

**Pyke, Bertram**

**Private**

**Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders**

**B158941**



Our original family had a sad element in its story, as we had an uncle who fell in WWII who we had never had the chance to meet. Bertram Pyke was the brother of our Mom, Vera Baetz (nee Pyke), who was just a year older than her and was a great playmate and friend as they grew up on a farm near Dyers Bay on the Bruce Peninsula in the Province of Ontario.

He graduated from Grade 8, and went to work doing farming and cutting logs, and then he moved to the Niagara area where he worked as a labourer, a laboratory assistant, and as a machine operator in St. Catharines.

War broke out when he was a young man, but he had a hernia and was initially rejected by the Army. So off he went to Toronto for surgery, and soon after he was in an Army uniform. By all accounts, he looked tall and handsome in his uniform, and his trademark curls barely fit under his army beret. He was a Private in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders Regiment (Princess Louise's), which were stationed out of Hamilton, Ontario.

He trained in Simcoe and Ipperwash, Ontario. He said goodbye to his mother Rachel and sister Vera and brother Harold in Toronto (his other sisters, Lottie and Mary, were that much older and were already raising families of their own on The Bruce Peninsula). Bertram left Canada on October 4, 1944 and arrived in the UK one week later. He and his regiment landed in Northwest Europe on November 4, 1944.



*Private Bertram Pyke, taken on his last day in Toronto.*

Bertram was stationed near Waalwijk, a town in the southern Netherlands. Within a short time my grandmother and Mom received the telegram that a family dreads during war, sadly informing them that their son would not be returning home. Our Mom always said that they were told Bertram died on a bridge, and that he was buried in the Canadian War Cemetery at Groesbeek.

Throughout our early years we heard fond stories of a Dutch family who knew Bertram before he was killed, and who had kindly tended his grave in Groesbeek for the past near-seventy years. Leon Leijtens, his wife Saskia and their wonderful family are residents of Berg en Dal and have become very special friends. Leon's grandfather and grandmother owned a café in Waalwijk, and Bertram Pyke and Steve Hnatiw (a corporal in the same regiment, and a Ukrainian-Canadian hailing from Olha, Manitoba) would come by on a regular basis and have tea and get warmed up in an upstairs room of the café. Leon's father, Leo Leijtens, was an 18 year old young man at the time and he would serve the 25 and 28 year old Canadian servicemen their tea and practice his English with them. It was wartime, and the Canadians were there to help liberate Holland, so the young Dutch fellow became fast friends with the two Canadians.

For two months this went on, until Bertram fell on January 30, 1945 in the battle for Kapelsche Veer. It had been a brutally cold winter, and the Germans had established a small bridgehead on a no-mans-land on an island in the River Maas. The Canadian commander wanted to rout them out of there, so sent platoons of men in canoes to take out the bridgehead. They were dreadfully exposed as the Germans held the high ground and the land was flat on any angle of approach. Bertram was not killed on a bridge, but was taken instead while his regiment attempted to remove the German bridgehead on the island. January 30th, 1945 would have meant he was killed in the fourth wave of troops to attack the bridgehead.

The loss of Bertram hit Leo Leijtens very hard, and then three months later he learned that Steve Hnatiw had fallen on German soil (Steve would be repatriated and buried at the Canadian War Cemetery in Holten, NL). So now both of Leo's

Canadian friends were gone, and this was a significant loss to the young Dutch man. Sometime thereafter, his sister Adri thoughtfully wrote a letter to the mayor of Wiarton, Ontario, asking him to deliver the condolences of her family to the bereaved mother of Bertram Pyke. The mayor walked the letter up the hill to Rachel Pyke, and this set off a chain of correspondence that connected the families for decades. Leo and his wife Toos visited Canada twice to meet the Pykes, and Adri also came along for at least one of these trips.

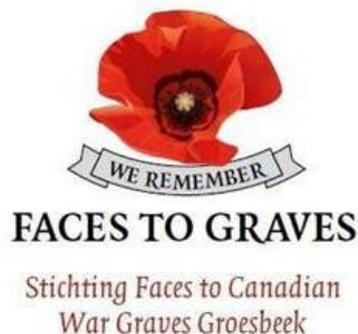
Bertram was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the France-Germany Star, and a Canadian Volunteer Service Medal. His military appraisal noted that he was a "quiet man who works hard", that he "played baseball and was interested in all sports", and that he played the violin. His post-war employment preference was listed as "truck driver", a vocation he sadly never was able to take up.

In the Netherlands today, one widely experiences friendly and open people living in well-planned and safe communities. Bertram and Steve and all the other Canadian troops helped to bring this about, and ultimately the liberation of Holland was the result of great sacrifice by Canadian, Polish and other forces. His life touched a Dutch family, and they have never forgotten Bertram. They continue to show this year in and year out, with three generations now having taken care of his grave at Groesbeek. And with their hearts and their kind actions, they have shown us that Love does indeed conquer all, and that we are all part of one large human family. And for that, we are eternally grateful.

May the Netherlands be free forever, and may our families continue to be connected across time and space...

Sincerely, Brian Baetz, Dundas ON, Canada and Dianne Cafik, Qualicum Beach, BC, Canada

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Biography made available for Faces To Graves, with courtesy of Brian W. Baetz, PhD, PEng, FCSCE, Professor Department of Civil Engineering, McMaster University.



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