

MY FATHER ... THE SOLDIER



Introduction

Carvil James Ritcey of Halifax Nova Scotia was my father. I loved, admired and respected him for the way he and Mom raised me and my brothers and sisters providing us with a good education, a set of guiding values and a solid work ethic. It was not however, until quite late in his life that I came to know and admire him as a soldier. He never for once thought he was a hero or that he had done anything extraordinary during the war; however, I came to appreciate the huge sacrifices that he and so many other young Canadians made on behalf of his country.

Hopefully in writing this account of his military service, you too will come to know and appreciate how well he served his country. At the outset, I'd like to acknowledge the wonderful work my sister Colleen O'Brien has done to document Dad's wartime memories. She was especially instrumental in having his personal story recorded and available on the Internet as part of the Memory Project.

www.thememoryproject.com/digital-archive/search-results.cfm

Family Background

The Ritcey family trace their origins back to Johann Phillip Henrici of Dierdorf, Germany who immigrated to Nova Scotia in 1750 on the ship "Ann". After working off his passage in service to Governor Cornwallis in Halifax, Johann was awarded his settlement package in Lunenburg County in 1754, where he founded and settled the town of Riverport. The family name was changed to Ritcey shortly after and they prospered in fishing, ship building and other ventures for the many generations that followed.



Memorial to John Philip Ritcey who founded Riverport Nova Scotia 1754



Captain Eli & Rosena Ritcey
married December 12, 1892



Melvin Josiah & Estella Annette Ritcey
married June 5 1912

Dad was born on October 4, 1915, the second oldest of seven children, born to Melvin and Estella Ritcey of Halifax. Dad's younger sister, Mona Blanche died at age ten. His mother Estella died due to complications giving birth to his sister Stella Mona on October 9, 1930 and his father Melvin died less than four months later when Dad was only fifteen. The family grocery business in Halifax was sold and the six orphan children were raised by Uncle Howard Wilbert and Aunt Blanche Ritcey.

The oldest son Gerald went to work at age 17 to help support the family and Dad did the same two years later after completing high school. In school, Dad's greatest passion was playing sports especially hockey and soccer. Dad worked initially as a packer and then as a shipper with Morse's Tea on Water Street in Halifax for several years. That is where he met and fell in love with his future bride, Lillian Cecelia Twohig. However, on September 3, 1939, England declared war on Germany and Canada followed suit on Sept 10th and all their plans were put on hold. The very next day Dad enlisted in the army at the ripe old age of 23.



**Private Carvil J Ritcey, Royal Canadian Regiment "A" Company
Parade Grounds of Wellington Barracks - Halifax 1939**

Enlistment

The Royal Canadian Regiment was mobilized on September 1, 1939 and ordered to recruit to war establishment strength. The RCR's were dispersed in four different garrisons at the outbreak of war and Wellington Barracks, Halifax was home to "A" Company. As Canada's most senior infantry regiment, the RCR's would take pride of place in the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade and proudly wear the "Old Red Patch" from WW 1 on their Battle Dress tunics. They came to be known as the "pukkas" an Anglo-Indian term current in the British Army at that time which meant "genuine, permanent, or solidly built".

On September 11, 1939, Dad was 23 years old when he enlisted with the Royal Canadian Regiment in Halifax. He was part of the "A" company and assigned Canadian Active Service Force Number A 4032. After their initial medical check-ups and orientation, the new recruits were sent to Valcartier, Quebec to complete their basic training. On December 17th, following six weeks of basic training, they

returned to Halifax, which was to be their embarkation point. On the train ride back to Halifax, their unit suffered their first casualty when their train crashed into another one on the same track. The collision caused a steam pipe under one car to break and it impaled one of the soldiers through his chest as he sat in his seat.

Going Overseas

On December 21, 1939, the RCR's under the command of General A.G. McNaughton, sailed for England on the "**ALMANZORA**", a Royal Mail Packet ship that had served in WW 1. Dad recalled that there were so many men seasick below decks that he couldn't stand the smell and remained topside on watch. One night the anchor came loose and banged into the hull, frightening the soldiers into thinking they had been hit by a torpedo. The threat of U boats led to extreme caution in the route across the North Atlantic, which took twelve days. They landed at the port city of Greenock on the Firth of Clyde Scotland on December 30, 1939 and subsequently were quartered in the Barroso Barracks at the Aldershot Army base in Hampshire England.

Almanzora



**Built in 1915 by Harland & Wolff, Belfast. Tonnage: 16,034 gross Capacity: 1,400
1940-45 served as troopship then an emigrant ship until scrapped in 1947**

From

Life in England

The Regiments' arrival at Aldershot marked the beginning of an unexpectedly lengthy and frustrating sojourn in the United Kingdom. In the winter of 1939-1940, England experienced one of the coldest periods they had seen since 1884. It was so cold, the Serpentine River, which flows through Hyde Park near Kensington Gardens in London froze over and people skated on it, which had never happened as far back as people could remember. Unfortunately, 90% of the troops ended up with influenza and

pneumonia. On May 10, 1940 the German Army invaded France and the Low Countries. The Phony War was over and the crack German Panzer Divisions advanced westward with lightning speed.



Pvt. Carvil Ritcey Aldershot Army Base England 1940

Barroso Barracks was located near Hyde Park and this is where Dad's early training was done. On one occasion he was scheduled to go on leave. However, he unfortunately had lost his shirt in a poker game and had no surplus funds. To earn enough money for leave, he offered to "blank out" (camouflage) uniforms. He laid out seven complete outfits on the parade square and proceeded to "blank" them out. He earned enough cash to get him on the train down to Canada House and from there he made the trip to Scotland by bus.

On that trip he met Sir Walter Scott's great- great- great granddaughter, Dame Jean Maxwell-Scott, who was about 17 at the time. The last of his direct descendants to inhabit Abbotsford Castle, Dame Jean served as VON nurse and later became a lady-in-waiting to Princess Alice, Duchess of Gloucester.



Dame Jean Maxwell-Scott June 8, 1923 - May 5, 2004

After visiting Sir Walter Scott's Abbotsford Castle, Dad had his picture taken in front of a statue to Rob Roy. While he didn't have any money on leave, Dad recalled that everyone looked after him, feeding and treating him royally.

