

Veteran reminisces about bombings, battles and 'damned hats'

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"When we joined, we hoped to be a battalion, but were assigned to a depot. We landed in England February 8, 1940 and were assigned to the No. 1 Infantry Base Depot," added Given, "We received all the reinforcements coming over (from Canada) and sent them up to the units that needed them."

Given was attached to the Royal Montreals for a while, and with so many soldiers returning wounded, Given and his comrades were given the job of sending them home.

He was later assigned to the Winnipeg Rifles, but wanted to be with the Highland Light Infantry (HLI).

"I got called in to an old colonel, Col. Bingham, who said 'Why don't you want to be with the Winnipeg Rifles?' I just told him I don't like the damned hats they had to wear," grins Given, "He took a dim view of that, and threw me out of the room, and then called me back later."

"He wanted to know if I had a 'legitimate' reason for not wanting to go to the Winnipeg Rifles," continued Given, "I told him I knew a few of the guys in the HLI, and it was close to my home in Georgetown. Well, he growled, 'That's okay, but you didn't have to insult my unit.' Turns out he was a colonel with the Winnipeg Rifles and I didn't even know it!"



Second World War veteran Tom Given, 93, said many expected the war to last a year.
Photo by Ted Brown

Given was stationed at Liverpool during a week of non-stop bombing raids by the Germans from 7 p.m. until 7 a.m. every night for a week. He helped fight fires from incendiary bombs.

After D-Day, Given and his HLI comrades fought at Buron in July of '44. July 9, the regiment lost 450 men in one day. Nicknamed 'Bloody Buron' the day was one that stuck in Given's mind.

"When I got there, I saw the jeeps comin' out with the guys feet first, it didn't look good," said Given, "We took a real beat-

ing there. The Jerries were using ambulances to transport ammunition. Somehow, our guys got wind of it and they started hitting ambulances, and they'd blow up. That was quite a battle—we shelled them for 24 hours, but they were so deep in their trenches we couldn't do much. It was unbelievable how the battleships were sitting out in the (English) Channel 30 miles away, shelling ahead of us."

Given said the navy artillery bailed them out more than once.

Given reminisced about a patrol that came across a farmhouse full of German soldiers.

They reported back, and the information was radioed to a battleship in the Channel. When they went by the next day, there was no sign of the farmhouse.

But when it came to dropping bombs, they weren't always accurate.

"Mistakes always happened," said Given. "It goes with war. One day we'd be bombed by the Germans, another day by the Yankees, by mistake, We used to joke that when the Germans bombers went out we ducked, when the Allied bombers went out, the Germans ducked, and when the Yank bombers went out, everyone ducked."

Given saw lots of sad things, and one event was in Trun, France.

"We were following a bunch of tanks up the road and there was a farmhouse burning," said Given. "There was a little guy sitting out on the side of the road, in his diaper, crying his eyes out. We gave him some chocolate bars, but we couldn't stop. He was just a baby, sitting there crying as the tanks rolled by. He was picked up by the padre later, but I always wondered what became of him. It was so sad."

Given was finally on a train home on March 9, 1945. His wife Lille was surprised to hear that he was on his way; she didn't even know he was on his way home out of the hospital.

No one had called her.

"He was coming into Toronto, and Tom Greaves drove me to Toronto to meet him," said Lille. "We were to meet him at the CNE grounds, and I saw a man I thought might be Tom, but I wasn't sure. He looked so thin."

"I got off the stand, and ran down to him and called out to him, and he looked around," she said. "It was good to have him home again."

Five years had passed since Given left Georgetown. When he left, Lille was pregnant, and his daughter Lorrie was a toddler. By the time he returned, he had second daughter Pat, who was almost five. The Givens had three more daughters and later moved to rural Acton area.

Tom went to work at Domtar Paper Mill, where he worked for the next 40 years.

And this past month, Tom and Lille celebrated their 69th wedding anniversary.

"It was so good to be home," said Given, "There were times I wondered if I'd ever see it again."

Given said there was a lesson to be learned from the war.

"None of us expected it to last so long. We went over thinking we could do it in a year—we were wrong—Jerry was just better equipped than we thought."

—By Ted Brown, staff writer

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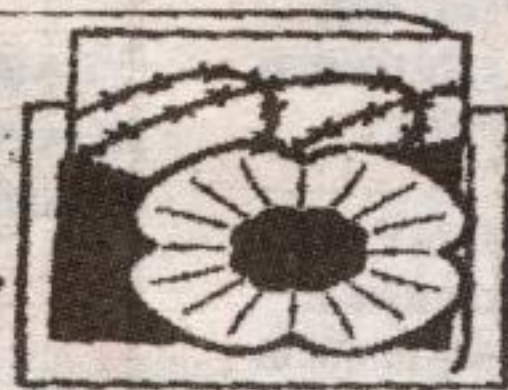
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