

# Chris Vokes is one of our last heroes

Continued from D1

First there was wire, then more wire, and then mutually supporting pillboxes all sighted in on any axis of advance which had been, the War History notes, "proportioned off with geometric skill."

This was backed up with dug-in anti-tank guns, dug-in flamethrowers, and infantry ready to move from trouble spot to trouble spot. Further back Panther tank turrets were positioned and sighted to deal with anything coming over the horizon. The Germans would see any attack silhouetted against the sky.

The war history notes "Kesseling had thrown in everything he had in order to retrieve his campaign from an autumn disaster. All he could hope for were the autumn rains.

**'I am confident you will add the name of the Adolf Hitler Line to those epics of Canadian battle history'—Lieutenant-General Sir Oliver Leese**

But the First Division went in and the battle was won again. By the start of September, the division was up against the Rimini Line which led the division into a battle for a ridge near the town of Frisoni.

In this savage little action the losses on both sides were prodigious.

The German Tenth Army Commander in a report to Kesseling called the Frisoni ridge action "a battle of material of the greatest magnitude."

And in a salute to the bravery of the division soldiers, that same commander noted, "though not strong in numbers, the Canadians are right good soldiers."

The First Canadian Division slogged on through the Lombardy Plain doggedly following up the skillful fighting retreat of the German army corps.

Major-General Vokes was, no doubt, starting to think about the part his division might be called to play in Winston Churchill's cherished dream to rush the Eighth Army into Austria and the Balkans in a thrust to save the area from the Russians.

But that was not to be for Major-General Chris Vokes had shown he knew how to lead armor and men. In Holland such a man was needed and he was sent to North West Europe Nov. 16, 1944 to officially take command of the Canadian Fourth Armored Division. He assumed command Dec. 1.

As Major-General Vokes went to Europe, Lieutenant H.D.G. Crerar arrived at the front Nov. 9 after recovering from illness in Britain. He was made commander of Canadian forces in Europe and promoted to the rank of full General, the first time this was given to any Canadian officer serving in the field.

Crerar and Vokes would come to work very closely together. When the critical thrust was needed, the call would go to Vokes.

When Major-General Vokes arrived in Europe he was told to take over the Fourth Armored and rest it following its drive up the coast of Belgium and Holland.

He arrived just as Hitler sent the last of his tank and crack SS divisions off through the Ardennes offensive during Dec. 16-26.

The famous Battle of the Bulge wore itself out after the Americans held at Bastogne. Although Vokes and his men did not have to rush to the aid of their allies, they were nevertheless held on six-hour marching notice at the town of Boxtel just in case.

On Jan. 7, 1945, elements of the German Army brought self-propelled guns across the Maas River and set up a "firm base" at the town of Kalesche Veer.

An attack to throw the Germans back across the Maas failed.

Major-General Vokes was told to get his armor ready and clear the town as it posed a threat to flanks of several armies getting ready to crash into the Rhineland.

**'I think Monty rubbed it in a bit'—Chris Vokes**

The War History noted Vokes called a conference of his men Jan. 14 and "it was now evident that only a deliberate operation on a larger scale including a greater weight of supporting artillery would dislodge the enemy."

Starting with a frontal assault which the Germans would expect, Vokes also called for a double flanking thrust plus a water-

borne attack on the rear of the town.

The plan worked, and to quote the War History, when the attack was over "no German except prisoners remained alive south of the main stream of the Maas."

From Feb. 22 to March 10 the Fourth Armored was part of Operation Blockbuster, the offensive into the Rhineland which pushed the last of the Germans up to and across the Rhine River.

The complexion of the war was starting to change now.

The Fourth Armored historian noted prisoners taken after the fight for control of the Twente Canal were "grubby, dirty, slender youths, boys and old men... calibre of troops opposed is not what it used to be."

There were other fights at the Kusten Canal, Overijsselsch Canal, Coworden and Mappen.

Thrusting up into northwestern Germany and nearing Denmark, Hitler's lurid Third Reich was stamped out on May 5 with General Vokes taking the surrender of German troops at his headquarters.

May was a surrealistic time when millions of people trudged across the face of Europe. Peace had come but there was no sense of victory as one watched refugees and displaced persons fighting for a place to sleep and anything to eat.

During this period the Canadian Army tried to help with food, and cutting wood for fuel. There were instances of clashes between Germans and displaced persons.

In Major-General Vokes' sector there was a fight between German troops who had surrendered and a group of foreign (impressed) workers, but to quote the War History "quick action was taken by our authorities including, when it was necessary, a severe reprimand to the senior German commander by General Vokes which soon disposed of the problem."

