

My Story: The War Years

Herbert C. "Bert" Saunders



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- with much love and admiration from the family -

As written by Herbert Charles (Bert) Saunders in a notebook given for the purpose by grandson Daniel, transcribed by daughter-in-law Laurel, edited by son Bruce, Daniel, and Laurel and arranged for publication by grandson Paul for Christmas 2005, The Year Of The Veteran.

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The Day Of The Typhoon
John Golley



A page from the notebook

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Chapter 1:

Introduction

On reaching my 88th year in 2004 I was asked to write a bit about my early years for posterity. Bruce had often mentioned it, but when my grandsons, Dan and Paul, asked questions I realized how little they knew of early parts of my life. They were now 24 and 21 years old, an age when they begin to think about the past – and the future.

So how far to go back in the lives of Freda and myself? Maybe my own dad and mother. My dad was born in Redhill -1879 and my mother in Reigate -1881, towns almost adjoining in those days, in Surrey, England, now joined together. My dad took his apprenticeship on the Estate of Sir Jeremiah Colman of “Colman’s Mustard Millions” in Merstham Gardens, and on to journeyman and top gardener, after six or seven years. Regarded as too young at 26 or 27 to be a head gardener on most large estates, he decided to come to Victoria, B.C., Canada, in 1908. He’d been told that climate and conditions were much like England which is key for a gardener. In 1910, my mother followed him out to Victoria where they married as pre-arranged.

My dad had found work in several greenhouses but no big estates were available at that time. He was at Flewins Nursery across from St. Joseph’s Hospital for a few years before going out to Butchart Gardens to help out for a while.



Fred Arthur Saunders and Ethel Pink c. 1908 – England

Then he got a job to lay out the grounds and the gardens at the new Resthaven Hospital for the rich elderly in Sidney. The family lived in a tent there with my elder brother Fred, a baby of about one year old. They fished crabs from a small row boat, and had plenty of clams which were plentiful at that time. From what they told me it was a good time, although the story goes that my mother caught a rat and threw it out of the tent with her bare hands. The fear of harm coming to the baby overrode all else.

They came into Victoria where my dad had joined the band, (playing the cornet) in the 5th Cdn. Army Brigade and was working at Brown's Nurseries at Esquimalt. Also the First Great War had started and he was slated to go overseas. It became a reality and I was born in April 30th 1916 and my dad left for Britain when I was three weeks old.



Ethel on the porch of Aunt Polly's Duncan home

My mother and Fred and I soon moved up to Duncan and lived with my Aunt Polly, as my uncle (Jim Saunders) also went overseas.



A postcard to the front – brothers Fred & Bert at 4 years & 8 months

Fortunately they both came back OK in late 1919, and my dad went to the Empress Hotel and worked as Head Gardener for 30 years. After the War he joined the 16th Scottish Regimental Band.

My brother Jim was born September 10th, 1920. I had a dad at last after three years, and now another brother. Our family lived

first in the Cloverdale area. I still remember that on our nights out I would fall asleep on the streetcar (the line ending at Cloverdale) and be carried by Dad down Cloverdale Avenue to Bethune Street to our small house, about two more blocks further. Fred started at Quadra Street School just around the corner.

We soon moved to 1818 Leighton Road, a small house near Bank Street School and near both Fort or Oak Bay streetcars. Easier for Dad to get to work.



Bank Street School Div III

Later I started at Bank Street School, attended it for only three grades, then joined Fred at Boy's Central School, and on to Vic High. I skipped Grade 7 when I was 13 but then took four years to finish the three year commercial course. I was good at all things except the necessary ones. Not bad at bookkeeping, English, history, but after almost four years I knew I would never get a passing mark on typing, so I quit, preferring greenhouse work.

I had always been interested in plants, flowers, and all types of gardening and, leaving Vic High in June 1933, I was accepted at Brown's Nurseries to apprentice in flower growing. Also worked with tomato and



Astride "Old Tom". Several summers were enjoyably spent on Aitken's farm in Duncan till 1933

cucumber growing under glass, as well as roses, carnations, and freesias. We also forced bulbs, such as tulips etc. for early blooming.

After three and a half years I took on another job at Ballantine's Greenhouses on Quadra as carnation grower. I worked there for three and a half years until the call for volunteers for the army. Things looked serious and in 1940, after my 24th birthday, I enlisted.

16th Scottish Regimental Band on the steps of the Victoria Legislative Buildings - Fred Saunders



My dad was so disappointed that it was war time again after he had fought “the war to end all wars”. Now, 20 years later, it was happening again.

I had a nice Willys car that was almost new when I bought it in 1939. My mother and dad reduced my rent so I could pay off the car. It was \$750.00 to buy and I still had a debt of \$250.00 to pay. I chose the Work Pt. Barracks Ack-Ack (Anti-Aircraft) Artillery as I would be in Victoria for training, and could still use my car. I was able to take Dad, Mom, and the dog on outings and found I had some left out of the \$1.40 a day to escort my wife-to-be, Freda, to a show and ice cream. It was Depression years so things were cheap: 20 or 25 cents for a show and 10 cents for large milkshake. The army was easier work than greenhousing from 7:30 a.m. to 5 for six days of the week – and Sunday if needed, for no more than “Thank you.”



At Somemos Lake

The new recruit
(wearing the lanyard of the anti-aircraft service)
with the family dog, Jerry





Freda and Bert in Beacon Hill Park 1939

Chapter 2: The Engineers

There was the offer of training at the Vancouver Trade School. I had had a bit of pipe fitting around the greenhouse so I put in for the plumbing and pipe fitting class. Soon I was off to Vancouver for a three month course. It proved a very fine and worthwhile surprise. I got good marks and was told I was wasting time in the greenhouse business and should see the instructor “if” I ever got out of the army. I didn’t take it seriously as I had my own plans by that time. “If??” But it gave me 25 cents per day extra as class C trades pay.

I found myself automatically in the Engineers instead of the Artillery and was shipped off to Dundurn, Sask. Had to sell the car, no more weekend leaves. Goodbye to Freda and Mum’s cooking and back into “basic training” – an introduction to the Bailey Bridge and other serious but interesting training.

The weather was not as good in Saskatchewan. Always a wind, even though hot and dry, meaning you seemed to be chewing sand all day. The sand dunes were all around and constantly moving.

In the fall of 1941 we found ourselves in a group of 50 picked to go overseas, told we would have a short leave to say goodbye. It was a short leave, three days home and not a word what direction we were going. We decided on the train that we would take four days, as

we were all from Greater Vancouver, Victoria and the Island. A sad farewell to family, friends, girl friends or wives. I bought two cards, one with a “bear” (code for heading to China) and one with a “deer” (for England). Luckily it was a “deer”. The Hong Kong option proved a disaster for those who went there. They were almost immediately overwhelmed by the Japanese and those who survived were incarcerated in terrible conditions for the rest of the war.

I was able to post the card on the way East. I should mention that we got only a “confined to barracks” for “missing” our train.

It was a dull trip on the old style trains – seats laid down and bunks pulled down to make two deep each side. Even worse on ship, “Duchess of Atholl.” We promptly named it “The Athole of the World.”

Next day we received word that two of our lads were taken off sick from the train and had been diagnosed with scarlet fever, so off to a large hut in Halifax to await a trip to the Debert Camp in Nova Scotia. It was early November of 1941. We were quarantined in tar-paper covered shacks and soon learned we had mumps among us and would be in for Christmas and New Year’s with no chance of leave. Those who were not sick made the best of it. We had a few route marches for exercise when weather permitted, plus sneaked out at nights (after we got to know the gate guards) to a nearby village. Also got a feel of the real cold weather and had to be careful of ears, face and fingers in 20 below. I learned to be lazy, wrote letters, played cards etc. and generally had a good rest as well as a not too exciting Xmas and New Year. It got a bit monotonous at times till around the end of January, when we were told we were all better and to pack. Off to Halifax harbour again.

On the ship, all was newly painted. It looked good, till we found, down in the hold or lowest deck, we were wading through water to get to the bathroom. It had been a German ship that was in the New York harbour since the First World War. It was detained there and set aside, pulled up to Halifax, and fixed up - so they thought!

It sprang a few more leaks as it began to take on more of a load. We would go to the big mess hall upstairs and water would be shooting from a pipe across the tables. With quick work these leaks were fixed up. We untied from the dock and dropped anchor in the middle of the harbour where barges came alongside loading us with coal for the engine room for a few days.

Off we went for a trip out as other ships came in covered with ice. We waved goodbye to Canada. However, we soon turned around and came back to tie up to the dock. We learned later, the captain was taking a trial run and a boiler was leaking. A refit was called for. (Not much of a surprise.)

Where to put 4000 people while they did the refit? The top decks, all the commissioned officers along with a good few nurses we had not even seen before, unloaded first. The riff-raff were in the bottom decks in hammocks, not allowed up except for alerts. At that point all of us in the lower part of the ship took turns marching up to the YMCA to have a bath in the pool or at least have a swim. You can imagine what the water looked like after the first day, but it was better than nothing.

We were off on a train about a week later with no information as to where to, but soon we found ourselves in such deep snow as we, from the West, had never seen



Winter sports in Quebec while waiting for our third ship

before. We landed in Valcartier Camp in Quebec, not far from Quebec City, on the wide part of the St. Lawrence River.

Boy! This travelling was great. Three weeks of skiing and snowshoeing in the winter playground of Quebec! Free, even getting paid for it! One day a few trucks took us for a day to Quebec City and back. We lost a few men to the winter sports, off to hospital with sprained ankles and broken bones as we tried to copy the French soldiers expertly skiing down the slick slopes.

It was over by the end of February. Back to Halifax again and onto the Orion, a ship from Australia loaded with canned fruit and meat etc. Off the next morning with one other ship and two small destroyers on March 1st, 1942 - almost two years since I had joined the army.

Good ships but small, and March is a rough time to cross. We were over in eight days instead of the twelve it would have taken in a large convoy. A convoy can only go as fast as the slowest ship. We moved more quickly and zig-zagged to avoid subs getting a bead on us.

