

Champion Perspective

THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

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FOURTH SECTION

Ortona to Oakville, Chris Vokes always a 'magnificent Canadian'

Story and photos by Jim Robinson

He hated the Germans, all Germans, until May 15, 1945, when he suddenly found himself in charge of them.

Not just the thousands of prisoners he had brought in while head of the First Canadian Division in Italy or the Fourth Armored Division in Europe, but literally millions of Germans.

And these millions had little if any shelter, no food, rags for clothing and no fuel to warm themselves during the bitterly cold fall and winter of 1945.

Major-General Chris Vokes had been selected for the thankless job of General Officer Commanding the Canadian Army occupation force in northwest Germany.

Even though his orders called for him to strictly discourage the soldiers under his command from fraternizing with the populace, "you can't turn your eyes away when children and women are starving."

"The Canadian is a very friendly type. He's just about the most undisciplined person to make into a soldier—but he doesn't turn away from women and children."

Major-General Vokes began to look the other way when occupation soldiers did what they could to help out.

"The Germans in our sector were on a ration of about 900 calories a day."

"We used to send over the remains from our mess to the soup kitchens, and let me tell you it made a pretty bloody good stew."

Since those days, Chris Vokes, 77, has been back once in the 50's and once in the 80's.

"It's all been rebuilt. They did a marvelous job."

"But you expect that kind of thing to happen anywhere."

"When I came to Oakville in 1946 there was nothing between here and Toronto, and now look at it," he said.

Changes, Changes.

The world has changed, the Canadian Army Chris Vokes so loved has changed.

There are very few heroes left, but Chris Vokes is one of them; and he earned his medals and citations during some of the most savage battles of the Second World War.

As the commander of the Canadian 2nd Infantry Brigade, Chris Vokes led his troops ashore in Sicily during Operation Husky, a joint British Eighth Army-American Seventh Army assault.

This 1943 invasion of the island, the first allied joint effort, was the largest amphibious operation of the war. A total of eight divisions and more than 3,000 landing craft were employed. By comparison, the Normandy invasion almost a year later put only five divisions ashore.

On July 21, the 2nd Brigade had come up against tough German resistance near Leonforte. To capture the town the official Canadian War History notes "Vokes decided on a daring plan."

Splitting his forces into "Lion" and "Tiger" assault groups, he was able to envelop the defenders thereby forcing an opening which eventually resulted in the Eighth Army taking the strategic town of Agrigola and getting around Mount Crapuzza.

This bold initiative had been noticed. On Sept. 29 he was at the Potenza Stadium in Sicily watching his brigade take part in an athletic competition.

He was summoned to Eighth Army headquarters from the stadium where he was informed he would be put in command of the First Canadian Division, quite a promotion.

And then, to quote the Canadian War History, "he returned to Potenza Stadium and watched the team from his 2nd Brigade capture the Sicily Cup by a considerable margin."

'You can't turn your eyes away when children and women are starving'—Chris Vokes

The fact he returned to his troops when other men would be out celebrating indicates the kind of respect he was able to build up with all ranks in his command.

Next came the assault on mainland Italy and the advance up the boot of the country.

It was tough fighting for the Canadians in places like the Moro River, the Town of Ortona, and the rock hard Ortona Salient where crack German paratroops fought it out with Canadian tanks.

The Eighth Army advanced up the boot until May 16-19 when they came up against the "Hitler Line."

Despite the best efforts the advance was held up and an attack on the Hitler Line had stalled.

Major-General Vokes was given the job of breaching the line.

"In a careful study of the problem assigned to him, General Vokes had already selected a line of attack 2,000 yards wide," the War History notes.

Timing the artillery barrage, the tanks, and the advance took three days of preparation, the minimum headquarters deemed needed for this kind of assault.

In this huge territory Chris Vokes was told by the Canadian Government of the day to keep the peace, and that went hand in hand with helping the citizenry fight off the ravages of disease, hunger, and cold.

And as he presided over their lives, his feelings that "I didn't hate the Germans after the war," started to become tempered with a new-found respect.

