Chapter Seven

Overseas

By the time the Second Front was opened in June 1944 and Canadian troops had landed in Europe, the German Army was already over two-thirds destroyed. Through the early 1940s the Germans had occupied all the Baltic states and entire areas of Russia. The Battle of Leningrad, where the number of dead was ten times that of Hiroshima, was the first time since Hitler had begun his march across Europe that Nazi armies were defeated in open battle. But it was the Battle of Stalingrad, the most savage eight months of fighting in World War II, that was decisive. A Nazi victory there would have ended the war. The defeat of Hitler’s armies on 1 February 1943 at Stalingrad changed the course of history.

Which is not to say that the Canadian contribution to the war effort and that of the other western Allies was not substantial and critical. Though the German Army lost two million soldiers in the grueling war on the Russian front, the Wehrmacht remained the best fighting force anywhere. Those in the SS divisions were frequently fanatical as well. Rarely did any surrender and even in the most desperate situations they would fight on until utterly overwhelmed. Hitler paid no heed to what had become clear as early as mid-July 1944: that the Allies could not be driven from Normandy. Throughout the following year he refused all advice to retreat. On the contrary, he gave the order that not an inch of territory was to be given up.

There were nearly 900,000 men in the German Army in France in late 1943. Stretching along the coasts were the Seventh Army, covering the Brittany and Normandy area; the Fifteenth Army, covering the area north from Normandy to the Netherlands; and additional forces in the Netherlands itself. German artillery, though seriously outweighed and outnumbered, was clearly superior. Well-dug in and camouflaged, the 88 mm anti-tank gun was an exceptionally deadly, efficient, and much feared weapon. American-made Sherman tanks were hopelessly out-matched and were easy prey for German guns. German Tiger tanks were 54-ton monsters, formidable in battle. These disadvantages for the invading army, however, were out-
weighed by Allied air superiority, which allowed Allied landing craft and shipping to cross the Channel and also enabled the Allies to deliver a constant hammering to German lines of communication behind the front.

Although he was at the Canadian Infantry Training base near Aldershot on 6 June 1944, Bill Walsh was not part of Canadian D-Day forces. It was early September by the time he was sent to the front lines, just at the close of the battle to close the Falaise gap. It was here, he discovered, that Dick Steele had perished, only days earlier.

Walsh’s regiment, the Essex Scottish, was one of nine infantry regiments in the Second Division of the First Canadian Army. At full strength, infantry regiments comprised over 800 men though most went into battle with less than half that strength. As part of the Second Front, its task was to drive the German enemy from France, Holland, and Belgium, and invade Germany from the west, hopefully beating the Red Army to Berlin.

After the brilliant successes of D-Day, the fighting in Normandy became a battle of attrition. The Allied infantry were required to attack, occupy, and hold small parcels of ground under circumstances that resembled the agonies of combat in World War I. The liberation of Paris on 25 August 1944 and the capture of Antwerp, Europe’s second greatest seaport, eleven days later, sparked a new wave of hope for speedy victory. Yet victory was nine months and tens of thousands of casualties away. Altogether, 42,042 Canadians died in active service and another 54,414 suffered wounds or injuries.

**Closing The Falaise Gap**

The Anglo-Canadian-American landing on the Normandy beaches finally opened a second front and was by far the largest amphibious operation in the history of warfare. Between 6 June and 20 July one and a half million men and tremendous quantities of weaponry and supplies were brought onto the continent. After successfully overcoming the mines, heavy artillery, and machine-gun fire on the beaches where they landed, the invading forces had to face at least one German Panzer division. Stubborn German resistance pinned down the Allied infantry for much longer than foreseen, until a breakout was achieved.