We hit the bad stuff off Newfoundland. Our hammocks were packed like sardines in a can, swinging so hard that one hammock came off the hook at the head end. The chap was taken up to the doctor for about ten stitches to a split scalp.

It was around this area we got to see a bit of action. We had a destroyer on each side of our two ships, and during the day a plane circled above to spot submarines. We were all designated battle stations on ship in case there was any enemy action. The bells went off. From our stand-to position we saw both destroyers tearing over to where a flare was dropped, both crossing and recrossing and dropping depth charges. We were against the side of the ship and each explosion was like a sledge hammer hitting the metal at the back of us. The explosions may have been almost a quarter of a mile or one-sixth of a mile away, so I could imagine being on the receiving end of those charges. It was reported later that an oil slick was seen after but no proof that the sub was destroyed. Word was that oil is sometimes let go by subs to give the wrong idea while they sit silent down low...

The weather got even worse after we left the shelter of Newfoundland and sickness was all over making floors slippery, in spite of trying to mop up. Getting out of your hammock was hard, as shoes had to be put on and cleaned off after a trip to the bathroom. Enough to make you join the majority of the sick. Maybe because

I had done plenty of rough weather fishing on the west coast I was OK, but many were sick all the way. Some even kept it up for a few days after landing.

Only one more stand-to off of the North of Ireland but possibly a false alarm as no action.

On reaching the Clyde Estuary after unloading quite a few of the troops, our group was left aboard to go all the way up the Clyde to Glasgow. Shipyards were going full blast at the time. In some places we passed so close to buildings you could talk to people waving from windows. All very interesting, after seeing nothing for eight days but the sea, on the few times we were allowed to go up for a bit of air. Took us all day before tying up and the ship had much to unload, including the rest of the troops. We were transferred to a train that took off late at night for parts in the south of England.

In the morning we were a bit surprised to see so many green fields, hedges and lovely green trees of all kinds. Not overcrowded unless going through cities or towns. Plenty of chimneys and row houses in those parts.

We of the Engineers landed up in Farnham, near Aldershot. It was a holding and training camp for all new Engineers. More basic training on the parade ground and much more Bailey bridge work. Also a chance to upgrade our trades pay from any C class to B class. I took advantage of that, and was surprised to find that the test was a few questions and the task of wiping a brass ferrule to a lead pipe which I had been good at earlier in training. So an extra 25 cents per day for B class. The holding unit singled out and sent out tradesmen to any units understaffed in any of those particular skills.

Chapter 3:

8th Engineers

The 8th, 9th Field Squadron and 6th Field Park of the Royal Engineers, 4th Canadian Armoured Division [see appendix] were formed up in Toronto and Regina and had come over around the 8th or 9th of June 1942 to the UK. About 15 of us from B C were needed for the 8th Fld and around the same number picked for the 9th. They were a Heavy Armoured Div which meant 40 ton tanks such as Shermans and Churchills.

I was in the 8th Field stationed at the time at East Horsley, and everyone was new to England. No sooner were we settled than it was announced we were being sent to the holding unit for “basic training”... Ever argued with a Sergeant Major?? It’s like kids telling a school principal how to run a school. “But we’ve just been through all that” – “Get blankety-blank!! packing! A bit more will do you good.” So back on the parade square and Bailey bridging and thoroughly “basically trained” for the 4th or 5th time if you counted Canada.

For nearly two years we were moved from place to place on all types of training. Building Bailey bridges on rivers of all kinds: too slow or too fast, tidal or non tidal. Then many nights bridge work till we could put all sizes of bridge up and take them down blindfolded. Then much minefield training and some months of building



A Double Single Bailey bridge (over the Somme in France)
see Appendix for bridge terms

underground secret forts, in case of invasion. These huts were complete with beds and meals and all provisions, as well as hidden entrance and exits.

We also lost a few men in training in England. Moving from place to place gave us motor transport training as we moved as much as possible at night with no lights except one or two red lights tucked under the back end of the trucks and dispatch riders (DRs) on motorcycles to assist. Our truck drivers travelled close to follow the red light of the one ahead but DRs had to dash past all the convoy to cut traffic off at each crossroad. We had many DRs killed or injured. Also on bridgework at night there were injuries, as in mine and booby trap work. But we learned, and in time were glad. It may be mentioned here that we were told not to sleep under a tank or heavy trucks to get out of the rain. In one tank outfit, two died under a tank as it settled on soft ground. No amount of jacking up could get them free in time.



Photos in England



(above) No. 1 Troop
- in centre, Stan Styles, the professional photographer travelling with us who unofficially took most of the accompanying photos

(left) Section 3
(Bert lower right)

(below) Dispatch Riders (DRs)
a dangerous job
(photo taken in France)



During the last year I had been handed a first stripe, making me a Lance Corporal, after about three of us and a Sergeant were picked to go around teaching infantry divisions how to lay or retrieve mines in fields. After this point I soon had two stripes as corporal in charge of a section of 10-12 men. Also in December of 1943, I had a three-and-a-half week course at Ripon in Yorkshire with the English Engineers' Camp on bridging, mines, and booby traps. It was taught by NCOs, returned men from North Africa and Italy. Every kind of German and Italian mine or booby trap known to them was there. A house was booby trapped with small firecracker charges that would go off if you did things wrongly. A good course.

By this time the "V-1"s were coming over England in ever increasing numbers. At one time I counted ten going up past us in the sky. They sometimes fell short, or were chased and shot down by spitfire planes – a dangerous action as they had to fire and veer away or be caught in the blast as the self-propelled bomb exploded.

Talk of invasion was around, as well as clear signs of preparation such as the building of large trenches, concrete-lined, to be filled with water to test the water-proofing of vehicles so that we would be prepared for beach landings.



The remains of a V-1 self-propelled bomb
(this one pictured in Atwerp, Belgium)



The ruins of Caen – August 1944



Map - August 1944 - Caen, France

Chapter 4: France

Finally we were off again. We heard about D-Day so knew we were on our way to France. There were delays as we got near the English Channel because of weather and difficulties but we made the crossing soon enough. We were landed from the dry Arromanches “floating pier” in late July. Off to the back of Caen, where enemy planes came over every night dropping their bombs. Then a shelling from guns first thing towards daylight every morning. The flack from our anti-aircraft barrages gave us much trouble as it fell. It seemed, at times, as bad as the bombings.

We had two picks and two shovels for each section - our most popular tools when pulling in to a new place to sleep. Digging a slit trench to sleep in was the first



Tracer bullets in the night sky near Caen and a typical well dug slit trench



thing to do. With my section of 10, each man wanted to get hold of those precious tools. Then a spot of gas splashed in and lit to kill any ants etc. before it got dark, throw in our ground sheet and a couple of blankets and hope for the best.

Our first job at that time was to haul rubble from war-torn Caen over the river to fix up or rebuild damaged roads or to fill in soggy stretches where trucks and tanks would sink in. We really dug our slit trenches in deep as we were amongst artillery, 5.5 inch field guns which carried on a battle with enemy artillery across the river about 4:30 a.m. each morning, so we were frequently on the receiving end of enemy shelling.



Bert and Jim – Army and Airforce - taken in Redhill England in late '43

After around two or three weeks, one night I heard a call, “Hey! Saunders, a guy here is looking for you.” What a surprise! Brother Jim was servicing fighter planes a mile or two at the back of Caen on a small makeshift airstrip. They had bicycles brought over with them. He

and a pal heard that engineers of 4th Division were up a distance from them and decided to take a look. Their blue uniforms were covered with dust so looked like the colour of the Germans, and they had shots fired over-head charging them to stop for examination.

Surprise was hardly the word to see him! Apparently they were there for just a month as the war was beginning to move up, then back to England at Gatwick Airport again for fighter planes. They had been bombed and strafed a time or two and runways had to be repaired time and time again. Later Jim said they never received any recognition of ever being in France on his medals of service. How long does it take to get killed? He was in the War Zone and he should have been credited.

Censored postcard home from the front to Uncle Arthur, "getting quite a bang out of it..." Censored by Ward



Just a little later one of the 5.5 inch Field Artillery guns had a breach explosion where the charge and shell explode. The gun fragments flew in all directions killing two in the pit and wounding others. Luckily it was 4:30 to 5 a.m. and we were below ground sleeping except for the guards. One big piece went through the door of our truck – took out the steering wheel and the other front door. We had our large piles of kit bags and other great coats etc. up top, so one pile got torn and messed up badly, two of our men slightly injured.

While we worked on the road, shells flew back and forth overhead. New recruits joining us would say, “Are those ours or theirs?” The answer was “Doesn’t matter, as long as they don’t fall short.”

An excerpt from page 27 of our 4th Div. Engineer book, Green Route Up:

“A rare scene witnessed in 9th Fld. sqn. – a 17 cm shell landed 200 yds. from camp, bored its way 5 ft. into the ground shot up 150 yds. into the air, changed direction about 30 degrees, landed at the end of a line of vehicles and came to rest 3 ft. short of a stone wall behind the orderly room.”

Note: Some shells are Armour piercing and do not explode on contact.

“One sapper in the 8th Fld. can boast of a 88 mm shell exploding on top of his slit trench without so much as scratching him. Two men of the 8th Sqn. were injured when an Artillery 5.5 gun exploded nearby from premature detonation. All units took a fair hammering from heavy artillery fire but the 8th Fld. probably took the toughest session of

all, as on several occasions were pounded from 1 and 2 hours by enemy mediums but, being well dug in, had no casualties.”



Tank rigged with flails to trigger mines

At around eleven p.m. on Aug. 7th, 1100 Royal Air Force heavy guns pounded enemy targets immediately in front of us for about one-and-a-half to two hours. We had packed and formed up in lines to put in an attack. We followed tanks equipped with flails, chains that beat the ground to explode anti-personnel mines, and with electric light beams. The large beams on tanks and trucks were to blind the enemy, hiding us and the infantry from direct fire. Soon prisoners were streaming past us. The odd truck or tank was seen burning or out of condition from hits. Our detachment went through on the left in half-tracks with about 600 lbs. of explosives in the back with the six men. Three in the cab – my driver, machine gunner and myself – nine men in all. Sitting under me was a box of 24 detonators, with only a small pillow between.



