

Knokke-Heist 50th Annual Canadian Liberation March



Military members taking part of the march at Hoofdplaat

During the period of 1-3 November, 35 CAF members and one British Royal Engineer from the Brunssum, Netherlands and Niederheid, Germany participated in the 50th edition of the Knokke-Heist Canadian Liberation March to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the Scheldt Estuary in Belgium and the Netherlands by Canadian, Polish and British troops. Approximately 130 Canadian teachers and family members accompanied the contingent for the numerous parades and the 33 km liberation march on Sunday 3 Nov.

The liberation of the Scheldt Estuary, also known as Operation SWITCHBACK, was conducted by the First Canadian Army and Polish 1st Armoured Division with the support of the British I Corps at the cost of over 6000 young soldiers. While securing the region was vital to the allied war effort as it opened the port of Antwerp and greatly reduce the logistics tail supporting the allied advances through Europe it was much more personal for the local population as it marked the end of the German occupation. Although the details of this crucial operation are well documented, they are not well remembered in Canada.



On parade at one of the many memorials during the weekend

I include myself within the ranks of those that did not know about this important Canadian Army operation until being posted to Europe earlier this year. The weekend of ceremonies in the Knokke-Heist area has been organized by Danny Lannoy and Dirk Overstraete for the last 50 years to ensure the region remembers the efforts of the brave soldiers. It is comprised of a number of parades in the area surrounding Knokke-Heist and concludes with the 33 km liberation march to recreate the journey of the soldiers during the liberation.



Marching through the town of Knokke-Heist



Marching towards the Freedom Museum in Knokke-Heist on Saturday night

Through every town the Canadian Contingent was greeted by streets lined with local citizens and houses, businesses and windmills flying the Canadian Flag. It was immediately clear to me that the sacrifices made by Canadian soldiers in the liberation of the region had not been in vain.



Marching through the Dutch countryside

The 33 km Sunday March begins at the allied troop landing site on beaches in the town of Hoofdplaat, Netherlands. As of this year a new plaque commemorates the starting point thanks to the generous donations by the Canadian contingent. Contrary to what you might think, the marchers walk westbound from Netherlands to Belgium along walking paths and small roads and made several wellness and parade stops along the way.

One of the stops along the route is The Hickman Bridge. This Bailey bridge, still in use today, was built under fire by Canadian Military Engineers and was critical to the success of Operation SWITCHBACK. This short stop and parade is specifically attended by the



The Engineers attending the parade at The Hickman Bridge Memorial.

Engineer members of the military contingent and for the past couple of years included the march's parade commander. This year the Royal Canadian Engineers were represented by LCol Denise Sweet, LCol Michael Watson, Maj Joe Forward, Maj Vlast Pojman and MCpl Lea-Anne Smith with Sgt Mike Brand representing the Royal Engineers. The Liberation Route Europe [webpage](#) describes the memorial as this, *"The Hickman Bridge, built by the Royal Canadian Engineers, was named by the engineers after their fallen Sergeant."*

After the completion of the bridge, Canadian troops were able to eliminate the last pockets of resistance around Knokke, finally liberating all of Belgium on 4 November."

As someone that was recently posted to Europe, I am really glad I was able to participate in this event. However, the 33 km of marching and numerous parades left many of us with sore feet, legs and backs, we were extremely lucky with the weather as we did not have any of the high winds or rain that have historically been the norm. I appreciated the camaraderie this event creates for those that participated and the efforts of Danny and Dirk to keeping this event alive. I was impressed by the For Freedom Pipes and Drums band that accompanied us for the parades, they were some of the best I've ever heard live and managed to keep us in step. I will remember the funny moments like the free Belgian waffles provided by a local restaurant while we were marching through Knokke-Heist. Nothing causes marching troops to break formation faster than free food at kilometre 32. Luckily the previous command given by the parade commander was "parade meander". I am grateful to the commitment of the participants, who volunteered to attend even though funding was cut this year and attendance was self-funded.



LCol Denise Sweet laying a wreath at the Hickman Bridge Memorial.

In all seriousness, the Knokke-Heist march is a week before the Remembrance Day ceremonies that are held across Canada, the Commonwealth, and many other countries and just reinforces the reasons for us to remember. Marching on the same soil where so

many have fallen during WWII and seeing the effort by the local population to remember and celebrate the events made me realize that here, in Europe all the impacts of the war, including the personal loss of family members and the destruction are still at the forefront of people's minds. I hope that this tradition continues for many more years, especially considering the current situation that shows us that we cannot forget and that we must be ready to protect the freedom that was one at such an immense cost.



Sources and background information

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