Operation Totalize was drafted by the head of Canadian Second Division, Lieutenant General Guy Simonds. The goal was to capture the medieval town of Falaise, twenty miles south of Caen, where William the Conqueror was born. It was launched 7 August just after the Americans launched Operation Cobra on the west front.
It took ten days for the Canadian forces to chase out the enemy, street by street, house by house, and to finally secure Falaise. The next assignment was to attack Trun, 15 miles southwest. Amidst choking dust, smoke, burning ruins, and booty, this was accomplished the next day, with over a thousand prisoners taken. It was clear by now that unless the Germans in Normandy withdrew to the Seine River — about 100 miles west of where they were concentrated, they would be caught in a pocket roughly 20 miles long and 10 miles wide, the so-called Falaise Gap. Churchill was to describe the decision to encircle two German armies in the Falaise Gap as “one of the most audacious decisions of the war.”

The drive from 8 August to 21 August cost Canadian divisions heavily: 1,470 dead, 4,023 wounded, 177 prisoners, out of 25,000 fighting men in all. Although the total losses suffered by the Germans from D-Day to the closing of the gap is estimated to have been 400,000 killed, wounded or captured, complete encirclement of the German forces never did occur. Those who escaped through the woods or battered their way through the Valley of the Dives were absorbed in the SS and Wehrmach divisions that the Allies would meet again in the Scheldt estuary and the bitter struggles for the Rhine crossings, and on the Ardennes offensive in December. One of those killed was Dick Steele. Steele was killed in mid-August in a battle in the Trun-Chambois area, through which most of the retreating Germans had to move. American, British, and Canadian divisions converged on this area, making it into “a cauldron of death and heroism,” as one soldier described it. It took the Allies 60 days to reach the Seine, following which came the capture of Leige and Antwerp, and the battle for the Rhineland. Bill Walsh was one of the Canadian soldiers in these later campaigns.

**Boot Camp, Aldershot, And The Browder Line**

Boot camp was not easy for Walsh. He was out of shape and at age 33 much older than most of the other recruits. Like his friends Dick Steele and Muni Ehrlich he joined the armoured corps. Basic training consisted of general conditioning, map reading, platoon tactics, first aid, radio communications, protection against gas, and weapons training (rifle, pistol, Tommy gun, anti-tank rifle, mortar and grenades). Advanced training was more of the same plus a degree of specialization. Each segment took eight weeks. Following the four months training, soldiers got a furlough and upon return were deemed ready for overseas service.

Muni Ehrlich, stationed in Dundurn, Saskatchewan, had advised Walsh to apply for officers training before going through boot camp. “Rank does not mean anything to us,” he wrote. “We join to serve without conditions
and qualifications. But many of us are officer material and I'm sure you are. Why not serve in a way that will enable us to give our utmost? I am mindful of the political difficulties in your road, but why not try, why not insist?" he wrote, adding "your father may be helpful, in this regard."

Walsh did not take this advice. It probably would not have mattered if he had. His experience in training camp was similar to that of several of the Communists. At some point they were recommended as commissioned officers because of their leadership potential. "In the army it doesn't matter about your politics," the basic training officer told Walsh. But of course it did matter. As in the case of the other Communists interned at the beginning of the war, Ottawa turned the recommendation down flat. The same experience was repeated in advance training. By early spring 1944 Walsh was shipped off to England and wound up in the Canadian Infantry Training Regiment near Aldershot. He got a steady stream of letters from home. Besides hearing regularly from various Party people about political matters, he maintained a steady correspondence with a few close friends.

22 March 1944
Esther, dear.

What a grand week-end Dick and I had together. We chatted, sang, drank, walked. Dick looks splendid and feels fine. He wanted me to tell him everything about you and the boys as I saw you last. I think the fellow is in love with his wife and boys. The home we stayed in is a sort of Anglo-Canadian institution. There I met Harry and Lou Binder, Lloyd Peel, Joe Levitt and some others. We had long political discussions on events in Canada. Thanks to material you sent me I was able to listen and understand and even participate in a small way.

Dick and I reserved the "mickey" I saved for ourselves. We drank our first toast to you, then the boys, then to Anne. The last one was to our reunion in Canada. By the way Dick and I are stationed only 9 miles apart. Tell Michael and Johnny I told their Daddy what good boys they are and that we are going to win the war together.