Destroyed vehicles pushed to the side of French roads

Our job was, on reaching Falaise, to blow trenches for the tanks on the high ground above Falaise so they would be sheltered in a position where they could cut off the retreat of the enemy. We were going across country, not on roads, so some of our crews had to deal with any spots that were blocked or to fill with bundles of hessian (rolls of branches and wire, the English called them “bundles of palings”) any holes or small streams too deep for trucks etc.

Unfortunately we were bombed by our own heavy bombers, not once but twice. We were mistaken for the line of enemy tanks and trucks trying to get down and around us to the right of our lines as we went south. Luckily for us we went through along with the lead tanks and the bombing was behind us and caught our follow-up supply line. Once the lead plane dropped his flair and load, the rest of his group followed suit. It caused much damage – casualties to men and equipment. A direct hit on our Quarter Master truck killed SQMS Forster, wounded three sappers and Lance Sgt Robson of our No. 1 troop. I had left the youngest member of our section, Sapper Tibble, behind as we were limited to nine because of space with supplies etc. He said later, “Next time take me with you, it’s safer.”

We did not really have a picnic. For some time it was an unbelievable mess with burning tanks of both sides while daylight came on and plenty of overhead bursting shells all over. My 2IC (second in command) in back turned out bad. He pulled one of the smaller chaps over him in back of the half-track to shelter him from shrapnel. A decided no-no! When at last we pulled in to stop, after about 27 hours of continuous heat and disaster which took its toll out of all of us, a DR came up ordering the stop. The small fellow on the receiving end of the treatment in back came to me with his rifle shaking saying, "If you don't tell that damned (so and so) to lay off me, I'll kill him." After, I had what I can only state was a very tough talk with this damned fellow.

I should give an idea here of what some incidents were like. Later in the afternoon we were going past, or through, the odd small village or farm. The roads were a bit above ground level. Just past a building, a jeep with four dead Germans was half on and off the road. One of the soldiers was lying across the middle of the road and had been rolled flat by a few tanks of ours. Going over him, our half-track cab (with just a canvas over top and armour about a quarter inch thick each side, a flap of steel over the windshield and small slits to see through) filled up with blow flies, many wanting to settle on hands, face etc. When we were nearly at the top of a small hill, we saw a tank battle going on plus a burning plane, so came to a stop. A DR came up shouting "Get the hell back behind the building you came by, till this is over." Rolling back to a flat space, I got out to direct our driver to get turned around. At the same time Jerries were coming out of bushes with their hands up to surrender. For some time we just signalled them to fall in and get back on their own, having no time to bother. This they did. We got around OK and back over the black patch on the road with our cab again full of

blow flies. At the back of the shed we had a breather (doors opened, flies cleared) to wait for the OK from a DR to start rolling. Another load of flies trying to stick to our sweating faces. I'm still very alarmed or nervous of blow flies. This was the time I picked up the original "Safe Conduct" leaflet for German prisoners to wave on surrendering.



"Safe Conduct" leaflets were dropped over France in the Falaise gap area to explain conditions of surrender – to both sides!

Back to the war – after a short night of trying to sleep we were off again. Cleared a very small group of mines at one place with a lull in the battle general. We learned we were to find a better stopping place as we had to wait for a day or two for fresh tanks to come up, as many had been lost. Our troop officer, John Ward, came up to give us news etc. He then said, “Where is (so-and so)?” Answer – “I don’t know, fellows say he dropped off at a small town and did not get back to the truck in time.” Ward – “I heard you had trouble with him.” I agreed (news travels fast). Ward – “How would you like Frank Concordia for a 2IC?” I told him it would be a pleasure. It was a great relief for me as we had always been the best of friends.

Ward told me of the 9th Fld Section that ran into an 88mm shell, the kind from most Nazi tank guns, which blew up their half-track as they tried to clear a road block. Sgt Neil, the sargeant in command of the section, and 11 sappers were killed when the 200 lbs. of explosives they carried exploded. Only five identifiable bodies were found.

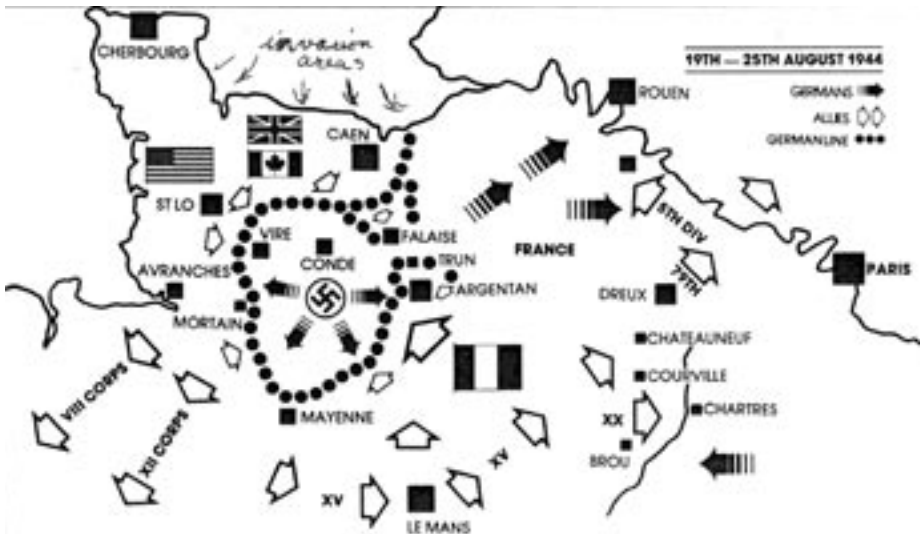
We later learned that the 9th Fld took a worse beating from the air - “friendly fire” as we call it now - first from U.S. bombers and a second attack on them by Halifax heavy bombers. One circled the area three times before dropping his 2000 pounder and buried nine men from HQ 9th Fld Sqn as they lay well-dispersed in slit trenches. All were dug out, or climbed through, five of them taken to hospital. Two other 6th Fld Park had two injured by bomb splinters. 8th lost only one sapper, as two 60 cwts (small trucks) were completely destroyed back at HQ. In another area, also a mix-up on bombers, as we were trying to outflank the German retreat to join the US troops. Lt. Jennings was killed also one sapper, Sgt. Nicol and LSgt McLeod were injured.

These incidents caused some delays, which in turn, caused a change of plans. Our new job was to move further east to blow bridges over the Dives River at Trun. 8th Fld was given four bridges. My section had one in about the centre of Trun. We arrived at about dusk and set to work while a couple of my men checked out all houses around to clear out any civilians. Our orders were that all bridges were to be blown at 4:30 a.m. We were all set by 3:30 or 4:00. Lt. Ward drove up to check. "Where are your beehives?" Answer - "Don't need them - no steel, only a stone and concrete bridge." Ward - "Put them on, we want to get rid of them." I connected them.

"Beehives" are shaped charges of a large size, around 16 lbs. They were often used to drill a hole to set a big charge that would blow a larger hole to "dig in" a tank for instance. We connected and tested all currents again, having electrical detonators. We ran out the whole roll of lead wire about 800 feet or more to a covered lean-to at back of a good building.

We blew right on time - 4:30 a.m. Looking out it seemed rock and pieces of bridge were all in the air. Realizing we had only a metal roof over the lean-to we were in, we pressed against the wall and hoped for the best. No large chunk hit our roof, but on walking down, most houses around were missing all their tile roofs. No sign of the bridge but a large hole fast filling with water. A Frenchman came running up to us jumping and calling, "Come-come!!" He took us around the back of a two or three story house where the whole back wall was missing. He was pointing up to a bed two floors above. He woke up to a missing wall beside the bed. Our checkers had only called out but no stairs were climbed. Later we heard that only five bridges were blown - three out of four for the 8th and two of five for the 9th Fld. Just as well!!

In spite of our many mishaps it is recorded that the Falaise Gap was the first real success to change the war on the ground and have the enemy on the run. The bridges not blown by the 9th, oddly, were not their fault. The Germans blew three because they were afraid we would attack across the Dives River. Lt. Renolds ran over a mine at one bridge and German machine guns fired on them. They lost two men who were wounded and had to be hospitalized. Luckily again, more by luck than anything, my section seemed to be in the right place to escape trouble.



German forces surrounded by the Allies. I blew a bridge in Trun.

In assessing Falaise Gap, we learned later that 50,000 enemy got through before completing the campaign. Against this – in a 20 mile area, 30,000 Germans were killed and 92,000 prisoners taken, many of them wounded. On top of this, besides the four Panzer divisions of men and tanks, trucks and other supplies and equipment trapped within the enclosure, those who got through with horse-drawn vehicles soon clogged all

roads from Falaise to the Seine River. This added up to a staggering defeat of 240,000 killed or wounded and 210,000 taken prisoner. Up to the Seine River the winning side included 3,500 pieces of artillery and some 15,000 tanks total for all U.S., British, and Canadian units, as well as a small Polish division.

In writing about this period of the trip up to the Seine, what we saw apparently was going on along all roads. All could be blamed on Hitler's orders to finally take the attack up into Normandy rather than follow the advice of his generals to hold at the Seine. To quote Andy Rooney's "My War" : "It was the worst slaughter of the war, a massacre vastly more deadly for the German soldier than D-Day was for ours." He added, "the roads were being hammered by artillery from side hills, but the P47s were strafing from the air." All stories mention the cart horses that bolted and bucked, dragging dead or dying over the top of men trying to walk their way out of it.

Our 8th and 9th along with a bulldozer and trucks were "leap-frogging" up Green Route Up. A team would work at clearing and de-mining, filling, and making the route passable for tanks and vehicles moving up this main road, while other teams would go around by side roads and start work ahead on their stretch, leaving a sign on the main road indicating where they started. This way several crews could be working at once and progress was faster.

