

Canada's Role in the Liberation of the Netherlands

Liberation Day is celebrated every year in the Netherlands on May 8th to remember the day that Nazi occupation in the Netherlands was ended. Canada played a large role in the Liberation of the Netherlands and Canada's contributions in this desperate attempt to end the war are remembered to this day.

After D-Day it took 3 months for the Allies to push into German occupied territory and reach the border of the Netherlands. The Allies started their plan to liberate the Netherlands with Operation Market Garden. While this operation managed to capture some towns and bridges as planned, it unfortunately failed in its overall goal. The Allies needed a constant flow of supplies, but to do this they would need to control the German occupied Scheldt River so that supplies could reach the Allied city of Antwerp. The First Canadian Army was sent to capture this area.

The Battle of the Scheldt lasted from October 2nd till November 8th in 1944. The First Canadian Army had Canadian, British, and Polish units in it and they worked together to end World War II. Due to the flooded land, the campaign was challenging. The small dikes the Allies used as transport lanes made easy targets for German machine gunners. Tanks and small boats were used during the battle, and the Canadians slowly managed to gain ground. Since much of the Canadian division had been fighting almost continuously since June when they had landed on D-Day, they were exhausted. Over 6,000 Canadians were killed, wounded, or taken prisoner by the time the battle ended. After many losses, the First Canadian Army managed to successfully reach its target. Then the area had to be cleared of mines, and by late November a convoy of ships from the Allies reached Antwerp. By the time the Battle of the Scheldt had ended the Allies realized that World War II would not be finished before the new year and the troops prepared for winter. This winter was called "Hungry Winter" as the troops mostly held their positions and made plans for the next major attack on Germany. Sadly, many Dutch within the Netherlands died because the Allies had not yet managed to completely free Holland from Nazi occupation. Since the Netherlands were one of the first locations the Germans captured, the Dutch within the country had been living under Nazi rule for the last four years.

The fighting started again in February with the Allies pushing hard in the Battle of the Rhineland. The First Canadian Army had the task of taking the area between the Maas River and the Rhine River to gain tactical ground. After almost a month of fighting, the First Canadian Army was reinforced by the 1st Canadian Corps and other Allied armies. Together the two Canadian armies had a force of 450,000, and became the largest Canadian army with a Canadian officer. Their general was General Harry Crerar. As Canadian, British, and other Allied armies worked to take the Siegfried Line, the Nazis continued to fight back steadily despite the Allies' gains. Finally, the Allies managed to capture the Rhine River and the Battle of the Rhineland ended on March 27th, 1945. Now Germany had lost one of their last defensive positions and victory was close at hand. In total there were 23,000 Allied casualties, of which about 5,300 were Canadians. However, now the Allies held the Rhine River from Strasbourg, France to Nijmegen, Holland. As April wore on the First Canadian Army pushed the Germans out of the northeastern portions of the Netherlands. The Canadian army always brought good news to the Dutch people as they brought with them food, fuel, and freedom. They were sometimes aided by Dutch resistance fighters. The Allies tried to avoid heavily bombing the cities in the Netherlands because they wanted the Dutch people to not have to completely rebuild. On May 5th, 1945 the remaining Germans in the Netherlands surrendered and all the Dutch people were finally liberated.

Many consider the Liberation of the Netherlands some of the worst battles of World War II. More than 7,600 Canadians died fighting in the Netherlands, and more Allies lost their lives. The Netherlands had the highest per capita death rate of the Nazi-occupied countries in western Europe and over 200,000 people died from war related causes before the country could be liberated. The Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery is the graveyard of about 2,300 Canadians, and the Dutch people remember the Canadians who died in the Netherlands in many ways.