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Striking Into Germany: From the Scheldt to the German Surrender

Harold MacDonald

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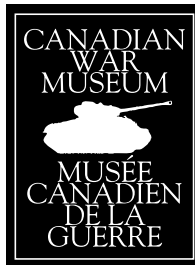
Striking Into Germany

From the Scheldt to the German Surrender

The Letters of Captain Harold MacDonald (with M.A. MacDonald)

We have seen in previous instalments of these letters (See *CMH*, Spring, Autumn editions, 2002) how Captain Harold S. (Hal) MacDonald of the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment fought across northwest Europe. Through the Normandy campaign, the capture of the Channel ports, and the clearing of the Scheldt, he served as a company commander and as regimental adjutant. Throughout it all, in vivid and mostly uncensored letters to his wife Marjorie back in Saint John, he recorded his personal reactions to these great events. MacDonald was appointed the North Shores' adjutant after the capture of Calais at the end of September. As he found the work of the position so demanding and the stress levels so intense, his letters to Marjorie became less frequent and somewhat briefer than previously.

But in December, while the regiment was stationed at Nijmegen in Holland, he moved from the job of adjutant to that of the North Shore's Liaison Officer at 8th Brigade's Headquarters. Although this too was a demanding job, MacDonald clearly found it less time consuming and stressful than that of adjutant, with the result that the number of his letters home increased and they also became more discursive. These letters are by a capable writer who was familiar with the grind of combat but who was now somewhat distanced from it with a wider view of events as they unfolded. Written from a slightly different perspective, his letters continue to provide a unique and invaluable insight into



the mentality and preoccupations of this front-line Canadian infantry officer as the army of which he was a member fought through the war's costly and exhausting final four months.

The First Canadian Army had concluded its hard-fought battle to clear the Germans from the Scheldt in early November 1944, at last giving the Allied armies access to the vital port of Antwerp. After a welcome break in the Belgian city of Ghent, the Canadians proceeded to Nijmegen in eastern Holland, within striking distance of Germany itself. They remained in this border location for the next few months holding the Nijmegen salient as a base for an upcoming offensive to clear the Germans from the Rhineland, then to cross the Rhine River and invade Germany itself.¹

During their long months of fighting, through Italy and through northwest Europe, Canadian units had suffered heavy losses, especially the infantry, leaving them critically short-handed. In the Scheldt alone they had suffered more than 6,000 casualties, between 75 and 80 percent of them infantrymen.² The Canadian military had, however, seriously underestimated probable losses, especially of the essential foot soldiers, resulting in urgent and mounting demands for reinforcements. This had triggered a political crisis in Canada sadly reminiscent of the conscription troubles of the First World War. It was not until the end of November 1944 that Prime Minister Mackenzie King decided to bite the bullet and send 16,000 home defence

Captain Harold S. (Hal) MacDonald of the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment photographed while on leave in London in late 1944 or early 1945. This photo shows him older and more stressed than before he had been in battle.

paddling around flooded areas in duck boats – till Jerry drops a few, and then there’s mad paddling for shore and their holes.” He went on to another subject. “I haven’t the nerve to loot, as is done. A number of guys have no conscience, me, well if the army had driven me out of my home and I was forced to leave some personal belongings & furniture, I wouldn’t want it all stolen and re-sold or destroyed. Sure, it’s war, but we’re only liberating them.”

On 1 December he returned to the reinforcement problem, after reading reports of rioting and sit-down strikes in Canada amongst those conscripted for overseas service.

Still following with interest – much interest – the actions of ‘The Zombs Strike Back’. Latest reports give us a very bad taste in our mouths and our ire and disgust are at a high peak. As a consensus of opinion tonight we will be ashamed to go back to England on leave, if we ever do get through this, and face those people who are giving all, and the English papers build all the stories up, such as the tearing down of the Union Jack. My God, what a mess of the war effort these directing powers have made. Here we are, a reputedly hard fighting, hard working and tough Army and proud of all that Canada stands for and now – the rank and file say ‘If I ever get back to England on leave I’ll take off my Canadas before I land’. Yes, even Mary of Arnhem (sp?) [The local German propaganda broadcaster] has a great time building up stories of the Canadian Zombies and makes good use of the situation as a basis for propaganda. What they should do is take back the Third Div. to quell the mutiny. We’ve been sitting planning our campaign, street fighting in Montreal and Quebec. Ha, with our experience in all types of fighting, what a treat it would be.

See where an infantry battalion was prevented from boarding a train for overseas by 1500 Zombs. My Gawd do a couple of Divisions stop us over here? Did the 12,000 plus on the Scheldt stop one Div.? Did the five panzer units against us at Bourgebus drive us back? Did the outnumbering Hun on three sides of us at Carpiquet force us to surrender? Darling, the answer to all is NO. And yet, 1500 Zombs can prevent a Bn. from coming over. What if it does lead to a mutiny. Should the Govt give in to a few and sacrifice so many and so much? It’s all out

photo courtesy of M.A. MacDonald

conscripts overseas.³ When some conscripts gave trouble over leaving Canada this was extensively reported, thus strengthening a strong prejudice against them already held by the overseas soldiers.

Hal MacDonald’s letter of 28 November 1944 reflects their reactions, using the common term for the home defence conscripts – Zombies, a Voodoo word signifying the living dead.

We follow with interest the battle of the century – whether or not to send over the Zombies. ‘Jerry Talking’ (Arnhem Station) has also made some interesting comments, and they of course highlight the demonstrations and ‘Down With Conscription’ parades. If they do come over, my idea would be to put them into separate units because they would never mix with the present fighting men. Life would be miserable for them. My gosh, I can’t figure out why they should be so yellow. Oh well, it takes all kinds.

By 30 November MacDonald returned to the less contentious subject of conditions of life. “Here in our neck of the woods there are no civilians – not allowed. The boys have fun

of proportion. What are we fighting for? Not our country now – no, for our own individual homes and loved ones. That's all. To think those guys have so much to fight for and yet they refuse to come over. Yes and they're not the only ones. There's W... L.... and lots of other Officers who brown-nosed around the bigshots 'till they got commissions so they could be dressed up and have all the glory and share in the honor of the Canadian Army and when they are forced to come over they deliberately get adverse reports so's they'll be sent back. That is not hearsay. I heard a statement to that effect from an Officer's own lips. He's for it.

Things are quite quiet now....Everything that comes over goes way past us – thank Heavens!

He asked Marjorie to send notes and cards to wounded friends being treated in Sussex Military Hospital, including Robbie [Major J.A.L.] Robichaud], now paralyzed from the waist down. "Those of us who saw him that night at Quesnay Wood wrote him off as having had it – yet he came through. Just plain sheer guts brought him through....Paul McCann is also there. He would like to visit you if he goes to Saint John. Understand he gets around quite a bit with a cane."

By 4 December, however, MacDonald's mood was lighter.

Had a laugh a while ago. We have a Dutch interpreter attached to us. He's a comical bloke, glasses, ill-fitting uniform, etc. The boys got him to sing a song for me. It's to the tune of 'Marching Against England' and is about the RAF bombing Germany. Seems that here when the Germans were occupying the country the Dutch would sing this song every time the RAF came over. Sounded funny to hear him singing the English words, 'Ve' etc. Sure I speak Dutch fluently – the whole four or five words.

Got a box from you yesterday – also one from the church. Yours had the Christmas wrapping but no 'Do Not Open', so I did – it was a grand box. The cards are in my pocket and I often look at them.

Only a week later, 10 December, Hal had great changes to report.

Have had a disposition like a bear awakened halfway through a winter sleep.... I've been working 24 hours a day, [but] in a day or so shall be able to write more and more. I'm through as adjutant. Never worked so hard before. Would get so tired I'd go to bed and just shake & shiver

& feel as if I wanted to break down and weep.⁴ Then Col. Anderson was ordered back to England. When Ernie got word about that we got our heads together & I'm going to Bde. [Brigade] tomorrow, as L.O. (Liaison Officer for N. Shore R.). Blake Oulton is taking Adjt. [Adjutant] job – he had a two month rest in England with a minor wound. I figure I'm getting a damn good break and every old officer in the B[attalion] envies me. The new C.O. is an Ottawa man...Felt I had more than done my share – been adjutant and doing a large part of 2 i.c.'s job for over two months & getting short-tempered & irritable & nervous. Nuts to that...I continue to draw 50 cents a day extra and have my own jeep & run my own life. A big change & a chance to catch up on sleep & mental outlook. Hated to see Uncle Ernie leave but it may be o.k.

But there was more to MacDonald's move than that, as he would disclose later.

On 13 December he began a long, chatty letter, three full army forms, answering questions and commenting on his current life:

Ah what a change from mad rushing & always a head full of a thousand and one details and wondering how, when, where & if they can all be accomplished within a certain time. Now am tied down 1/3 of the day as Bde Duty Officer & rest of the time have numerous things to do – visit my unit & other formations, etc. But there's no rush or tear. Can even sit down & play a game of crib, and been able to wear a freshly pressed B.D. [battledress] each day & boots polished & swell meals & waiters & a small bar. You see, even in line as we are, Bde HQ keeps a certain semblance of dignity...