The RAF Typhoon fighters were the fastest ground-level tank, train, and truck destroyers. They attacked with rockets fired in twos or fours from under their wings with great accuracy and destroying power. Our own troop had a taste of them on one occasion a few weeks before the Falaise Gap run. Two Typhoons attacked a couple

of German trucks that had been captured and used by our artillery to bring up ammunition for their guns – a bad thing to do. We had pulled in for the night under trees in a field nearby. They hit both trucks. Luckily we were not seen by the Typhoons. From our vantage point we watched the bombs exploding and the German trucks engulfed in fire.

To get back. It was these Typhoons along with other types of planes strafing that turned the roads into a mass of trucks, carts, horses, and corpses. Our job was to bulldoze all this off the roads to get our tanks through. This meant cutting the harness off most of the bloated horses. One pair of cart horses were still upright between two trees beside the road. We had to cut one tree down and cut the harness off the horses before bulldozing wagon and horses into the bush and trees. The smell was more than most could take, even with wet handkerchiefs or rags across our face and nose. Many vomited.

Our book “Green Route Up” reports one occasion: “Lt. Pyke’s recce car got stuck in the belly of a dead horse in the ditch, flooded with recent rains. In recovering it, the spinning wheels splashed rotten guts, crawling with maggots over poor sappers helping, who were already sick enough to die.”

Strangely enough, there were the lighter sides. We came across some vehicles with cases of booze of all kinds. Also one large box of money which we helped ourselves to. We lined up the cases of vodka or Calvados and rye at the side and a bottle went to each tank as they slowly moved up to the area we had cleared. One of the bulldozers had cleared a narrow space up one side so other groups of about ten men could be working on forward areas – and so on. By the end of the day we

pulled into the first clear spot that came up, a small farm. We had two prisoners working or going along with us. After giving them a drink we posted our guards for the night. Securing the prisoners in a shed, we chose our own bottles and settled down to eat.

Revived a bit, I had a bottle of orange-flavoured brandy in a blue bottle, a French drink I had sampled at one time in Canada. I managed to have a very good sleep.

Unfortunately so did the whole camp including our guards and prisoners! So Lt. Ward who had gone back to HQ to report and receive orders, was not pleased at all when he walked into a quiet camp. No cooks or breakfast. So there was hell to pay. But he was also understanding. There was no bad trouble except sickness. I was picked to corral as much liquor as possible and to be sure it was not dished out unless Lt. Ward gave his OK to do so.



A pontoon bridge over the Seine in France – a Double Single Bailey

We arrived at Elbeuf on the Seine River where a bridge had been started, a job of our 4th Div. Engineers, 6th, 8th, and 9th. All were into stages of dysentery and many were lined up at a doctor's tent on hand. Shells began to settle in, more by enemy artillery. The Seine being a wide river, we had to use a pontoon bridge which made it vulnerable to shrapnel etc. pontoons that were hit low by flying pieces could sink a bit, and needed to be replaced.

The 6th Fld Park's bulldozer driver Sapper Marchment was killed while working on the far side of the river, and Sapper Hore from Fld. Park took over on the dozer under heavy shell fire. He was observed at this time by a French General and received the Croix de Guerre – the only Canadian sapper to do so as far as I know.



"Spr. Hore – Croix de Guerre. One of the bulldozer operators whose individual efforts were nothing short of magnificent"

Moving on, my Section was on roads and verges, clearing before the trucks and tanks went on. Still having bowel trouble even after good doses of Epsom salts. "Gosh Doc, that's the last thing we need!" Answer "That's to clear out infection completely (which it did!!) and a couple of opium tablets to settle things down."

We picked up a few Teller mines on a turn in the road, but detected mostly shrapnel on the sides, until we heard German voices in a bush at the back of a clearing. All of us went on the alert. It sounded like wounded but you can never be sure... I said I was going in towards a large tree near the edge of the bush. Frank Concordia offered to go too. "OK take the other tree," as we called "Come on out." They answered "Come on. Come on." Our six more fellows and our driver had the safety catches off on their rifles to fire into the bush if anyone opened fire, but kept away from the two trees. From behind the tree I called "Schmeisser?" the only German word I knew. The answer was "Nein, nein." There were two of them in a bit of a dip in the ground – both with bad leg wounds. We grabbed one under the arms and he screamed so loud we dropped him. Frank and I looked at each other, picked him under the arms again (he passed out then) and dragged him to the road. We told the others to bring the last one out and hoped a Jeep or empty truck would pass by in the right direction.

Nothing came. It began to rain, our detectors got wet, also supper time had passed and no time to finish the area we had to travel. With all our gear and equipment we had no place to lay out the two of them, we so passed by. I decided to get a Jeep ambulance.

We got back to our troop, reported to Lt. Ward that we had not completed our tour up as far as our area. "OK get something to eat." I explained I was going up

first before it was too dark to pick up the two wounded Germans. He said "Leave them." I said, "I can't do that. They will be dead by morning. The fellow we pulled out first had his foot at least 12 inches out from end of his pants [detached from the rest of his leg]." Ward repeated, "Leave them."

Frank, standing near, said "I'll go with you." With that Ward threw up his hands, saying, "The tanks go through at 8:00 in the morning so it means you'll have to be out before breakfast." I answered, "It will be done." He turned, and walked off. We had challenged a direct order but he was an understanding officer (they are few).

We had two Jeep ambulances on the road outside, opposite our field, beside a prisoner cage or wire for temporary holding. The drivers argued that they were not supposed to go beyond the turn-off where mines had been picked up. After being told it was all cleared beyond that, they finally agreed on one Jeep. It was dark but we had no trouble and I hoped they both got to a hospital in time.

To disobey an order was not the thing to do but Ward was a good sort. I have always felt I took a chance, but I am happy about this incident, especially when later, both I and Lt. Ward lost a lower leg and foot on "Schu" mines. After being wounded later, I realized what it was for them to be left for many hours or maybe days before being picked up. In the majority of cases a badly wounded man was no longer your enemy. It's true, though, that many on both sides, then and now, would not agree with that theory.

A few days more of road work then a search for where to cross the Somme. It was decided to cross near Abbeyville and Pont Remy where four bridges had been blown where the river broke up into several branches. The 9th Fld had the first three to build – a 60'D.S., 40'S. S. and 70'D.S. 8th Fld had the last and largest 90'D. S. to complete the crossing. At 1205 hrs, our 8th Fld completed the 90 feet. These were the first across the Somme in WWII to allow the Allies to move ahead.

We had a good dip in a spot on the Somme River – not allowed, but the bath was much needed. It was only the second clean up we'd had as the mobile shower caught us only once. Then we were able to bring up the material to start building, even though we had to wait till the first 60' bridge was completed. So by September 4 all squadrons moved across the Somme expecting to have a bit of a rest. The rest was short as we found little resistance and were ordered to move up to Belgium on the 5th.

One of the changes for me at this time was that I was ordered to move to the 9th Fld as a Recce (re-connaissance) Sgt. I requested a hearing as I felt it was



Frank Concordia takes over No. 3 Section of Ward's No.1 Troop when I go to No. 9 Fld as Recce Sargeant Sept 6 as we were heading into Belgium

not good changing squadrons. I felt changing horses in the middle of a stream was not a good idea. It was explained that the 9th Fld had lost all too many NCOs and were short, especially on Recce Sgts., and my training in December of 1943 was for this eventuality. I was also told that because of changing squadrons in the line of duty I would not lose rank, unless for some good reason. I should have insisted that this be put in writing, but that's another story. In 8th fld., Frank Concordia took charge of Sec. 3 of the troop.



The Ward Bridge at Pont Remy, France. This was the forth built in one day by the combined 8th and 9th. The 9th Fld built one 60DS which we had to use to get our construction materials across to our site. Then they built their two smaller bridges while we completed our 90DS. Total time for all four bridges – 9 hours, 30 minutes – and much of that time in darkness!

Chapter 5: Belgium

The 9th Fld was a good outfit and had as much, or at times more, tough work than the 8th. I enjoyed my new freedom, working on my own mostly. Drawing any driver or type of truck, armoured car or Jeep needed from M.T. (Motor Transport). My promotion was noted in my pay book, September 6th 1944, with a 30 cents per day pay raise.



Map of Belgium - Early Sept '44

We had very little hold up on the trip to Belgium. Even the marking of roads and verges was passed over because we were moving through quickly. We found that all the bridges still intact on the Ghent Canal were blown by the enemy as we approached Bruges. A strong force of about 2000 of them had decided to make a stand. We recce officers had a quick look at Moerbrugge and Lt. Pyke killed one German but was wounded by 88 shrapnel. He had a cast on his wrist, broken a few days before, so was evacuated. Lt. Rollefson, and Sgt. Toole made another recce and decided to stake the bank seat to build a bridge. Sapper Kauger from 6th Fld started knocking down a few brick walls for the bank seats and all our equipment was unloaded before early morning.

Several times we took small arms fire and mortars while we were on the working parties. The Germans counter-attacked, got through the Argyles – a Canadian Scottish Regiment – on a bridgehead, right to the far bank. A bridgehead is usually an area secured by the Infantry on the opposite side of a river. During the day, tanks came up on our bridge site and drove the enemy back. The #2 Troop of 9th Fld had started on approximately September 12th and moved across and on to Moerkerke on September 13. #3 and #1 Troops came in at noon to relieve #2 troop for a much-needed rest. I was with #3 troop. During this changeover ten sappers from the #3 troop were wounded and evacuated. Others with slight wounds stayed on. The bridge was completed but a very tough job. Recce had gone down to Balgerhoek at the end of September 13th. They began unloading at 1750 hrs. And 8th Fld had vehicles passing over at 1950 hrs. A record for an 80' DS Bailey in war time.