4 July 1944
Esther dear,

A few minutes ago the news came — Minsk has been liberated. Will you accuse me of having lost my sense of proportion if this fumigation of Minsk brings back other things to mind? I'm certain that Dick's response will parallel my own.

He too will think of Elkind, the "spitz" who taught us tool grinding and whose enthusiasm for Esperanto as a weapon of peace and brotherhood was so insistent that Dick and I attended his Esperanto class. How proud Elkind was when I addressed the large Minsk radio audience in Esperanto — "the language of hope". And Muriel the stage actress, so devoted to her art. I could never understand how she found
the time and energy from her multitude of activities in cultural and communal work for us. But she did.

And old Dimitrovitch peering over his glasses with a twinkle in his eyes, and sharply reminding Dick and I that there were still a few tricks about fine metal grinding and life itself, the two "Kanadskies" could learn from an old Russian worker.

Mrs Dragunski and her husband who emigrated to the new born Soviet Union in 1918 so that "our child will be born in the new world." Now pretty Mrs Dragunski had three children. Her hands were calloused, but she said, "let American and English women have our fur coats and our nicest delicacies — we need their machines now. Some day we too will have nice things — all of us."

And Emma too who said to us "in the struggle for progress, you are with us or against us; there is no middle road." And in answer to the protest at her sharp division: "Yes, it is beautiful to live; but it is not hard to die, if one dies for life."

These and many other people of Minsk I recall vividly. How many of them were alive to welcome back the Red Army? Perhaps not one.

They used to josh me because I was a teetotaller. Three years ago I made a promise to get drunk the day Minsk is liberated. Tonight I'll do it.

The meetings in London with Party comrades were very important for Walsh. "It was the first time I had an opportunity to discuss some of the questions that were bothering me," he explained. "Why was the war a just war when Hitler invaded Austria and Czechoslovakia; then a war between imperialists when the pact was signed; then a just war again after the USSR was attacked. Of course I knew the Party position and for me to question it would be disloyal. But I wanted a chance to discuss this and other questions with the leaders. The others did too. We were all serious guys. There were other questions. Some of us didn't like what we were hearing about the Browder line and in January, when we were all on the front lines, we got this letter from Tim Buck telling us that the Party is supporting the Liberal candidate, McNaughton, in a federal by-election and why it's important for us to vote for him. We all hate this guy. Our comrades are dying all over the place, we're desperately short of men and this very same guy we're asked to vote for and just named minister of defence is still opposed to conscription!" Walsh complained "The last time we met was in July and we decided that some time after we were home we would look for an occasion to call for a meeting with Tim to discuss these matters. Of course it never happened."

Earl Browder, for many years General Secretary of the Communist Party of the United States, had argued that centralized planning required by the war effort had permanently changed the character of the American economy. He said that an "enlightened capitalism" led by "men of vision and
intelligence" were leading the country into a postwar world of "planned economy, peaceful industrial expansion and resultant well-being for all the people." \(^1\) Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin had just met face-to-face for the first time in November 1943, at Teheran, where they projected a postwar world of cooperation, friendship, and unity which would assure peaceful development for all countries. The Comintern had been dissolved a few months earlier. It was in the "spirit of Teheran" that Browder dissolved the Party into an educational organization and proclaimed that Communists now "loyally support the existing system of private enterprise." \(^2\) This viewpoint was hotly contested among American Communists and would soon be reversed after Moscow unexpectedly changed the Party line and removed Browder as Secretary-General.

In Canada the Party leadership talked in much the same terms as Browder, calling it "creative Marxism for the post-war world." Only later and not very persuasively did it insist that it always viewed cooperation between the working class and some sections of the capitalist class as a tactical question in the fight against fascism. In the February 1945 federal by-election in Grey North, Ontario, called to provide a House of Commons seat for General Andrew McNaughton, newly appointed Minister of National Defence, the Communists supported McNaughton against the CCF nominee. In the June provincial and federal elections the Communists, still evidently under the spell of the "spirit of Teheran" advanced the slogan of a "Liberal-Labour Coalition", again working against CCF candidates and no doubt costing them seats.