Across the Channel: the 1st Time

The RCR's were originally earmarked to be reinforcements for the 1st British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.) troops already deployed in France. However German troops invaded France and the Low Countries on May 10, 1940. Hitler's Panzer Divisions advanced with lightning speed and began to push the French forces and 1st BEF into a retreat mode back towards Dunkirk. A massive seaborne evacuation of 338,000 troops was successful in averting a catastrophe but a huge amount of equipment was lost. The Battle of Dunkirk lasted from May 23 to June 14, 1940 but the massive impact of it would be felt for years.

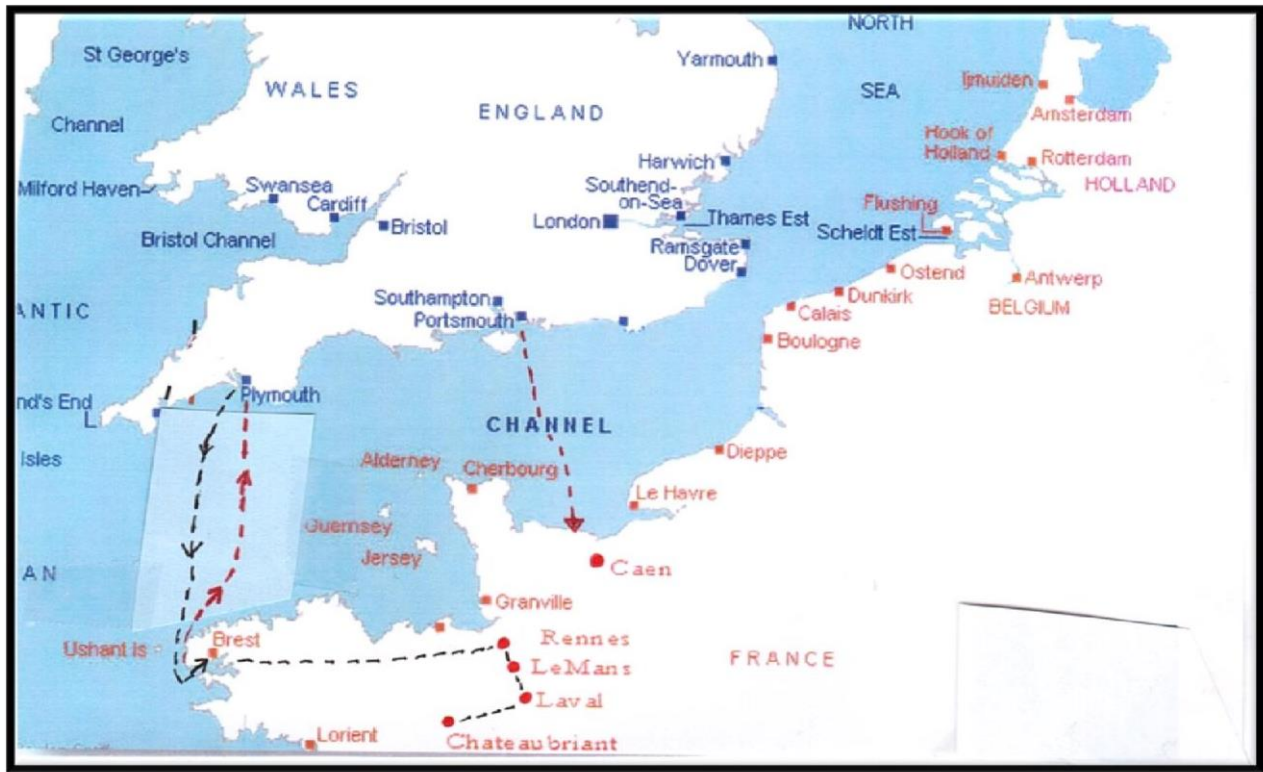
As the French armies collapsed and the road to Paris lay open, a new plan was hatched to launch a 2nd British Expeditionary Force into France through Brittany. This included the 1st Canadian Infantry

Division together with the British 3rd and 52nd Lowlands Divisions. On June 13, 1940, the 48th Highlanders and the RCR's embarked on the El Mansour at Plymouth England and sailed for Brest. Built in 1932 and weighing 5,818 tons, the El Mansour was an ancient tub that was accustomed in peace time to plying the waters between Algiers and Marseilles



They crossed the English Channel and disembarked at Brest, France early on June 14th. They were hastily loaded into WW 1 boxcars, each labelled with the signs "40 men or 8 horses ", and transported 200 miles inland and eastward to bolster the B.E.F. efforts. Their trains passed through the towns of Rennes and Le Mans towards Laval. After Laval, they headed southwest towards Chateaubriand when word reached them that the railway yards ahead were being bombed by the Luftwaffe.

With the German 5th Column threatening to cut them off, the train headed back to Laval and arrived late on the night of June 15th. More boxcars bearing British and French troops were added and the train was ordered to return to Brest. Somewhere between Rennes and the coast the train came to a stop and the entire French train crew vanished. Dad recalled that his friend Percy Hunt, a former fireman with Canadian National Railways in Canada volunteered and drove it swiftly back to rail yards in the Port of Brest.



Map of English Channel and Coast of France

The RCR's along with the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment boarded the SS Canterbury and crossed back over to Plymouth on June 16, 1940. It's a good thing because on June 17, the Luftwaffe hit an ammunition train in Rennes, which was sitting next to other trains evacuating French and British troops and 1,000 men were killed.



SS Canterbury

After their return to English soil, Dad's RCR's were transported up to Southampton & Dover to help with unloading the wounded and re-organization of home defenses. One of the rescued soldiers from Dunkirk gave Dad his East Surrey regimental cap badge as a thank you and I still have this as a memento. The Canadian Division at that point became part of the British 7th Corps responsible for confronting the expected German invasion along the south coast of England including Sussex and Kent.

The RCR Regiment was then assigned the task of protecting various airfields while the Battle of Britain raged on and the buildup for the eventual invasion of Europe started to get underway. When war was declared, Croydon Airport, outside of London was closed to civil aviation and played a vital role as a fighter station. Croydon Airfield was attacked in the first major air raid over the London region and the strategic bombing of London continued for 54 consecutive days.



