From the President Alice van Bekkum

The last newsletter ended with the visit to Bergen-op-Zoom where the members of the board of the foundations for Groesbeek and Holten met. Today it’s my privilege to tell you that we have made huge progress with this umbrella group for the three Canadian War Cemeteries. Soon this nationwide platform will transform into a new foundation called CanadianWarGraves.NL and the board will be formed by two representatives from each committee of whom I shall be one. I can tell you that the virtual memorial to be developed by professionals will include all Canadian war graves in the Netherlands and fundraising will start soon. This meaningful project gets added value because several other sources of historical information will become available. You understand that requires thorough preparation and well-considered implementation. So much more than I could ever imagine when I spoke about my dream to give each grave a ‘face’ in Groesbeek?

I want to express my gratitude to all Canadians who have already provided us with information and photos of their relatives! We will carefully handle this information when composing a life story for the virtual monument. By telling their stories we’ll keep their memories alive. But I also want to tell you about the people behind this project, like the members of the board, researchers etc. who are all inspired and voluntarily give their time and knowledge to make this possible.

I have started by telling you the latest news first; now it is time to give you a bird’s-eye view through the highlights of the past period.

In April the conservator of the Liberation museum gave us permission to photograph the archives of ‘Het Nederlandsche Oorlogsgravencomite’ (Dutch War Graves Committee). Fred Hulsman, one of the volunteers in the Research Team and I spent a lot of time making pictures of the small cards with information about the adopted graves. Since Fred is a local man he recognized the names of some of the families who had adopted a grave and sometimes he was able to find relatives through that. Two members of the Research Team are working now on a file which will show this information. We only have permission to approach the people whose names and addresses are on the card, not to publish these records. When the file is finished we’ll work on that. Unfortunately the adoption program stopped when the Dutch War Graves Committee was no longer active. Often people ask us about adopting a grave, but this is not part of our project. Nowadays we have too many other responsibilities.
May 4th Carolyn Russell visited her Dad’s grave together with her children to show them the place where their granddad is buried. Rifleman Ossie Cameron of the Regina Rifle Regiment stayed at the house of the family Hendriks in Nijmegen only months before he was killed. Carolyn got the chance to meet Jan Hendriks, a son of this family. He still remembers that Ossie returned to the family just seven days before he was killed to tell them he had to leave to fight in the frontlines. They never saw him again…

Carolyn meets Jan Hendriks

After this special meeting the ceremony took place for the Dutch ‘Dodenherdenking’, Remembrance of all casualties of WWII, preceded by the traditional silent march from the town hall in Groesbeek.

A special commemoration took place at the Canadian War Cemetery in Groesbeek. The descendants of James Strang commemorated the anniversary of the day he died: June 2, 1942. Sergeant James Strang, of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, was killed together with two other crew members, Sergeant J.E.R. Lyons, Wireless Operator, Air Gunner, Royal Air Force and Sergeant W. Brookes, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. Their plane got a direct hit on the way to Essen and exploded. James left behind his widow and young son Malcolm, who had turned 5 just days before he was killed. He also left behind a legacy of family service in the Royal Air Force, with a member of every subsequent generation serving in the RAF; a tradition which continues to this day.

Strang’s granddaughter Michelle Howden, who lives in Goch, Germany planned a trip to Groesbeek on the occasion of this 75th anniversary. The short but impressive celebration at the Canadian Cemetery was led by RAF Padre, Reverend Ashley Mitchell.

Great-grandson Alistair, grandson Martin, granddaughter Michelle and son Malcolm

In June we received a letter from Jennifer Squires, daughter of Vivian Hamilton Graham who was a Lieutenant in the Canadian Scottish Regiment. He married Violet Morris in 1939.
Jennifer writes: “My sister never met our father Vivian, but I remember meeting him once when I was about 4½ years old. He had a great sense of humor and loved to have fun. He excelled in mathematics and sports I was told. When writing this and assembling the photos I realized that his memory has never been forgotten and the loss is still felt profoundly by my sister and I. Thank you for organizing this wonderful memory Vivian and Violet at gathering for the soldiers in Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery.”

Christening Jennifer
Vivian & Violet, June 1941

Nijmegen Four Days March 2017

It is a tradition on the third day, that the route follows the Zevenheuvelenweg on which the cemetery is also located. About 250 Canadian soldiers took part in this huge international event and they gathered at the cemetery for a Commemoration.

We were there with other members of the Royal Canadian Legion-Branch 005 who took care of the colour party.

Every year several regiments from different countries pay their tribute to the fallen.

Swiss regiment

Photo: Anne van Benthum
The day before the march I met Corporal Aaron Lauritzen serving with
the Calgary Highlanders at the Cemetery. Because I knew that a soldier of this
regiment would join the group, I brought a list of the names seventy-two Calgary
Highlanders buried here and the names of three of missing soldiers at the Memorial.

Aaron writes: “I think its wonderful work you’re doing there and I passed this list on to
my chain of command.” He also passed it on to Lindsay Moir of the Glenbow
Museum Library and she sent me photos and information about three of these
Calgary Highlanders. Thank you so much for that!

Adj. Francis Sévigny, CD of the 5th Service Battalion also took
part He writes:
“What you are doing is so meaningful and important. It is a
cornerstone action that put a lot of meaning into the phrase “we
will remember them”. I will do my best to put you in contact with
as many people as possible. I have already met somebody this
morning who has a few relatives in the cemetery. Faces to
Graves is an outstanding idea and everybody should do as much
effort as they can to make this work, one grave, one soldier at a
time. Please receive all my respect and gratitude for what you
are doing.” Francis, thank you for your supporting words and your
efforts in helping us to continue this work!