We lost two more sappers and an officer injured near Oostkamp on our side of it where meals and rest were taken. During completion of the bridge, shells,

luckily just missing the bridge, fell in the canal and time and again we took cover in buildings that had lost their roofs. One time I stepped on soft plaster and roofing, finding a dead Argyle infantry soldier underneath. Later I went up into the village of Moerbrugge searching for any boards and lumber to cover our planks as a screen against wear of the many tanks that would cross over.

The road up a bit was a sight worse than seen on movie pictures. In the centre was nothing but dead enemy soldiers. We had relied on our artillery to drive them back. The result looked as if a group had formed up marching about 25 or 30 in a column in the middle, all very dead. At the side were several sitting or lying. One sitting looking at me with eyes open, holding an apple in one hand and his knife in the other. I approached and took the knife from his hand. I was amazed that heavy explosions had killed him by concussion only, as not a mark was on him.

Walking up further I found a Schmeisser on one dead man and picked it up and took the belt off and extra clips and ammunition as I was not carrying any weapons at that time. When I found a small wood mill near the far outskirts of town, a Belgium man came out and greeted me, and I told him we needed planks. He pleaded with me not to take any. I assured him we would be paying



The Schmeisser that I salvaged from a dead German soldier and that eventually came home with me.

him well for any bill presented and a truck would call in shortly. With that I got back to get a truck. The planks were rough-cut but OK for our job.

I never carried my Schmeisser as much of my work was at night. It was wise not to fire one in the dark as our own sappers and infantry knew the difference between our Sten gun and the Schmeisser and would fire in reply in the direction of the sound.

Our next big job was an attempt to cross two canals that ran parallel at Moerkerke where the Leopold and a branch of the Ghent Canal came together. A 300 foot triple single Bailey Bridge was proposed, supported in the centre by sides of the two canals. We were told to get as much sleep as possible after a quick supper before moving out at 9 p.m. or so.

The whole thing seemed to have its trouble from the start. One sapper from the 9th Fld Section came into camp before the meal. He had picked up an Italian gun similar to our Sten repeater. As he pulled his great coat off the back of his truck this gun came out, the butt hit the ground and, not having the safety catch set on this strange gun, it fired putting two slugs up through the fellow's stomach. (So much for picking up the unfamiliar weapon.) He died on the way to hospital.

We started away in half-track trucks, piled up with 12 or 14 men in each. Around 1 1/2 miles from our site we were told to hold up for some time as snipers had to be knocked out from a church steeple. Dark. Most got out and settled for a sleep or rest at the road side.

All was fine till about 11:30 p.m. when we got a "Let's go" from a DR. All jumped into the nearest truck and off we started to move, following the red light beneath

the truck ahead. A yell coming from beneath our cab's front seat made us stop fast. One fellow had the front wheels of our truck go over his hefty legs between his groin and knees. Off to hospital in a jeep. Luckily it happened on the soft grassy verge of the road. He turned up a few days later and told me that where the front wheel went over his legs every pore of his skin was bleeding. A lucky, tough fellow. Especially lucky that we got stopped before the back tracks of the half-track hit him! Another reason not to take shelter under vehicles!

We managed to get on the building site, still in the dark, but nothing had been unloaded as the barrage of shells, mortars etc. had been bad and it got worse by the hour. We tried a couple of times but found ourselves pinned down at the back of the dykes of the canal. One officer came up in an armoured car, got hammered, the driver tried to back up to turn but dumped the vehicle over the bank and it stayed there (as in the accompanying painting).



This artist's painting depicts the scene, not as I saw it, but as the artist saw it by day.

We found two children in the basement of a house who we rescued and then found someone to help them get back along a ditch on one side of the road. They were about eight and ten years of age.

Our infantry, the Algonquins, had a bit of a beach-head to start with, but as dawn approached they were ordered to retire to the home shore. Many swam back leaving shoes and uniforms on the far side.

I should have mentioned, long before now, that I always had the greatest admiration for the infantry regiments who had to try to secure bridgeheads for us on most bridges we built. We knew what a tough job it was to go in, crossing defended water obstacles in small boats, with no tank or aircraft support in many cases. If there was such support, it meant even more determined opposition.

We were usually the second ones in, before heavy 40 ton tanks could go into action, as they needed our bridges to deploy. We were often working stealthily in the dark, wearing dark overalls (I wore a black beanie sent from home) It was good for officers to have their stripes covered as they were particular targets for snipers. We didn't wear helmets because even their occasional clank against the steel components we worked with would alert snipers and observers to our presence.

We had one lull during which three or four of us tried to unload a Bailey panel truck, but small arms fire came through direct from the far canal seeming to go right through our small group. The tracer bullets angled upward as a Schmeisser sometimes acted if not held firmly. Lance Corporal Cayford fell right beside me with three 9 mm bullets in his chest. I bent down beside him and he murmured "Cover me. . . cold." I procured a great coat,

covering him till the Jeep ambulance came. He died on the way to hospital, we learned later. One fellow in the truck passing panels back down was not hurt nor any of the rest of us below.

Just after that the Jerries also brought Ack Ack guns to burst on the site as well as everything else they could throw at us. A DR came up with orders to "Get the hell out" and soon we were all lined up to the beginning of that same ditch to single file back. Unfortunately there was a dead cow in the ditch which held up progress as not one of us wanted to jump over till forced to by a lot of cursing etc. from behind. We took refuge in the small village till nearly noon when things eased up. Alas, that was one bridge that did not get built at the time.

I later read that, on recce, Major Sharon, Lt. Cole and Lt Renolds plus one sapper were standing together. Lt. Renolds was hit with shrapnel and retired temporarily, Lt. Cole was saved by his steel helmet that was almost penetrated by a piece of shrapnel and another NCO [non-commissioned officer] was injured. Lucky again only one dead but I don't know any figures on the Algonquin Infantry who were part of the 4th Division working with us.

On September 13 a bridge was built further down on the Derivation Canal (a branch of the Ghent canal) at Balgerhoek. No enemy there but, of course, no bridge yet across the Leopold Canal so we had to cross there. The Leopold crossing would come later, but we were moving up West towards Germany again.

Our "Green Route Up" reports that Lt. Ward of 8th Fld was working on the other side of the Leopold Canal near Isabella where Sapper Rudd of 6th Field Park was killed by shellfire while delivering lumber for an

improvised bridge. Carefully hidden Teller and Holts mines were in a paved road. In some cases cobblestones were used: the stones lifted, mines placed under and smoothed over. Fog at first protected the workers but as it lifted, Lt. Ward's party were fired upon and the bridge was blown up less than 125 yards (measured later) ahead of where 25 mines had been lifted. After this the Isabella front was static for several weeks. (I mention this as I did the recce two to three weeks later on that bridge.)



Refugees on the road leaving the war zone - always a sorry sight

I got a break when Lt. Livingstone took #3 Troop of the 9th Fld (including my troop in 9th Fld) and #3 Troop of 8th Field down to put decking on a railway bridge in Ghent, the only bridge not blown in the area. I considered it a break after what we'd been through recently. For a change here was no enemy fire while we built this one. It was hard work during the day but we did not work at night. A turntable (a platform of wood as the tanks, when turning, would lift and jam up on the

cobblestones) was laid on top of cobble stones at each end of bridge and one of the two rail tracks had to be planked with heavy planks to take 40 ton tanks etc.

At night we found a place like “Kitty’s Bar”, the famous saloon in Gunsmoke westerns. We soon found we were buying cold tea (instead of alcohol) for girls we paid to dance with. There was a threat to tear the place apart till they promised free drinks to make up and they explained they could not let the girls get intoxicated. Things settled down and they did their best to try and keep it that way. It was like a holiday in a way. I was billeted with a nice old lady who asked if I would like a bath - it was only my second bath in three months, aside from the illicit swim in the Somme River. She also offered to do some washing of underclothes, socks etc. which were pretty stinky by now. I loved the dear old soul!

There was a shoe shop right where one side of the bridge was. I went in and bought a pair of a child’s wooden shoes that took my eyes, small enough to keep in my kit bag. I still have them and they remind me of Ghent. People in Belgium as well as Holland wear wooden shoes a lot, especially, I guess, in that wartime. It was interesting to see them working on the blocks of wood. Still don’t know what wood it is but all said they liked them even inside the house as slippers.



The P29 handgun I carried through Belgium and Holland

From this Ghent job we were busy on the triangle area up on the northwest side of the Derivation Canal – Oost-Eecloo, Sas van Gent, and Bouchaute – and at times above, where several bridges were built and roads repaired and mines lifted. It happened several times that German patrols laid mines during the night on stretches that had been checked. We lost one jeep and, of course, there were injuries here and there. The roads had been heavily bombed by U.S. and our own RAF planes leaving huge craters that had to be filled. It took over a week to get some roads passable.

About this period, I was searching for material for culverts etc. I had just entered a small farm near the edge of a town, when I saw a German officer coming towards me with hands raised to surrender. I signalled him to go around me and back to the village where I had seen a couple of Army police. Once I had turned him over I went back to the farm. A boy about ten years old came running. He said “gun” pointing to a barn and leading the way inside, pointed to a ladder. Up above I saw the officer had been in hiding there and had left a nice P29 handgun, like a P28 but with a covered barrel. It was a pistol rather than revolver, with extra clips that load into the grip and with a nice belt and holster. From then on I always wore it, as up till then a rifle or Sten had been just a nuisance when I was carrying maps and notebooks etc.

On another interesting day I was sent out from around Sas van Gent to a part of Holland on the west side of the Scheldt that had hardly been touched by Germans or our own soldiers. I went to a small town about 20 to 25 miles to inspect a large barge filled with large artillery shells of all sizes. It had been pulled down the Scheldt Estuary and grounded at a wharf in front of this town. Almost all the residents of the town including the

head or "mayor" were on hand to meet my driver and myself as we "liberated" the town. All arrangements had been made ahead of time by phone (or how?..)

My job was to report on size of shells etc. and also to see if the barge was moveable (which turned out not to be possible). It would have to be unloaded as it was beginning to leak badly. It had been there about three years, since Dunkerque. They feared it would be hit or bombed by stray shells or V-1s trying for ports near and at Antwerp, and their town would suffer if and when. I could only give them hope and take back my report.

