From the president Alice van Bekkum

After the previous newsletter ended with the lovely token of recognition given to me for our project by the Canadian Defense Attaché Col. Timothy Young, there is even more good news. (Find all previous newsletters on our website under ‘media’.) We were pleased to receive €500 from the proceeds of the Red Maple Dinner; in addition we were given another €500 from the Ambassador Mrs Sabine Nölke and her husband as a personal gift. Many thanks for this wonderful gesture. We want to reserve a small part of this money to take our volunteers from the Research Team for a day out, more about that later.

I also met Richard Russell that evening at the embassy and he offered help with our project. I invited him to come to the meeting of the Research Team.

In November we had news from Anne Gafiuk; she wrote ‘I heard about your upcoming website through Typhoon pilot, Harry Hardy, DFC, now 96 years old, living in Burnaby, British Columbia. He suggested I help! I am working on www.thetyphoonproject.org and three pilots, buried in Groesbeek are on my website. Thank you, Harry and Anne for sharing these stories!

Just before Christmas, Ron Labrie sent us a nice biography with photos about Private Ernest Floyd Myer, who like Ron came from Ponoka, Alberta. Ernest died on the very first day of Operation Veritable, not far from Wyler, just over the German border.

We received another Christmas present from Kurt Johnson; he said he is working on the life stories of seven soldiers who came from places in the Ottawa Valley. Kurt lives in that area himself, and he has already sent photos of four of them. Kurt, thank you for sharing them with us! And after we placed a call on Facebook in early February, Kurt was able to put us in touch with the Chappell family we were looking for. Awesome!
Christmas Eve was again an impressive event.

Members of our research team also work for this organisation called 'Lichtjesavond' and they placed on their own initiative a photo of the soldiers, whose life story they have researched on their grave.

As the candles were being placed I saw a number of people standing by one grave and I asked them if they could tell me something about the soldier in that grave. Elsbeth Hoyer told me that she at last was seeing a photo of a soldier for which she had been searching thirty years! Donald MacKeracher was billeted with her grandparents in Kaatsheuvel; Elsbeth’s mother, Riet Laurijssen, then 20 years old, had told her that she and Donald had been in love. But alas he never returned, because he got killed in the heavy fighting near the Kapelsche Veer.

Riet never forgot her soldier and always spoke a lot about him; she married Elsbeth’s father only years later. Elsbeth and her husband have done their best over the years to find out more about Donald but her mother had thought he was Scottish, and they had not looked at the Canadian regiments. We were able to bring Elsbeth in contact with his family in Canada who were happily surprised by this story.

Elsbeth Hoyer
Report: Adrian van der Pol. ` On Saturday 2 February, the yearly commemoration of the Kapelsche Veer battle was organized by the Pheasant foundation, Waalwijk. It was led by the chairman, Ton Guezen. As usual it was wintry, cold and rainy, but mild in comparison with the bitterly cold weather conditions at the time of the Kapelsche Veer battle in 1945.

Several wreaths were laid: Foundation Pheasant, RCL 005, Polish Veteran organisation, Mrs Elsbeth Hoyer in remembrance of the soldier, Donald MacKeracher from the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders of Canada, who lodged at that time with her mother’s family and for always stood deeply engraved in her mother’s heart. He died 30 January, 1945, 22 years old. She never forgot him.

At the coffee after the commemoration, I met the son of the Polish soldier, Michael Salewicz, one of the Polish soldiers who came back after the end of the war to Breda, married a Breda girl and started a family with five children. See: https://youtu.be/hIcK0uliYSI Only years after the war could he go back to Poland, by which time his parents had died and he never saw them again’.

At the beginning of the year, we said goodbye to Christa and Peer Oppers who did editorial work for us; they found that with all the other things they had to care for, there was too little time left for our life stories. A pity, but understandable. Thank you for your efforts.

Jim Hoover, who wrote a biography of his uncle James Earl Hoover (also Jim), offered to support us. He approached the RCL Commands in the different states in Canada to ask them for help. He wrote: “For the realization of the Digital Monument of Faces To Graves we are dependent on volunteers and family members in Canada who can provide us with information and photos. We would appreciate your help in this matter very much and we need it to accomplish our goal.” We’d like to say thank you to Jim for his efforts as well as the Legions who spread the appeal. And of course for every single response we have received after that!

Report: Hennie Koster. ` On Friday, 19 February, 2019 Operation Veritable was remembered by the Foundation Groesbeek Airborne Friends. This was one of the fiercest battles of WWII. This Operation was the start of the Rhineland offensive whose aim was to drive the Germans to the other side of the Rhine and defeat them.

Just as seventy five years ago, it was a cold and wintry day; nevertheless there were many guests present, including Mayor Steins from the municipality of Kranenburg in Germany.
The commemoration took place at the grave of Flight Lieutenant Robert Cecil Smalley. Bert Eikelenboom told the life story of Robert Cecil Smalley, who together with the whole crew of the Lancaster MD 961, lost his life on 8 February, 1945 when it crashed near Best.

