

# The Canadians and the Liberation of the Netherlands

**April-May 1945**



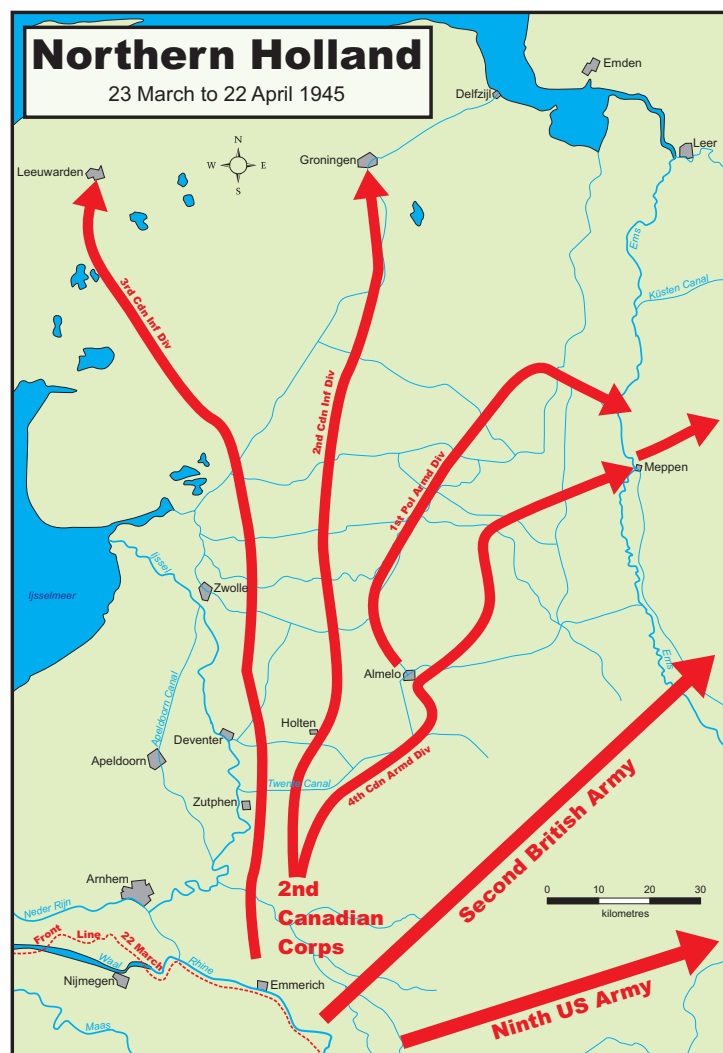
*Holten Canadian War Cemetery from the air.*

**The Canadian Battlefields Foundation**

When Field Marshal Montgomery declared, “we have won the battle of the Rhine,” on 28 March 1945 it was finally possible to begin the liberation of those provinces of the Netherlands still under Nazi occupation. Montgomery gave this task to First Canadian Army which was to open a supply route through Arnhem before clearing “Northeast” and “West Holland.” Within the Canadian Army 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Corps was responsible for Northeast Holland while 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Corps, just arrived from Italy, was to advance to the west. Britain’s 49<sup>th</sup> (West Riding) Division, which had been preparing for the river crossing at Arnhem, continued to serve with First Canadian Army throughout April and May.

If the story of Canadian operations in April contains no great decisive battles, it includes a potent mix of both triumph and tragedy. Canadian and Dutch memories of April are usually recollections of that “sweetest of springs,” the spring of liberation. Canadian soldiers found themselves engulfed by a joyous population which knew, all too well, what the war had been fought for, and they showered their liberators with kisses and flowers and love. But April was also the cruellest month; while the war had been won, the killing did not stop.

Fatal casualties are often the best measure of the intensity of combat. For the Canadians in northwest Europe, the worst days had been 6 June with 359 fatalities; 8 July (262); 25 July (344); 8 August (290); 14 August (261), and 26 February (214). On 16 other days, many of them in October 1944, fatalities exceeded 100 men. The last such 100-fatality day was 10 March 1945



at Xanten and Veen. In April 1945 more than 50 soldiers were killed on each of seven days; 114 more were killed between 1 May and the surrender on 5 May, including 12 on the last day of fighting in Europe.