Parliament had created the Canadian Army of Occupation Forces and Major-General Vokes was named General Officer Commanding of the Third Division of 853 officers and 16,983 men with headquarters at Bad Zwischenahn.

Instead of giving orders to kill Germans, Major-General Vokes now gave orders to help them and act as "ambassadors of Canada."

In an address to all men in his command he said: "As we appear, and as we conduct ourselves, so will Canada be judged both in Germany and in any other country in Europe in which we may find ourselves whether on duty or on leave."

The War History notes the army of occupation played a major part in saving millions from death and starvation during the winter of 1945, one of the worst on record.

**'Your action played a decisive part in the initial victory'—Field Marshal Sir Bernard Montgomery**

The history notes there was "never any serious difficulties with the German population who indeed seemed glad of the support for law and order provided by occupying troops."

A measure of how Major-General Vokes exercised his command can be seen from a remarkable decision he took regarding the death sentence of a German officer.

During June 8, two days after the Normandy invasion, members of the 12th SS Panzer Division murdered 45 Canadian soldiers, many of whom came from the Royal Winnipeg Rifles.

Heading up this unit was Standartenführer Kurt Meyer. SS Standartenführers were known for being particularly ruthless paragons of the Aryan ideal.

In December 1945 Meyer was tried by a Canadian Military Court in Aurich and found guilty on five charges of murder. He was sentenced to be shot.

Vokes, rather than just letting the sentence be carried out as he was certainly allowed to, reviewed the case.

He decided the responsibility for the murders was more vicarious than a direct order, and commuted the sentence to life imprisonment.

"The finding and the sentence of the court were within the law, but the severity of the sentence was not, in my opinion, in keeping with Canadian justice having regard for the degree of responsibility," GOC Vokes said in his commutation of sentence.

Meyer was released Sept. 1954. By 1946 the Canadian Government had decided it could no longer maintain an occupy-

**'Though not strong in number, the Canadians are right good soldiers'—Commander, German Tenth Army**

ing force in Europe and on May 15, Major-General Vokes handed over responsibility for his area to the British.

On June 20, 1946 the Third Division was disbanded and Major-General Chris Vokes, C.B., C.B.E., DSO, C.D. came home.

Home for Chris Vokes was to be Oakville where he was put in charge of a barracks where Canadian soldiers came before mustering out into the peacetime era.

The Ortona Barracks was the name given to the base in Oakville which honored Major-General Vokes and the part he and the First Canadian Division played during one of the first major victories the people back home in Canada could be proud of.

In this post he watched the soldiers of 1939-1945 drift out to become insurance salesmen and construction men who would launch the baby boom, to change this country and inbue it with a new, quiet nationalism.

The children of this era would never know war, only rising taxes, transfer payments; and battles would be fought over pipelines and constitutions, not the clear cuts of right and wrong, democracy versus National Socialism.

Yet through it all, Chris Vokes retained a high regard among all ranks, even those fleetingly flowing through the Ortona Barracks.

"I didn't know all the men personally," he said, "but they sure all knew me."

And that perhaps is the reason why Chris Vokes was honored June 12 by all his old comrades in the Royal Canadian Legion Branch in Oakville which bears his name.

Those under his command remember him as "old bullet head", a nickname he had never heard before it appeared in a weekly newspaper from a former enlisted man who was praising the general and entreating veterans to come to the night in Chris Vokes' honor.

"I knew they called me electric whiskers and other names but that was a new one to me," he said pausing before he talked about them, and those days of 40 years ago.

"They were all a good lot. "And I think the most difficult thing anyone can do is instill discipline in a Canadian, but once you do, you have a bloody great soldier."

Several names come to mind when he thinks of the greats and the boffins of the Second World War.

He still retains great admiration of Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, the victor in North Africa and the leader of the drive into the Rhineland.

"He had the ability to reduce the most difficult problem into its most simplistic form. "And once that was completed, he wanted it done."

"He didn't care how you did it, he wanted it done, and that was that."

The general watched the movie Patton starring George C. Scott with some amusement. In that film Patton was the confident, almost mystical, warrior leading his troops to objective after objective before Montgomery could get there.

Chris Vokes was there during the real interchanges between the two men and "I think Monty rubbed it in a bit."

On the other side of the coin was the continuing struggle with Ottawa to bring in more recruits and get them to the front so the Canadians would have enough muscle to force their victories into triumphs.