There was also a delegation from the Faces to Graves Foundation present, including: Saskia Peters, Franca Nielen, Fred Hulsman and Hennie Koster.

Various people present laid wreaths on the grave of F/O Robert Cecil Smalley and others. Fred (left) and Hennie (2nd from left) laid a wreath on behalf of the Faces To Graves Foundation.

Afterwards the Last Post sounded, followed by a minute’s silence and a reading by the chaplain Rudo Franken. The ceremony ended with the playing of different folk songs, after which everybody was invited by the Groesbeek Airborne Friends for a cup of coffee or tea at ‘De Oude Molen’ café in Groesbeek.’
Meanwhile Richard Russell at our Research Team meeting, suggested a master database should be set up; this would also have the advantage of making it possible for us to work together from various accounts via Dropbox. The task of putting all the information, stories and photos into an archive and coordinate it has fallen on my shoulders throughout the years; this has been partly caused by the fact that our board members live spread across the country and the burden became steadily heavier. Richard immediately put his finger on the sore spot; his idea to work together with Hennie Koster and be responsible for the data-management has really saved the day. Of course it does not happen on its own and it will take daily effort to keep it updated. Now at last we can make selections: e.g. how many photos do we have, how many life stories are there, have they all been edited, how many need translating, etc. etc.

Unfortunately Dropbox is not free and has to be paid for; now that the data has been entered and there is the opportunity to work together, the Foundation finds it difficult to finance. We are fully dependent on donations and our expenses such as wreaths, leaflets and website hosting makes inroads in our budget.

For this first year that we work with Dropbox, we received a generous donation of €750 from Concordia de Keizer BV, Rotterdam. With this we can make ends meet for the time being. Very many thanks!

We were asked to take part in an interview, about the Canadian War Cemetery by the local Radio Berg and Dal in the Programme ‘Toen en Now’ (Then and Now). Fred Hulsman, Michel Janssen and I were interviewed for an hour by Leo Zilessen, an experienced volunteer with this Organisation.

Fred Alice Michel

Just before the recording we met Marijke, Leo’s wife, and she told us that her parents had adopted the grave of Robert Nolet; she promised to send us his photo and now we have another face to a grave. The recording was sent out on 24 March and it can be heard on our website under ‘Media’. This broadcast is also listened to in Canada by former residents of Groesbeek.

In an article in De Brug, (the local paper) from September 2018, we asked schools to take part in our School Project. We had an enthusiastic response from Anita Aengevaeren, a teacher in the Canisius College in Nijmegen. The result is that two classes are helping with the writing of life stories of soldiers who are buried in the Canadian Military Cemetery in Groesbeek. Dick Akerboom keeps an
eye on the project and Sigrid Norde assists and has already spent several afternoons in the classroom helping the students. We will report on the results in the next newsletter.

There was an unexpected extra touch when we received news from teacher Jim Osler of the Springfield Collegiate Institute from Oakbank, Manitoba: 30 students would be visiting Groesbeek on 29 March. We brought the teacher in contact with Anita and this led to an invitation to lunch at the Canisius College on 29 March.

It was nice to see the first hesitant contact between the students from both schools, soon the question arose if the visitors would like to look around the school, followed by a tour led by the Canisius students. But the teachers also whispered something about exchanges between the two schools ...

The Canadian students had researched the stories of 17 soldiers from the Royal Winnipeg Rifles and read each one out by the appropriate grave at the cemetery.

For one of the students it became emotional, she could use some support
In March we received three biographies and photos in the mail from Vaughan Ashburn, one for Bergen-op-Zoom and two for Groesbeek; Vaughan is associated with the Albert Ashbourne Memorial, RCL branch 71 in Gagetown, NB. Many thanks.

When Sigrid Norde began researching the story of a soldier from the Calgary Highlanders she found that he had died during the liberation of Doetichem. His name was on a monument there and she wanted to know more about that and contacted Karel Berkhuysen from the Foundation ‘Doetichem Herdenkt’ (Doetichem Commemorates).

This produced a snowball effect; Sigrid has written a life story for all nine soldiers whose names appear on that monument. They were all killed during the
lerection of Doetichem, first buried there and later reburied at the Canadian War Cemetery in Groesbeek. You’ll find Alex Elchuk’s story on our website.

This also has helped the organisation in Doetichem to open an Information Centre which took place officially on 19 March with Sigrid as a special guest. The life stories of the nine soldiers are presented in the centre. Great job of Foundation ‘Doetichem Herdenkt’!

It was our day out with our volunteers in the Research Team on 6 April - a day full of new experiences. Cees Pot, a guide with the local WWII museum accompanied us along the places in Germany where many Canadian soldiers who are buried in Groesbeek, were killed. It means that we can now visualize some of the places mentioned in the biographies we have written.

The day began in the canteen of mini-camping De Hoge Hof, close to the Canadian War Cemetery, where we were welcomed with coffee and delicious apple pastry. Cees gave an introduction to our ‘battlefield tour’ by Power Point presentation; he then took us to ‘the Tree’ behind the farmhouse and let us hear a recording of the command given there for the start of Operation Veritable.