Find even back in Bde is noisy. In front line usually everything is over & misses us, but here – we get it. Right now our HQ is separate from our living quarters & a bit of warm ground in between. Makes things interesting....Glad to have my first day as Liaison Off over with. Still have an adjutant's complex – taking all advances as indicating somebody wants something or has a kick coming & I have to think quickly & work out an answer. Never realized how much of a strain I was under till I changed.

He anticipated "being able to write far oftener than I've had time to up to now," and had just learned that a leave to England should be coming up in a month's time, with maybe a 48-hour one before that to someplace nearer. In the meantime, "This is a peculiar front – we have mess dinner with shells landing around us & a battle going on nearby."

In this somewhat disjointed and rambling letter, he wrote: "Some friends back home have a disease similar to jaundice, only it leaves a broad yellow streak down one's back." Commenting further on the home front he noted with interest that K.C. Irving had bought the Saint John newspapers and was "becoming quite the business tycoon." Then, about experiences in battle: "I've never had to grapple hand to hand, but have had success within grenade range. Didn't feel a qualm till thinking it over afterwards & then a shiver at the thought of how close we came to buying it. Me, I'd rather see their bodies flying from effect of mortar shells." About the important matter of his cigarette supply, he reported: "Now have 600 cigs on hand. I figure I lose about 300 out of every 1,500 sent. Not a bad average though."

On 14 December, after reminiscing about good times back home he described his day: "Was duty officer 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. Then visited the other formations. Fun not having to rush & tear & worry & swear & ferment & rant & rave and be under a strain 24 hours a day. Got back at 5, did some work & then back to quarters. Then supper, sat by the fire & wrote letters." A letter of 18-19 December said simply: "We had to evacuate our mess & sleeping quarters. No equipment was lost – just a few holes here and there." The next day he went to the dentist to have a troublesome tooth extracted, but it broke, causing a lot of pain and difficulty.

Christmas carols were being played on the radio on 21 December. "Bad stuff, thinking – so much wish I could be with you for Christmas." He would be on duty midnight to 8 p.m. "Same thing last night. Had 3 hrs sleep this a.m. so won't be too bad. Busy day tomorrow." Then he spoke about a published interview Marjorie (a newspaper reporter) had had with their former commanding officer, Colonel Don Buell who, after his serious wound at Quesnay Wood, was back in Canada making appearances to promote Victory Bonds. Adjutant Blake Oulton had been sent a clipping of it and, not knowing it was by Hal's wife, showed it to him, saying: "It's far better than the average stories in the T.J. [Telegraph Journal] – must be an outside reporter." MacDonald was pleased to enlighten him. The letter ended: "The Boche seems to have been inoculated with a dose of pep. Well, I can't discuss it either pro or con, or any way – nuts!"

The action he could not discuss was in fact the massive German Panzer counterattack south of them, in the Ardennes, the "Battle of the Bulge," which began on 16 December and lasted some 10 days. It did not, however, involve Canadians.

Writing about their Christmas:

For us, well, it was just another day. Frankly, it was hard to realize it was Christmas. We had a few drinks. I was on duty midnight to 0800 & slept in yesterday morning. In afternoon went up to Unit and then down to Div, then was on duty 7 to 12 last night.

Oh yea, Jerry put on an entertainment for us Christmas Eve. A bugler playing 'Silent Night'. Reply to that was a hell of a lot of fire. Then they set up a loudspeaker & started calling us friends & asking if carols made us lonely & they played carols. Ha – the b's got more than they expected. Method of counting the days till Christmas was 'Three more Fighting Days till Christmas'. Then the best one was one of the guys calling for fire & he says Peace on Earth, Goodwill towards Men – bring down fire on Target Ten. And so it goes. Mail has been quite slow but maybe there'll be some in today. I hope. Oh damn this war – am completely fed up.

He was feeling worse by 27 December. The tooth extraction of five days past had resulted in an infected cavity and a constant ache throughout the gums, which he was treating with drinks of whisky, and consequently:

Afraid I rather put my foot in it today. One of the Sods who has never been out of Bde since the invasion mentioned about the tough time in the line. That finished me. I gave out & asked him what he knew about it.

Honestly, I think the men who live in slit trenches should have a separate decoration. [As adjutant] I used to write up all OR [Other Ranks] citations and the CO wrote up the Officers'. Necessitates the addition of a lot of baloney as the armchair heroes don't, or don't seem to, realize what action is.... Had a swell letter from the mother & sister of one of my men who was killed away back. A lovely letter – shall send it on to you.

The Brigadier had just asked whether he was interested in staff work. Hal was doubtful about it.

After finishing duty runs on 30 December: "What a change & almost a shock to be able to wear pressed BD [battledress] & polished boots

again – and to think used to go for months without a change or cleanup. Can even squeeze in a bath a week now.” Just after a cleanup the day before he had been within 100 yards of a target when an enemy plane “came in out of the sun & bombed it. When they started machine gunning we hit for what appeared to be the entrance to a cellar. Jumped down & we landed in about 2 1/2 feet of water – no cellar. Very wet & very disgruntled.” They had had a movie in the mess that night: “Kismet, quite colorful.”

When he wrote at 10 p.m. New Year’s Eve, Guy Lombardo was playing on the radio, bringing back memories. Then a crap game started, of which he gave an account while it was in progress. “I had 60 Dutch cents so I put it in – now I’m richer by 4 guilders, but will no doubt – oh oh, am now even. Now I’m up two. Now how in heck did I get inveigled into this game. Played four games of crib right after supper. What a way to spend New Year’s Eve. Shouldn’t be too caustic, or rather moody. Have so much to be thankful for.”

A gloomy letter of 2 to 3 January discussed continuing dentistry problems, mentioned the “horrible” situation in Greece, and the heavy noise going on around them. “Hope it slows down so I can sleep.” The good news came a few days later, 7 January, reporting that he and a friend were to go on a 48 hour leave to Brussels. “Oh, our plans for Brussels? Sleep & eat, a Turkish bath, touring the city – a bit of quiet drinking.”

At 11.30 p.m. next night, halfway through his letter, MacDonald had to make a run, on a dark, snow-stormy night.

Got the stuff together & then had to get the jeep. Didn’t bother waking my driver & thanked the Lord he had put on the chains. The countryside really beautiful, every branch had a sleeve of snow. Had to go through a minefield and be damn if halfway through the markings had been obliterated, so I had to park the vehicle & go on foot through the snow. Then on the way back missed a rd. turning & piled thru a field of bush – then up to the other forward position. What an interesting night. Tomorrow morn I go on leave to Brussels. Hap Day and I. We’re taking a few bottles of champagne & cognac & that’s all. Have no

Hal MacDonald getting out the essential cigarette, near Nijmegen, winter 1945.

intention of getting pie-eyed but we’ll no doubt keep an edge on & enjoy every minute.

Two letter forms of 13 January relate the events of the leave and their return.

Hap Day and I started off in a HUP [Heavy Utility Vehicle]. Had 6 bottles of Champagne and 2 bottles of cognac, were pressed and cleaned up. Roads were bad & got into Brussels about 1700 hours. Checked in at hotel (on 30 francs a day including meals & service), had a bath and a few drinks. First leave in 7 months, faced with the realization that we hadn’t a thing to worry about for 48 hours, well stocked stores & pretty girls, etc. Just didn’t seem possible.

After a bath went down to the Palm Room – lo and behold, apple pie and ice cream, beautiful atmosphere, good band, couples dancing. Had a couple dances with hostesses & then back to the room. Had a couple more drinks & set off on tour of nightclubs. Went to Maxims, then Broadway, then to Parisien & couple of small ones en route. Saw about 8 floor shows.

The night clubs are clip joints, excessive prices for drinks & food. Each club has its cabaret show and the girls are the drink enticers. They dance with you & then the drinks & food. Some of them were good dancers though. Practically every one of them will sleep with you if you want them to or if they like you. Peculiar thing, they think nothing of it. F’instance, Hap’s conversation with one of the partners at the Officers’ Club brought out the statement that ‘she liked to sleep with men & have fun but her parents were strict & wouldn’t allow her to go to night clubs & meet strange men like other girls could’. We made the rounds – had a barrel of fun, paid out hundreds of francs on bribes to orchestras to play special requests & got back to hotel about 2 a.m. I paid a band to play, and repeat ‘You’re all I adore’....

Next morning got up at 10 a.m. Drank a bottle of champagne & downstairs. Met Hank Elliot (GOC’s ADC [aide de camp]). He joined us & we went for a walk. A beautiful city. Saw the urinating boy [the famous fountain statue Mannekin-Pis]. The churches are lovely. Shops are extremely well-stocked but fantastic prices. Coupons are requested mostly, but there is a Gift Shop – only thing was, the shop was closed for four days & two of those were the days we were there.