Val Boucher and Dad at Croydon Airfield England in 1940

Dad recalled that the first mass air raid on England was on September 7, 1940 and the second biggest air raid took place on March 9, 1941. During both of these air raids, Dad was in London on leave and when he was asked to take cover down in the subway he answered "No way. If I'm going to get it, it's got to be above ground!" The latter raid was the worst one since January 1941 with five high explosive bombs falling near Buckingham Palace. Coventry was also very badly damaged in a separate aerial bombing raid.



German Dornier bomber shot down in Dover March 17, 1941

The above photo was taken March 17, 1941 and shows the wreck of a German Dornier 117 bomber that the Royal Artillery on the Dover Coast brought down. Dad's company had been wiring in the Dover area at the time and he took some photos to send home to his sister Stella and Uncle Wilbert in Halifax.

1941: Training Continues

During the summer of 1941, Dad's infantry training continued, offset somewhat by guard duty at the airfields. Occasionally Dad's company would be sent on maneuvers in various locations around the country. One of these was the seaside resort town of Bognor Regis in West Sussex about 90 kms south of London. This resort area had been a questionable favorite of King George V.



'A' Company RCR's marching at Bognor Regis, a town on the south coast of England 1941.

That summer, one of mum's brothers, Art Twohig, was serving on a Royal Canadian Navy corvette. He landed in Liverpool and went by train to the south of England in search of Dad. He hitched a ride on an army truck and arrived at Heathfield, East Sussex. Rations were quite scarce at that time due to the German submarines destroying ships carrying food and supplies to England. Dad said it was just like Christmas when Art arrived, bringing with him a full kit bag of chocolate bars, chewing gum and cigarettes. After staying with Dad in the tents, rain and mud, Art expressed the view that he wouldn't want to be in the army and he was looking forward to getting back to his ship.

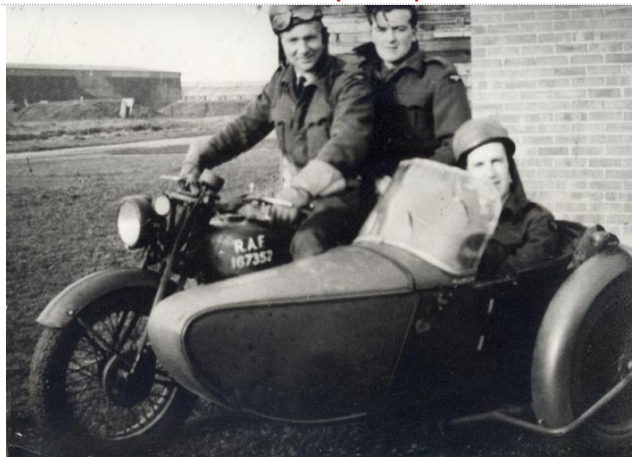
1942: More Training

Dad was a dispatch rider in August 19, 1942 when the following photo was taken and as he noted on the back of it "he was probably in the best shape of his life. He was in H.Q. as a Mortar Platoon Recce and enjoying it". As a dispatch rider, Dad told us several entertaining stories about being AWOL and returning to base with several buddies hanging on dearly for the late-night ride back to base.



RCR Dispatch Rider August 19, 1942

1942 Norton 16H Military Dispatch Rider Outfit



Thanks to Will Millar of BC, Canada for this picture of his father circa 1942 and to Rich Payne for confirming the bike is a Norton 16H fitted with a 4.00 x 18 front tire rather than the 19". The wider tires would have made sense of course. Engine: 500cc Side valve.

1943: Even More Training

In early May 1943, Dad was involved in the major military exercise called “Tiger scheme” which was primarily designed to get the Allied forces prepared for the invasion of Europe. The exercise involved combined forces operation of 100,000 troops. Troops participating in “Tiger scheme” noted that it was particularly grueling for the infantry involved, who marched over 140 miles during the course of the exercises. Dad indicated these exercises resulted in many casualties and loss of life due to instances of carelessness and friendly fire. One example he gave was of men crossing rivers on wire lines and having bullets striking the water and then ricocheting up and killing them. In another example, during a heavy rainstorm, one group of six soldiers took shelter under a tank. In the wet weather the ground softened and the tank sank into the soil, crushing all six men to death.

During the “Tiger” exercise Dad was involved in a motor vehicle accident. He was driving his Norton motorcycle and a fifteen hundred weight truck drove him into a ravine and he was injured. He ended up in hospital in Gourrock, Scotland for four months with leg injuries and was classed as Section 4, Medical Injury. During his convalescence, a Scottish couple with the last name Valentine were particularly kind to Dad and they visited us in Halifax after the war. During his rehabilitation, the RCR’s were took part in the invasion of Sicily and they left poor Dad behind.

A Change of Regiments: RCR to Highland Light Infantry of Canada (HLIC)

On May 14, 1943 Dad was Struck Off Strength (S.O.S.) from the Royal Canadian Regiment and on May 26, 1943 his fitness status was changed to F5 Recovery, while he was recuperating in hospital. Major Tom Power, Dad and about 20 other men were instructed to join the Highland Light Infantry Regiment from Galt, Ontario.

Dad’s service record indicates he was Taken On Strength (T.O.S.) with the H.L.I.C. on July 20, 1943 at Spear Hill Camp. They wanted seasoned veterans with the H.L.I.C. on D-Day since they hadn’t yet seen action yet. This was the 9th Infantry Brigade of the Highland Light Infantry and Dad was assigned to Platoon 12 Company ‘B’. Dad was with them when the Regiment moved first to Cissbury Camp on July 30th and then on September 3rd, when they moved to Boscombe, near Bournemouth, Scotland for intense training in the use of assault landing craft and the clearing of beaches and villages working with artillery support. Their training in Scotland was observed by Lt.-General H.D. Crerar.

In the succeeding months the Regiment was steadily on the move. On October 28 to Hursley Camp for a few days, then to Bushfield Camp, then November 13th to Botley Camp and on December 8th to Hillsea Barracks, Portsmouth.



**Lloyd Ritcey with Transport and Private Carvil Ritcey with Highland Light Infantry Regiment
Heathfield / Redhill, England August 1943**

I was fortunate to read the “Two Generals “, a graphic novel by Scott Chantler, which outlines the experience of the author’s grandfather Law Chantler, who was a Lieutenant with the Highland Light Infantry during the war. In March 1943, the H.L.I.C. Regiment left New York aboard the Queen Elizabeth and arrived in London a week later. Part of their training took place near Southampton and elsewhere in England including a canvas camp located in SpearHill, near Ashington in West Sussex. In December 1943, the Regiment was based in Cosham, a district of Portsmouth. On Christmas Eve, the officers and men hosted a wonderful party for local children including parading with them to the Court Lane School and providing gifts. All of the men agreed it was the highlight of the Regiment’s holiday festivities.

