

Stonewall Jackson

By Henk Dykman

“You may call me Stonewall Jackson”, the North Nova Scotia Highlanders veteran said. We had just been introduced to each other at a reunion of the regiment at the Amherst N. S. Armouries in August 1991. What followed was an animated conversation. Sergeant Russell Jackson, from Midland ON. did most of the talking. It did not take long to understand why Russell liked to compare himself to that well known General of the American Civil War. Actually, he might have climbed higher in rank if he had been more diplomatic in his army days. As a matter of fact, you will not find him mentioned very much, if at all, if you read the official documents of the final battles of the regiment in W W II. Yet he played a significant role in those, at least in the liberation of Zutphen. Indeed, he said that he and his platoon were the first Canadian liberators entering the territory of the City. No Canadian historian has mentioned that so why am I convinced that Russell was telling the truth? Because Russell’s descriptions of the terrain where he fought with its buildings and other features were quite correct. How do I know? I grew up in the area and I have made a study of Zutphen’s liberation. The North Novas liberated the village of Warnsveld, no more than a kilometer east of Zutphen, on April 5 1945. It’s sister regiments of the 9th or Highlanders Brigade, the Glens (Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders) and the H L I (Highlanders Light Infantry Regiment) began their attack on the southern outskirts of Zutphen early in the morning on April 4.



The North Nova Scotia Highlanders near Buitenzorg on the Vordenseweg. With his back to the camera Russell “Stonewall” Jackson, third from left John Croft who got wounded the next day near “t Velde” in Warnsveld

The North Novas moved in on the right flank of the front that afternoon. My home was south-east of Warnsveld in the teaherage of a rural school near the hamlet of Leesten and we were liberated by the Glens early in the afternoon of April 4. But the Glens did not advance any further north that day

and so the North Novas were the ones who, moving in the direction of the village of Warnsveld, liberated the psychiatric hospital just north of the school, after nightfall.

At the cemetery

"I served with A Company and my platoon came to a (Warnsveld) cemetery at dusk", Russell said. "We saw a small building. One of the men moved cautiously up to it and peeked through a window, as we covered him. "They're all asleep, Serge". "In a cemetery? That's strange. Kick in the door!" We looked inside. "They're all dead ,Serge." Bodies, covered with sheets, all in a row. "Pull of those sheets, guys". "Oh, come on now, Serge". "I said, pull them off!!!" "Guess what! A couple of very much alive young Germans were found among the dead! The fighting among the gravestones was tough. I had more than twenty men with me. But when the enemy gave up finally and fled and the place was ours, only half of my men could carry on fighting! We took our prisoners with us as we went back to the mortuary and searched them there. Then I made a big mistake. I dropped something that ended up behind me so I turned around and bent over to pick it up. Immediately I felt a sharp pain in one of my buttocks. I turned around, took my rifle by the barrel and swung. The youngster with the knife still in his hand died instantly. The others did not move. And so my battle was over for that day," Russell said.

In 2015 I attended the remembrance ceremonies at the Canadian Military Cemetery at Holten, Netherlands on May 4 starting a 11:00 a.m. in the morning. The Dutch keep two minutes of silence for all war dead at 8:00 p.m. the evening of the 4th. All over the country. In Holten we did that also that morning. A surprising number of Canadian WW II veterans, nearly all in their nineties, were still in attendance. So was princess Margriet, the daughter of the later Queen Juliana who was born in an Ottawa hospital in 1943 and the darling of these Canadian veterans. And so was Prime Minister Harper. A Dutch gentleman by the name of Gert Jan Oplaat from nearby Markelo spoke to the youth at Holten, Canadian and Dutch, present at the ceremonies. He told them a story. To my great surprise, it featured Sergeant Russell Jackson of the North Novas. And Mr. Oplaat mentioned Russell's actions at Warnsveld! I found out later that he was Russell's host whenever Jackson visited Holland and the two men became great friends. Mr. Oplaat visited Russell in Midland as well. It was not surprising that he had a rather moving story to tell to the young people at the cemetery. " Russell was involved in a battle near het Jachthuis at Warnsveld when he and his men were attacked by a troop of German S S youngsters who were obviously drunk and irresponsible. They were soon all killed. That was not surprising, yet Russell said it still bothered him that these guys, so young , died so needlessly. As a matter of fact, Russell shed tears when he told the story and said it still bothered him. Yes, it was hard for the Canadians to fight those children, 16 or 17 years old!" Well, that last remark was obviously true, but the story still puzzled me. The details of what happened made me wonder. Het Jachthuis (which means the Hunting Lodge) belonged in the old days to nearby castle Het Velde. It was less than one kilometer north-west from the hospital. As we have seen, Russell was wounded at the cemetery so he did not get to het Jachthuis. And the fighting there ended only after dawn on April 5, with the help of three British crocodiles, big flamethrowers. Also, it was B Company that liberated that place, while Russell was in A Coy. Why would Russell be so emotional after the battle on the Warnsveld cemetery? I can think of a very good other reason: In the woods not far from the cemetery stood a large building. It was part of the psychiatric hospital and it was the home of a group of patients and staff that had been evacuated from the west of the Netherlands in 1943. The head psychiatrist in charge kept a diary and recorded many dreadful things that happened there during the winter and spring of 1945. And this tragedy unfolded when the enemy fled from the nearby cemetery in the late evening of April 4: Some male patients who peeked through the barricaded windows of the building saw the retreating Germans running past. They noticed that the gunfire had ended. They decided it was a great time to meet the liberators. Jumping and shouting they left the building and ran toward the cemetery. They probably looked like a bunch of drunks, especially in the dark. It was logical for the Canadians to suspect a counterattack. Who was in charge of those Canadians, who ordered his men to fire? No doubt, it was Russell. Three patients were killed instantly. The head psychiatrist, upon hearing the renewed gunfire, took a large white flag and came