"MacKenzie King wouldn't stand for conscription at home."

"One day I was summoned to my headquarters by the Minister of Defence of the time and told the morale of my corps was terrible."

To his surprise, Vokes found out the morale problem stemmed from the constant clamoring of officers for more recruits. This minister's version of bad morale, it seems, was an extrapolation of being verbally assaulted by the men he was supposed to be speaking on behalf of in Canada.

The Minister, Chris Vokes remembers, went on to the European Theatre of Operations and got the same treatment.

"He went back to Ottawa and the next thing he was calling for conscription."

"Next thing you know he was gone. It was said King kept the filled out resignation of each cabinet minister in his desk."

"There was no way he would go for conscription so Raleston had to go."

But the message which started with Chris Vokes and the First Canadian Division in Italy could not be ignored.

"When it finally dug in, they brought in Andy MacNaughton to ease conscription in with home service."

That meant Canadians would be called up to serve on the home front and were told they wouldn't be going to war. Sooner or later, however, the troops would be sent off to Europe or Italy. It was subterfuge on the MacKenzie King scale but it worked.

And curiously Vokes could not help but notice something strange.

"I used to make it a point of asking each new soldier how he had come to be in the army."

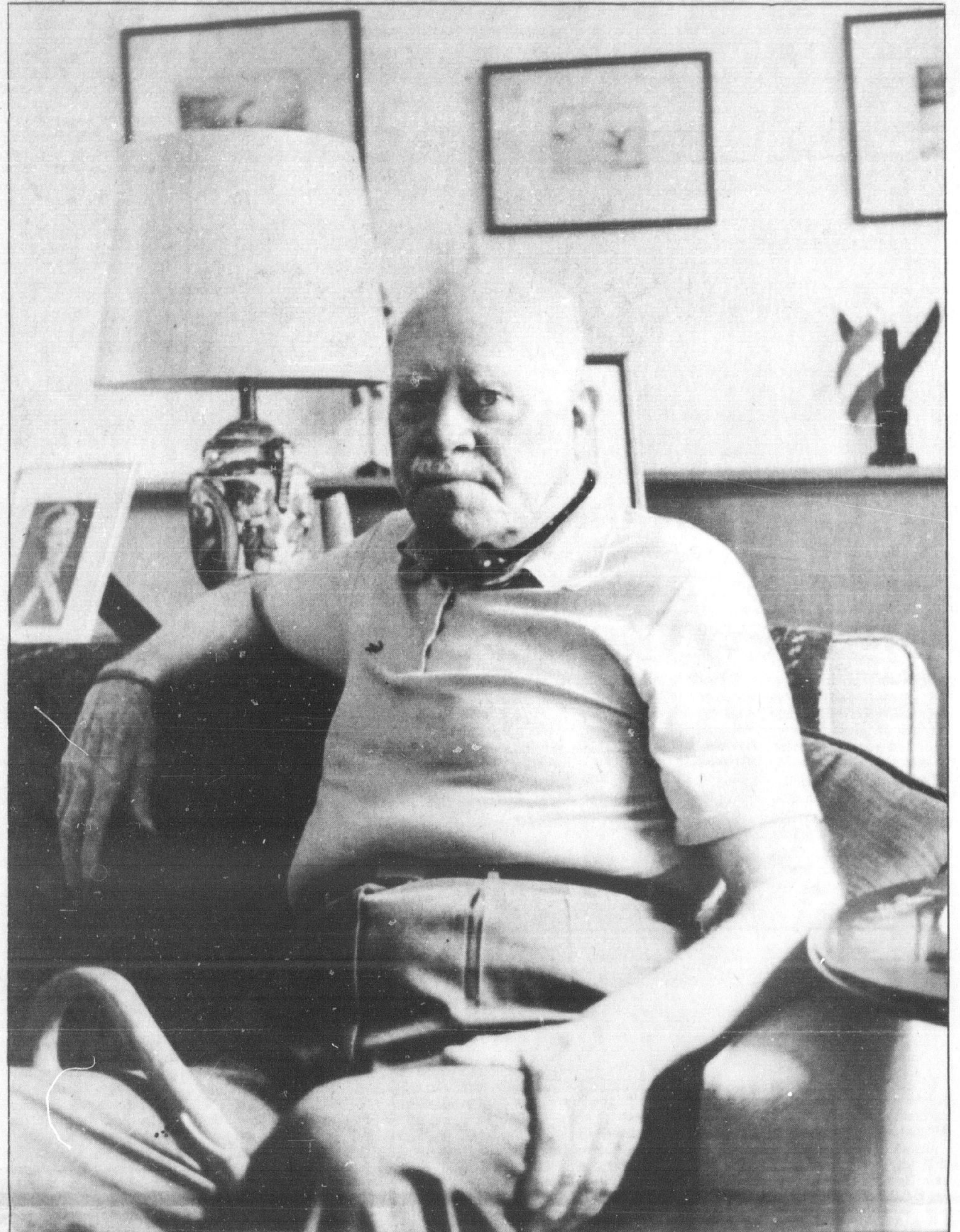
He found that there was a pre-conscription and post-conscription mentality.