Research Team meetings

The board of Faces To Graves is very grateful to Richard Meeussen, owner of
hotel restaurant ‘t Zwaantje in Mook. He offered free accommodation for the
monthly meetings of the Research Team. In the meantime, we really feel at home in
this hospitable place.

Wish of a Lifetime

September 15th was a special day
for Harriet Jeneraux; she came to visit her
Dad’s grave for the first time in her life! “Wish
of a Lifetime” made her dream come true.

I (Alice) guided Harriet to the grave
of Sergeant Edison Alexander Smith of the
North Nova Scotia Highlanders and could
tell her about veteran Major David Dickson,
who passed away in 2014. Maj. Dickson always told us that his Sergeant saved his life
when he was seriously wounded in Bienen, Germany. On every pilgrimage he paid
his respects to Edison at his graveside and always liked to tell what happened. The
battle for Bienen was a heavy fight and David Dickson got hit badly and fell on the
top of a dike, in full sight of the enemy. Edison, who had brought other victims to
safety, now returned for his Major. But this time he was hit himself and fell on top of Dickson; this prevented the Major from being hit again and killed. Edison died as a hero but this does not relieve Harriet’s pain. She whispered: “If he would not have been such a hero, I might have known my Dad all my life…”

Thanks to some special members of Branch 005 we could surprise Harriet with a tribute at her Dad’s gravesite.

For lunch I took them all to the restaurant ‘t Zwaantje and Richard Meeuussen showed Harriet a regimental photo of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders made in London in 1941. After the war, several generations of the Meeussen family have been involved with the veterans of WWII. Richard’s Dad received this photo in 1986 after he hosted NNSH veterans free of charge for one week. Harriet immediately recognized her Dad! Isn’t this amazing?

Major Dickson took me and my husband Leen to Bienen in 2007 and showed us where it all happened. German historian Josef Becker had met Dickson before and together they started the initiative to place a plaque on the wall near the church to
remember the fallen. The North Nova Scotia Highlanders Regiment lost 39 men on that day. There is a Roll of Honour in the church on which their names are remembered.

Now we could bring Harriet to Bienen where Josef Becker showed her the place where her Dad lost his life.

Thank you Joyce Power, for your support and Steven Glaser, Program Manager for Wish of a Lifetime, thank you for the wonderful video footage you have sent us!

Find the video of this organization about Harriet’s wish here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BgXklD9BULA

Canadian newspaper article about this event: http://www.ngnews.ca/community/woman-visits-grave-of-father-she-never-met-157076/

Dutch newspapers also covered her journey, you will find them all on our website under ‘media’.

North Bay

In October I met Annemarie and Richard Rhindress, cousins of Saskia Peters, member of the Research Team. Annemarie lives near North Bay and has put us in touch with Teri-Lynn Janveau of the North Bay Public Library.

Teri-Lynn asked for photographs of the headstones of the seven soldiers from North Bay. With this she has set up a display,
in which she has placed an appeal to family members of these soldiers, with the request to contact Faces To Graves. What a beautiful action, because of this, these young men are also commemorated in the place where they never returned!

In early November, at the meeting of the CanadianWarGraves.NL platform, Henk Vincent of the foundation ICB Holten brought a DVD for us. There are photos of every single headstone on the DVD together with information they had gathered over the years about the soldiers buried in Groesbeek. Thank you very much for this contribution to our archives which we are working on to prepare the digital tribute for the fallen.

Research Team

November 8 - A new member of the board, Wim Poppenk, will help to organize the meetings of the Research Team volunteers. He will bring structure in the paperwork. We also decided to meet every six weeks instead of every four weeks; one meeting in every quarter will be held on a Saturday in order to give working volunteers the chance to come. At the next meeting in December we will welcome two new volunteers, who contacted us after a request in the local newspaper.

Remembrance Day – 11 November

There was a ceremony at the cemetery in Groesbeek organized by the Canadian military stationed in Germany.
Adriaan and Alice lay a wreath of Faces To Grave

After the service, I had the opportunity to introduce members of our Research Team to the Canadian ambassador in the Netherlands, Mrs. Sabine Nölke.

Apeldoorn

The day after that we joined the service at the National Canadian Monument in Apeldoorn. Students from the Koninklijke Scholengemeenschap Apeldoorn also took part in the ceremony.

Jelle Reitsma, advisor for Faces To Graves recited three life stories of young soldiers who lost their lives in the battle for freedom. One of them, Private William James Mennie of the Carleton & York Regiment is buried in Groesbeek.

Just before Remembrance Day an article was published by the Ottawa Citizen. The reporter Bruce Deachman reached out to us through our Canadian contact (friend) in Ottawa: Lorne Richardson.
Ottawa Citizen:  
http://www.ottawacitizen.com/dearly+loved+forgotten+dutch+volunteers+keep+canadian+soldiers+stories+from+being+forgotten/15634227/story.html

The first person to respond to the article was Vanessa Kirtz; she is a teacher at All Saints High School in Kanata and she was involved in the school trip which was made to the Netherlands in 2015 to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the liberation. As part of the trip, each student researched the life of a soldier who is buried at the Groesbeek cemetery. There are 38 names on the list and Vanessa will contact the students and ask them to send the results of their research.

Last but not least we would like to say thank you for the donations we have received; they will be well spent in helping to further this project!

We will remember them...

Photo Michelle Howden

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