Sometimes, unexpected things happen in life: like the writing of this first newsletter of our Faces To Canadian War Graves Groesbeek Foundation. I couldn’t have imagined that two years ago!

Shortly before Nijmegen’s Four Days Marches of 2014, I, as a member of the Royal Canadian Legion, spoke to the president of Branch 005 Gerard Hendriks about my dream to give a ‘face’ to all those military men who lost their lives and are buried on the Canadian War Cemetery in Groesbeek. I myself already had much information and many pictures of a few of the soldiers; sometimes I had met their Canadian families or I had gotten in touch with them in a different way. Often, I would attend memorial services where veterans came to pay their respect to their fallen comrades. Now that time is running short and only a few of the veterans are still able to take the trip, it is my opinion that it is our duty to keep remembering their comrades!

Gerard Hendriks had a proposal: write your wish on a piece of paper and I’ll hand them out to all the Canadian soldiers taking part in the Four Days Marches. And that is how one piece of paper became the start of the project Faces To Graves. That particular piece of paper was an explanation about the idea to raise a digital monument and the request for people to contact me and send information and/or a picture.

After the memorial service at the cemetery, that traditionally takes place on the third day of the Four Days Marches, all participating RCL members were offered a refreshing beverage in the military camp Heumensoord in Nijmegen. There I discussed the subject some more. Right away people started to speculate about how to put the idea into practice. Jan van Loo, lawyer and co-founder of Branch 005, could not believe a similar initiative didn’t exist yet. He was very interested and we stayed in touch.
On November 8th 2014 after the Remembrance Day memorial service in Apeldoorn, Jan van Loo and I founded the working group Faces To Graves, witnesses by Gerard Hendriks. The second step was taken.

From left to right Gerard Hendriks – Alice van Bekkum – Jan van Loo

Adriaan van der Pol contacted me as a response to the flyer I left on the cemetery during the Four Days Marches. He asked me if we could use his help in any way. Since he used to work in the world of banking, you will probably understand why he is now the treasurer of our foundation.

We have taken many different steps, including an announcement of this project in the local newspapers. In these articles we asked for information about fallen veterans and we asked for volunteers. We got several serious responses.

In early 2015 we contacted Wiel Lenders, manager of the Liberation museum, who together with Cathy McKell, coordinator PR/Marketing, promised us their support and cooperation.

The close contact to the relatives of a fallen soldier from Saint John, N.B. resulted into a visit years ago. Our host arranged an interview of my visit by a reporter named Michael Staples in The Daily Gleaner at that time. I approached this reporter early 2015 and asked him if he would write about our project. Which he did on January 14 and he also published my attempt to find relatives for the Faces To Graves project on June 6, 2015. That quickly resulted in responses from family members and I also got an e-mail from Tom McLaughlan of the 8th Hussars Museum, who offered his support and referred to the “Lest We Forget”-project of the Belleisle Regional High School in Springfield. We raised fourteen complete life stories that we got permission to use for our database by Steve Wilson, the person behind the project. Students aged 11 and 12 years old are researching and documenting these life stories. They also make beautiful films about the soldiers.

In May 2015, the 70th anniversary of the Dutch Liberation was celebrated and because the Canadians contributed to that greatly many veterans and their families had come to our country. That was a great opportunity to find more relatives of the soldiers, so we made sure our brochures were to be found on the cemetery. We finished it just in time, with the help of designer Annemiek Melchers! You can find our pamphlets in the National Liberation Museum, tourist information Groesbeek and in the RCL clubhouse restaurant Mondani in Lochem, among others.
If you want to be reachable via the internet, you will have to put a website address on the brochure. Luckily, I found Frank van Duin prepared to design a website for us, based on the brochure. He did a great job and he also makes adjustments whenever we need. He does not intend to continue working on our website once the database/Roll of Honour is added to the website. He announced his lack of time, beforehand.

Frank van Duin is also active as a member of the Groesbeek Airborne Friend. In this picture he is during the commemoration of Operation Veritable, telling the story of a number of soldiers who died during this operation, they are buried right next to each other.

In Apeldoorn I met Donna Maxwell from Calgary. She has collected many pictures of fallen Canadian soldiers. She gave us permission to use them and that is amazing!