to the North Novas with a male nurse, who had a lantern. He was too late to save those three patients. It is not surprising that this incident might have bothered Russell for the rest of his life. In Amherst, Jackson continued with his story: “

First Canadian in Zutphen

In the morning of April 6 A Company was located at the west side of Warnsveld, facing Zutphen. A jeep and a truck drove by. Nobody had stopped them, because it was dangerous to be on the street due to sniper fire from the city cemetery. When the jeep approached a bridge halfway between Zutphen and Warnsveld the enemy opened up. The jeep was hit and the British officer inside died. The road was on a dike and the driver took cover behind it and so did the men of the truck. They managed to get back to Warnsveld along the foot of the dike. I had rejoined the company. Our Captain having gone to a meeting at division headquarters, a lieutenant called upon us for volunteers to try and get the truck back. “It’s from the Salvation Army” he said” and it’s full of chocolate.” “It’s easy, lieutenant, if you first take the cemetery” I said. (Me and my big mouth!) “Well Jackson, go ahead with your platoon and do that” the lieutenant said. And so, we got going again.” “How did you manage it Russell? That road was so well covered!” “Well, we went through the pastures north of the road, not far from a little river. We used our regular methods. Two men would run forward a number of yards and drop, covered by the rest of us. Two others would run past them and drop. And so on. That way we came to a fair size moat around the cemetery and waded through that! The cold water came up to our armpits and we had to hold our equipment over our heads. Then we climbed up the bank on the other side and attacked. The enemy was completely surprised and none of us were killed. After the cemetery was taken we used our walkie-talkie to let our headquarters know we were okay. “They’r e in”, I heard them say. “They’re in Zutphen”, is what they meant. And guess what I did next?” “Looked for dry clothes, Russell?” “Nope. I sat down on a gravestone and wrote a letter to my mother. On toilet paper! My mum has never understood why I did that. We were still bothered by small arms fire from a little bunker near the road so we asked the company for snipers. None were available, so we had to do our own. When a white flag appeared we found half of the enemies inside dead.” The question that came to me as I listened to Russell was how it could be so easy to surprise the enemy in the cemetery. But I saw later that spring some heavily damaged gravestones and other effects of shelling and I am sure the mortar platoon of the North Novas Support Company helped Russell and his men to get the enemies to keep their heads down. “We went to the houses across the street and after getting spoiled by the locals we moved up the road further westward into Zutphen, as far as a police station”, Russell said. “You must have gotten a lot of praise for all this?” “Are you kidding, Henk? At Third Division headquarters it was announced that the 8th Brigade, which attacked the city a few hours later just north of us, would have the honour of being the Zutphen liberators. We had no business being inside the City at all. I was told to get back to Warnsveld right away. But I told my superiors I had not risked my life for nothing and I would not go until I was relieved. That did not happen till the next day, April 7, when B company of the Glens arrived. And their captain , George Cain, was shot on the street a bit further west from where we were. I had warned the Glens to be very careful.” 9 Was there then no indication at all in the documents of the North Novas about Russell’s exploits that morning of April 6? There is nothing in Will Bird’s book “No Retreating Footsteps”, the official account of the regiment’s experiences. Nor did I see anything in the official War Diaries of the regiment. Russell was, of course, guilty of insubordination. Still, it was quite an achievement! Well, with the N S H war diaries the Ottawa Archives mailed me a set of very fine sketches of North Nova front line situations of April 4, 5, 6 and 7. The April 6 one shows a line of little arrows between the Berkel river and the main highway, from Warnsveld to the Zutphen cemetery. “Stonewall’s” way!!!!

ZUTPHEN

A Coy
ACTIVE SNIPING
BY THE ENEMY



A Coy

D Coy

WARNSVELD

C Coy

B Coy

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