1944: Invasion of Europe

In January 1944, the Commanding Officer of the HLIC, Lieutenant Colonel Shantz was suddenly posted back to Canada due to a medical problem. Lieutenant Franklyn “Smokey” Griffiths assumed command of the Regiment. It would be his job to handle the final organization and training for the HLIC’s part in the invasion of Europe. On Jan 26th, they moved to Fort Gomer near Gosport, England, site of the old Royal Flying Corp field. The pace of training increased and in February 1944 every member was issued a bicycle in the belief that this would speed their secondary advance after D Day. Unfortunately, many of the men had to learn how to ride them and the collapsible bikes frequently broke down.



Dad (front row far right) mounted on the bike with Medical Kit in HLI Exercise Pedal 11 April 1944 near Portsmouth, England. PAC 136851 on page 18 of Bloody Buron book.



Part of their training for the forthcoming invasion of Europe took place at the Paulsgrove Chalk Pit, Portsmouth.

This was a pretty heady time for the Highland Light Infantry Battalion as the invasion of Europe was imminent. At Southampton on February 28, 1944 the battalion received an inspection and pep talk from Lieutenant General Bernard Montgomery, Deputy Commander. (It was apparently General Montgomery's idea to equip them with bicycles). The regiment was then inspected by his Majesty King George VI on April 25, 1944 at Farsham and again on May 13, 1944 by the Supreme Commander, General Dwight D Eisenhower. This latter inspection took place at Romsey, England near Wickham in the company of the HLIC commander General Rodney F. Keller.

Side Story: First Nations Comrades in Arms:

As documented in the book "Bloody Buron", during his May 13th inspection, General Eisenhower singled out and spoke to an Indian soldier from the Cape Croker Reserve in Ontario. There were other references to two Indian brothers from Cape Croker, who were otherwise unidentified. In Dad's notes however he recalled serving with "Chief" and "Chum" the two Indian boys serving in his section. "Chief" was wounded at Buron yet he had captured 12 Germans two days before Buron, thus providing key intelligence prior to the battle. Dad never knew these lads' full names and he always felt afterwards that they never got proper recognition for their war service.

After further inquiries, I determined that the Ojibwa Cape Croker Reserve, located 45 minutes outside Owen Sound, had the highest enlistment level in the army with 102 band members signed up of any reserve in Canada. John McLeod contributed six sons and one daughter to the war effort. Three of his sons, Charles Donald, Malcolm J. and John R. all served with the HLIC Regiment of Galt and it is highly probable that Charles ("Chief") and Malcolm ("Chum") were the two Indian lads Dad recalled serving with overseas. In 1972 as Canada's representative Silver Cross Mother, Mrs. Mary McLeod laid a wreath at the National War Memorial, the first Canadian Indian to do so.

As an added bit of irony, in May 1944, just before D-Day, in the holding camps where the troops were quartered, Dad vividly recalled that they were playing the new Errol Flynn movie "They Died with Their Boots On" about General George Custer and his famous battle with the Indians. If you wanted to, you could watch it four times a day and this was where Dad came to love hearing "The Garry Owen" which apparently was the tune played during the battle of Little Big Horn during the movie.

Operation Overlord: June 6, 1944 D-Day

On June 5th, Dad and the H.L.I.C. boarded their LCI landing craft as part of the 12 vessels, which formed the 262nd flotilla of the Royal Canadian Navy, departing Southampton for JUNO designated "White" beach with the 3rd Canadian Division. RCN photographer Robert Milne, who accompanied the invasion force aboard LC 306 took the following photos. Each LCI had a serial number board affixed to her bridge for easy identification by the troops boarding. Dad's "B" company and Battalion HQ embarked on LCI 250 Serial # 1707 on far left of the photo.



Highland Light Infantry in Southampton embarking D-Day aboard LCI 250 (Left), LCI 125 (Middle), and LCI 306 (Right). Serial numbers L to R 1707, 1706 and 1708 respectfully.



Highland Light Infantry carried by LCI 125 going ashore on D-Day. The ramps on either side of the bow on LCI 125 are about to be lowered and the soldiers are lined up along the gunwales with their bicycles. This vessel sustained damages in landing. It was holed by

obstacles in the bow causing a 15° list which had to be corrected by the counter floating of ballast tanks



Highland Light Infantry of Canada landing at Bernières-sur-Mer, 6 June 1944. Disembarking from L.C.I. 125 of the Canadian Landing Craft Infantry (Large) 262nd Flotilla, are members of 'A' Company and 1st Platoon of 'D' Company. Photographer Gib Milne had moved up to the bow gun platform of LCI 306 to take this photo. The ramps on either side of her bow are down and the HLI soldiers are wading onto French soil with their bicycles.

The HLIC Regiments' initial objective on D-Day as part of the 3rd Canadian Division was to seize Carpiquet Airfield, located three miles west of Caen. They fought three days against battle hardened German troops to gain control of the approaches to the airfield and Dad's Company "B" then occupied the villages of Basly, Gruchy & Villions Les Buissons from June 10th until July 7th. This latter village overlooked the city of Buron and the airfield, which they attacked on July 4th.

The 3-week period allowed the Allies to continue the buildup of their beach head in Normandy as men, supplies and materials poured ashore. Their main objective of Caen, was a major road and rail junction and thus strategically important. The City had to be taken eventually however the long delay allowed the Germans to build up the surrounding towns into a fortress. Operation CHARNWOOD was initiated at the end of this period to finally secure Caen by July 18, 1944, and it evolved into a full-scale Corp attack numbering over 115,000 men.

“Bloody Buron Normandy - 08 July 1944 “

An excellent source of research material was a book of the above title written by Captain J. Allen Snowie, historical officer of the Highland Fusiliers of Canada. It details the HLIC's heavy involvement in the battle to capture Buron. This was considered the bloodiest battle of WW2 as they were up against the veteran 12th SS Division led by the infamous, Colonel Kurt Meyer. Colonel Meyer was later found guilty of ordering the execution of 134 Canadian prisoners of war, mostly North Nova Scotia Highlanders, at the Ardennes Abbey.