Meanwhile the foundation was officially founded; Foundation Faces To Canadian War Graves Groesbeek; we did also document the right to use the title Faces To Graves Foundation, because many people were already familiar with this title. Jan van Loo, lawyer, took care of the articles about the foundation we founded with the three of us. On May 27th the foundation was registered.
After the 70th Remembrance Day we took pictures of the information left at the graves, sadly we can hardly find the people who left that information or pictures because they did not add their address.

Private D.J.R. McClean van de Black Watch of Canada.

Pilot Officer J.W. Clarke R.C.A.F.

Adriaan van der Pol reads information left at the grave.
However, one message did come with a name. Veteran Jim Miklos left a message at his comrade’s grave. A little while later, I was able to get in touch with him, through the reporter of a newspaper article on the internet about veterans. Jim Miklos told a lot about his friend.

We also took pictures of the pages in the visitors’ book in which visitors can write a message. In some cases family members leave an address; we wrote them and that left us with up to 50% of responses that we are very content with. We are still doing our best to retrieve the people behind information and pictures.

In June I met Ken Holmes in Ottawa, Canada. Ken Holmes is a retired Lieutenant Colonel of the Canadian Engineers whom I have met several times before. He is very much experienced in military research and has free access to the Library and Archives of Canada, that are located in Ottawa. Ken thinks our project is a warm initiative. He supports us wherever possible and helps us to get information of all Canadian Engineers buried in Groesbeek.

In the Netherlands Jelle Reitsma, retired Brigade General of Cavalry from Apeldoorn helps us with his knowledge and actions. Especially when it comes to military explanations he is very helpful to us and we appreciate that greatly! We have met before at the memorial service for Remembrance Day at the National Canadian Liberation Monument in Apeldoorn where he told a story about several soldiers who were killed in Apeldoorn.
During the Four Days Marches in 2015, Faces To Graves got a spot in the beautiful promotional tent of the RCL – Branch 005. That way we could hand out our brochures in the parking place near the cemetery, thanks to Evelien and Eelco de Zee who had made a very nice spot for me in the tent.

Evelien and Alice.

On the occasion of Remembrance Day 2015 I got to lay a wreath at the cemetery in Groesbeek in name of our foundation for the first time.

10 November 2015 wreath laying at the cemetery in Groesbeek.

Near the end of November around the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Liberation of Bergen op Zoom, I wrote an article for the local newspaper about our project in Groesbeek in which I made an appeal to people who would like to start up a similar initiative for the cemetery in Bergen op Zoom. I got several responses, including one from the Citizen Committee “70th anniversary Liberation of Bergen op Zoom”. We spoke about that with a few members of that committee during a meeting in the Liberation Museum in Groesbeek. There really should be some kind of platform where similar initiatives could come together. Next to the three big Canadian War Cemeteries in Groesbeek, Holten and Bergen op Zoom, Canadian casualties are also spread out across civil cemeteries throughout the Netherlands. Often, there are people who look at these graves and want to know who the person in the grave is, just like us.
By now we have had a few meetings with board members of the Foundation Information Centre Canadian War Cemetery Holten. We spoke about the cooperation; they have had ten years of experience in filling in a database. This database is consultable in the Information Centre, a beautiful building right next to the parking place in front of the cemetery.

In the Netherlands and Canada we have contacted owners of websites on which you can find information about one or more soldiers who are buried in Groesbeek. All of them are willing to work with us; we get to use the information with source notification for our database. That is great!

We want to thank the volunteers who have signed up for our project very much for their preparedness to help. Some of them have already started the search for information and that is almost too good to be true. We intend to start a Research group on a location, where we can get together on a regular base.

We would also like to thank all relatives and others who sent us information and pictures. That gives us the opportunity to compose the life stories. Sadly, you are going to have to be patient, setting up a proper database takes a lot of time. Behind the scenes people are working on it as much as they can.

We would like to conclude this letter with an urgent request for you. Please send us information and pictures, support us with your contribution, or submit as a volunteer to do research for us. You’ll find all relevant information on our website. We can’t reach our goal without your help!!

www.facestograves.nl