This tragic toll in young men’s lives took place against a background of the triumphant defeat of the Nazi menace, but the victory was achieved at great cost.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry Division, which had landed on D-Day and liberated parts of Zeeland in October 1944, led the April advance into the Netherlands liberating Zutphen, Deventer, Zwolle and then Leeuwarden. The enemy defences in Zutphen were well prepared with the bridges blown and anti-tank obstacles blocking the roads forcing the Canadians into a series of difficult battles. The 9<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade (Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders, Highland Light Infantry of Canada and the North Nova Scotia Highlanders) fought a fierce battle on the outskirts of Zutphen while 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade (Queen’s Own Rifles, North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment and Le Régiment de la Chaudière) cleared the town center with the support of the tanks of



the Sherbrooke Fusiliers. Zutphen was finally freed on 8 April.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade (Royal Winnipeg Rifles, Regina Rifles and Canadian Scottish Regiment) crossed the Schipbeek Canal advancing on Deventer from the east. Sherbrooke tanks and flame-throwing “Crocodiles” from 79<sup>th</sup> (British) Armoured Division supported the infantry but as the War Diary of the Canadian Scottish reports,

It would not have been possible to take and hold Deventer so successfully if it had not been for the splendid co-operation of the Dutch underground movements.

Zwolle was liberated after a brief battle on 14 April and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, with 7 Recce Regiment (17<sup>th</sup> Duke of York’s Royal Canadian Hussars) and the Royal Canadian Dragoons, in the lead reached Leeuwarden the next day.

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The 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Division, veterans of the Normandy campaign and the advance north from Antwerp to Walcheren Island, paralleled 3<sup>rd</sup> Division’s advance with Groningen as their ultimate objective. Fifth Canadian Infantry Brigade (Black Watch, Calgary Highlanders, Régiment de Maisonneuve) working with the tanks of the Fort Garry Horse fought a stiff battle for Doetinchem on 1 April. After crossing the Twente Canal, Holten was liberated on 8 April, and Ommen three days later. Special Air Service paratroopers from France’s 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Régiments de Chasseurs parachutists and 1<sup>st</sup> Belgian Parachute Battalion were assigned the task of seizing bridges in advance of the ground troops and were responsible for eliminating the enemy from a number of villages north of Ommen. Second Division with 8 Recce Regiment (14<sup>th</sup> Canadian Hussars) in the lead, liberated Westerbork, the transit camp from which Anne Frank and so many other victims of the Holocaust were transported. They reached Assen on 13 April, by-passed the town and attacked from the north overcoming the enemy in a two-hour battle that yielded 600 prisoners. Later that day the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade (Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, Essex Scottish and Royal Regiment of Canada) reached the outskirts of Groningen to find a determined enemy defending the city. The battalions of 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade cleared the area south of the ring canal and with the aid of machine gunners from the Toronto Scottish Regiment, firing from the roof of the railway station, secured a bridgehead into the city.

The 6<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade (South



**A Canadian convoy passes through Holten, 9 April 1945.**

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Saskatchewan Regiment, Fusiliers Mont-Royal and Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders of Canada) working with the Fort Garry Horse advanced into the city forcing the enemy to withdraw to the Grote Markt much of which was damaged in the three-day battle. The garrison commander surrendered on 16 April.