Had a drink & back for dinner. After dinner started out (3 of us). Met a black market pimp. Got a pr. [pair] of silk stockings which I’ll send along to you. Really sorry the Gift Shop was closed as hoped to purchase some lace etc. to send back. Went back to hotel & got haircuts & shampoos. Hap went to sleep in chair. He wasn’t well – can’t

photo courtesy of M.A. MacDonald

understand it! Hank & I had supper & sat listening to dinner music and making jokes (old & new). Then went to Ensa [Entertainments National Services Association] theatre to see *The Merry Widow*, brought over complete from London. We had front row seats & honestly had more enjoyment out of that & a spirited conversation with English orchestra member between acts.

Finished at 11:30. Started on a search for either eggs or steaks. Found a swell cabaret – drank beer only & listened to band, had numerous requests played. Spoke of our (perfect) wives & then had a huge egg & bacon omelette. Then home to bed. Went window-shopping the next a.m. The stores have everything in them – at a price. After dinner we left & drove home via Antwerp. After having gone thru this campaign, that 48 hours was Heaven.

His wife's most recent parcel had had lots of reading material "which will come in very handy during duty shifts – due to various exigencies have had a lot of duty last 2 days." There'd been some important jobs, but he could give no details, adding: "We're on the winning side now and I'll be back with you soon."

A letter of 15 January was written on ordinary paper (not airmail forms) with a printed address: Headquarters, 8 Canadian Infantry Brigade: "Just for a change, shall write ordinary mail, as a comparison [presumably for delivery time]. Will enclose a few things." These included the menu from a pre-Christmas mess dinner, and an ironic set of verses from a newspaper, no source or date given:

All the Winners, by Scorpio:

Venezuela is in the war!
Sound the trump and beat the drum!
Paraguay marches with Ecuador,
All for victory, here they come!
Venezuela is here! Hurrah!
Forward Latin America!

It concludes with

Latin America fights – Ha Ha!
What an example for Ankara!

Several days later MacDonald explained why his letters now had to be vague about his activities: "The big trouble is that what I do ties in with something that has either happened or will happen...and there are blokes now doing penal

servitude for being too descriptive. You have to see the screeds and bumph emanating from a high level on security. To a certain extent we are tongue-tied & the restrictions increase as one goes to a higher formation."

His duties included keeping in the bigger picture: "what goes on down south or to the west. We know damn well what goes on to the north – all too well. I have to keep in close touch with the unit, & have shifts of duty & I'm supposed to be always available for a rush job. Last night at 9 p.m. had a two-hour drive to make, in a blizzard." Then, after listing his schedule during the current day:

At present there are six of us in a large room. We've scrounged a stove & coal. Cy Tanner is asleep in his chair. I'm in shirtsleeves. Bob Bickford is down to unit (QOR [Queen's Own Rifles]), they're having a do. Paul Verge & Pierre Taschereau are down to Officers' Club in Nijmegen & Jock Chochinov just came in. Jock used to be our reg't sigs off. & we always end up talking of our days in Carpiquet.... In a couple of days we'll be in a tumbledown, blasted building, have a semblance of a mess, be rocked to sleep with shells & mortar strikes coming or going. Am in a rotten mood today....Everyday we lose someone, the eternal boredom of khaki, of some faces, of some topics, of everything.

One of his friends had just come in:

Couldn't talk, could hardly walk. Had more fun with him when he was trying to undress. He got so tangled up he couldn't move. All he could do was grin stupidly & try to focus his eyes. He's a big, young guy from Toronto....The Div. photographer took a picture of our Bde group t'other day & I'm going to try to get into a local photographer, so, Hon, you shall have pictures...In tomorrow's letter must tell you about "It," the biggest hoax of the Cdn Army.

On 21 January: "Anyone who mentions salients to me after this war will be shot, immediately. Am a bit fed up. We had a party tonight with assorted bigshots, & to see certain people trying to ingratiate selves with GOC and so on....The best news is, of course, the Russian offensive. Don't you admire them? Would like to be attached to them for a short while."

By the next day he had his new uniform set up with

A group of soldiers from the North Shores share box of chocolates.

new flashes, new divisional patches, new Bde bar (red cloth over Div patch) & new service stripes sewn on....Now the other Officers and NCO's are having the same thing done. I went long enough without changes of clothing, baths. etc. and now, when I have the opportunity, I'm going to keep as clean as possible – Why not? I've seen enough Hell on earth, and average of a nightmare per week confirms that. I'll break down & tell you something. About once a week I see Noel [his friend Noel Humphries, killed at Calais] not as I last saw him but as we used to be, having a drink or small talk or exchanging snaps of our wives for admiration....Then a lot of other mental pictures.

The lights went out & now we have four candles glowing and a fairly decent fire. Am content to stay in every evening to enjoy the little-known comfort of a warm room & a good fire & good companions. Bad point of being with Inf. Bde, or Bns, one's time is so cut up that one can't settle down to a good book or constructive reading.

He looked ahead: "Think of our future: it's not going to be easy at all. It will be hard for me to re-adjust myself & hard for both of us to readjust, but therein will lie our happiness & the opportunity to help each other. There will be no obstacles we won't be able to overcome."

In a second letter form of that day, he commented on the printed account of an engagement.

What stirring words, what a change from 'Come on guys, for God's sake kill those bastards' Or when pinned down & having men die in your arms or screaming for morphine, to lie doggo, unable to do anything but pray & say words of encouragement to a shell-shocked case, or reorganize a platoon of men numbering 6 to 8 out of 35 or so who started out an hr. before.

Yes, one can say pretty things beforehand but when one is in the midst of the enemy with one chance in 100 of getting out alive, things are slightly different – words can't be wasted & aren't necessary. A pat on the back, a grin, and that's all. The old saying still holds good, we who have seen a bit of the real thing, dislike & refuse to talk about it – only when some of us who were together then, get together, do we discuss the funnier side of it. There are funny sides to all of the attacks. In a way I miss the thrill & excitement but still get enough.

Commenting on a write up he had seen about one [unnamed] action in which he had participated: "a good show ... but the story was very inaccurate in every detail. Names were mis-

spelt, figures were wrong, description was away off & when the MO [Medical Officer] attended men on the battlefield was screwy. MO was beside me throughout the whole op.” He concludes this long letter by saying: “writing you makes me feel so much better.”

On 24 January, he was

sitting in the mess as near as possible to the stove....Some of the guys are playing rummy, & just finished a game of crib...We were saying last night that accidents & injured people & the sight of blood won't have any effect on us now. Yesterday was a normal day, a couple of contact runs & then on duty. At 1900 hours & after late supper we decided to attend OR's [Other Ranks] dance downstairs & wait on them, so four of us went down. Served punch, rinsed glasses, poured coffee. The babes were supplied by local welfare or somepin. There were a couple of very nice ones. Would have liked to share a comfortable fire with them – purely for the homelike atmosphere & opportunity to write – of course. But one musn't interfere with the guys, so we didn't cut in but stood on the sidelines with fangs bared & low growls emerging from our throats....

The army paper 'Maple Leaf' for weeks has carried a lot of baloney about a big surprise 'better than a posting to Canada' & 'the biggest treat in the lives of fighting men'. All the guys in the trenches were consumed with curiosity – only to find out it's a hamburger joint opened up in the salient – everything free. But dammit, it's of no value to the fighting man. Used by hundreds of Corps troops, L of C, [Lines of Communications] etc, but the guys in the line were pretty sore about the whole thing – felt they'd 'been had'. Frankly they were. Makes me mad to hear & see the absolute stupidity & lack of knowledge Corps troops have of the life of a fighting man.

A few days later, 27 January, he attended a lecture by the divisional psychiatrist who discussed types of wartime mental problems.

He was very good but, my Gosh, we've had and handled every type & have our own methods of treatment – sometimes rather grim – and on looking back I wonder if HSM [Harold S. MacDonald] was the guy who took the Bren & pulled the pin & forced the lad out of his hole. That was seemingly years ago....I remember very well the thoughts before going into battle...you were very near, then when contact was made I had a lot of other things to think about – then afterwards the gasp of thanks that I was still alive & with you.

His letter of 1 February ran to three airmail forms about recent duties and events, including the welcome arrival of boxes and letters, and answering questions. He added that a lot was going on “that I can't talk about just now.” A friend in the room remarked “Three letter forms – what DO you write about?” On 3 February : “Saw an amusing sign today, placed on a rd. to our FDLs, [Forward Disposition Lines?] reading 'No Russians past this sign'. How optimistic.”

On 9 February, he was again busy juggling headsets, mouthpieces & telephones and felt he should begin his letter:

Hello MMH, message for you OVER. Hello HSM o.k. OVER' and so on. Between headsets, mouthpieces and telephones feel I could do with 10 arms. Did I say thanks for the latest Esquire you sent me? Yummy. The Calendar girls are, of course, out of proportion but they have pretty, uh, faces. The Bde Cmdr [Commander] also sends his thanks. Oh, yes, caught the prop. program from Arnhem tonight. Hans talking to Tommy about the numerical superiority & so on and the peace-loving Germans fighting against great odds but their fighting ability is therefore increased to using all and every means of defence. After this sparkling speech they played Jack Silver's wording of 'Canada's theme song, 'I'm a Zombie' You've no doubt heard it. It's well done....Haven't the foggiest notion what day it is – do know it's now 0345 hrs 9 Feb & shall soon (in 15 mins) be waking Rogers & take my turn at napping by the fire....