The pocket over the Leopold Canal was still a problem as the Scheldt had to be cleared before ships could get down to the port of Antwerp which had already been recaptured and was an access for our forces. Major Allen of the 8th Fld planned the details. The 8th Fld took the crossing at Leopold, the 9th Fld the Derivation Canal. These two canals were close together with a dyke between. There was artillery support, two observer planes in the air at all times and mortar fire. Even Typhoons were brought in to give the enemy no rest, but on their first try on October 6th the 3rd Inf. Div. crossed the Leopold and established a small bridgehead against fanatical opposition. The 3rd Div. made a landing on October 9th across from Flushing on the other side of the Scheldt, but in spite of Typhoons and our firepower and shelling, it received firm opposition and hard fighting prevailed. (This, of course, we learned later.)

Our struggle was bitter and not till October 13th was a bank seat established for the bridge on the far side of the Leopold. As others have said, "It had the makings of a real stinker."

On Friday October 13th we began work on the South bridge. The 9th Fld at 1100 hrs and 8th Fld started on the far bridge at 1130 hrs. In spite of shell and mortar fire, making us stop now and again for our artillery to zero in on fire locations, both bridges were open for traffic at the same time, 1815 hrs. For both 120DD Baileys it was record-breaking quick time for building a bridge like that under fire.

Lt. Ward's 8th Fld's bridge materials had to be barged across our canal to get started on his project. Two sappers from our maintenance party were wounded later including my pal Serada, who was later killed in Germany. Lt. Rollefson who was in charge of our bridge put me in charge of the right side.

One fellow gave me a bit of back talk. One time, after a rest because of heavy shell fire, when I called "OK, let's go again," he shouts, "Who do you think you are, Saunders? Like to see you make me get up there!" I shout back, "I don't give a ---?! whether you're up there or not. If someone else has to do your job, this bridge is going up. I'm not even reporting you, but someone else will do your job, and you've got to live with them for a long time yet." He came up along with all the others.

I should explain here, I knew this fellow from two and a half years before, when we were a group of 50 from B.C. coming over to the holding unit. He went to the 9th Fld, and I went to the 8th Fld when they came over later. Both of us were sappers then. He probably resented my authority and thought I was easy meat – one of the types of cases you run into at times – always a few characters.

On October 15 our #1 Troop built a raft south of Watervliet and ferried 15 vehicles across for the Argyles and cleared about 22 Teller and other anti-tank mines. My #3 Troop was opening roads from the Philippine to Isabella, filling craters, moving trees etc. on the soft (not cobble) roadway. I then did the recce for the 80' DS and got a heavy hammering from mortars. Someone on the other side of the canal saw me taking measurements and checking for bank seat clearance, so they were giving orders to crews firing electric fired mortars or "moaning minnies" as we called them. Plenty of long-dead Jerries around and I laid down cuddling up to the largest I could, and fast decided I had enough information and took off fast for the road back. I found a few good deep slit trenches, dug by jerries, to jump into as the moaning minnies followed me down the road. Jumped into one on top of a dead Jerry who gave off a strong moan or grunt himself. Even dead men can grunt!!

Anyway, got back to where our gang was lifting mines, still around. They said, "Hey, you're bleeding!" My ear was cut by either glass or slate and sure was bleeding. Got well wrapped up by medics and later was called up to see our Major who had come up with orders. The bridge had to be built regardless of resistance. Material would be on the way up shortly.

As I gave my report, he sent his orders into 6th Fld. The bridge went up starting about midnight with no enemy resistance, as they had moved back. We had a little trouble, as, on rolling forward, one side came off the rollers. All of us who were pushing with our shoulders under it got driven down about four inches, giving most on that side a sore back for a week or more.

In spite of roads being well checked a few times, now and before the project had been abandoned, a bridge lorry, a D-6 bulldozer and one of two troop 60 cwts were blown up by mines. Cpl Faries of #2 Troop was seriously injured. He had deep cuts, bruises to his head and broken limbs even with sandbags on the floor of the vehicle. A heavily mined area! We learned later, the delay trying to clear this area was considered a mistake. The enemy had been secretly evacuating tanks, trucks and in fact a good part of a division or more got out over from Breskens to Flushing by barges, at night, for many weeks, coming out around Bergen op Zoom. As in a lot of plans in war, afterthoughts are easy.

The argument was really about strategy – whether to shorten our supply line up the Schelde to Antwerp first or drive on up to Bergen op Zoom and beyond. Most say it would have trapped all the enemy and given us other ports above earlier, but who knows? I'm sure many lives would have been saved but, again, fighting would have been heavy either way.

Word came immediately the next morning for us to make haste to Antwerp as most of 4th Div. had started moving on October 15. An interesting day as we passed fields of azalea plants. These were plants that I used to unpack back home while working at Brown's and Ballantine's a few years earlier. Large boxes arrived about two months before Christmas, to bring into flower at holiday time. All came from Belgium.

The enemy had made a mistake in estimating how high the tide would be when blowing holes on both sides of the tunnel under the Schelde River at Antwerp. We were able to drive down and through, around the large holes at each end, just short of where the whole tunnel would have been filled up with water.

Chapter 6:

Holland

Our advance from the Schelde up to Bergen op Zoom was one of the most difficult tasks many had experienced. We passed a training camp where Germans were making and being trained in every kind of mine and booby trap. Some roads were difficult as they were three to five feet or more above surrounding territory leaving us exposed. They were often lined with trees 50 or 75 feet apart, which were felled criss-crossed over the road and booby-trapped, with many mines set on the verges.



More refugees travelling the partially cleared road
South of Bergen op Zoom

From reports all roads were treated the same and often it took time, patience and lives to clear them. Later I heard that some small villages had many enemy left behind to contend with. They had also laid many small mines to slow our progress as winter set in.

On the road we were on, we began to use the trees to our advantage. We would first examine the tree carefully, then saw a branch off and tie our rope (with slip knot) at the end of the heavy cut stub, up high. Then we'd take it back to the end of the long cable on our vehicle, then back up and it would roll or pull the top end of the tree over the bank and set off any small mines, booby traps etc. at the far side of the verge. Then it was easy to roll it off the heavy trunk side. We missed the trees now and again as they saved a bit of time and worked well.

We had the occasional enemy here and there but found they were not too anxious to tackle us. Only in one place, where there were four or five behind a concrete building who gave resistance with mortar fire. We called up a small artillery gun to take care of it before they surrendered. Other spots of trees or bush we usually put a few shots over to test, sometimes resulting in a couple or three walking out, hands up.

Nothing compared to reports of 8th Fld and 6th Fld Park.

Quote from our "Green Route Up":

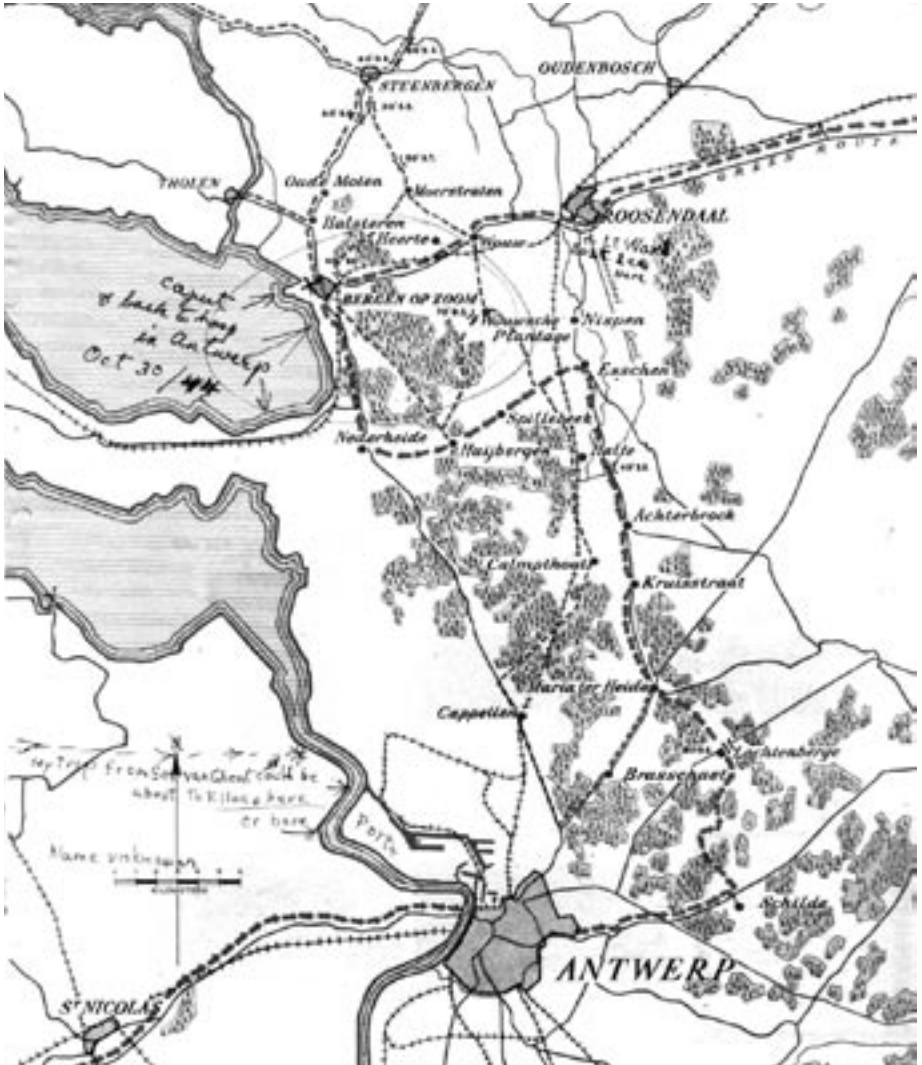
20th Oct, 8th Fld, 2 troop. Eight tree roadblocks averaging 200' in length and 20 trees each at RR crossing near Camphout. Booby traps every 3rd tree, some shells, some Teller mines, all wired from branch to branch. On same stretch 3 craters, 2 anti-tank ditches and 2 wired roadblocks

cleared. They were fired on by a 20mm gun which bored holes in their 1/2 tracks and a bulldozer struck a mine – badly damaged the blade but protected the men.

