

Thompson turned 21 on D-Day at the Front

BY MAGGIE PETRUSHEVSKY
The New Tanner

Turning 21 was an important milestone in everyone's life when Bill Thompson reached that marker during World War II.

Turning 21 on the front lines was even more significant, especially when that date coincided with D-Day.

But trying to remember anything particularly significant about the event is another matter.



Bill Thompson

"I just remember I was in Italy, doing two weeks at the front when D-Day came," the rural Acton resident says. "It must have been a quiet day since I don't recall much about it. We'd do two weeks up front, then get sent back

for two weeks to rest."

One of a large family, only Bill and his brother Frank actually saw service during the war.

Bill enlisted in Kitchener in 1942, was called to the 48th Highlanders and wound up with the Scottish Fusiliers guarding the Welland Canal and power generators at Niagara Falls for a year.

He remembers patrols along the canal, especially on cold winter nights, when he walked from one crossroad to another, turned and retraced his steps. Each stint on guard duty was three hours long, followed by three hours off.

The canal was equipped with automatic lights which tripped when someone - or something - crossed the signal and turned them on. Animals - like deer - tripped the signals often and the only way to shut them off was to go to the light and physically turn it off.

"You'd often just get to the opposite end of your tour and see a light was on and you had to go all the way back and shut it off," he says.

Thompson was shipped to England in March of 1944 and wound up sent to Italy with the Irish Regiment of Canada.

He recalls not being able to trust anyone in southern Italy. Its citizens supported

Mussolini and a soldier passing through heading for the front lines to the north had to "watch (him)self" all the time.

In the north, things were just the opposite. Here the Allies were greeted as liberators, much as the Canadians were met in Holland.

"They'd come out and meet you with open arms as you entered their town," Thompson says. "They were so glad to see you. They'd grab you and thank you for what you were doing."

The Germans had already taken what they could to feed their own people, so pickings for the Canadians were poor.

Since the unit's rations could be three, four or even five days behind the advancing soldiers, they often scavenged what they could from local farms along their route.

"Occasionally we'd catch a chicken and cook it," he says. "Even if food was scarce we could always find gasoline and we'd fill an old can and cook over that. It made a great, hot fire. But just about the time we'd have the food ready, the order would come to move out and we'd have to leave it before we even had time to eat."

The scariest part of front line duty, Thompson says, was getting sent out as part of a small party of two or three

to capture a prisoner from behind the German lines and bring him back for interrogation.

Thompson was shot in the stomach on Dec. 12, 1944. He was with a patrol crossing a river chasing a bunch of Germans in broad daylight when he was hit. He was taken to a field hospital by jeep and remained in an Italian hospital until March 1945 when he was shipped to England, and then

to Toronto to await discharge.

He was still waiting when the Japanese surrendered in August.

That day too, was memorable. He had gone uptown with another buddy and was on a streetcar when people started just coming up and mobbing the cars, climbing aboard without paying. Papers and pamphlets began cascading out of windows.

"We couldn't figure out how come everyone was getting free rides," he recalls. "It wasn't until later that we found out the war was over."

Remembrance Day is very important to Thompson and he'll be at the cenotaph Saturday as usual.

He'll also attend Sunday's Remembrance Day service at Churchill Community Church, as he usually does.



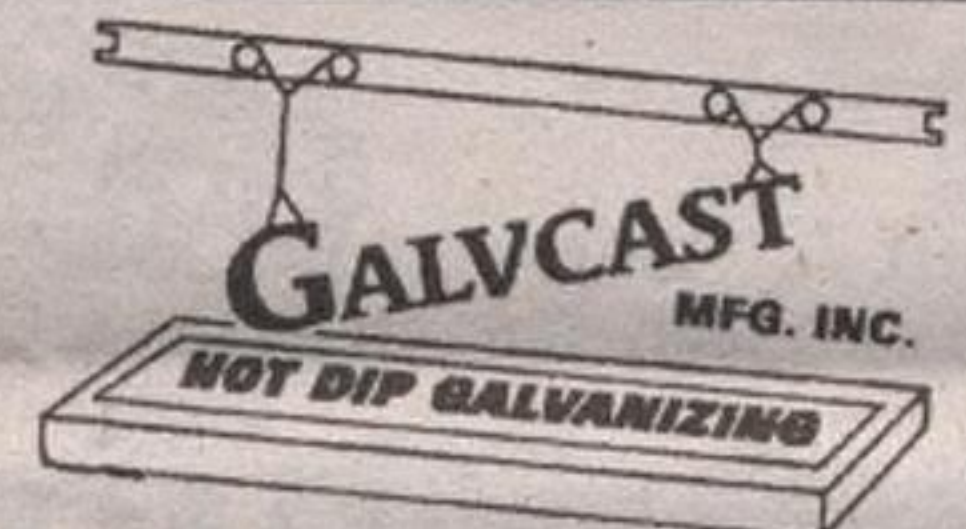
REMEMBERING: Gr. 5 French Immersion pupils from Robert Little Public School shared lunch with participants in the Wheels to Meals program Monday at the Acton Seniors Centre. As entertainment for the lunch participants, the students recited In Flanders Fields, the famous poem by World War I veteran Col. John McCrae of Guelph. - Maggie Petrushevsky photo



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