As to what was going on, “Honestly, I'd love to give you all details, but impossible.”

The events MacDonald could not discuss were, in fact, the beginning, on 8 February, of Operation Veritable, the first stage of the Allied campaign to seize the region between the Maas and the Rhine Rivers, and prepare for crossing the Rhine itself. This action, planned to commence many weeks earlier, had been delayed by the massive German offensive in the Ardennes. Now the 3rd Canadian Division, as part of a seven division British and Canadian force, would advance in amphibious vehicles to clear the flooded polder area to the north of the main assault. The terrain in which the Canadians were operating well-fitted the nickname they had been given for their part in the Scheldt campaign – the “Water Rats.”⁵ By 9 February the 8th Brigade had taken their objectives of Zandpol

and Leuth, and soon after that Kekerdom.⁶ Meanwhile, and over the next few weeks, the British were encountering heavy opposition in battles to capture the historic city of Cleve and the Reichswald, a heavily-mined forest preserve to the southeast.

On 13 February MacDonald was

on the graveyard shift from midnight to 0800. The yawns do chase one another. Guess I must be getting old – can't stand all night sessions like I used to....Had a very interesting day. Was on duty 0800 to 1300 and the air was very crowded so I was kept busy. Then the afternoon started very quietly till about 1500, when we picked up a message that the Brig., with others, was stranded halfway across [presumably the flooded polders]. Couldn't contact our water vehicle friends so I buzzed down & after considerable trouble & arguing & wheedling managed to borrow a veh. [vehicle] from the Eng. [Engineers] Rather fun, cruising over a vast expanse looking for them. Finally located them on a grp. of farm bldgs just before dusk & rescued them. Also picked up the QM [Quarter Master] of the QOR's, so I've been promised unlimited drinks at anytime from that unit.

Later in that letter he reflected about rank and advancement. "War has definitely done something to me – made me very cynical & given me a keen knowledge of life & its uncertainty, and definitely a value on life itself and not the position one holds."

After the movie in the mess that night, *Adventures of Mark Twain*, they prepared and ate "sardines, self-heating oxtail soup, self-heating cocoa, a can of clams, noodle soup and a 1/2 lb Laura Secors [sic] chocolates. The three of us felt pretty tough this a.m."

Later the same day he was

riding in everything, Dukws [wheeled amphibious vehicles], boats, Buff[aloe]s [tracked amphibious vehicles] – result is a nice windburn. Unfortunately had a Buff behind us hit a mine and 'brew up'. Twisted over & the three members of crew were either killed by the mine or pulled under & drowned – rotten luck. We cruised the area but could see nothing. Had a new experience of being mortared while on water. The bursting bombs give a rather pretty effect. Was on duty tonight till midnight. Yep, it's now 0200 hrs....Peculiar, so much happening & yet so little to talk about.

He was in a depressed mood on 17 February. Mary of Arnhem was on "with her messages from POW's interspersed with heart-rending songs." His own group had been a long time holding one position, "and just small raids & patrols, & now we've swept over and through the Reichswald. Nothing to stop us now (I hope)....Oh yes. We have a mascot. Emmslander Butler [?], the boss of the Huns we kicked out of the polders the other day, evacuated but left a canary. It was shell-shocked when Paul Verge brought it in but it's gradually beginning to look like a bird, but such a bird – half its feathers are lacking.

Ducks on the flooded polders during an attack on Nijmegen, January 1945.
This photo was taken by MacDonald using a captured German camera.

photo courtesy of M.A. MacDonald

However, it does give out with a song now & then but dammit – it sings in German.... About snapshots, got some good ones the other day, while out playing sailor over the flooded polder.” Then, turning to newsmen at the front: “The method of collecting news for the Maple Leaf must be different in Italy. I’ve been in and about enough of them & never saw a reporter ‘till days afterwards.”

He was on the midnight to 8 a.m. shift again two days later, 19 February. “Busy as Hell all day – wireless sets & also on the phone.” He was sipping self-heating mock turtle soup.

It’s definitely mock but at least warm. Oh say, had the experience of driving through the Reichswald Forest the other day (that’s the

one piece of garden ground not inundated. For the seat he took a wicker armchair & cut a hole in the seat. For the walls he took a respectable carpet & fastened it up. You see, we now don’t expect many comforts and anything that will add to our comfort is legal game. Rather inclined to feel sorry for the civilians with their few meagre salvaged belongings but can’t allow sympathy or emotions to change our attitude. After all they are part of the people who supported the Party & they no doubt did lots of gloating back in ’39 to ’43 when things went well.

Tremendously enjoy getting the Bde viewpt. on battles, etc. One sees the full picture, whereas in a Bn or with a Coy one is primarily concerned with such a small portion of the operation. So far all goes well....Wish I could read German. Some fine-looking books here.

Amphibious vehicles loaded with soldiers of the North Shore
Regiment head towards the enemy. Near Nijmegen, 8 February 1945.

advantage of being an L.O. – one can choose various routes quite often.)...Trenches, trees slightly shell-shocked & stripped, guns – but still when coming through it couldn’t help but recall the numerous accounts of ‘rides’ in the Reichswald and a certain spot it has in history. Our present location is in one of the few semi-intact houses in this place. Brings back memories of Caen to pick my way over & around rubble.

Was really disgusted last night. Saw glaring examples of poor staff work & I was so annoyed I shot my face off – am surprised I’m still here....Have a friend as company for the night. A little German mongrel bitch (dog, I mean, Dope); anyway we can’t fraternize. The poor thing was starving and cold. Now it’s sleeping on a couple of cushions & very comfortable. Lucky animal...Our sanitary chap built a latrine in the

On 22 February he had received a letter from

the father of one of my boys killed in Carpiquet. I’m safe now darling, because they’re burning candles to St. Anne for my safety. Was really busy yesterday and last night was first night’s sleep in two days. Slept in a dugout part of Siegfried line. However we now have a reasonably whole building. The civilians we come across are mostly old or elderly farmers –rather poorly clothed, and in the majority refugees or forced evacuees. However in the houses (especially noticeable in those still standing in Cleve, where I spent two nights) they had very good furniture, well supplied with wood and coal and evidently no lack of clothes or food – large quantities of preserves and canned fruits, and those houses were just average houses. No, I don’t think they suffered any great hardships till we came along with arty

& bombers. Military gov't or civil affairs follow us closely & make any necessary arrangements for clothing, feeding & housing. As far as fwd [forward] elements are concerned, civilians are confined to the bldgs they are in. You do keep close track of the war. Shall bore you with detailed descriptions when I return. Distance between Bde and for'd Bns is usually decided by the terrain, usually near Reserve Bn. Tac HQ [Tactical Headquarters] is up with fwd elements.

A letter of 23-24 February related how he "had to meet two important personages & guide them to Bde HQ. Am becoming quite expert at it. Some livestock around here and we anticipate steaks tomorrow. They will be good after compo packs." (The two individuals were, in fact, none other than the commander-in-chief of First Canadian Army, General H.D.G. Crerar, and the commander of 21st Army Group, Field Marshal B.L. Montgomery.)

He continued the next day:

Had steaks for supper. To think a few days ago it was wandering around our back yd. Honestly the men are eating as we used to eat in Normandy as far as meat is concerned. Saw a DR [Despatch Rider] the other day with about 12 chickens fastened on the back of his bike and two soldiers pushing & pulling a pig & another sharpening a knife on a grindstone. Sides of beef all around. Don't blame them a bit, either. Have no compunction about men taking anything & all they need from the farms & bldgs & am lacking in sympathy for the people – one has only to recall scenes in England after a bombing or a V-1. They have asked for everything they are getting. I do feel sorry for the kids, though. They are not responsible but, true, they are young & will now grow up with a proper perspective – if we do our postwar job thoroughly.

At last, on 3 March, MacDonald was able to disclose what he had been doing the last few weeks:

This has been a marvelous show. At the beginning I was liaising with a tank Bde & had a grand time. Started out to join them in a Scout Car. Got stuck in mud & then tore the rear end out of the Scout Car (it was the Brig's) & then got stuck again in [a] Jeep & finally got on my way in a new Jeep I have. Spent 24 hours with them & really kept travelling, keeping in contact with our own Bde. The roads in back were jammed & most of the time I used fields & lanes. Rather grim sights & a few unmarked minefields but no

accidents. Few houses remain standing... While on the tanks existed on sandwiches & tea & a bottle of Horlick's Malted Milk your Dad sent in a parcel.

Got back off that job & holed up for a day. Slept for 16 hrs as I had gone 60 hrs without sleep. Oh yes, found my tank suit invaluable. Saved me from getting covered with mud, from freezing to death – March is certainly coming in like a lion. Saw a few guys I knew. Remember Perry Robinson? He was with us in Brockville [Officer Training School]. Well, t'other day, while arranging a changeover of Bns, went across a field following tank tracks & stopped for a minute to wait for Jerry mortaring to stop. When a couple of them came close, Pat (my driver) & I headed for a slit trench nearby. There I was in the same slit as Perry. He had just finished digging it. Amazing where one meets friends.