Also even worse, Lt. Ditchburn lost 2 mine detectors from small arms fire. One sapper wounded, 20 mines in small nest. Another area 20 ft by 30 – five R mines, six 105 shells, one 50Kg bomb and 2 Schu mines were removed. When a railway gate opened the whole issue blew up killing L/Cpl McDonald, Sprs McCaw and Trithart and wounding Cpls Stewart and Durand. The next 150 yds a solid tree roadblock wounded two German snipers when a charge went off. Cpl Buchanan went forward to recce the north end of the block and lost a foot on a Schu mine. Lt. Ward and Spr Fulham rushed to his aid and Lt. Ward lost a leg on another Schu. Shortly after Spr Johnstone lost a leg after he had helped carry Ward and Fulham out as Fulham having been hit as well by the same blast. Spr Johnston later died.

You see when I say we got off easy with only two sappers slightly wounded? I, of course, knew this only after reading the “Green Route Up” made up by HQ in Holland after the war while they were waiting to go home in their turn. This book and one other, “41 – A Souvenir War History’, were sent out to all who were with one or two of the Field companies. [see opening credits]

I knew most of these men for the two and a half years with the 8th Fld in England and a part in France. I have had to shorten some quotes, as best I could, but this shows how lucky I was at the time.



Map of Holland – “Caput” at Bergen op Zoom

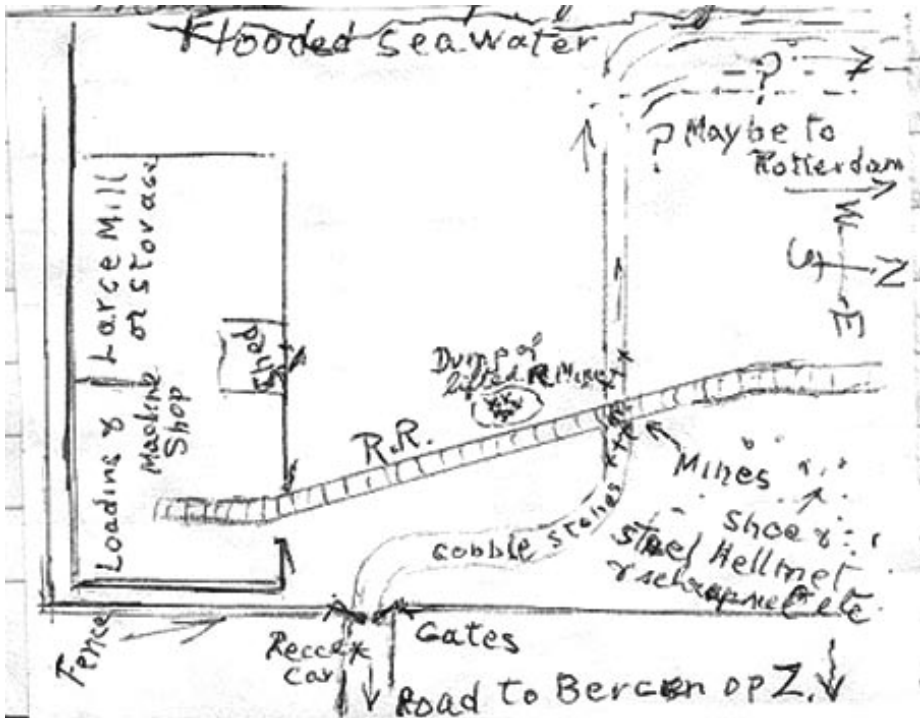
We reached Bergen op Zoom about October 27–28. It was being bombed by enemy artillery fire. I had a job to deliver a written note to Div. 3 over to the west and was told it meant a trip through woods. There was a trail OK only for a jeep, but a sign saying, “Enemy beyond this point”, had to be removed along with wire fence. It was a bit of a chance but it proved to be no trouble.

No mines or enemy showed up. About a half mile further there was another fence and guards in the distance yelling, "Who goes there?" as I removed the fence and the driver came through. I gave a call back and we drove up to be examined. There I found where the Div 3 HQ was located. I delivered the letter and we made our way back (some distance). Then we got settled down for a one-day rest while shells still hit here and there.

My Injury

On October 30 I was ordered to try a recce for a road out of Bergen towards north-east as all routes directly north were blown and no bridge equipment was available at that time. With a recce armoured car and driver, I started off talking to civilians. We were told of a road down to water that had been used by Germans and that might still be above the waterline in the flooded part. We went through gates into an area with a large mill for making or repairing steel. There were railroad tracks going inside and out of the building along a side road, then north.

The road crossed the tracks and headed down to the water. It had signs of previous fighting and shrapnel around. Three mines on each side of the tracks were obvious where cobblestones were disturbed so we set about removing them, being careful no trip wires or booby traps were attached. We especially checked, where tracks crossed the road, that no wires or signs of Schu mines, nut crackers etc. were showing. A problem was that our detectors did not work when shrapnel or tracks of steel were near. I had just pulled the last of the six mines and my driver went back to our recce car for white tape to put around these Riegel mines which we set aside, off the road.



My map by memory of the site where I was wounded

I was carrying this Riegel mine containing 15 lbs of explosives over the breeze (sort of sandy coke or burned coal) filling up the RR track bed, when I stepped on a Schu mine.

I thought I was dead!?! Instead I was lying on the ground with the mine lying across my chest, a good part of my pants blown off, a foot missing - just a length of bone and flesh below the knee remaining.

I was saying to myself, "It didn't go off!" (realizing the Riegel, probably still armed, hadn't exploded from the concussion) and feeling how lucky I was to be alive.

My driver and two Dutch civilians came up. One had a kit that our Army Medics gave out to civilians in towns where action and bombings took place. They bound

things up as best they could, carried me into a small shed in the mill, while my driver went back to Bergen op Zoom for a jeep ambulance. I waited only about 30 or so minutes, then I was taken to a 1st Fld dressing station, where there was a doctor with a shot for my arm and a priest with a bottle of rum. The couple of shots - by doc and the priest (with doctor's consent) - did a lot to put me on the right track. The rum warmed me.

Some more waiting in different tents to sort out casualties, then to a large ambulance taking four, plus a medic to give pills or a drink if needed. It took from around 1:30 or 2:30 to close to 5:00 to get to the Antwerp hospital.

I was then taken over by the Army Medical Corp, an English Division. I had to surrender my P29 pistol, clips and belt to the driver of the ambulance before going into the hospital.

Four doctors were operating off a large waiting room of wounded, all lying on the floor, waiting their turn. It seemed to take a long time. Another wait on the table as the doctor cut the bottoms of my pants off and looked at the left leg first after giving me a shot. He gave me a nail taken from my knee as a souvenir. I put this in my money belt along with about 600 guilders I had just received from the paymaster as we were supposed to go on a short holiday to Brussels as a break before next pay day. Only my tunic and a few more strips of pants had been removed at this time and I was soon fast asleep.

The next morning I woke, not feeling too bad, looked in a drawer beside my bed. My money belt was there - empty, except for the nail I had put there on the operating table! It came to me then why they said R.A.M.C. (Royal Army Medical Corp) was called "Rob

All My Comrades". I spoke to the head nurse about my cash and she sent for the two who brought me up but, of course, they shook their heads and looked as innocent as a couple of lovable school children. I said goodbye to any cash till next pay day.

About 12 days in Antwerp hospital, which included one trip back to the operating area for a bit more trimming. The buzz bombs kept landing and one fell just outside on the road. It blew in the windows on the first three floors on that side. I was on the 4th or top floor so I was OK.



Notice in the Victoria paper about my injury
 I was anxious to let my folks know I was okay

I sent a couple of quick notes off to Victoria to let them know I was doing fine, as I learned they sent a wire to my folks, as they always did, if the injury was classed "serious." They did not know how great it was for me to get off so lightly.

Chapter 7:

England and Canada

Back to England on my first plane trip, I found I was back at the same hospital in Cookfield, near Hayward's Heath and Red Hill and Reigate, where I was treated about a year earlier for a sprained ankle. I stayed there for the rest of November, then December, January and part of February before being sent up to the west coast to sail for Canada – almost exactly three years since I left. We had a March trip in weather that was rough for the small ship.

While still in England, I had another half inch taken off the bone or bones to try for more flesh and to trim it up. Lots of shots, pills, exercise, ropes, pulleys, and weights to keep the skin loose at the end of the stump. There were many good times to be appreciated as we were in nissen huts of 50 patients each all around the grounds of the hospital, only going in for large or important operations. One nurse and one orderly at 12 hour shifts at nights to attend to all. It makes me laugh to hear how doctors, nurses and helpers are all overworked these days if they have four, six, eight patients to attend to.

I was also able to get up on crutches later. Card games went on and I could visit and talk with other patients. It made me see over and over how lucky I was. No jaundice as I did not need blood – only the usual fluids to give body moisture etc. Visitors began to come, especially my

Uncle Charlie and cousin Barbara from Merstham, near Redhill. Brother Jim got leave to come down and see me from an airport. Uncle Charlie even rented a taxi, came down to pick me up and I spent a few days at Xmas 1944 with the whole family.

One fly in the ointment was a character in the office who asked me for my pay book. He took my 30 cents per day Lance Sgts. pay off, explaining that I had to put three months in before being confirmed in the rank. I was paraded as requested when the paymaster came at last. He said he only had the authority to give me pay for one month after having the leg off and I would have to take it up when I landed in Canada.