In the battle of Buron, Dad's platoon encountered a German Panzer grenadier unit, which had eight tanks and the unit was comprised mainly of experienced paratroopers. Dad recalled later that they would have been wiped out if it hadn't been for one brave soul. This Sergeant had a PIAT anti-tank gun and with it he destroyed three tanks and caused the rest of the Germans to withdraw. Dad's recollection is validated on Pages 72 and 110 of the “Bloody Buron” book.

At the time, visiting journalists interviewed some of the soldiers and wrote articles based on whatever was told to them. Many of these accounts were uncorroborated but on the basis of the news articles many people received medals while the true heroes often went unrecognized. Note: according to the book Sgt James Peter Kelly was awarded the Military Medal for his actions against the eight tanks.

Dad recalled that during the battle of Buron, the ground troop positions were marked by orange coloured flares as a pre-arranged safety manoeuvre to avoid being bombed by their own air support. Unfortunately, one of the reinforcing units coming up from the rear was mistaken by Air Command and they were decimated. Almost 1,200 casualties resulted from the inability of the pilots to distinguish “orange” flares from “yellow” ones. The battle of Buron was also the one where two brothers were killed within twenty feet of each other. Dad's platoon leader Captain Vince E Stark was also killed near the anti-tank ditch in Buron.

Buron is also the setting for a story Dad relayed to me that deeply affected him throughout the war. At one point, he took shelter in a farmhouse and there were two wedding rings on the mantle. The house had been abandoned very quickly as there were dishes and food left on the table in evidence of a hurried departure. Dad thought to himself “If I take those rings someone would shoot me right in the head as soon as I step outside” So he hid the rings in the bottom of the sugar bowl and always wondered if the lady of the house ever returned and found them.

The only burial party his unit was involved with took place after Buron. He remembers the Padre, a young man of 20-22 years of age. He recalls one of the corpses had a severed head and when they were lowering it into the grave, the head rolled down the body. The Padre jumped in and set it right but shortly after that, the Padre cracked up and was sent back to England. After that none of the front-line troops were involved in burials, the rear echelon troops were used for this purpose. This incident was also supported by the information in the Bloody Buron book and I've concluded from it that the Padre must have been Padre John M. “Jock” Anderson DSO MID as noted on Page 89

As noted in his service records, effective July 9, 1944, Dad was promoted to the rank of Lance Corporal on an acting basis and at the same time he was awarded the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and the 1939-43 GRI Star. The records show that on September 19th once he was wounded, he reverted back to his previous rank of Private earning the princely sum of \$ 1.50 per day.

The terrible cost of victory at Buron was over 50% casualties of the regiment strength of 800. They lost 17 officers and 268 men killed with 200 more wounded in that single day of battle. Two men in Dad's 12 Platoon were later awarded medals for their actions at Buron; Pte Pete Borodaiko and Sgt James Peter Kelly.

After Buron the battalion moved on through Franqueville and St Germaine and Captain D.P. Kennedy took command of Dad's "B" Company as they became among the first troops to enter Caen.

Caen July 9- 18, 1944

One of the sights Dad recalled was of the sixteen local women who had "collaborated" with the Germans. Just before the Canadian troops arrived in Caen, the residents rose up against these women and put them on display in the town square, where they shaved off all their heads. Dad always felt sorry for those women feeling that they must have done what they had to, in order to survive.



Another memory Dad shared concerned their first leave after D-Day. Their uniforms were taken from them and they were sent through delousing showers and given British uniforms to put on temporarily. He remembers the French women up on the hill, observing the soldiers in all their "natural" beauty and commenting in their "attributes". The British uniforms were gas treated and had white powder on them which caused burns and irritated their skins. It took roughly about a week before they got their own uniforms back.

Two other battle honours are mentioned in the HLIC Regiment that took place shortly after Caen was liberated. They were the battle of **Bourguebus Ridge** and **Faubourg de Vaucelles**, during the period July 18-19 1944. The Regiment then moved on to capture Cormelles, Rocquancourt, Cintheaux, Hill 195, St Hillary Farm and Soignolles.

Battle of Falaise August 7-22, 1944

After Caen was taken, the HLIC Regiment under Lt Colonel Kingsmill, were primarily involved in Operation "Tractable", the closing of the Falaise Gap in August as they pursued the retreating Germans across France. The Falaise Gap was a geographic pocket, within which a major German Army Group was caught in a pincer movement between Allied Divisions. Once all the flanking forces could join hands, the result was one of the greatest military slaughters in history... the destruction of Germany's western forces of over 300,000 men.

Two specific battle honours were earned by the HLIC Regiment during the period when the Falaise Gap was closed. They were "**Laison**" from Aug 14-17, 1944 followed by "**Chambois**" from Aug 18-22, 1944. This was the 9th Brigades' debut in the use of "Kangaroos"- armoured troop carriers for crossing rivers. It was also the time that the Brigade was placed under the command of the 4th Canadian Armoured Division and their task "was to cut down on the west, inside the Polish Armoured Division and close the Gap."

Dad was involved in numerous skirmishes during Falaise, including one memorable battle in a creek area. Initially his Platoon attacked the German positions and inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy. Twelve hours later, the Germans counter attacked and our Canadian troops suffered major losses. This particular battle left its mark on Dad. It was raining so hard and as he took cover in a trench, he remembered all the dead horses and Germans, their tanks and equipment all scattered around and blown apart. The smell of death was everywhere and he recalled the horror of watching one poor dead soldier lying in the crossroads disappear piece by piece as the tanks rolled over him. Dad lost a lot of comrades on that campaign. Dad's perspective was that someone up above was ensuring there was a proper balance in effect.

At that time, Dad had been an Acting Lance Corporal for about two months and it must have been around that time that he received a visit from his younger brother Lloyd. Lloyd, who was serving with an Engineers Unit, had landed in France on D-Day + 30 days. Their unit's task was to build or repair bridges to facilitate the Allied Advance. During the six years Dad was overseas he and Lloyd only got to meet each other three times. They met twice in Heathfield/Redhill, England in 1943 and once more in France in 1944 although this latter meeting happened quite by accident.

Dad was returning from patrol one night and when he reached the road, he noticed a line of trucks with Lloyd's unit number on them. He enquired of a Frenchman if he knew where Lloyd Ritcey was and the guy pointed to the third truck up the line. There Dad found Lloyd with his feet draped over the steering wheel fast asleep.

