities is to raise funds to assist the CWM. In this regard, the Friends are selling used military history books, donated from collections of members and others, over the internet. Additional books are constantly being added to the site, as the time of volunteers allows. The current books have been categorized by the topics of naval, aviation, pre-20th century, biography/memoir World War I, World War II, and foreign language histories.

Please take a look at www.friends-amis.org
All proceeds are used towards supporting the CWM.