19 August 1944

Esther dear, At the moment of writing things look bright on the fighting fronts. All about I hear lads making predictions on the "end of war." The most pessimistic has apologetically spoken of Xmas, the most sanguine — next week. It does appear that the last decisive battles will soon be joined on both fronts, and the odds are all in our favour. But there will be battles ahead, not simple parades or manoeuvres. The beast will fight most ferociously when he's at the approaches to his own lair. The Nazi beast has nothing to lose by continuing the fight long after there is no possibility of victory for him.

What do you hear from Dick? Haven't heard from him in a dog's age.

A few days after writing this letter, Walsh's regiment, the Lincoln and Welland, was shipped off, but he alone was told to fall out, no reason given. Next day he was asked to report for an interview. It turned out that he was being considered for intelligence work. "It reminded me of that time I was
called in by the Comintern," he recalled. "The officer was a major, about my age, and he was very sharp. He questioned me in French, then German and Russian. And I answered back in kind. Then, out of the blue he asks, 'What do you think of the Browder line'? And I remember what I answered. I said 'it depends on what position you start from. If you start from the position that the main goal is to defend the USSR then it made a lot of sense. You throw yourself into the war effort and you forget about the class struggle.' He said 'You're a Stalinist!' I said 'you're a Trotskyite.' I don't know what he was, probably just a professional intelligence officer who knew the score. But he had me hopping mad."

Walsh didn't remember if he was told what the ultimate recommendation was, but he shipped out with the next group which happened to be the Essex Scottish, by coincidence soldiers recruited from the Windsor area. And in short order he was placed with the intelligence section of the regiment.

Death Of Dick Steele

He heard the rumour within days of being on the front lines.

29 September 1944.

Esther dear,

Our world won't be the same. It's one thing to be surrounded by destruction and death every minute — it's another to try to reconcile myself to losing my best friend of twenty years.

The suspense has been hellish for you. And since you survived that and the even worse climax — you've given me strength that I need. For me there's been a period of acute suspense too. I had not heard from Dick for some time. About 3 to 4 weeks ago, somewhere in France, I tracked down a member of Dick's regiment in search of news. He hemmed and hawed but couldn't tell me anything definite. But his whole attitude was enough to get me extremely worried where previously there had only been anxiety. I tried to make enquiries from other sources, but day followed day without word, and in the meantime my own fighting began. A hundred times I wanted to write you. But throughout those long days and nights of not knowing, I understood that if the worst were true, you'd know about it and I'd hear from you or someone else. That's why I couldn't write anything but those few ambiguous notes. I hope you understand now why I've been silent when all my thoughts have been with you and for you.
Along with your letter was one from Miriam. She also told me about Dick and about Muni. You know how I felt about Muni. In Hull, under awful conditions, I learned to love that man.

And so, Esther dear, I'm doing my best as a tiny fighting cog. If I'm to survive where better men have fallen, I'll come to you as quickly as possible.

Esther Steele received other letters about Dick's death. This, from a letter written by a 24 year-old Joe Levitt:

Dear Esther,

I like to think that there have been in each generation men so good and kind that their love and devotion to their fellow men led them to make any sacrifice for the public good. Dick was one of these. This feeling for people coloured his every thought, his every deed. Being a citizen of a community waging a just war, he took up arms. He helped to smash the once proud German Seventh Army and when Canadians knifed their way through to Falaise, to close the ring around the Nazis, he was there fighting with his magnificent courage. And since this is real life, his tank was hit by an enemy shell and he died instantly.