As Lloyd was “on duty”, he offered Dad the use of his tent and cot. Dad accepted but was so exhausted that he dropped prone onto the bed and fell fast asleep... forgetting to disarm. There he was wearing a full belt of grenades and when Lloyd came into the tent “he was afraid to shake Dad for fear he would explode”. During that visit, Dad gave Lloyd a P-38 pistol which Dad had taken off a captured German soldier. Lloyd subsequently almost accidentally shot his commanding officer with the pistol so he gave it away.

After Falaise, Dad’s unit fought their way through Vimoutiers, Orbec, Elbeuf and Brionne before they crossed the Seine River on August 28, 1944. They pushed on through Rouen, St Saens, Quesnoy and Abbeville where they crossed the Somme River at Port Le Grand. At this point, the 3rd Canadian Division, including 9th Brigade and the HLIC was assigned the task of clearing the Channel Ports of Boulogne and Calais so that the Allied supply lines could be shortened. They successfully encircled Boulogne on Sept 5th and ‘B’ Company brought back 25 prisoners from their Sept 7th patrol.

Cap Gris Nez September 17-23, 1944

As Dad’s unit fought their way across France, they were in the thick of the fighting. On September 16 heavy bombing was conducted by Lancaster Flying Fortresses & medium bombers plus 25 regiments of artillery on the area Boulogne to Cap Gris Nez plus Mont Lambert and Le Cocherie.

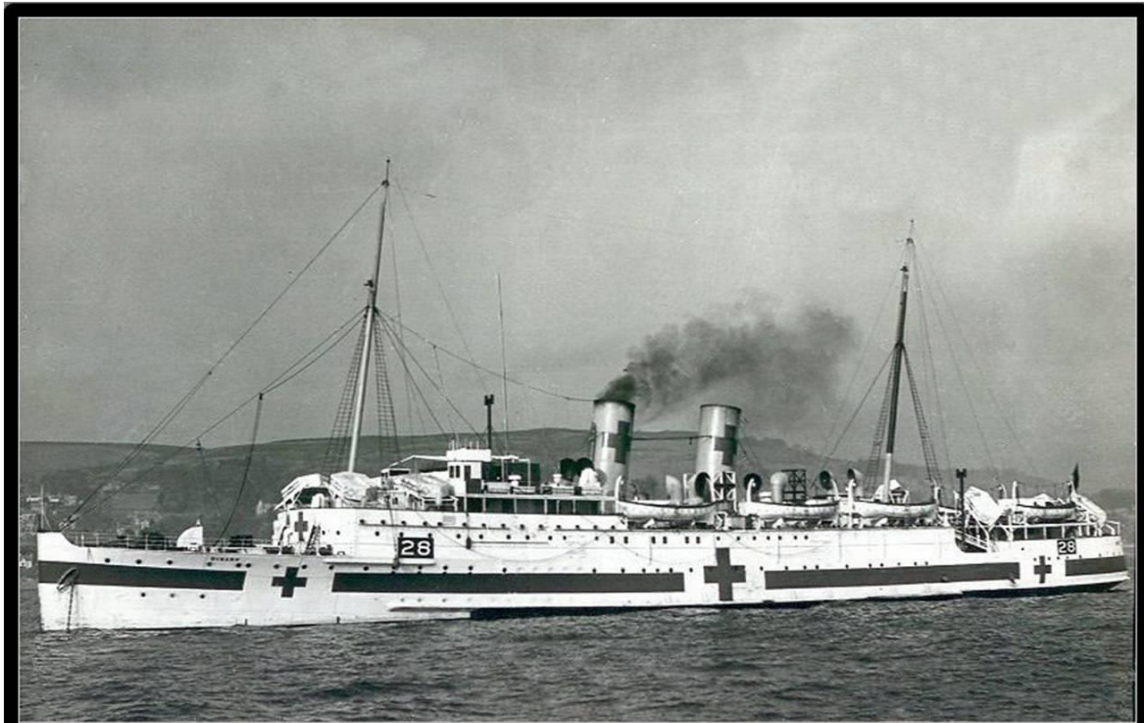
On September 17, 1944 Dad was injured in a place called Cap Griz Nez. This was the location where the Germans had installed some huge coastal artillery guns to harass Channel shipping and to send shells across the Channel on Dover. Cap Gris Nez was also a launch site for many of the infamous V1 rockets which Hitler used to terrorize London and the south of England. The V1’s were launched starting in June 1944 and they continued to rain down until the French port cities of Calais, Cap Gris Nez and Boulogne were captured. For the first time in four years, Dover was safe from the menace of the enemy’s artillery. On September 23, 1944, the capture of Boulogne resulted in a ratio of 4:1 prisoners to the HLIC. The Nazi flag, sword and dagger of the German Garrison Commander Schilling was sent by the HLIC to the Lord Mayor of Dover as a tribute to the steadfastness of that city in the face of fire from this area for three years. The accompanying message read “Greetings and enjoy your pint of beer in peace from now on - we have all of Jerry’s Big Bertha’s.”

At one point in the battle of Cap Gris Nez, Dad was in a graveyard and lying in a trench when a shell hit the side of the trench and it split the butt of his rifle. When he woke up a day later, he was in a jeep with four other wounded and Padre Jock Anderson. Shrapnel was in his shoulder, arm, wrist and his rear end. He was evacuated through the Port of Dieppe. There he was loaded onto a white hospital ship operated by the 28th Field Hospital regiment. Once again Dad was extremely fortunate, as records show that Hospital Ship No 28 had been damaged at Juno Beach on D-Day and had only just returned to active service arriving in Dieppe one day before he was wounded.

Dad recalled that the doctors operating gowns were made of red rubber fabric so they wouldn’t show the blood. The voyage from Dieppe to Dover was memorable only from the point of view that the

decks were so covered in blood that at night the swarms of cockroaches came out to feast on it and when a spotlight was shone on them, the whole deck appeared to be moving.

HOSPITAL SHIP NO 28



Dad was hospitalized in Park Prewett Hospital in Basingstoke, which in peace time had been an insane asylum e.g. the Park Prewett Mental Hospital. He had a cast on his left arm and bandages on his shoulder and hip. In later years, when we as children used to inquire how he came to be shot in his rear end, Dad used to reply that “he was shot in the behind going back for reinforcements”!

