



Canadian troops arriving in Britain, ca 1940.

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PA - 64029

one month to capture Carpiquet airfield and Caen was not taken until July 10.

On August 16, the First Canadian Army succeeded in taking the strategic town of Falaise to the south of Caen, and a week later Paris was liberated. The Canadians were then given the task of clearing the coastal areas and opening the channel ports for vital supplies – a task they accomplished not without considerable sacrifice.

#### Eastwards to the Rhine

Antwerp represented a bigger challenge. Although this inland port was already occupied by the Allies, the approaches to it, including both banks of the River Scheldt and the South Beveland Isthmus, were controlled by the Germans. Canadian forces were heavily involved in freeing these approaches, and on November 28, 1944, the first Allied convoy was able to enter the port of Antwerp.

In February 1945, the Allies launched a great offensive designed to drive the Germans back over the Rhine. The First Canadian Army, strengthened by other Allied formations, was given the task of clearing the Reichswald Forest, breaking up the Siegfried Line, clearing the Hochwald Forest defences and closing up the Rhine.

Progress was not easy, as mud and flooded ground hampered the advance. The assault on the Hochwald Forest and Balberger Heights involved particularly fierce fighting. It took the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Infantry Divisions and the 4th Armoured Division from February 26 to March 4 to clear the enemy from both objectives. During this month of fighting, 5304 Canadians were killed, wounded or listed as missing.

#### Canadian Naval Operations

Meanwhile at sea, the Royal Canadian Navy was making heroic efforts to keep the supply lines open as its part of the Battle of the Atlantic. Canada had 500 ships and, after the Americans and the British, had the largest fleet on the Allied side. From special amphibious operations and assisting Russian convoys, to the war with Japan, the Royal Canadian Navy was always to be found at the scene of battle. Many officers and men of the RCN served in the Royal Navy, one a Lieutenant Gray, winning the Victoria Cross with the Fleet Air Arm in the Pacific.

#### The liberation of the Netherlands

In the final months of the war, Canadian forces played a key role in the liberation of the Netherlands. The 2nd Canadian Corps, assigned to clear the north-eastern Netherlands and the German coast, had advanced into Germany as far as the Weser by VE Day. Meanwhile the 1st Canadian Corps was brought in from Italy to concentrate on the Germans remaining in the western Netherlands north of Maas.

The liberation by the 1st Canadian Corps of the area north of the River Maas came just in time. This area contained the cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague, where food supplies were exhausted and the population had almost

reached the end of its endurance.

Arnhem was taken on April 14 and Apeldoorn occupied on April 17. On May 5, the German forces in the Netherlands surrendered. The formal German surrender was signed on May 7 at Reims, and the Second World War was over.

## Memorable words from a surgeon-poet

One of the Canadians who enlisted for the First World War made a significant contribution to the literature of that war. John McCrae, a much-respected teacher and doctor from Guelph, Ontario, tended hundreds of wounded soldiers every day during the second battle of Ypres, surrounded by the dead and dying.

'The general impression in my mind is of a nightmare. We have been in the most bitter of fights,' he wrote. 'For 17 days and 17 nights none of us has had our clothes off, or our boots even, except occasionally. In all that time while I was awake, gunfire and rifle fire never ceased for 60 seconds.'

One of McCrae's closest friends was killed in the fighting and buried in a makeshift grave with a simple wooden cross in a field where wild poppies were starting to bloom. The incident inspired him to write the following poem.

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie  
In Flanders fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields.*

John McCrae moved on to become Chief of Medical Services at No. 3 Canadian General Hospital in France. He died in January 1918 of pneumonia and meningitis, and was buried in Wimereux Cemetery with full military honours.

His poem was translated into many languages, and partly as a result of its popularity, the poppy was adopted as the symbol by which those who gave their lives in battle are remembered.