Battle Of The Scheldt

The Canadian forces which began to stretch out towards the Seine in pursuit of the retreating Germans were more experienced and better trained than the units that landed on D-Day. On 5 September Antwerp, the second largest port in Europe, was liberated with the help of the Belgian resistance. Securing the use of the port was essential because the Allied supply lines were stretched to the limit — all the way back to Normandy — and Allied bombing before D-Day had destroyed all French rail transport and most of the roads were in disrepair. But, noted Admiral Sir Bertrand Ramsay, Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Naval forces, "Antwerp is useless unless the Scheldt Estuary is cleared of the enemy." Antwerp was 65 miles from the sea, and the banks of the long, narrow Scheldt estuary were controlled by elements of the German Fifteenth Army which had not been involved in the battle for Normandy. They were joined by about a hundred thousand of those who managed to escape capture. Hitler was determined to hold Walcheren Island, the bridgehead around Antwerp and the Albert Canal positions as far as Maastricht. The big fear was that the Germans would mine the Scheldt River to block the Allies from using the port.
The task of making Antwerp usable as a port was given to the First Canadian Army under General Guy Simonds. The Second Division, which included the Scottish Essex, was ordered to Antwerp to defend the city and to clear the Scheldt. The Second Division was undermanned and undersupplied for this task and suffered huge losses in the muddy banks of the canals. Casualty rates ran as high as 75 per cent within some battalions. After the enemy was finally cleared out of the south bank of the Scheldt River, the Second Division was ordered to move north from Antwerp, securing the docks and the port facilities as well as the canals and the suburbs. In Antwerp the Essex Scottish Regiment overlooked the villages of Merxem and Eekeren, where the Germans were still strongly entrenched. See-saw skirmishes, often at extremely close distances, contrasted crazily with the night life in downtown Antwerp, only a street car away where soldiers on six-hour passes were permitted to visit. Antwerp sparkled with night clubs and the shops were well stocked with an assortment of goods, including beer, ice cream, and fruit. Bill Walsh spent some enjoyable time there along with his old friend, Johnny Miller, a member of a fellow Fourth Brigade battalion, the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry.

On 2 October the Scottish Essex along with the rest of the Fourth Brigade and the entire Second Division was required to abandon "Shangri La" and begin the task of opening the ports. The first phase was to clear out the so-called Bresken Pocket. Bresken Pocket was a sodden, dike-laced corner of Holland. The casualties were high. Twelve hundred Germans were captured. Canadian casualties included 314 dead, 2,077 wounded, and 321 missing in action. Ground gains were measured in yards and even feet. The Germans were shoved back canal by canal until their backs were finally to the sea. The next task was to seal off the Beveland Peninsula that linked Walcheren Island with the German supply depot and military centres to the east. This was partially accomplished on 15 October, after four days of intense fighting.

By now, the Allied Command finally acknowledged the importance of gaining full use of Antwerp. On 9 October General Eisenhower signalled to Montgomery that "unless we have Antwerp producing by the middle of November, entire operations will come to a standstill. I emphasise that of all our operations on the entire front from Switzerland to the Channel, I consider Antwerp of first importance." The sixty German coastal guns were embedded in concrete along the shores of Walcheren. These gun batteries had to be destroyed. On October 28-30 over 3,000 tons of explosives were dropped on the German fortress on Walcheren Island. But the infantry advance towards Walcheren was very slow. The Germans had mined various points along the dikes which Canadians had to use since the Germans flooded the land. The Second
Canadian Division slogged dike by dike, mainly on foot since armoured vehicles were easy targets for well-placed enemy guns. The men were unbearably dirty, cold and wet, having lived in water-filled holes in the ground. On 1 November, after six weeks of almost continuous fighting, the Essex Scottish, Rileys, and some other regiments were retired from the Battle of the Scheldt and the task of crossing the Walcheren Causeway was taken over by other units. Middleberg, the capital of the island, fell a week later. It took another three weeks to clear the Scheld of mines. The first convoy sailed into Antwerp 28 November. “Freeing the port of Antwerp,” wrote one participant/historian, Arthur Bishop, “marked a turning point in ending the Second World War in Europe, which still had a little over five months to run. With the supply lines firmly established, the Allies could now advance to the Rhine, ford it, and drive into Germany.”