Park Prewett Mental Hospital in Basingstoke, England



Built between 1913 and 1915 by asylum architect GT Hine, for £250,000. Park Prewett Mental Hospital was not opened until 1917, when during World War 1 it served as a military hospital for the Canadians. After the war ended in 1918 it opened up as a psychiatric hospital and by 1936 had 1,400 patients. During World War Two it was again used as a military hospital.

Dad remained in hospital only a few short weeks however records indicate he was promoted to the rank of Lance Corporal. He then was transferred to a convalescence program until early October when he was officially released from hospital and made available for active service with the HLIC.

During this period, Dad had been approached to take a training officer position in England, teaching replacement troops what they needed to know before they headed to Europe. Unfortunately, Dad had heard horror stories about training accidents and so he declined the offer as he felt “he would be safer on the front lines.”

Battle of the Bresken Pocket and the Scheldt Estuary October 1-November 8, 1944

After a rehabilitation of less than a month, Dad embarked once again on a short voyage across the Channel to a destination only identified as “NWE” (North West Europe). He rejoined his Platoon 12 Company “B” with the HLIC regiment, which on October 3rd had left Cap Gris Nez and in a single day had moved from France across Belgium to the borders of the Netherlands. They moved up through St Omer, Poperinge, and Ghent to Desteldonck. They had reached the Waal area of the Netherlands situated on the southern shore of the Scheldt Estuary near the approaches to Antwerp and the Belgian border.

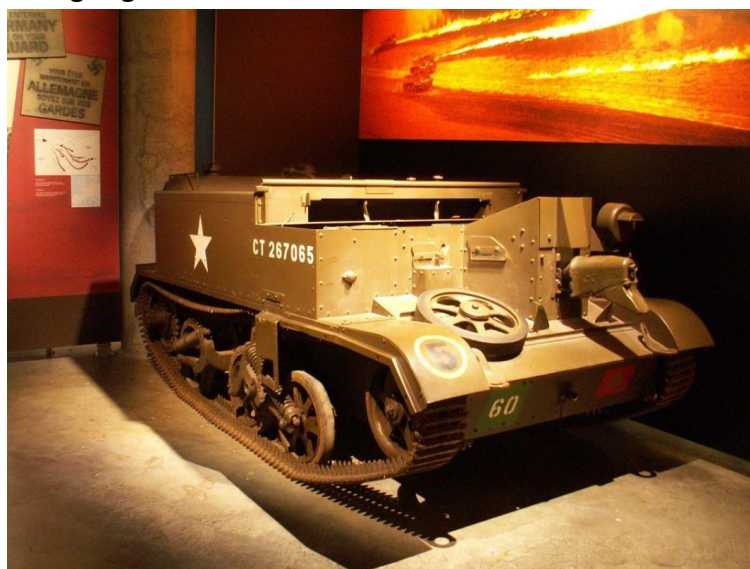


As part of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division's 9th Brigade, the HLIC Regiment conducted an amphibious operation with the aid of "Terrapins" and "Buffalos". Dad referred to these as “water buffalos” or amphibious tracked vehicles with pontoons along the sides. They could travel straight from land across water, much like the “Harbour Hopper “currently takes tourists across Halifax Harbour. The buffaloes were stripped down hulks and only lightly armoured yet they could carry almost a full platoon of 20-24 combat ready soldiers. The 3rd Canadian Infantry Division were nicknamed the "Water Rats" by General Bernard Montgomery due to the poor conditions of terrain through which they fought, first in the Normandy landings, and then in the flooded Bresken Pocket and the Scheldt Estuary.



LVT-4 Water Buffalo as used in World War Two

After moving through Hoofdplaat and Savojaard Plaat they loaded into the Buffalos in the afternoon and entered the Terneuzen Canal just east of Oostacker and moved along the Canal towards Neuzen. The assault began on October 7, supported by extensive artillery and "Wasps" (tanks equipped with flamethrowers). The Wasps launched their barrage of flame across the Leopold Canal, allowing the troops to scramble up over the steep banks and launch their assault boats across the canal. Two precarious, separate footholds were established, but conditions for the Canadian troops were horrendous as the enemy recovered from the shock of the flamethrowers and counter-attacked. However, the troops clung with grim determination to their extremely vulnerable bridgeheads. This battle was truly one of being "against all odds."



"Wasp" Flame thrower adaptation of the Bren carrier for the Canadian Army in WW2

Despite horrendous conditions and tenacious fighting, they finally liberated Biervet, Roedenhoek, Breskens, Schoodijke, Fort Frederich, Zuidzande, Knocke and Zeebrugge. On October 29th the battalion was given a three-day rest period in Driewegen. On November 1st they cleared Cadzard and Zoute before reaching a strong fortress area to the east of Knocke-sur-mer. This is where Sgt Norman Eugene Tuttle of 'B' Company was awarded the DCM for outstanding display of bravery. He and 12 Platoon charged the position, took out a pill box and forced the surrender of an enemy force many times their own number. A total of 17,000 prisoners were captured in the battle for the Scheldt.

Dad didn't relay too many details about the Scheldt battle except that it was a "messy amphibious operation with a whole lot of reinforcements needed to replace the returning wounded and that they all had a very rough time of it that winter." On November 4th the regiment moved back to Ghent where they were billeted in private homes until Nov 9th when they moved on to Deynse.



Canadian troops preparing to leave Ghent, November 1944.

(National Archives of Canada 116741)



On November 11th the Regiment arrived in the Nijmegen area where they took over from the 82nd and 101st American Airborne Divisions. The following three-month period was one of unrelieved monotony and acute discomfort with all movement restricted to the cover of darkness under direct observation of the enemy.

Dad recalled that winter in Nijmegen & Arnhem, Holland was one of “short patrols and cold wet winter days. The women of the area were really hard up that winter and they would take the blankets the soldiers gave them and make coats out of them.” Nijmegen is the oldest city in Holland being over 2,000 years old.

The Rhineland & Waal Flats Feb 8-15 1945 and the Hochwald Forest Feb 26 Mar 3 1945

In early 1945, after a long winter stalemate, military operations by the Allied armies in North-West Europe resumed. The exertions of the First Canadian Army in the Battle of the Scheldt had resulted in the port of Antwerp being opened in late 1944 and materials and supplies for the final thrust of the war were pouring in.