Our last HQ was in a flattened town [probably Keppeln⁸]. Evidently the house was quite prosperous at one time – had a good cellar. One of the boys was moving a cupboard & found a small opening which led to a large room. It had everything in it – towels, tools, food, radio, smoked hams, a bolt of cloth, sheets, table cloth a lot of it was sheer loot – still had store labels on it. All kinds of flannelette sheets, vast amount of tools. Now everyone is well supplied with towels, blankets etc. Can't trust any of these people. Some amazing stories of young lads. One boy of 10 threw a grenade into an Ops room, another lad shot a soldier through the stomach. Funny, I can't feel sorry for the homeless people trudging the roads with a bundle of personal belongings. Present HQ was occupied but we kicked them out & took over. The houses are dirty & cluttered up, & windows are, of course, all broken out, so it's just a matter of tossing odds & ends through windows. We must have billets for the men. Was out in the yard last night & a lad was leading a sheep away to tie it up. He said: 'The son of a so-and-so keeps coming back to its pen & it can't keep it up, 'cause I'm sleeping there.'

Had a letter from a former sgt. of mine. He was wounded but rec'd the MM [Military Medal]. As Adj't had to write up citations & it was prac. useless writing them up no matter how gallant the action, if the battle was unsuccessful. Armchair boys wouldn't OK them. Dammit, gallantry is gallantry regardless of results – if a man cripples himself or dies in an attempt to succeed, it shouldn't be held against him.

There are lots of Germans who aren't fleeing but are putting up determined fights. The last show was a real slugging match. Had a horrible shock when I was going along a road & saw one of my former Sgts. lying dead – his carrier had just hit a

mine. He was a hell of a fine chap. Dammit why do all the nice guys get it – the fellows who have so much to live for.

Three days later, 6 March, Hal wrote from the Hochwald “while on the swing shift again.” He described his busy day, travelling the muddy roads to and from units, then: “Honestly, I don’t envy the boys the job they had in the woods – heavy mud, mines, and a hell of a barrage back at them – arty is not so dangerous in the woods but damned demoralizing.”

Was a bit upset this morning. Coming along the rd & a lad walked on a mine about 20 ft. off the rd. Various people were calling to him to crawl out. Jiz [*sic*], a man can’t crawl on stumps. I was so damned mad, got a stretcher bearer & the two of us went in & gave him a shot of morphine and carried him out & sent him off. He was in bad shape but perfectly rational – lots of guts. Of course, shock is so great, he wouldn’t actually feel pain, but those fools standing there...

He hoped for leave by the end of the month. If Marjorie could have joined him “we’d stay at the Park Lane or Savoy or Claridges. For a bachelor, the Waldorf is OK – good rooms & bath and good food.” But for the present: “Fighting’s been very tough in this battle. The bastards are fighting maniacs.”

On 9 March:

Am now camped out in a wood. Had to dig down about 3 feet so as to make my pup tent comfortable...Personally, I’m a creature of comfort and would rather usurp some broken down house, but mine but to obey orders, so – I’m back living underground. Now sitting in Ops vehicle. The sigs have a radio in t’other half of Ops so we have music...playing ‘Long Ago and Far Away’...Oh, going on leave the 31st. The Bde Cmdr asked Bn if I could stay here for another tour. He sd. he was more than satisfied & didn’t want to lose me at this time...Isn’t the war news grand! Lots of speculating going on now as to where & when & how & if, etc.

He resumed two days later:

Just discovered it’s Sunday. Were you ever too tired to sleep – so tired you feel extremely active. Well Paul Verge & I are sitting in Ops vehicle, and we were just saying there’s no sense in going to bed ‘cause we couldn’t sleep if we did. Have had little sleep the last few days. Last night was on the prowl from 0230 till 0800. Pitch black night

& no lights – a son of a gun trying to keep on the rd & the verges full of mines. At first light about 0600 Pat & I lifted the window shield & let in the fresh, misty air – no beret, & removed the hood of my tank suit – very refreshing.

An unexpected but welcome second leave to Brussels came through the next night for Hal and two others, and on 16 March he began a long letter. They “took a truck to Brussels – hard to realize only a few weeks ago we fought through these forests.” After registering in a hotel they

contacted Edgar Thibodeau, our former Aux[iliary] Service Sup who now has charge of the leave centers in Belgium. He has the best staff, the best chef in Belgium, and a number of Aux. Ser. women assisting him. We had fun. Had lunch with Edgar – fried eggs & tomatoes, white wine...steaks, green peas & boiled potatoes & dessert & coffee with Triple Sec liqueur. An excellent meal, & then toured the town, got a few drinks here & there & generally acted out.

Next morning we went shopping. Everything is so darn expensive, almost prohibitive. Did get half a dozen rather cute glasses – for drinking, of course. Ordered another little trinket which will be sent from Brussels direct...Wednesday evening we had Edgar down to the hotel for supper. Had to forge a meal ticket for him, but ‘twas easily done. Took him up to the room for awhile & then we went walking. Visited a number of night clubs but weren’t impressed by any and went streetcar riding. At 10:30 –or 2230 hrs – went back to hotel for a bite & then went out again. Asked a civilian gendarme for a place to get a drink & ended up in a night club underground & behind a theatre – a rather posh dive. Had just ordered a bottle of champagne when a Military Raid was pulled off. They couldn’t guarantee we’d be sent home to Canada so we were all disappointed. A bit rotten to be checking up on people for being in a place of entertainment after curfew. Actually, it’s hard on military people working in Brussels to be picked up in a raid like that, but have my doubts if anything will happen to us – not that we’re worried – far from it. Anyway, after chatting with the provost we went home to bed.

Thursday morning went walking & had dinner again with Edgar. He has a grand staff – the waiter Joseph is a character – the chef presented us with two bottles of champagne & we had potatoe [*sic*] salad and marvelous baked ham & delicious bread. As a gift to Edgar we took him two smoked herring we bought from a street vendor. Really did have fun, a bit of drinking, a lot of foolishness & a bit poorer, but if it wasn’t for those breaks one would go crazy – but definitely.

It was in this long letter of 16 March, after his return from leave, that MacDonald confessed to having “a let down feeling, the big misery & the blues.” This arose from the dilemma whether to go back to the regiment – for without that there would be no promotion – or to stay at brigade. “Right now I’m in a good spot – hazardous enough to make life interesting – but no promotion. The question is, should I be content to remain as is, or should I go back to seek glory?”

The next day, 17 March, he wrote “Just a note written while heating water to have a cup of Oxo before going to bed,” which nevertheless grew into a long letter.

Have a comfortable dugout now. May I describe it? It’s basically a pup tent. Have dug down about 4 1/2 feet then set the pup tent over. Have a packing case serving as a step down, in which I keep my boots. Procured an old stove today, had it fixed, & the tent is warm as toast & I can heat water for washing & shaving on it. Also the batman washed & dried clothes in the tent – a marvelous set up. On the floor I have tarpaper...On the walls I have oiled silk Aircraft Recogn. [Recognition] (a bright color) which is rolled completely around the walls – at this stage I have succeeded in covering all the earth. On the edges, acting as anchors to the inner tent sides, I have white clay bricks which look clean & act as shelves. On one side is my safari bed.

Along the other wall I have a soap box which serves as a washstand & holds my shaving kit & 2 candles & a small kerosene lamp (by which I am writing). Also on the wall are the Hedy Lamarrs from the book. Running from end to end I have a clothesline on which socks & towel are drying – across one end I have a long pole & my clothes hang on that...As I face the entrance there is on the shelf: my mess tin, thermos bottle (I procured it), my pistol, my haversack, my light 14 rainproof jacket (again, *procured*), my fleece-lined vest, my battledress – socks & a towel drying overhead, my pack, tank suit & wash basin (a good German enamel one). The bright wall covering is really something – matter of fact it gave to the tent the name of Passion Pup! Of course these added improvements came with time. First night just a foot deep hole with tent thrown over. After a couple days one ends up with a home.

By 18 March his future had been decided. Colonel John Rowley of the North Shores and Brigadier Roberts, the brigade commander, had been discussing it,

and general impression seems to be that they figure I’m not to go sticking out my neck now after having kept a whole skin in the thick of the worst of it. Seems to me they want me to come out in one piece. The Bde Cmdr wants me to stay on for another three months – the Col. says OK but as I’m not interested in staff, & if finds he needs a qual. & trained exp. Coy Cmdr during that time he can recall me...I’m quite content to remain on that basis.

This photo was taken by MacDonald in the Reichswald forest and shows the evolution of his home in the ground: stone, lined floor and sides, heater, wash basin, etc.

The Brigadier had added that by the end of his three-month tour of duty “the bad part will be over and Hal can carry on where he left off when he came here.” MacDonald had told Colonel Rowley “that when I went to Bde it was purely for a change & a rest as the Doc had threatened to evac[uate] me otherwise. Guess he understands.”

As for other matters: “The German civilians can’t take gentleness. Treat them like slaves or swine & they’ll do as you order them. In other words they will accept orders meekly but do not know how to accept gentleness.”