Using their hands, old men and women started removing the rubble. The beaten German soldiers pitched in with one massive movement to reassemble all the shattered structures of post-war Germany.

Chris Vokes saw "professors, actual professors working the peat bog" to bring fuel to heat homes.



With Monty in Europe. Major-General Vokes, left, chats with the commander of the Eighth Army, Field Marshal Sir Bernard Montgomery. General Vokes found Monty a strategic wizard.

Just prior to going into action, General Leese sent this message to Major-General Vokes on the eve of the assault.

"I am confident that you will add the name of the Adolf Hitler Line to those episodes of Canadian battle history—Sanctuary Wood, Vimy, Ortona—Good luck to you all."

The scale of the attack and resistance encountered was on a scale previously unknown to Canadian soldiers. The First Division smashed into the 2,000 yard-wide line Vokes had selected.

The line was forced and the Eighth Army poured through as the German Army Group was forced to pull back in a disorganized



In Sicily. It was near Ortona where he made his mark and later in central Italy where he became victorious.

'Vokes decided on a daring plan'—Canadian War History

retreat. This major effort was lost in the headlines because on the other side of the line, Monte Cassino had given way.

The Eighth Army Commander wrote to Major-General Vokes following the successful conclusion of the operation.

"I feel at this stage of the battle I would like to write this letter to thank and congratulate you and all ranks of your great division on the breach of the Adolf Hitler Line."

"Your attack was extremely well laid out, very well supported, and brilliantly executed."

"Your infantry attacked with the same dash and determination that I have grown always to expect in them since your first operation with me in Sicily."

"Your action played a decisive part in the initial victory."

"The Adolf Hitler Line will always be a worthy battle honor in the annals of the First Canadian Division."

The division fought up through Frosinone and Florence until the end of August, 1944, when the Gothic Line, a brilliant defensive creation by Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, was reached.

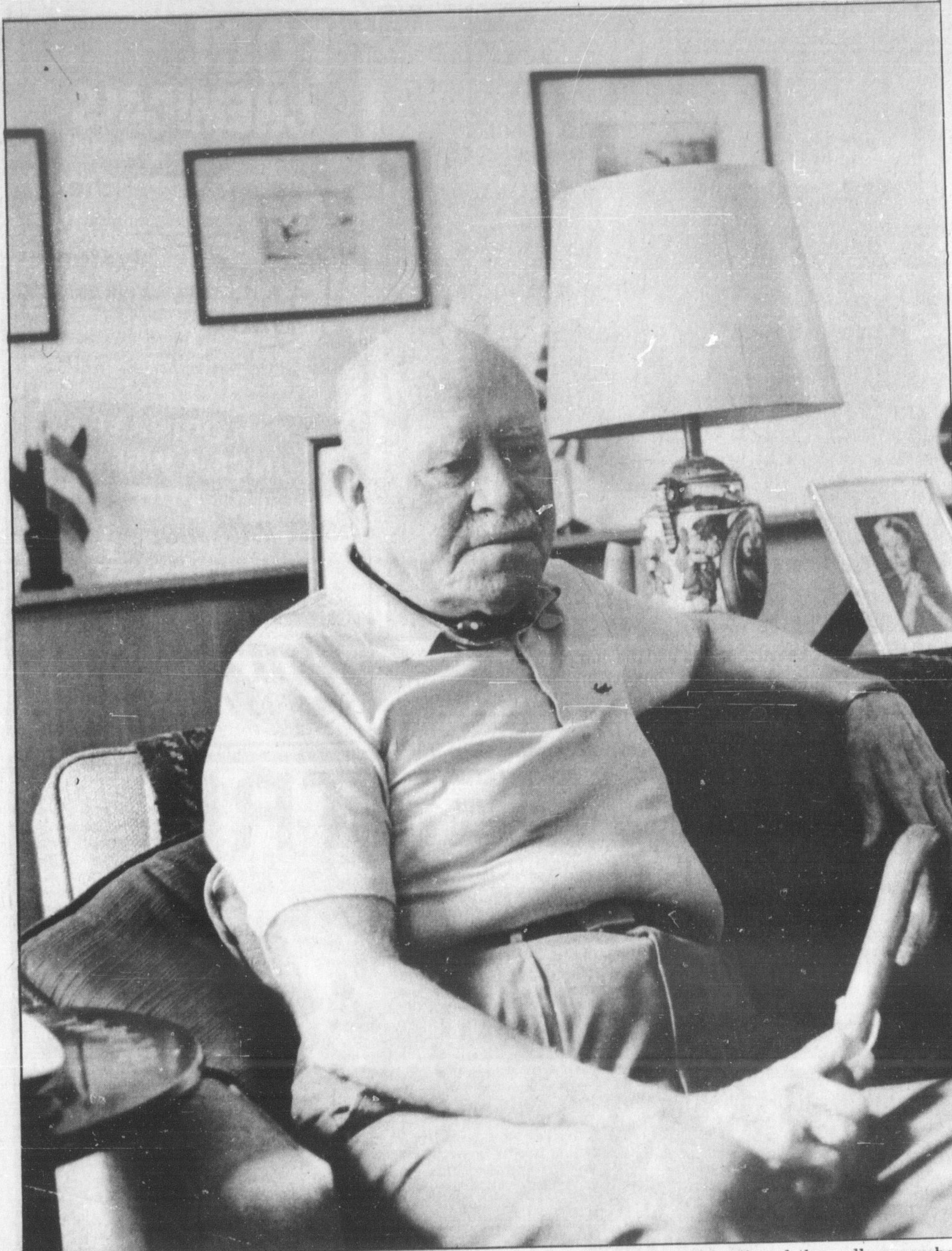
Kesselring, who entered the war as the head of a Luftwaffe air fleet proved he was an even better army commander by holding up the allied advance at the Adolf Hitler Line and then nearly crushing the Anzio landings.