The initial goal was to reach the Rhine River, the last significant natural barrier between Allied forces and Germany. From their winter positions in the Nijmegen Salient, the First Canadian Army reinforced by elements of the British 2nd Army, began operations to advance south east, clearing all land west of

the river. The Siegfried Line in the Cleve area and the Reichswald area was one of the strongest and deepest parts of the defense of the German homeland.

The initial attack on 8 Feb 1945 was launched by three British divisions and the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division on the flooded left flank over the Waal Flats. The ancient city of Cleve was bombed flat, and the heaviest artillery bombardment of the entire war was laid on. The Materborn Gap was considered the key to the advance; 3,000 meters of open ground stretching between Cleve and the trees of The Reichswald to the south. The British made it through on 11 Feb after three costly days of fighting through the woods. The 3rd Division, making use of amphibious vehicles, had a slightly easier time as many Germans opted to surrender or withdraw as the British advances threatened to cut them off.

The battle for the Hochwald Gap lasted from 27 Feb to 3 March and advances were measured in hundreds of yards. The 3rd Division returned to the line and the 2nd Division sent a brigade to assist in opening the gap.

The fight to advance 20 miles into the Rhineland and clear the remaining German units west of the great river took as long - one month - as the 200-mile advance that would follow it to end the war. The cost in terms of casualties was also higher as the First Canadian Army took 22,000 German prisoners and killed or seriously wounded 22,000 more. During the Rhineland fighting, the Germans lost 90,000 men while inflicting 23,000 Allied casualties.

To the north of the Allied lines, the Dutch people were tragically still under German occupation and there was very little food. The people were literally starving to death and resorting to eating tulip bulbs to survive. They had to endure those conditions until the following month when on April 28th, the Canadian army was able to negotiate a truce with the German commander that allowed food supplies to reach the starving Dutch people. No part of Western Europe was liberated at a more vital moment than the west of the Netherlands and the Canadian soldiers who contributed so immensely to that liberation were cheered and greeted with great joy.

Dad was officially promoted to rank of Lance Corporal on February 5th. On February 8th, Operation "Veritable" commenced with the isolated companies of the HLIC evacuated by Ducks and Buffalos and brought back to Beek. In doing so, the battalion passed over a large number of flooded minefields thus avoiding many casualties. On February 10th, "B" Company moved up to Keeken and launched their attack on Duffelward. The Company had to cross 900 yards of ground saturated and knee deep in mud in order to approach the town. As darkness fell the water continued to rise from the flooded dykes and the situation was precarious until "A" Company arrived in Buffalos sufficient in strength to break up enemy resistance. On Feb 12-13th "B" Company went on to capture Bienen and consolidate their lines.

It was at this point when his unit was commencing the battle for the Hochwald Forest on February 15th 1945 when it was announced that anyone who had five or more years overseas was to be sent home on "rotational leave". Dad returned to England shortly after and went home by ship to Halifax

arriving in early March. Mom met him and they received permission to get married on April 2, 1945. A cease fire parade was held by the Battalion on May 8th in Aurich and at 1500 hours they heard the announcement by PM Winston Churchill that hostilities were to cease. The war in Europe was officially over.



After the War

Mom & Dad bought a set of flats on Edward Street near Jubilee Road in Halifax, mainly due to its close proximity to the Camp Hill Veterans Hospital where Dad had to go for his many surgeries on his legs and for his rehab therapy. Like many returning veterans Dad was lucky to land a job as a clerk with the Post Office, located on Water Street in Halifax, and a 30 minute walk each way. As a postal clerk he was on his feet all day long sorting letters and organizing the parcel loads for trains heading to Montreal but he never complained.

The first year of their marriage, Mom worried about Dad because he couldn't sleep very well. He would get up in the middle of the night and go down to the basement and cut kindling wood. He cut so much kindling that all three sides of the basement were full. That was his way of handling the memories of the war and his re-adjustment into civilian life.

Later on, Dad became Assistant Postmaster of the branch just off Spring Garden Road and occasionally he worked the North End Branch on Almon Street. One day, the branch he was working in was robbed by a gunman. After the robber left and his coworkers were acting quite stressed out, Dad calmly remarked to one of his buddies “somebody could get hurt working here.” I guess compared to what Dad had experienced in the war there wasn’t a lot to get excited about!

Dad didn’t talk much about the war for many years and often he only spoke about the good times he and his buddies experienced overseas. When he was well into his eighties my sister Colleen got him to open up more and this gave us a chronological insight into his wartime service. My sister Beverley, who was a teacher, convinced Dad to attend some of her classes each November and talk to her students about the war. He even agreed to be interviewed by some of her students. Each year Dad made it a point to attend the Remembrance Day ceremonies in the Grand Parade in downtown Halifax. In August 1999 Dad was invited by the Royal Canadian Regiment to be one of their guests of honour in the viewing stand as they celebrated a significant anniversary with a regimental parade.



Carvil Ritcey, with daughter Colleen in Visitor Stands (lower right) August 1999 Royal Canadian Regiment, Grand Parade Halifax Nova Scotia

Dad and his bride Lillian enjoyed 51 years of marriage before she died on July 14, 1996. Dad enjoyed seeing their five children prosper and get married; raising eleven grandchildren before he passed away in Halifax on July 3, 2007 just three months shy of his 92nd birthday.



The Ritcey Family: Beverley, Donald, Raymond, Colleen, Kevin with Dad Carvil 2007

Conclusion

In putting the above summary together I've drawn heavily upon notes prepared from various interviews with Dad plus his official Canadian Active Service Records and personal photos. I also referenced the books authored by Scott Chantler and Capt. J Allan Snowie as well as information and articles from the Internet. Finally, I reviewed the Regimental History of the Highland Light Infantry of Canada 1940-45 written by Jack F Bartlett.

I apologize for any and all grammatical or syntax errors and sincerely hope that readers notify me if there are any factual errors in the content of this summary.

Kevin Ritcey
Penticton, British Columbia

February 25, 2012

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Personal letters of Carvil Ritcey to the scholarship Committee of the Royal Canadian Regiment in support of application from granddaughter Gillian Ritcey in 2005; includes summary of overseas service and lists of RCR and HLIC comrades who served with Carvil Ritcey during the war.