

Wounded WWII veteran thought war would last a year

It was September 20, 1944 in a northern French seaside town called Le Portel. The Allied forces were pushing through France after the June 6 D-Day attacks, and the fighting was fierce in the small towns, as the German army tried to hold back the Allied advance.

A sergeant with A Company of the Highland Light Infantry had left his Georgetown home five years earlier, in September of 1939, leaving behind his pregnant wife and a toddler daughter. He had shipped out of Toronto January 24, 1940 for a nine-day trip across the Atlantic in a troop ship.

But he had only been fighting in France since June 12, 1944, six days after D-Day, and in that short time, had seen some fierce fighting.

As it turned out, September 20, 1944 would be his last day fighting the Germans.

Sgt. Tom Given had almost been killed earlier that day, but a horse saved his life. As he was jogging up a road near Le Portel, the horse ran out in front of him into the path of German machine gun fire, killing the animal instantly.

The Germans had their machine guns firing on 'fixed lines', meaning they were set up to fire in a straight line, as unsuspecting soldiers walked right into the line of fire. This time, the horse took the deadly fire, saving Given's life.

The next time he wasn't so lucky.

From his Georgetown home, 93-year-old Tom Given shared his experiences, more than 60 years later.

"At Le Portel the houses in the streets were all connected together, like row houses. Our reconnoiter guys had been in and said there was no one there, but we got into town and all hell broke loose. The Jerries (Germans) had connected all the cellars together by knocking out foundation walls between them, and they could run right through them. They would fire from one house, pull their guns back, go down through the cellar and set up a few houses up the street. We were on one side of the street, they were on the other. There was a hell of a lot of lead flying around that place.

"Two of us were sent up to take this place—the fellow behind me was backing me up

with a Bren gun," said Given. "There were two Jerries across the street, and I took a shot at one, and I was trying to go after the other guy, but another just stepped out and he nailed me right there. It happened so bloody fast—I never even had a chance to react."

Given would later learn that his backup with the Bren gun hadn't been so lucky. He was killed at the same time.

In spite of being hit, Given considered himself pretty lucky. The spray of 9mm bullets had hit him in both arms and his right leg. One bullet had penetrated his arm and came out through his wrist.

"When you get hit, that doesn't really bother you, your body goes into shock and you don't really feel that much," said Given. "It's a couple days later when you have time to think about it—about what might had happened.

"He (the German) hit me in both arms and one leg—how the hell he never got me anywhere in between, I don't know," he added. "That's the scary part, thinking what might have been. You just sit there thinking, 'Holy doodle, I could



Sgt. Tom Given of Georgetown poses outside a depot in France in 1944. The Second World War veteran was wounded 13 weeks after D-Day. Photo courtesy Tom Given

have been killed."

Given was shipped to a hospital in England where he underwent numerous operations on his arm and wrist until March of 1945, when he was shipped back home. He had been overseas for more than five years, but spent only 13 weeks in France before being wounded.


Long before the war, in 1937, Given had military in his blood, joining the 20th Halton Rifles

militia, who would later be known as the Lorne Rifles Scottish, and eventually the present day Lorne Scots.

With the outbreak of war in 1939, he was quick to enlist.

"We joined up real quick," said Given. "We didn't figure it (the war) would last very long, but we were in for a big surprise—the Germans) were smarter than we gave them credit for."

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