By mid-October, men were stretched to the breaking point, with battle exhaustion becoming a major problem. Half-strength infantry companies were common. It was during these violent weeks of fighting, during the Battle of the Scheldt, that shortages of manpower reached a crisis point. The need for suitable replacements, already a critical problem in August, was now desperate, with totally untrained and unprepared volunteers being rushed in to relieve infantry deficits. Infantry losses comprised 75 per cent of total army casualties. But out of the nearly half million enlisted in the Canadian Army, only 85,000 men were in fighting formation. One problem was that few of the surplus were infantry trained. They were redundant in the services to which they had originally been assigned. The only solution, short of conscription, was to give artillery, service corps, armoured, and engineering troops short courses in infantry weapons and tactics. In most combat units about half of the men were thrown into the breach without adequate training. Many did not know how to fire or load their weapons. Put against some of Germany’s finest soldiers, these volunteers were being ruthlessly exploited. Meanwhile, sitting in Canadian camps were 70,000 home-defence conscripts, many with extensive infantry training, waiting for invaders who would never come. They refused to serve overseas and the Prime Minister, fearful of losing his political base in Québec, would not force them to. Not surprisingly, this hesitation produced bitter feelings among troops placed in jeopardy and being sacrificed by their own government’s political opportunism. These reluctant warriors were soon dubbed “zombies,” men without souls. Back in Ottawa, on 19 October Defence Minister Ralston finally reported to the War Committee of the Cabinet that the conscripts must be used. King, believing this to be a plot to dethrone him, forced Ralston to resign. It was then that he appointed General Andrew McNaughton, an anti-conscriptionist as minister of national defence. It was only when the 70,000 trained infantrymen shunned McNaughton’s exhor-
tations to volunteer for overseas duty that King reversed his stand. As it turned out, less than half of the first contingent even crossed the ocean, the rest having deserted, and by the time they arrived in Europe, in late February and March, most of the intensive fighting was over.

Still Holland, December 1944

Dear Esther,

Did I write you last night? Yep, I guess I did. Two letters in fact. Finished the second too late to send along with letters of thanks to some of those friends who have sent xcards and gifts — and starting too late tonight to write anyone else but you. Tell you a secret — I don’t want to write to anyone but you. Sorry kid. Can’t help it. Do you mind very much?

Guess you’re up to your neck in preparations for xmas and New Years parties for the boys and for the movement. I know dear, your heart isn’t in it, but as you say Dick would have wanted it so, and the boys,— life must go on. They say that “time heals everything”, I wish I could tell you that’s true. But it isn’t. I know. It takes more than time, more than movement, more than everything I’ve seen and done. Maybe, Esther dear, we can solve this together. You’ve already been of such help to me — so that nothing I can do will repay you. But I’m trying, by what I’m doing here. And I’ll try, if you let me, when I come home. That sounds so trite but how else can I tell you that you mean so much to me? I’m no poet, just a soldier who loves you.

Walsh was committed to fulfilling Dick’s request that he take care of the boys should he perish. It is clear from their extensive correspondence, several letters each week from Walsh, that he and Esther were in each other’s thoughts and that Esther was talking up “Uncle Bill” to the twins. At the same time, however, he was getting mail from other women displaying a keen interest in pursuing a life with him.

Rhineland And The “Unkillable Twenty”

The first major offensive in 1945 was the crossing of the Rhine. The First Canadian Army threw 340,000 men and 10,000 tons of supplies a day into the campaign. The human costs were greatly reduced as a result of a major Soviet offensive in January. By 2 February, Soviet spearheads were within 60 miles of Berlin and more than a million German soldiers had been killed, wounded or taken prisoner. These Soviet victories eased the burden on the
 Allied armies while greatly increasing the pressure on Churchill and Roosevelt to accept Soviet plans for reshaping Eastern and Central Europe.