In a letter of 19 March, Hal recorded that one of his sergeants had just returned from Paris with pictures, one set “a group of interesting spots to see in Paris, t’other a group of the usual French love scenes, which gave birth to a spirited discussion on whether some of these feats are humanly possible.” He had just sent off a box which included the set of glasses he had bought in Brussels, a roll of film and a booklet of 3rd Division Ballads. But by 22 March, writing in his dugout, the black mood was again upon him. It was, he said, the accumulation of

nine months of not knowing if the next 24 hours would be the last or not. Of living either in holes in the ground, damp cellars or broken down houses, of seeing bodies & parts of bodies of friends, of burying them, of killing & helping to kill, of being happy just to have an oil stove to keep warm with, or a bit of cloth to line a slit trench, happy just to be living – but how long can one live without lifeblood....Darling, I’m tired – not physically – am getting plenty of sleep now. Sometimes awake in the middle of the night & have to smoke & twist & toss, but that’s OK. It’s a tiredness that a week or a month or two months won’t erase.

An old friend, he said, was going back to Canada “under a cloud that he created, but nevertheless the assh-’s going, I envy him but couldn’t do it myself. Hell, could never live with HSM if I did.”

“How brightly this candle flares. The shorter they burn, the longer the flame. Not with us. It seems the longer we keep going the less we can put forth.” What helped him to survive was “the sure knowledge that I have something to live for.” The next day, 25 March, he apologized for writing “such a morbid letter. However, I’m not always like that.” The day just past had been “a big day

– yet, to the men, it’s just another job.” On the night of 24-25 March, the North Shores had moved in Buffaloes across the River Rhine, fortunately encountering little opposition. But a day later, 26 March, their Colonel, John Rowley, was killed by a shell during the attack on the German town of Millingen. Major Neil Gordon took over command.⁹

The next few days at brigade were strenuous, with little rest. “Up to March 28 had had 10 hours sleep in 96 hours due to moving about & the bit of excitement we were having,” MacDoanld said in his letter of 3 April, in the first airmail form of a series that describe a leave in England: “twill be a running commentary as I can’t mail them till I return.” He had had “an anxious 24 hrs preceding ‘cause I was afraid something would happen to cancel it.”

After re-crossing the Rhine, Hal drove by Jeep to B. Echelon

and picked up Tim Mulligan (our Aux. Serv. supr.). We had a bottle of champagne to celebrate the great day. Drove to the Transit Camp (100 miles) & caught the train to Calais – a 12 hr trip – stopped in Lille for tea and sandwiches. Got into Calais at 0700. Had breakfast & waited till 12:30 for a boat. Left Calais and got into Folkestone about 1700 – the nicest sound I heard was a NAAFI gal on the train asking if we wanted a “coop” of tea. From the boat we went to the train – in fact we ran, the train was waiting for us. Got into London at 1830. Went to the Waldorf & took my room reservation – had it changed to a double to take in Tim. Had our first baths & a couple of whiskies. Had supper in the Grill Room & then went walking. Called at the Strand Palace & then up to Regent Palace & then walked along Picadilly – quite a street. The gals are certainly doing a rushing business.

Had a good sleep & up early in the a.m....Tim left for Brighton right after lunch & I went down to Horsham to see Unc. Ern Anderson. Had a swell trip. Talked to everyone I could – it was such fun to talk to civilians again & get their viewpoints. Got to Horsham & by bus to the camp. On the bus met a London businessman & his wife. Had a pleasant conversation in the course of which he pardoned himself for being personal but said he found my accent very enjoyable to listen to & asked my descent. He claimed he had made a hobby of studying & classifying various accents. Apart from the flattery he was very nice – also his wife (ahem). Got to the camp but the boss was away. However Bill Curran was there & we had 2 hrs of conversation & shop talk. Tom Paige was there & I had a chat with him....Went back

to London & while waiting at Horsham for the train followed with amusement the attempts of two gals to catch my eye, uh huh, a pickup. I wasn't having any. When the train arrived I picked a compartment with one vacant seat & watched them go up the aisle looking in. Some fun. Got up to London safe & alone.

Back at the Waldorf, he sent off a cable to Marjorie, ran into old army friends, had drinks & chatted, then walked to the Strand Hotel, encountering several other friends in the bar there, including a former sergeant. After this he took a tube back to his hotel, and: "On the escalator a drunken Yank was pestering a young WAAF who obviously & verbally showed she didn't want his company, so I started talking to her & we took the same tube train – young & refreshing & Yorkshire. She left the tube & I went on to the Waldorf."

The next afternoon he caught a train to Carlisle, where the Ferrises, English friends, had invited him to stay. The family consisted of Captain Ferris, his wife, and his mother. The Captain, now retired, had served with the British Army in India. "Received a royal welcome. Capt. Ferris was a bit tardy coming out & emerged on a cane. I didn't know whether to sympathize or not until Grandma kicked the cane away." He had brought some chocolates & a bottle of champagne, and after a meal they "sat in front of the fire talking & chatting & drinking champagne. First they'd had for years & years & glasses had to be cleaned & polished. Had a rotten sleep. Fantasies & weird dreams."

He spent from Monday to Friday in Carlisle. "Slept till 9.30 every day...Evenings, after tea at 4.30. sat chatting till dinner at 1930. Had trouble sleeping." One afternoon he

went with Captain Ferris on a round of his ARP [Air Raid Precaution] area – he is responsible for, and organized, all CD [Civil Defence] & ARP in Cumberland. A lovely trip, driving out towards Solway from inland & suddenly coming around a turn in the hills & seeing the Firth below. Had tea in a little village & took another route back. I couldn't feast enough on the countryside – no burning or burned houses, no dead cattle or humans. Really beautiful. The next p.m. Mrs Ferris & I put on walking shoes & took the dog on an 8 mile walk along the banks of the Eden. Very, very pretty – blossoms out & the river calm & peaceful."

He arrived back in London on Friday, leaving the Ferris household "amongst tears & blessings" on Thursday night. While waiting in the train station in Carlisle he talked with a Scotch porter, watched "a drunken wedding party falling out of cabs & a couple of soldiers chasing a babe along the platform. It's fun watching life go along." When the train finally arrived the friendly porter "scoured the train for a seat – no luck, so I stood for 6 1/2 hrs talking to an Australian. Very interesting chap. Quite a lot of guff & very much against the Poles." At 7 a.m. he got a seat and slept till they arrived in London at 9 a.m. At the Waldorf he sat in the lounge "dirty, tired & miserable." After getting his room and a bath, then a shampoo and a haircut, he again met with friends, including "an RCAF chap returning to Canada after 2 Ops & feeling very browned off." That evening he and friends went dancing at "the Astor Club – one of the fun clubs in London." His date was a young Scotch widow, a dress designer on business in London, with a young son back in Cornwall. She had been "one of the few who evacuated with Br. troops at Dunkirk & the boy was a cripple for some years."

The next day, Saturday, Hal kept an appointment he had made with a photographer, Hugo's in the Strand. "I felt at ease & lighting was good...Do so hope they turn out OK as I want to send them to you for a Birthday Gift." Colonel Anderson came up from Horsham to visit & they spent Monday chatting & had a long lunch at the Vanity Fair Club with a woman friend who was hostess to the regiment's officers in Rottingdean. After Anderson returned to Horsham there was a farewell drinking party with his army pals. "Felt very satisfied with life...contrary to other times I've been in London, I was glad to be alone & able to wander as fancy took me. Enjoyed myself tremendously & got a change – a very necessary one – even though I did not get a rest. Was really tired & far more nervous & pensive & jumpy than I thought I was." He then mailed this seven-airmail-form account of his leave and started another one, not dated, but postmarked 17 April.

Left London on the leave train Monday night. Arrived in Folkestone about 0200 & slept there, taking a boat at 0830. We had a bit of fun coming over – nothing serious, just a threat. Got into Calais, had tea, then dinner. Left Calais at 1700 hrs & got into Nijmegen at 1000 following day – a

MacDonald's jeep, safely parked in an earthen revetment.

long, tiring train ride. Waited two hrs. for transport – then a five or six hr. truck drive & got into Camp late in p.m. Wednesday. People seemed pleased to see me. Discussed & described all my activities – had a good night's sleep, & got a shock next morning to be sniped at when going down to the unit. A very rude reminder that there is a war on.

While MacDonald was away on leave, the North Shore Regiment, as part of the 8th Infantry Brigade, had fought its way from Millingen (where they had lost their commanding officer) on through Emmerich to Hoch Elten. In early April, while he was still in England, they had captured Zutphen, a large town on the Ijssel River, in a two-day battle against fanatical Hitler Jugend. Then it was on to Heerenveen, and by mid-April, when MacDonald returned, 8th Brigade headquarters was established in Bolsward, Holland.¹⁰ Once again Canada's army had not been given the high-profile role of striking for the heart of Germany; they had instead been assigned the important but less glamorous task of driving the Germans out of Holland.¹¹ In some parts of Holland food supplies had fallen so low that Dutch civilians were starving to death, and the news media were full of stories about this situation. But MacDonald had a different account of conditions in his own unit's sector. In a letter postmarked 17 April he began:

Maj Gordon now has the Bn. A trick of fate, after I had everything arranged with Col. Rowley... This part of Holland is really beautiful. It's the story-book Holland – lovely homes & gardens & fields – the people are definitely a better type than others we've seen, but, what first amazed me was that contrary to all reports, articles, speeches, etc. the people are seemingly well fed & well-to-do. They have money, lots of eggs, towns are full, shops seem to be stocked with everything under the sun. I visited a couple in Zutphen and was shocked. The usual collaborators of course being treated rough, but the girls are better dressed, better looking. The farms are well-stocked & certainly no signs (visible signs) of hardship, aside from the people clamoring for cigarettes & chocolate. Guess the boys did some very good bartering with the young females. Have had some beautiful days. Drove all p.m. with top & windshield down on Jeep. Love to feel the warm breeze. Got a bit more tan.