"It was one of two things."

"Either their mother had told them they had not raised their son to be a soldier."

"Or the wife had said if her husband went to Europe and starting having affairs with the women, then she would at home."

**'I didn't know all the men personally but they sure all knew me'—Chris Vokes**



He is called a "magnificent Canadian." General Vokes remembers the army he commanded with admiration and respect for Canadians who he said are as good as any soldier in the field, and better than

most. The drastic reduction of the great army he so loved to today's Canadian Forces is viewed by him as a sad come down from the once great stature of the army, navy, and air force.

And then miraculously after Canada was fully committed to beating the Axis suddenly "they were proud their sons and husbands were going."

Chris Vokes has never gotten over that nor has he ever forgiven the government for watering down the Canadian army, navy and air force into the unitized Canadian Forces.

It has been stated the metropolitan police force of New York City is larger than the Canadian Forces to which Chris Vokes says, "I don't doubt that at all."

The biggest shame "is letting the army get so small. It's so small now, that if we had an emergency, we couldn't cope."

"It takes 12 months to properly train a good rifleman."

"But we couldn't do that now."

**'They should have kept at least a number of experienced leaders'—Chris Vokes**

And the reason is Canada did not keep a form of selective service like the United States where a proportion of its young men were called up annually for basic military training.

"They should have kept at least a number of the experienced leaders who could impart the lessons they learned."

He points out that such a cadre of leaders was assembled secretly by the Germans after 1918 and that blossomed into the tough and well drilled Wehrmacht of the Second World War.

He fears the commanders of the 80's may have forgotten just how many men and women it takes to put an effective force in the field.

For every soldier at the front there are probably four to five people in the rear feeding him food, ammunition, transportation, intelligence and medical help.

Then one comes to the front.

"In my time a group would be about 120 men, but you never actually had that many. "Sickness, casualties and what have you usually reduced the strength by 30 per cent, so you actually only had about 70 to 75 men at one time."

"That's the reason we were always searching for reinforcements."

If he was told today he would be in charge of the Canadian Forces tomorrow with the

mandate to bring it up to an effective force which could hold its own; he frankly admits he would not know where to begin in an age of computerized, megaton warfare.

But he does concede that any building must "start with the basic rifleman."

"Wars are still won and lost with the basic soldier."

"The most important thing any commander can do is instill discipline in his men."

"If you can do that he will have the discipline to withstand mud, cold, heat, fear and hunger."

Can rigid discipline really conquer fear? "Yes, it can," Chris Vokes says with conviction, and he can recount many times where discipline was the deciding factor.

And was Chris Vokes, the victor of Ortona, the Hitler Line, and the Kusten Canal ever afraid?

"Oh yes, many times but I had to use discipline to overcome it."

Montgomery, Patton, Crerar, Cunningham, Alexander, Eisenhower, Wavell, Bradley, Stilwell, O'Connor they're all gone, remembered by the few who served under them, brought to the baby boom generation by televised documentaries, and

existing only in detail through memoirs and official histories.

What makes a great leader?

Is it clear, blue eyes?

Is it a rich baritone voice?

Is it the sense of being in the presence of one who knows how to make a decision?

Is it the sense of being in the presence of one you know you can trust?

**'Wars are still won and lost with the basic soldier'—Chris Vokes.**

Chris Vokes is all of these, but there is something else.

It is the intangible of touching everyone with the conviction "here is a man I can follow, and who I can call leader."

And that is the essence possessed by a very few, and among the few Major-General Chris Vokes remains.



Return to Nijmegen. On May 5, 1980, Chris Vokes returned to the town his soldiers helped free. It was part of celebrations of the 35th anniversary of the liberation of Europe. General Vokes was given a rousing welcome and honored by Dutch Queen Beatrix.



Ready for Kesseling. Major-General Vokes, right, is shown before battle talking with his superior and friend Lieutenant-General Sir Oliver Leese, wearing the sweater.