Operation Veritable was launched 8 February, the goal to blast through the three-mile-wide wall known as the Siegfried Line, built by Hitler before the war. The shattered units of the Wehrmacht had tumbled behind it after their long retreat from Normandy. It took two weeks, from 8 February to 21 February to breach the Siegfried defences. The first task was to drive the enemy from Moyland Wood and secure an attack position on the Goch-Calcar Road. The opposition was fierce, since the Germans concentrated an unprecedented weight of artillery and mortars backed by some of the best troops in its army. The companies leading the attacks were from the Essex Scottish and the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry. Almost at once their Kangaroo armoured vehicles and the tanks that accompanied them were belly-deep in mud.

By 19 February both battalions succeeded in crossing the road, but German shelling increased in intensity, knocking out the Essex Scottish commanding officer's radio. The farmhouse containing battalion headquarters was levelled to the ground by German armour. All that remained was the floor which was now ceiling to the cellar. Bill Walsh huddled there along with nineteen other men led by Lieutenant Colonel John Pangman. Meanwhile, three German tanks, and forty troops took up positions around the levelled headquarters.

"A door, extending a little above the ground level, opened to stairs into the cellar," recalled Walsh, in his account of "the Unkillable Twenty," which was how one newspaper headlined this story carried on all the wire services. "Soon after we got in, a German soldier entered the cellar through that door. We shot him. I used a Sten gun, which many Canadians referred to as a 'plumber's nightmare'." The sten gun mentioned by Walsh was a primitive looking weapon with a stubby barrel crudely welded to a bulgy piece of pipe with slots cut in it. It was first manufactured in 1941 as a cheap, easy-to-produce weapon for the Resistance. But it wouldn't fire a burst of more than three rounds without jamming. In the words of one combatant, "to supply these totally unreliable weapons to regular troops, who must face the enemy in mortal combat for days, weeks and months on end, must surely rank among the foremost criminal acts perpetrated on Allied troops in World War II."6

According to Walsh, "We were in the cellar a short time, illuminated by our portable lamps, when two German tanks pulled up and started firing. Fortunately, they were so close to the cellar and their canon were so long that their shells seem to glance off the stone floor. Much to my astonishment and anger, the Colonel stood at one of the cellar windows, shouting 'kamarad!' I was shocked as were some of the others. I unceremoniously
pulled him away from the window. I proposed to him that I would get out of the cellar and crawl in the general direction of where I considered our fellow battalions were situated — somewhere behind us. As the Intelligence Sergeant I kept track as near as possible of all such information. He agreed. Another officer, the signals Lieutenant, left with me."

"When we got outside, crawling on our bellies, I could hear German being spoken, but not clearly enough to make out what they were saying. As arranged, we split up. It was a dark night but there were lots of stars which helped keep my direction. After an hour or two, or maybe three, I heard English spoken. I revealed myself to the nearest sentry. He took me to the nearest group of soldiers, and miracle of miracles, one of them was my very good friend Johnny Miller. He took me to his Colonel who told me he would report the situation to brigade HQ. I was to stay with Johnny in this battalion, the Rileys. I was united with my battalion when the situation permitted two or three days later."

At 9:30 next morning the Royal Regiment made contact with Pangman and attacked the German position, and Typhoon dive-bombers blasted the Germans from the air. It was not until 2 p.m. that carriers could get forward to bring out the wounded. That battle cost the Canadian army 400 men, half from the Essex Scottish.7

By 10 March the Rhineland battles were over. They had lasted a month and cost 15,634 soldiers, including 5,655 Canadians. German soldiers taken prisoner amounted to 22,000, about the same number that were killed or seriously wounded. On 26 March General Eisenhower wrote to General Harry Crerar, Commander of the First Canadian Army "to express to you my admiration for the way you conducted the attack by your Army beginning on February 8 and ending when the enemy had evacuated his last bridgehead at Wesel. Possibly no assault in this war has been conducted under more appalling conditions of terrain than that one."8