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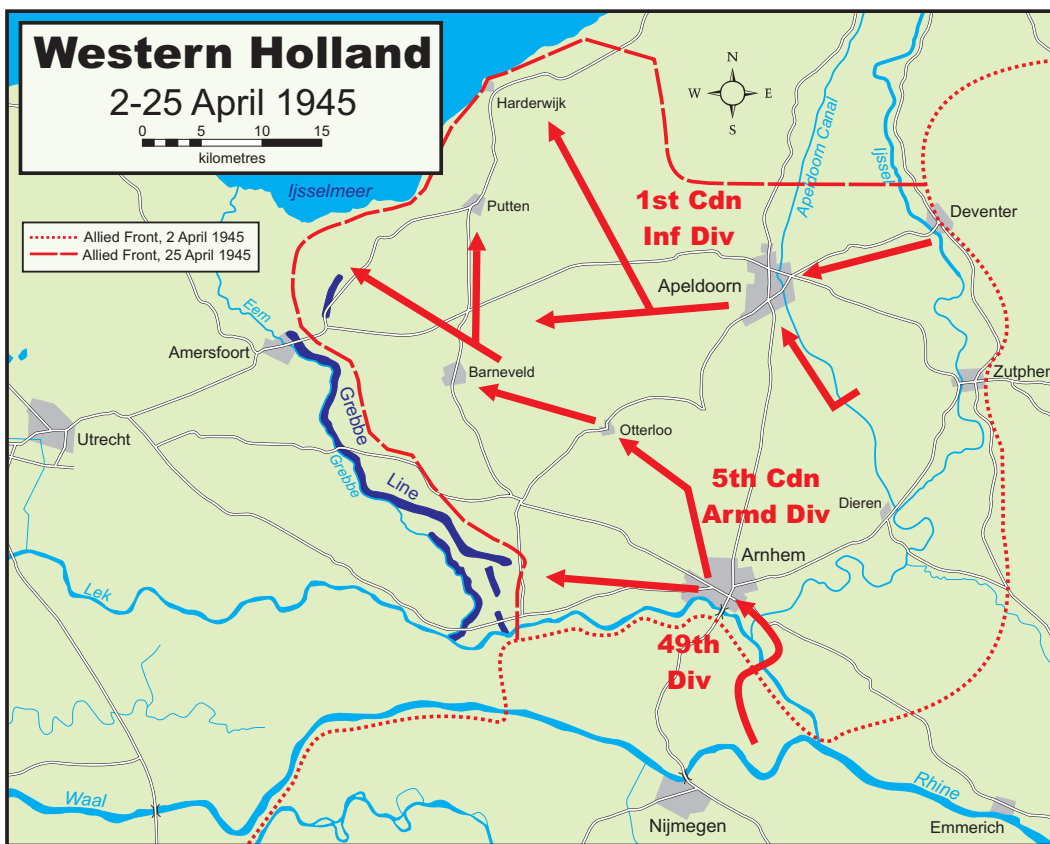
The 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Division was ordered to protect the left flank of British 30 Corps as it advanced to Bremen. After 10<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade (Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders of Canada, Lincoln and Welland Regiment, Algonquin Regiment) with tank support from the South Alberta Regiment) overcame the enemy defending the Twente Canal west of Delden that town was liberated on 3 April. The 4<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade (British Columbia Regiment, Canadian Grenadier Guards, Governor-Generals Foot Guards and the Lake Superior Regiment) led the way to Almelo before continuing into Germany. The Polish Armoured Division, part of First Canadian Army since August 1944, advanced north from Almelo reaching Emmen on 10 April and Winschoten four days later.

While the divisions of 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Corps were liberating the northeast 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Corps began operations in the west. The first task, clearing the "island" between Nijmegen and Arnhem, was carried out by 49<sup>th</sup> British Division and 11<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade (Perth Regiment, Cape Breton Highlanders, Irish Regiment of Canada) with the armour of 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Armoured Brigade (Ontario Regiment, Three Rivers Regiment, Calgary Regiment) in support.

