

The Liberation of the Netherlands: How the Dutch Still Honour Canadian Soldiers

[BERT ARCHER](#) | NOVEMBER 11TH, 2021



Canadian World War II veterans salute as they attend a memorial ceremony in honor of Canadian soldiers who died during the liberation of the Netherlands in 1945 at the Canadian War Cemetery in Holten, east Netherlands, Monday, May 4, 2015. (AP / Vincent Jannink)

Every year, the people of the Netherlands celebrate the 1945 liberation of their nation by Allied troops — mostly Canadians — from Nazi occupation. In remembrance of that monumental moment, we revisit journalist Bert Archer's 2019 journey to the Netherlands, in which he followed the footsteps of Canadian soldiers along the liberation route and experienced the gratitude the nation still holds for them generations later.

In a cemetery just outside the Dutch town of Holten, I heard a story about Leena Van Dam, the Dutch widow of a Finnish man who, when she noticed a Finnish name on a headstone there one winter, asked whether she could put a candle on it for Christmas Eve, as Finns do. It took some wrestling with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission apparently who, even

when they relented, insisted she would have to put a candle on every grave at her own expense.

Being Dutch, she did exactly that, beginning in 1991. Since then, it's become a tradition across the country, with middle-school students each being assigned a soldier, and placing their candle every Dec. 24, each one a torch thrown, held high. Some schools have the students research their soldier and write an essay about what they've learned. I've seen pictures of these cemeteries on the night they're lit. They're beautiful.



Each year, on Christmas Eve, the Canadian cemetery in Holten is lit with candles.

I was visiting Holten in advance of the anniversary of the liberation of the Netherlands and the end of the Second World War this year and next. There's a grave there, with Francis Welburn's name on it. The son of Winifred and Charles Welburn of Winnipegosis, Man. (population as of the last census: 647), Francis died on April 20, 1945, just eight days

before Mussolini, 10 days before Hitler and a little over three months before Hiroshima. He was 20.

The inscription reads: “Sleep on in peace, dear one, safe in the arms of Jesus, safe on his gentle breast,” but because this is the Holten Canadian War Cemetery and this is the Netherlands, there is staff, and there are stories, sourced and vetted, completely true, but stories nonetheless. The story about Francis is that, though his parents wanted to think of him in the arms of Jesus, he actually died in the arms of his friend, Digby Smith. The story continued that, though Digby survived those critical 18 days till VE-Day and married and lived a long life, when he died, in 1982, his wife found a note that said he wanted to be buried beside Francis. She had to fight — they’re pretty strict about who gets buried in cemeteries like these — but she won, and his ashes, at least some of them, are snuggled up beside Francis [..].

There are as many war stories in France, the U.K., Belgium, and Germany and Italy for that matter, but they are nowhere better preserved or more ardently told than in the Netherlands, along the route of the liberators. And these aren’t the only stories spread out beneath the well-kept lawns behind the Cross of Sacrifice. Two hundred of the 1,394 men and women buried here at Holten were killed after VE-Day, I’m told, and at least three of them whose headstones say they were 18 were as much as two years younger than that.

If you’ve been to the towns along the Somme or near Vimy Ridge, you may have seen Canadian flags in cafés and restaurants or seen an occasional smile broaden slightly more than you’d expected when you say you’re Canadian. It’s vicariously edifying, a species of gratitude you don’t often encounter.

But the Netherlands is a different thing entirely.