VE-Day

In the final six weeks of the war, the Allies moved across the plains of northern Germany, chasing the enemy down. The First Canadian Army did not advance towards Berlin. Its task was to clear northern Holland and the adjacent coastal area of Germany, while liberating western Holland. For Bill Walsh's regiment there was to be just one more intense battle, securing the city of Groningen. The Essex Scottish used Kangaroos to rush a bridge and penetrate the city's south edge. Machine guns covered the streets and snipers infested upper-storeys of buildings. When the Rileys barged into apartment buildings, they found themselves engaged in hand-to-hand
fighting. They soon discovered that most of the enemy that fought with such ferocity were Dutch SS units who must have decided that death in battle was a better fate than death at the hands of their countrymen. On 14 April, in the midst of this final battle, they heard that US president Franklin Delano Roosevelt was dead.

Once Groningen was secured, the Second Division was instructed to move onto Oldenberg, just into Northern Germany, 250 kilometres east. As they entered small towns, huge bands of men and women marched through the streets, arms linked, ten to fourteen abreast, singing their national anthem over and over. But for the soldiers these last days of the war were miserable; resistance was spotty and prisoners were taken in droves, but the enemy still had plenty of mortar rounds and the will to use them. It rained steadily and the men were soaked and tired but pushed to maintain the pressure to bring the war to an end. Casualties were not as heavy, but still more than 50 soldiers were killed on each of seven days through the month of April, and 114 between 5 May and 8 May, the last day of fighting in Europe.

Only six months earlier Hitler had been calculating that with the Soviet Union about to enter Eastern and Central Europe, the contradictions within the camp of the Allies would convince the Anglo-Americans to go for a separate peace. He told his generals in December 1944: “In all history there has never been a coalition composed of such heterogeneous partners as that of our enemies: ultra-capitalist states on the one side and ultra-Marxist on the other; on the one side a dying empire — Britain; on the other side a colony, the United States waiting to claim its inheritance. These are states which diverge daily... If we can deal a couple of heavy blows, this artificially constructed common front may collapse with a mighty thunderclap at any moment.”

This strategy may explain Hitler’s frantic effort to recapture Antwerp and Leige and with them huge Allied supply depots, including oil. But while his forces were inflicting large losses on the Allies in a losing cause, Soviet forces not only occupied Hungary, Austria, and most of Czechoslovakia, they were at the German frontier and 35 miles from Berlin by early February 1945. The two main industrial supply centres, the Ruhr and Silesia, were soon occupied as the Allied forces crossed the Rhine and met the Red Army at the Elbe. Hitler killed himself on 30 April 1945. A few days later, the German High Command surrendered.

On 6 May, in barns and sheds for miles around, thousands of men in stained battle dress participated in memorial services. Everyone was exhausted and emotionally drained. Two days later they gathered again to hear a broadcast from King George declaring VE-Day. Still there was no celebration, but rather a profound thankfulness that they had survived. “We
were near Oldenberg when the war ended," wrote one Canadian soldier, "It was a quiet affair. There were no cheers, just great relief." In early summer Bill Walsh's regiment was sent to Amersfoort in Holland to await repatriation. Since repatriation was organized on a point system that emphasized a first-in, first-out principle, giving priority to married men, Bill Walsh was among the last to be sent home.

Notes

3 Jeffery Williams, The Long Left Flank (Toronto 1988), 82.
5 Arthur Bishop, Canada's Glory, Battles that Forged a Nation (Toronto 1966), 293.
6 Bishop, Canada's Glory, 353.
7 Bishop, Canada's Glory, 320. Another account of this episode in the farmhouse shown on the map as "Kranenburshof" may be found in Blackburn, The Great Guns of Victory, 281-8.
10 Williams, The Guns of Victory, 299.