It was Kesselring who halted the route north of Rome by his soldiers and created the Gothic Line.

From what Winston Churchill had liked to call the "soft underbelly" of the Axis, Kesselring was to turn into one of the toughest nuts of the Second World War. In fact the German troops in Italy were never defeated and still held on to much of Northern Italy when the armistice was reached.

The First Canadian Division came up to the Gothic Line on Aug. 31 and found the front had been transformed from quiet countryside to a deadly killing ground.

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Major-General Christopher Vokes, C.B., C.B.E., DSO, C.D. He lives in Oakville today and considers Halton to be his home. His military career took him through some of the most savage actions fought in Europe and Italy. He remembers those who served

under him as a "good lot," and they all remember him with affection as witnessed Friday when a special evening in his honor was held in the Halton Royal Canadian Legion Branch which bears his name.

'Battletime leader,' 'He led us well' That's Chris Vokes

Who is Christopher Vokes and why would he draw a capacity audience of men in their 50's and 60's lining up around a room just to get his autograph?

Statistically there was perhaps little in his early life history which would bring him to be called "one of Canada's most distinguished and colorful soldiers with a career that spanned 34 years."

Born in Armagh, Ireland, he came to Canada as a youth along with his family seeking out a new life.

His father was a military man, so it seemed the natural step for Christopher Vokes to write the entrance exams at the Royal Military College.

The first time he wrote, at 16 years of age, he did not make the grade.

Typical of his style in later life, he regrouped his own internal forces and attacked again, this time gaining entrance.

He graduated in 1925 and was commissioned in the Royal Canadian Engineers.

When the drums rolled across Europe, a newly promoted Major Vokes was sent to England, arriving in 1939.

He was one of the first Canadians in the theatre.

Following a series of promotions, he was named to command the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry.

In June 1942 he was made a Brigadier and put in charge of the Second Canadian Brigade and started to make his name in dispatches, and more importantly, he gained the respect of his troops.

That respect was shown by a number of nicknames bestowed on him by his troops.

"I didn't care what they called me," he said, "as long as they won battles for me, and they did."

His stirring war feats are recounted elsewhere on this page.

Posted in 1946 to head Military District No. 2 in Toronto, he selected Halton

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"PRESS ON"
Chris Vokes