His next letter (dated 17 April), began:

Had hoped to write you every day but from the day I returned we have been busier & busier... The BM was away, so I was acting Gill (all Greek to you?). The Bde Major was away & I was acting Staff Officer 3rd Grade for a few days besides doing my LO and duty officer job. Then a couple of long moves & newly liberated country – a marvelous scene & to top it off the weather has been grand – warm & cloudless – we are all tanned. Have been doing a lot of running around

& so-called trouble-shooting...NSR are having a show & I'm on the sets. Rather fun to follow the whole thing from a comparatively safe distance – till I have to go up in person.

This is beautiful country. They always told us in the Scheldt that true Holland was the northern part & they were right. Amazing how quickly people produce flags & orange decorations. Two days ago one end of town was cheering when we entered & the other end was still in cellars while Inf. cleared a few snipers left behind. Talking to numerous people just released from SS prison camps or just escaped from Rotterdam. Amazing stories of hunger & death & hiding under floors etc. They really do appreciate liberation & I'll bet money Holland doesn't go into a slump as did Belgium & esp. France. The Dutch NBS (underground) have a rigid control over towns & have been of great value. I honestly admire them, but dammit wish the girls of 18 to 20 wore longer dresses & were not so well or overly developed. Hard on morale to drive through a town & be faced with such sights....

He continued the next day:

We're set up just on the edge of a town [probably Makkum] – the roadway is always lined with people, exactly like a circus. Matter of fact someone stuck up a sign '8 CIB 3-ring circus'. They pester us for cigarettes & chocolate – in fact they're pests. Hank & I were coming back from QOR lines the other night about 2230. A soldier was drunk & broke a window. We got him out & bandaged him up – blood all over, then sent him back to his unit. The people asked us in – we had tea & cake & a glass of wine. Very friendly but it is difficult to carry on a conversation in broken Dutch & broken English. Up to last night had had 3 hrs. sleep in 50 & got off duty at midnight & hit the hay. Slept till 0930 – was I ever tired. Patty had put hot water on the heater to shave in so I poured half in a wash basin & stuck 3 eggs in the remaining water – had boiled eggs while shaving. Patty traded 100 limey (issue) cigs for 48 & 5 duck eggs. Was free yesterday & walked through Julianna [sic] Park – a beautiful spot. Sat by the little stream watching the swans & ducks & just missing you...Had a long fast drive yesterday through a number of beautiful villages – canals, dykes, old houses, tulip gardens....Must get over & eat now.

It was on the 18 April that the Friesland area of Holland was officially declared to be free of Germans. Two days later, on the 20th, the Canadian 3rd Division moved to take over from the Polish Infantry Brigade west of the Ems River,

in Germany. This was a long advance of over one hundred miles.¹² A letter of 21 April began:

Haven't the foggiest idea of where the other days in the past week have gone to. Once again back in the thick of it – Had to lead the convoy & drove for 5 hours. Beautiful country. I can now tell you something of the past 10 days. Had perfect fighting conditions & the welcomes in all towns & villages was more than glorious. – Another interruption. We moved again.

It is now April 22...this frontier crossing becomes confusing – now desolate country – burning houses, sullen-faced people who doff their hats as we pass. Have done a lot of driving today in a heavy, cold wind. Nerves are edgy & face burning....Just had a lucky break. Came off duty at 2000 hrs. Had a lunch & sat down to write you when the BM asked me to go looking out for tanks. 'Twas almost dark & I could see a rotten job ahead. Started down the road & ran kerplunk into the Joe looking for us – so we got together....There's so much to tell you – about the 2 weeks in N/W Holland – beautiful villages, cheering people – Heerenveen, Meppel. You see, we drove the Hun ahead of us till he hit the sea & stopped to fight. Rather like cornering an animal, & from what I've seen of a concen. [concentration] camp near here, the word 'animal' applies. Then we eradicated them....The welcomes – we had marvellous weather, hot & clear...we passed through beautiful towns. I'm all for the Dutch people, neat, clean & solid & certainly organized. Just now am in the mess with battery radio on a 3-day old paper, in front a petrol Pressure lamp. Pat traded soap for 68 eggs & had five last night, 2 for breakfast & 4 for lunch.

The North Shores' line of advance was along the Dutch-German frontier and frequently they crossed into Germany. On 24 April, obviously from Germany, Hal reported: "Toured scene of today's fighting...guided Bde headquarter to a new area & set up Ops...The country around here is typical German – average farms, prac. every bldg. bearing a scar – some burning fiercely. Old men & women & children, some sullen, some terrified. Behind prac. every home we have come across buried loot & goods – chattels, silks, liqueurs, SS equipment – anything & everything – shoes, suits...."

On 27 April he began another multiple airmail letter.

Am on night shift & really been busy...quiet now – even the shelling, thank goodness...Have a

MacDonald reclining on his jeep,
Heerenveen, Germany, March 1945.

sprained knee. How'd it happen? Went with Brig. to a forward position. Just got there when we got shelled....Left Brig. there & cont'd on & again got it. Got into a doorway in time, but slipped & wrenched my d—knee-hence the limp. Got back to the Brig. & again got it, then we visited another unit & returned to HQ about 2030.... Saw a show in the mess "The Bridge of San Luis Rey" – not too bad. Then on duty until midnight. Crossed & re-crossed the border today. Interesting to see how the men react. In Holland smiles, In Germany frowns – though the guys all admit there are some babes around here they'd like to fraternize with....Hope we get some rest soon – am getting tired & cranky. The BM told me yesterday I was a moody person – am afraid it's true.

He spoke of the

overoptimism so apparent in England and in the newspapers. Fighting is as tough as ever. Friends are being killed & wounded daily – the end is in sight, but how people can celebrate or prepare to celebrate when others are going through Hell is almost beyond me. Went through a forced labor factory the other day. Never saw such filth & squalor & lack of sanitary, feeding & sleeping accomodation. A peculiar war now. Roads are cluttered with released Poles, Russians, Lithuanians – they are lost. All they know is we are Allies & in they come. They are almost a problem. We are all in favor of them helping themselves to all they can get. Interesting when the Poles overran a concen. camp the other day & found Polish women amongst the internees. Some found wives. Their LO tells me summary justice was meted out. Watched with interest a German family evacuating their water-isolated house. They had to wade a couple of feet in water up to hips. Very fitting. They made us do it so often....Noticed today I haven't lost my technique for ducking in a hurry but certainly dislike the

bloody shells – not so bad if they're slow & give a warning though.

Later, on the same day, he continued: "Had a very busy night...Another battle, or week's battle, is finished & now we can get a couple days rest." His knee was aching and badly swollen, so "I got Patty to drive me up to the CCP (casualty clearing post) & the Doc poked & prodded & bandaged & ordered me back tomorrow." He reported having lost "a good deal of stuff [equipment] in fires, bombing, shelling, etc." They had had "a bit of a party last night" he wrote on 29 April.

An Ensa show put on a bit of a concert in the barn – it was definitely corny. Two men & three girls – such awful types too – however will give them credit for doing their best, putting on a show in a draughty barn, men sitting on bales of hay, cows & pigs etc. and shells landing within a mile. Rather adverse conditions – but still they were corny – VERY CORNY. They came into the room we have set up as a mess afterwards & drank & then had coffee and rolls. We all got a bit high. It's amazing how one can only stand a couple of drinks & then gets whacky & high. They (the Ensa types) left & we carried on for awhile. Eventually got to bed. Everyone was sick at some time during the night, and honestly we drank very little. I only had 4 or 5 whiskies & I was off.

The next day, Sunday, Hal "attended Church in the barn, sitting on straw." He objected to the way the service was conducted.

Pad Hickey, the Bn R.C., is a prince – but this chap takes religion as just a job. I was heartily disgusted He announced Communion after the service. Just two of us remained, then he lit a cigarette first & stood talking. Personally felt 'twas

no way to talk – not for a Communion Service in the lines, so told him possibly next Sunday would be better, and left. Dammit, there's little enough religion in our lives & why ruin what there is of it.

His news on 29 April included taking out some war bonds and also subscribing to the 6th Victory Loan. Then:

We liberated a couple of music boxes, one large one with records & a smaller one. Am going to keep the smaller one in my scout car. We (LO's) have prac. driven everyone in the mess crazy by getting two of them going and sitting around. The smaller one has 'Martha' on it. The Brig last night threatened to send us all back to the line if we didn't stop them.