The army commander, General Harry Crerar, decided to delay a direct attack on Arnhem until the city and its defenders were cut off by an advance across the Ijssel River to Apeldoorn. This in turn depended upon the success of 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division in clearing the east bank of the river and the cities of Zutphen and Deventer. As the Canadians prepared for these operations they were confronted with a new set of problems. Reports from the old provinces of Holland, including the cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam, indicated that the terrible conditions of the "hunger winter" were continuing and the people of western Holland were facing starvation. The Nazi governor, Arthur Seyss-Inquart, who had deliberately



***A Canadian convoy passes through the peaceful streets of Winschoten, Netherlands.***  
CFPU ZK991-1



“The more I saw of the orderly, deliberate way the Canadian Army (in Northwest Europe) went about its tasks, the more I liked doing business with them.”

Operation “Cannonshot,” was launched at 1530 hours on 11 April. The enemy appeared to be totally surprised. Apparently ignorant of 1<sup>st</sup> Division’s presence they assumed that the attack would come from 3<sup>rd</sup> Division at Deventer. The initial opposition came from small German battlegroups built around one or two self-propelled guns. The Seaforths and PPCLI used their PIATs (Projector, Infantry, Anti-

created the food shortage in retaliation for the actions of the Dutch resistance, now threatened to flood much of Holland as a defensive measure. If military action was the answer, all possible speed was required.

First Division, waiting in the Rhineland, was placed under the command of Guy Simonds’ 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Corps. Formation patches and divisional signs were removed and the division was brought north to woods in the vicinity of Gorssel while 3<sup>rd</sup> Division captured Zutphen. Major-General Harry Foster held his Orders group on 10 April and outlined the plan for the first phase of Operation “Cannonshot.” Foster selected 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade, (Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry, Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, Loyal Edmonton Regiment) to make the assault crossing of the IJssel River.

Second Brigade was introduced to the Buffalo, a Landing Vehicle Tracked, which could enter and leave the water on most gradients while providing 30 men with protection from small arms fire. The corps plan called for an elaborate “smoke box” created by smoke generators and concentrations of medium and heavy artillery on prearranged targets with virtually unlimited artillery on call down to company level. Medium bombers were to hit prearranged targets and Typhoon aircraft were on call. This was war in a new style for those who had fought in Italy. In his memoirs, *Once A Patricia*, Syd Frost writes:

Tank) until the first anti-tank guns got across the river. By 9 p.m. the bridgehead was “snug”. German reserves reached the area at midnight and in accordance with their doctrine counterattacked immediately.

The Allies had long since learned that German battlefield behavior was amazingly predictable and that is why competent Allied commanders insisted on digging-in after an assault rather than exploiting their initial success. Why, they reasoned, risk an encounter battle when enemy troops will come to you allowing your artillery, mortars and machine-guns to destroy them with observed fire? This is precisely what happened in the IJssel bridgehead. The Seaforths and PPCLI repulsed hastily-mounted counterattacks, taking more than 200 prisoners and inflicting heavy casualties. The Loyal Eddies joined them, and by dawn the engineers had a bridge in place and the tanks of the First Hussars were across in preparation for the next phase.

The plan now called for 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade (Royal Canadian Regiment, 48th Highlanders, Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment) to advance east along the axis of the Apeldoorn-Deventer railway to the airfield at Teuge while 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade (Royal 22e Régiment, Carleton and York Regiment and West Nova Scotia Regiment) was directed south of Apeldoorn to

prepare an assault crossing of the canal in the event 1st Brigade ran into difficulty.

With the 48th Highlanders leading, 1st Brigade moved swiftly west. The RCR with tanks from the First Hussars took over the lead and by noon on the 13th were less than one mile from Apeldoorn. The plan to pause at the airfield and prepare a coordinated attack across the Apeldoorn canal north of the city was abandoned when the Dutch resistance reported that the main road bridge over the canal, in the heart of the city, was intact. At first light on the 14th the RCR-1<sup>st</sup> Hussar battlegroup fought its way toward the bridge which turned out to be well protected by anti-tank guns. The 1<sup>st</sup> Hussars lost two tanks, including one which tried to smash through a road block. North of the city the bridges were blown and patrols from the Hasty Ps established that the canal was strongly defended.

