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March retraces army's path

Belgians honor Canadian liberators

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KNOCKE, Belgium

So far from home, it was an improbable display — fluttering in the soft misty drizzle of a northern Belgian morning, suspended between barns, high above a narrow cobbled road, a bright Canadian flag.

And under the red and white arch of the flag, a line that stretched out of sight along the flat road, came an apparently endless straggling arm of very wet people.

Few Canadians may remember the battle, but the marchers were out yesterday to celebrate a battle regarded in these parts as a great Canadian victory.

The battle on Nov. 1, 1944, brought the end of the German occupation of Knokke, and the final

surrender of German troops two days later at Zeebrugge made Belgium the first European country to be liberated from the occupying armies.

Not many of those marching yesterday were old enough even to have been born when Knokke was liberated. Probably the parents of most of them had not been born.

But there were a few, such as Gerard Adriaenssens, who had been a young member of the Belgian resistance when the Canadian army fought its way down from the Netherlands in the last days of October, 1944.

His family farm lay along the route of the Canadian drive. His were the barns that supported the Maple Leaf flag yesterday high over the heads of the marchers as they approached the outskirts of Knokke.

Mr. Adriaenssens had two particularly striking memories that helped to inspire what has now become the annual Canadian Liberation March.

The first was the sight of a handful of Canadian troops late on the afternoon of Oct. 31, 1944. They had suddenly appeared on his father's farm, looking for Germans and fearful of minefields. He led them to the barn where German soldiers were hiding and then he guided them through the minefields.

"We were very happy. It was going to be all over. My father and I cried because we were very happy."

Then, years later, he made a visit to Manitoba and met a young man whose father had died in Europe during the war. The young man had

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JOHN GRAY/The Globe and Mail

Gerard Adriaenssens was member of Belgian resistance.

Belgians celebrate freedom

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grown up without a father and did not even know where his grave was.

"My friends who had been in the paratroops — I was in the paratroops later — we used to have a march regularly on my farm and then drink beer and so on to remember the war.

"But then I told them about this young man in Manitoba. His name was Scott. We decided we had to help young people understand the war and we wanted to do this with Canadians because they liberated our area."

Until then, the battle of Knokke lay buried for 30 years, with most of the other memories of a terrible war. It was only in 1974 that Mr. Adriaenssens decided that some memories should be resurrected.

So he and two other Resistance friends found 165 people who agreed that Nov. 1 — All Saints Day, a holiday in Belgium — should be celebrated with a march that retraced the path of the Canadian army.

The 165 who made the first march in 1974 grew over the years to include local hiking clubs, social groups and families. Even in yesterday's steady rain, 2,052 people and half a dozen dogs set out from Hoofdplaat across the Dutch border on the 33-kilometre hike to Knokke:

It was the route taken by the brigades of the Third Canadian Infantry division long ago, but this time the progress of the day was marked not by bullets but by the band of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry and by hundreds of Canadian flags whose design had not even been dreamed of when they fought the battle of Knokke.

There were about a thousand townspeople gathered at the war

memorial to watch Veterans Affairs Minister George Hees lay a wreath, and there were another thousand at the city hall where the day's festivities ended.

It was a day for nostalgia, and it was a good day to be a Canadian on the streets of Knokke.

Inside the ancient city hall, they cheered Mr. Hees for saying, "Thank you for just being what you are, for allowing us to be your friends."

And they cheered ambassador Max Yalden, who used to be Canada's official languages commissioner, for giving a speech in English, French and, most of all, Dutch.

But the greatest cheers of the day went to Mr. Adriaenssens, who had guided the Canadian soldiers through the minefields 43 years ago, and he told the notables at city hall yesterday of his memories:

"As they went to sleep at night, on the floor of the barn on some straw, in their battle dress, some took off their vests that were stiff from dirt and mud.

"They were not Rambo soldiers as one now imagines, but rather quiet, simple boys with a dull look in their eyes, who mourned their comrades who fell that day. They sat there quietly and knew that it might be their turn to offer their lives the next day, so that we here in Europe might live in freedom, friendship and peace.

"That is what we must tell the youth: the sacrifice these young Canadian soldiers freely gave for us; that is why we do this march — so that they will always be remembered."

Mr. Adriaenssens, who is now 63, also made the march from Hoofdplaat to Knokke.

Wandelen voor vrijheid in herdenkingsmars



Doedelzakken in het ochtendgloren tijdens de veertiende Canadese bevrijdingsmars

- FOTO DE STEM / COR J. DE BOER

Van onze correspondent

HOOFDPLAAT / KNOKKE - Naar schatting 2500 wandelaars, waarvan 2086 officieel ingeschreven, hebben gisteren de veertiende Canadese bevrijdingsmars tussen Hoofdplaat en Knokke gelopen, 150 meer dan vorig jaar.

Gistermorgen begonnen de wandelaars onder slechte weersomstandigheden aan de 33 kilometer lange tocht, waaraan werd deelgenomen door veteranen, sportverenigingen, jonge en oude wandelaars, maar ook Belgische, Amerikaanse en Canadese militairen en een NATO-detachement. De organisatie, in handen van de Heemkring Cnoc is Ier, Heemkundige kring West-Zeeuwsch-Vlaanderen en de WNZB uit Knokke, was opnieuw perfect.

Hoofdplaat pulde gistermorgen uit van de wandelaars. In lange slierten, in de tussentijd gezellig babbelen, bewoog het gezelschap zich door de polders.

Hiervoor had de heer A. Goossens, voorzitter van de Heemkundige Kring West-Zeeuwsch-Vlaanderen, wel de wandelaars als de Canadese militairen en oudstrijders welkom geheten. Met muziek van de Canadese Pipes and Drums Band.

Vrijheid

Terwijl de wandelaars aan de veertiende bevrijdingsmars begonnen, togen genodigden en oudstrijders naar het landingsmonument te Biervliet. Daar werden de gevallen herdacht en een krans gelegd door de Terneuzense burgemeester C. Ockeloen en de heer A. D'hondt, voorzitter van Cnoc is Ier. „We moeten voor onze vrijheid blijven vechten en deze inhoud geven. Het is hartverheffend, dat zoveel mensen, waaronder vele jonge mensen, zich bewust zijn van de vrijheid”, aldus de heer Ockeloen. Nadat The Last Post was geblazen en een moment stilte in acht genomen was. Daarna vertrok het gezelschap naar het Dorpshuis in Hoofdplaat, waar hen een ontvangst wachtte door de plaatselijke dorpsraad.

Herdenking

Rond het middaguur arriveerden de wandelaars in Oostburg, terwijl de genodigden en oudstrijders op het gemeentehuis werden ontvangen door loco-burgemeester J. Thomaes en wethouder J. de Vries. Nadat dit gezelschap een korte herdenkingsplechtigheid had gehouden nabij de Hackmanbrug in Retranchement, kwamen de wandelaars, genodigden en oudstrijders gisteravond samen in Knokke. Bij het monument der gevallen werd tenslotte een herden-

kingsplechtigheid gehouden en een krans gelegd.

Vanmorgen om 09.30 uur wordt in Knokke een rouwdienst gehouden, waarna de Canadese militairen en oudstrijders zullen deelnemen aan de dodenherdenking in het Belgische Adegem. „Door de regen hadden we iets meer uitvallers dan vorig jaar, maar we zijn tevreden, het is weer allemaal uitstekend verlopen”, aldus de marscommissaris Jozef van Bellegem gisteravond.