We then travelled to the cemetery in Wyler and later to Louisdorf and in each place we visited, Cees sketched a picture of the fight there seventy four years ago.

In Rees near the Rhine, lunch stood ready for us. After this, we met Josef Becker, a German historian who lives in Bienen; he took us to the dike where the North Nova Scotia Highlanders approached Bienen, where heavy fights
followed. We were very impressed when Josef told us how he, at that time, a curious young boy, went through the meadows to see what was going on.

Josef met Major David Dickson in the 1990’s and they went back to the places where many of his soldiers died. He and Josef became friends and when the Major expressed a wish for a memorial to this battle, Josef brought it into being. It is the first memorial in Germany where Canadian, British and German soldiers are remembered together.

The plaque hangs on an old wall by the church in Bienen. There also is a remembrance book in the church where the names of all the Canadian, British and German soldiers who were killed, are written.

Text tablet (unveiled on 19. November, 2000): This tablet has been placed by a group of surviving Canadian veterans of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders, 3 Canadian Infantry Division, in proud and grateful memory of those forty members of their regiment who fell in battle at Bienen, Germany on Sunday March 25, 1945 and in memory of those fellow combatants of 9th Canadian Infantry (Highland) Brigade and 51 British Highland Division who died in the same battle and in the same cause and, as well, in respectful memory of those adversaries in the German Army who died on that same fateful day.

Josef thank you very much for guiding us, but also many thanks for your donation to spoil the volunteers with cake!
From left to right Adriaan van der Pol, Cees Pot, half of Jaap van der Woude, Wim Poppenk, Alice van Bekkum, Hans Peters, Josef Becker, Fred Hulsman, Marian Straatman, Dick Akerboom, Kim Huvenaars, Richard Russell, Hennie Koster, Michel Janssen, Franca Nielen, Saskia Peters en Gwyn de Jong. (Members Research Team, board members and both guides.

We then went on to the Mooshof, the farmhouse where Aubrey Cosens (Victoria Cross) was killed.

And on the hill in Uedemerbruch we could see where one of the biggest tank battles in history took place - the battle of the Hochwald Gap was as fierce as those in Normandy but with three times as many victims.

After this impressive day we drove back to 'De Hoge Hof' in the Netherlands around 5 pm and then homewards.

Cees gives explanation and shows pictures.
We recently received lots of photos of soldiers from Donna Maxwell from Calgary and Wouter van Dijken, Netherlands. Thank you so much for your efforts!

Two members of our Research Team, Marianne Straatman and Saskia Peters are currently busy recording for a TV program that will not be broadcast before September. We are therefore not allowed to tell anything about it, but you will certainly hear more about it in the next newsletter.

Faces To Graves cooperates with Bergen op Zoom and Holten in Canadian War Graves Netherlands. The fundraising has started and we keep in mind: alone you may go faster, but together you will achieve more!

On 4 May, Dutch Remembrance Day despite icy cold weather, many people walked the silent march to the cemetery, where a nice commemoration followed. Fortunately, the dark clouds gathered and the rain drifted away.
Children from primary school "Op de Horst" from Groesbeek were actively involved in the commemoration; compliments for their very well prepared performance!

Together with volunteer Patrick van Es, veteran Airmobile Brigade, Alice van Bekkum laid the wreath for Faces To Graves.

Last news: we have received the go-ahead from the municipality Berg and Dal to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the liberation and prepare the event ‘Faces of Groesbeek’. Depending on permission from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, we plan to place a photo by all graves for which we have a photo of the soldier - at the moment we have nearly a thousand. The event will take place in the first two weeks of May, 2020. Please note this in your diary.

The SeW-fund has donated €1000 towards the financing of the event ‘Faces of Groesbeek’. Super, we are very happy with that!
We thank everyone who has sent information and/or photos and we especially thank family members and others who have sent us the life story of a brother, uncle or other relation. This all helps us to build our Digital Monument; we are working very hard to get this published. On our website you will find regularly changing stories that will give you an impression of the work going on behind the scenes. Often we get to hear what an enormous task it is; it’s like climbing a mountain, if you look up at it you come no further. But once you take the first steps, you want to go on.

As you will understand, we can only work on this project with the help of your donations and we want to thank all those who support us in this way.

Above all we want to thank you for your heartwarming words of appreciation that inspire us to go on with this enormous task: to give a ‘face’ to 2619 graves.

We thank Richard Meeussen of restaurant ‘t Zwaantje in Mook for his hospitality for the Research Team meetings. He offered free accommodation for the monthly meetings of the Research Team. In the meantime, we really feel at home in this hospitable place.

On behalf of all of us, we wish you a lovely summer and who knows, maybe we can greet you at one of the commemorations at the Military Cemetery, the dates of which are to be found on our website.

Like us on Facebook https://www.facebook.com/FacesToGraves