The RCR and 48th Highlanders went about their task carefully. With the BBC reporting that the Soviet Army was in the suburbs of Berlin and the Germans seeking a truce in western Holland, no one wanted to take unnecessary casualties in what appeared to be the last days of the war.



***Band of the Royal Canadian Regiment taking part in the ceremony for the liberation of Apeldoorn.***

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While these events unfolded 49<sup>th</sup> Division, with Canadian tank support entered Arnhem. The CBC correspondent Matthew Halton described the city as a “deserted burning shell.” In response to Hitler’s orders Arnhem had been evacuated and systematically looted as punishment for supporting Allied troops during Operation “Market Garden.” Once Arnhem was secured 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Division took over the advance west forcing the enemy troops defending Apeldoorn to withdraw. On

17 April the Dutch resistance in the city reported the enemy was gone.

The joy of the local population knew no bounds. It had appeared as if their garden city was to become a battleground and now, almost miraculously, the fighting had ended. The War Diarist of the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment described the scene that followed:

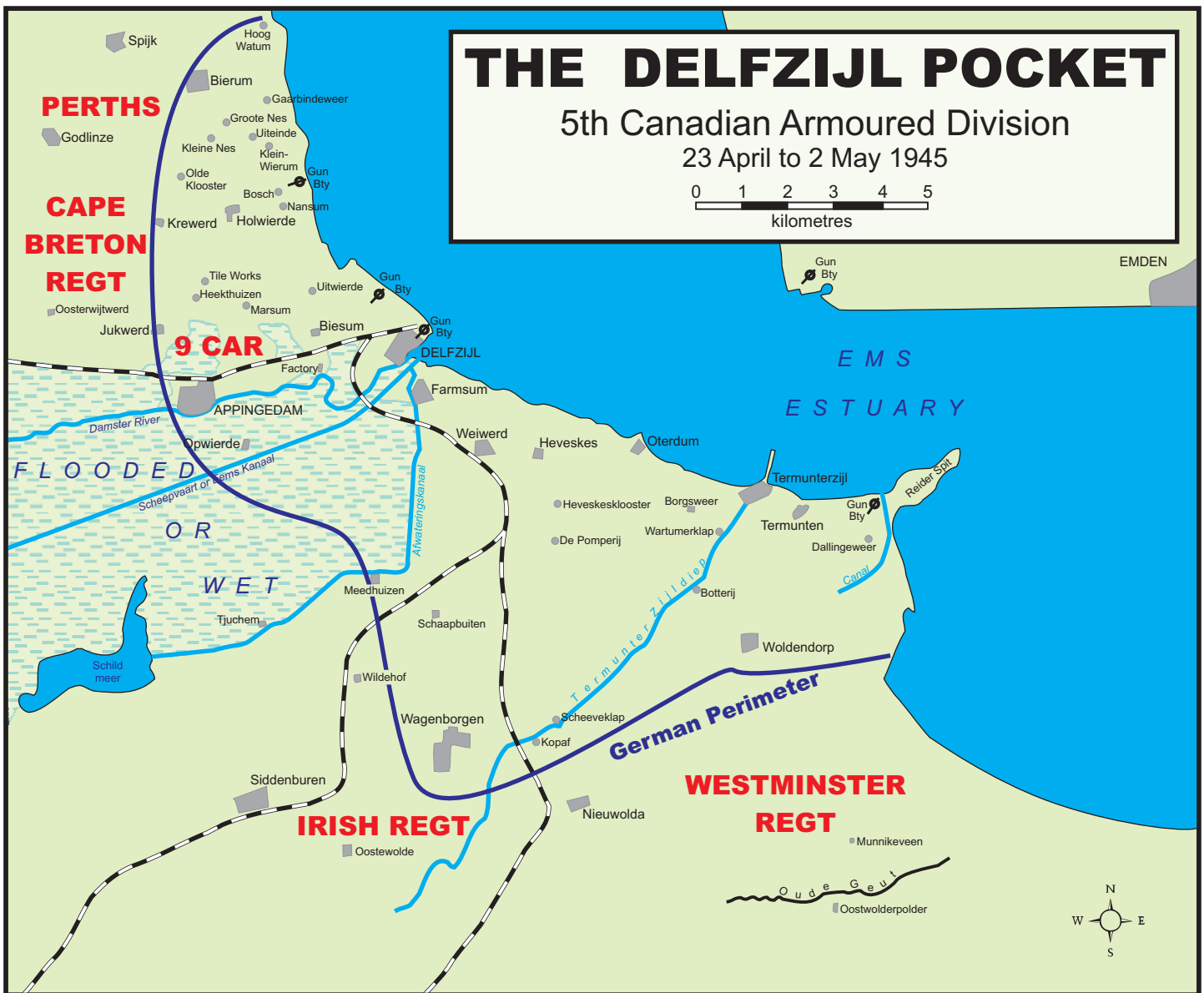
The battalion crossed the bridge and got formed up on the west side of the Canal, a brief Orders Group was held and we started through the city. It was tough going due to the cheering and crowding of the thousands of liberated Dutch people who crowded the streets and showered bouquets of flowers on the troops...many a fair maiden’s kiss was forced on the boys.