By the end of April, the 3rd Canadian Division had captured the town of Leer, as, after Hitler's suicide in his Berlin bunker on 30 April, the war drew to its conclusion. Fighting continued, nonetheless, with the three regiments of the 8th Infantry Brigade crossing the Ems River on 2 May and driving toward Aurich, against increasing opposition. A day later, 3 May, they had reached the village of Ulbargen, a few miles from Aurich.¹³ MacDonald's letter of that date opened with an apology for not writing for three days.

Have been very busy...on phones & wireless sets, or else get called for a job. These Scout Cars are rotten things. Patty & I have been doing 30 to 50 mile one way runs & every time it's pouring – consequently we get soaked to the skin and no protection in front. Doing quite a bit of night work & that is tiring...There's talk of peace negotiations – now why can't this left sector fold up.

On 4 May, with surrender negotiations underway, Montgomery had instructed Crerar to limit his operations to reconnaissance only, but this news evidently took some time to filter down to MacDonald. He wrote from outside Aurich: "Here it is another day – a day filled with excitement. Had just started to have breakfast when BM sent to me. Had to control traffic on a vital bridge – thank God we have sets in our cars. Can now keep in touch." He was on that job for a good part of the day and had just got back for an evening meal in their quarters when "the house & barn we were sleeping in went up in flames. In 10 minutes it was Kaput...wonder how much more fighting we'll get. A conflicting

day. Commanders waiting to discuss things, people not knowing what the score is on the war." But then, that day's letter halted with the following remark: "Darling can't tell you all I want to. It's too super magnificent." These words must refer to Crerar's announcement that evening that all Canadian operations were to cease "forthwith" and that the official cease-fire would come into effect at 0800 the next day.¹⁴

Only then, the day of the German surrender in the British-Canadian sector, did MacDonald continue the above letter:

At above point had to rush off. Got back at 0530 this morn – had 1 hrs snooze in a chair – wash, shave, drive to HQ & breakfast and now at 0800 am on duty in Ops lorry – 9 hrs sleep in 72 & starting on another 12 hrs at least. Thank God the end is in sight. Big doings this morn. Provost & white flags etc. Our Brig is running the show. In front of me is the instruction 'Cancel all offensive action ops forthwith & CEASE FIRE at 0800 hrs 5 May '45. Further details will be forthcoming.'

He could not, at that date, give a fuller account of the "big doings this morn" and his trip into Aurich "with the German garrison smartly turned out & saluting." In fact, MacDonald had driven the commander of 8th Brigade, Brigadier J.A. Roberts, into Aurich to accept the German surrender. Some dozen years later, in 1958, Hal prepared over thirty typewritten pages of material based on his wartime letters for Will R. Bird to use in compiling his history, the *North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment*. By this time MacDonald was able to provide more detail about military affairs than censorship regulations had allowed him to put in his letters written on the spot. The following is the account he wrote for Bird about his experiences during the negotiations for surrender in their sector, now in the possession of his wife, Marjorie:

Took the Brigadier into German military headquarters at Aurich on May 5. It was a long brick building, and the German general's headquarters were at the end of the officers' mess. The I.O. and I waited in the mess while the Brigadier went in to discuss surrender terms with the general. There were quite a number of German officers in the mess, beautifully groomed, immaculately dressed, and much polite heel-clicking. We felt very outnumbered by these

Dutch civilians celebrate their liberation with Canadian soldiers.

superb specimens, being tired (I'd had 9 hours sleep in the previous 72, and part of that a snooze in a chair), and fairly dirty. [He later added, verbally, that it had not helped that there were also several large and dangerous-looking German police dogs with them.]

As a souvenir of his service as escort to Brigadier Roberts during some of the peace negotiations, Hal MacDonald was later given one of the weapons surrendered, an 8-shot German semi-automatic officer's pistol manufactured by J.P. Shuer & Son, Suhl, together with its leather holster. This is now in the firearms collection of the New Brunswick Museum with a record of its history.

On 6 May he wrote from new quarters "with glass in two out of three windows." He had had:

a wonderful sleep last night... 'specially since in the preceding 90 hrs had had exactly 8 hrs sleep

– part of that sitting in a chair. I wrote you yesterday morning wasn't itWe were controlling all traffic & keeping the only & main road to Aurich clear. No one beyond a certain crater in the rd except flag cars (our Brig & German General's). Everyone else was turned back. Amazing that when the cease fire was in effect, although negotiations were still going on, the number of people wanting to go to Aurich which was, of course, out of bounds. I went in. Some civilians waving, all happy. The German garrison smartly turned out & saluting & otherwise no one except 1 sect. of our Prov. [Provost] we put in there.

This letter described more of what had gone on the previous day when he had returned from Aurich with an interesting illustration of how dramatically enemy roles could shift with the coming of peace, from armed menace to curious tourist. After his return from Aurich to 8th Brigade Headquarters he was again sent to direct traffic on the road into town:

Turned back all the snoopers & souvenir hunters – some with amazing alibies and excuses, some with super-official passes, etc. The funniest thing was this. Patty & I had rolled our Scout Car across the rd, effectively blocking it & forcing everyone to stop.... Saw two guys in uniform coming towards us on an M/C. They looked German, but there are so many Dutch, Serb, Russian, Polish, French and PW & slave labor on the rds that I didn't pay much attention to them till Patty sd. 'They're Hun'. Sure enuff. Two German Lieuts in full uniform on a motorcycle going visiting in our lines. Explained to the one who spoke some English that that was in our lines & that as our arrangements were not complete they could not go on. Maybe tomorrow. So incongruous. Twenty hrs. previous & they would either a) not be so free & open or b) been dead or wounded promptly. A crazy war.

By 8 May, V.E. Day, his mood was decidedly upbeat.

So grand to have life ahead of us, & after all those months in the Bn when I did say finis to my life. Darling it still seems like a dream – that this whole thing is over. Our prayers & hopes for 5 years finally come true. It's so magnificent that I just

can't believe it. We are set up in a dairy & house. Clean – electricity, dressers, & a more or less normal period of getting cleaned up & straightened away. Dammit, I feel like shouting & jumping – to think I will be going home – a definite fact now & not just a wish. Now I shall try to forget all that has happened in the past 11 months. Haven't had a celebration yet. Some of the lads tied one on last night but I wasn't in the mood. However one of these nights I will.

The next day he began figuring up the points he needed for early repatriation.

Two pts for every month in the army & additional for every month away from Canada (no discrimination if in action or not) + 20% of total above pts if married in Canada gives me 174 or 175 and 174 is the minimum. What I can gather, having nothing in writing as yet, 174 pts or more means priority in return to Canada – following the basis of first in, first out....keep your fingers crossed. Wish you could be here tomorrow. I'm acting Adj. on a Bde parade & everything is polished, blancoed, clean & pressed.

He continued on 10 May:

SMH Ad

We are in a rather quiet village (Holtrop) south of Aurich...The parade this a.m. was a definite success. Rather like old times to get out & take over a parade and then march them to a Church for our Victory service. A swell service and Communion afterward. Tonight in our mess VE Day party. Everything is well in hand & the dinner menu sounds very enticing & we have a good amount of the stuff that builds morale & lowers morals. So-o-o guess maybe I'll be able to do a spot of indulging.


It would be a good party, but subdued; they still had a lot on their minds. But the 8th Infantry Brigade would stage a tremendous celebration in Amersfoort on 6 June, the first anniversary of D-Day. It began with a big parade, with bands playing, everyone shined up and looking their best, and ended with a party of over 200 couples and live bands that played all night. Ahead lay an eventful summer in Holland, full of socializing, work, and maddening repatriation foul-ups as those who had survived the fighting waited to get back to Canada and get on with the rest of their lives.

2. Bill McAndrew, Bill Rawling, Michael Whitby, *Liberation: The Canadians in Europe* (Montreal, 1995), p.60.
3. J.L. Granastein, *Canada's Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace* (Toronto, 2002), p.295.
4. These symptoms and their causes are discussed in Terry Copp and Bill McAndrew, *Battle Exhaustion: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Canadian Army, 1939-1945* (Montreal and Kingston, 1990), pp. 23, 74, 103.
5. Bercuson, p.263.
6. James Alan Roberts, *The Canadian Summer: The Memoirs of James Alan Roberts* (Toronto, 1981), pp. 111-114.
7. Crerar was identified to Marjorie in a letter that referred to an old Hamilton friend of Marjorie's father. Montgomery's presence is confirmed by a reference in Will R. Bird, *North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment* (Fredericton, 1963), pp. 506-507, which contains an amusing account of MacDonald's meeting with him.
8. See Roberts, pp.118-119.
9. Bird, pp. 532, 535-536.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 551.
11. Bercuson, p.267.
12. Roberts, pp.124, 127.
13. *Ibid.*, p.130.
14. These events are outlined in C.P. Stacey, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War: Volume III: The Victory Campaign, The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945* (Ottawa, 1960), pp.609-612.

Notes

1. David J. Bercuson, *Maple Leaf Against the Axis* (Toronto, 1995), pp.254-56.

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