Canadian veterans who return to Apeldoorn for the anniversaries of the liberation know that memories of 1945 are still warm.

Major-General Bert Hoffmeister’s 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Division moved quickly west with 5<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade (Lord Strathcona’s Horse (Royal Canadians), 8<sup>th</sup> Princess Louise’s (New Brunswick) Hussars, British Columbia Dragoons, Westminster Regiment) leading the way to Barneveld. The 11<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade and divisional headquarters arrived at Otterlo and on the night of 16-17 April large numbers of enemy troops withdrawing from Apeldoorn, stormed through the village “whooping and shouting in a very drunken manner.” The attacking force of some six hundred, who had been ordered to join their comrades defending the Grebbe Line, suffered some 300 casualties in this chaotic encounter. The next day as both brigades pushed forward the Supreme Commander General Eisenhower ordered the Canadians to halt before the Grebbe Line. The Nazi civil and military authorities, who had threatened to flood much of the country, had blown up the dyke protecting the country’s newest polder and in the hope of preventing further damage while negotiations for an armistice were underway no further offensive action was permitted.

First Canadian and 49<sup>th</sup> British Divisions remained in place at the Grebbe Line but 5<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division was ordered north to Groningen province to take over operations to open the port of Delfzijl. This move was necessary because all of 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Corps was committed to action in Germany.

Operation “Canada,” the last battle fought on Dutch soil, began on 23 April. The attack was to be coordinated with 3<sup>rd</sup> Division’s fight for the German ports



of Leer and Emden. The flooded terrain, minefields and heavily fortified gun batteries slowed the advance and the Canadians suffered more than 250 casualties in this lengthy battle.

The last days of the war in Holland and Germany were a difficult period for everyone, civilian and soldier alike. It rained most days and while enemy resistance was not well organized there was no shortage of ammunition and casualties were reported through to the last day of the war.

On the morning of 5 May all units were ordered to cease offensive operations. There were few signs of celebration. The predominant emotion was simple relief at having survived mixed with sorrow for comrades lost. Two days later 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian and 49<sup>th</sup> British Divisions crossed into the western Netherlands bringing relief to the most populated parts of the Netherlands.



This brochure is based upon material from Terry Copp and Mike Bechthold, *The Canadian Battlefields in Northwest Europe 1944-45: A Visitor's Guide* (2005) and is a joint project of the Canadian Battlefields Foundation and Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. For information contact us at [www.canadianmilitaryhistory.ca](http://www.canadianmilitaryhistory.ca) or [www.canadianbattleofnormadyfoundation.ca](http://www.canadianbattleofnormadyfoundation.ca).

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Front and back cover photos by Evert Stieber.

*They fought for the liberation of Europe and the hope of a better world!*



**Holten Canadian  
War Cemetery,  
Christmas Eve  
2004.**