One good thing was my kit bag had arrived from our 9th Fld. The chap in the storeroom said, "There's the muzzle of a gun poking its head through the top. You can't take that back." I said (quietly), "Bring the kit up to me and I'll fix it." He did. I quietly, at night, took out the Schmeisser and, piece by piece, wrapped it up in all the soft clothing and underwear at hand. As I suspected, we on crutches could not be asked to unpack our bags for inspection. I got the gun back and kept it in good shape, boring a hole in the breech to make it inoperable and registering it with the RCMP as a souvenir. In June 28 of 1990 I turned it over to CFB Esquimalt Naval Museum Bldg. #20 (N) Esq. BC. VoS 1Bo (Serial # 6065 - 9mm 32 shots D-268272)

About the 12th of February 1945, a group of us got on a train to travel to a port near Bristol and board the hospital ship Letitia. No one wanted to change my Sergeant's stripes (all the army or the government wanted was the 30 cents per day) so I was back as a Sergeant in the Sergeants' Mess, with a great menu and a Scottish crew who treated us royally. It was a very rough cross-

DONALDSON ATLANTIC

≡≡≡ LINE ≡≡≡

Menu

Tuesday, 13th February, 1945

BREAKFAST

Grape-fruit
 Cream of Wheat Cereal
 Smoked Fillets of Cod in Milk
 Fried and Boiled Fggs Plain Omelette
 Grilled or Crisped Canadian Bacon
 Rolls Brown & White Bread Scones
 Griddle Cakes with Maple Syrup
 Tea Coffee

LUNCHEON

Pineapple Juice
 Scotch Broth
 Broiled Fillets of Haddock, Carlton Butter
 Stewed Steak and Onions
 Grilled Calves Liver, Robert Sauce
 Mashed Swedes Baked & Boiled Potatoes
 Blueberries and Cream
 Biscuits . Cheese . Coffee

DINNER

Tomato Juice
 Liver and Salami Sausage
 Creme Dubarry
 Fillets of Plaice, Meuniere
 Paupiettes of Beef and Olives
 Roast Quarter of Lamb, Mint Sauce
 Cauliflower, Cream Sauce Roast Potatoes
 Cold: —Preserved Corned Beef Salad
 Cream Caramel
 Coffee

TWIN-SCREW TURBINE HOSPITAL SHIP "LETITIA"

The sumptuous menu on the Letitia, coming home as an officer. An improvement over the outward voyage!

ing because of the size of ship and it still being wartime – all the lights were on and there was a large red cross on top as there still could be the odd sub around. It took about 10 to 15 days before we were all packed up and then sailed across. A long trip over to Canada, then a hospital train home, dropping off fellows at all points across. I arrived back to Vancouver sometime in March. Freda, Mom, and Dad came over to meet the train as I was due into Shaughnessy Hospital. It was wonderful to see them all.

I should say here, on the trip over I ran into Sgt Nicol who was badly wounded at St. Silvain, France, at the same time as L Sgt. D McDonald (both of the 8th Fld) who later died. Sgt. Nicol had a bad head wound. It was figured he did not stand a chance so I was surprised to see him. He had been a long time in hospital and had a plate in the back of his head where shrapnel had come out and was still wrapped up, as a plate was to later go in the right side where the piece had entered. It was a great surprise to me (but as in my case, miracles do happen!) that Sgt. Nicol got off the train on leaving Saskatchewan or entering Alberta.

I had a short get-together with Freda and family but was hauled off to HQ in Vancouver to check in. I received a discharge certificate dated April 18, 1945 that was one of the most foolish things I had ever been asked to sign. I refused to sign it and asked to be paraded. It said only that I had enrolled in the...

“2nd AA Battery, RCA, July/40

*Discharged by reason of unable to meet the required military physical standards of the army
Pt 11#91 Apr./45.*

Marks and scars – Amputation rt. leg.

It was signed by CA Dawson , Major for Colonel CO” and noted below –

“Canadian Voluntary Service Medal and clasp.”

No mention I had ever been over in the war zone for at least three of the five years and almost four of them with the RCE 8th and 9th Fld Sqn Armoured Div. Not leg “blown off in action” but “amputation”. I was refused any parade to higher authority. I was told that if I did not sign they could not get me to the hospital where I had to be that night.

By this time I was sick of the army passing the buck continually. I put my own additions to the certificate and signed.

I said to myself, “To hell with the army. I’ll get on with my civilian life from now on.”

Postscript

Many times when things got tough during bombing or when I was held down by shelling etc. I promised myself that if I ever got through OK I would never worry again. I would get settled, marry, and live happily ever after?! Easy to say but that's not the way it works.

People react to pitfalls and problems such as death from sickness and accidents. Tragedies of earthquakes, floods, fire, typhoons etc. can be as bad as war for those on the receiving end. In life, luck plays a large part in plans often with nothing to do with right or wrong. But good plans, plus fairness, tolerance and a degree of common sense and knowledge often pay off in the long run.

Herbert Charles (Bert) Saunders

Victoria, B.C. 2005



Our wedding day September 20, 1945

Afterword

Bert and Freda married in September 1945 and settled on about five acres of land at 3994 Blenkinsop Road in Victoria, B. C. Bert's plan, in spite of his disability, was to follow up his greenhouse apprenticeship experience before the war with his own greenhouse business.

This they did as a team for the next 29 years. Building as the business proved out and using many of the skills Bert acquired in the engineers, they eventually constructed 1200 square feet of greenhouses.



The Saunders Brothers
in birth order Fred, Bert,
and Jim c.1947

They grew principally carnations with side crops of freesias, stocks, and mums. They gradually finished the “tar-paper shack” , the unfinished house that came with the property, and added on an addition in 1956. Their two children, Lynne and Bruce, were born in 1948



c. 1954 with Lynne and Bruce and a big fish, greenhouses in the background

and 1950 and enjoyed a rural upbringing on the farm. It was a self-styled and successful business employing one longtime worker full-time and many part time and summer employees, the first work experiences for many. It was a satisfying life.

When they retired from greenhousing in 1974 they moved, with the house, to an adjoining lot on MacKenzie Avenue. They soon moved to French Creek near Parksville, where they built a house and enjoyed the friendly retirement neighbourhood and activities like fishing, gardening, masonry, and lots of travelling.

They moved back to Victoria in 1997 to be nearer services and family.



Freda and Bert in front of their Ophir Place condo in Victoria c.1998

Appendix

Some military terms:

4th Canadian Armoured Division Royal Canadian Engineers consisted of:

- HQ headquarters squadron
- 6th Field-Park Squadron - supply division
- 8th Field Squadron - mostly from Toronto area
- 9th Field Squadron - mostly from the West
- The 8th & 9th were the two “working” squadrons

The term “Field” denotes the heavy 40 ton tanks that were part of this division.

Within the field squadrons are 4 troops of about 75, 3 working troops and an HQ troop.

Each troop has 5 sections HQ and 4 working sections of about 12 men, the HQ will have a smaller number

Numbers varied. Numbers varied according to action and needs to move men around according to casualties.

Ranks:

Sapper

Lance Corporal

Corporal

Lance Sargeant - (1 Recce Sargeant - 1 Section Sargeant who would take over from Full Sargeant if needed)

Full Sargeant

The German Schmeisser

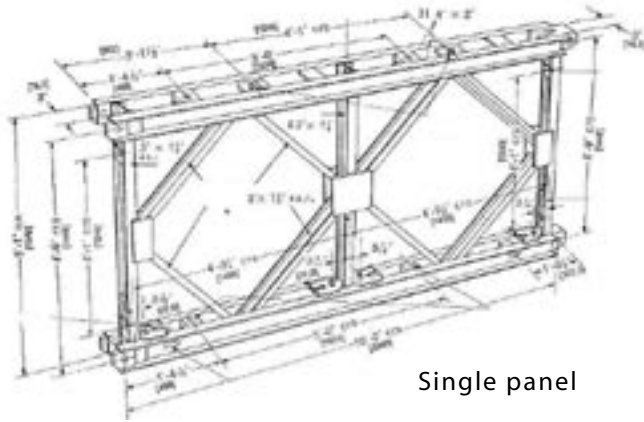


Ironically the Schmeisser's ammunition belt buckle had the motto "Gott Mit Uns" - God Is With Us

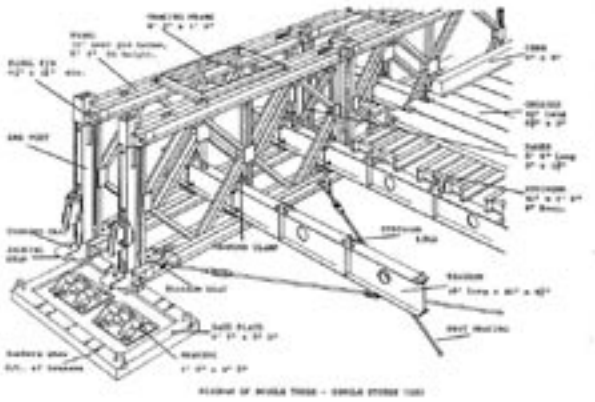
My elder brother Fred was a corporal in charge of the Coquitlam B. C. RCMP detachment and was able to get me a licence to keep the gun provided a hole was drilled through the chamber. We did that after taking the gun into the woods and firing off the rest of the clips of ammunition

The Schmeisser resided in the family attic until donated to the CFB Esquimalt Naval Museum in 1990

Bailey Bridge



Single panel



Double panel



Often the bridges are built on one side of the gap on rollers, double length to counter-balance and with a special tipped up landing end, and then pushed across by man-power or machine

Bailey bridges were a basic building block in the Engineers toolkit for spanning obstacles like rivers and trenches. They are built of standard side panels, decking joists and deck panels. A Single would be for a lighter load or short span and has a single row of side panels. A DS, or Double Single, has a two panels side by side on each side. A DD or Double Double has two panels side by side, on each side, with another double row of panels on top, all bolted together to carry very heavy loads or longer spans. They are still manufactured and used today.



Double Double with load



M4 tank crossing 110 foot Triple Single

German Mines

Teller Mine - anti-tank

“Teller” translates to “plate”

The T-Mines or Teller mines were a family of anti-tank mines that had a large explosive charge designed to disable an enemy tank. The name came from their flat, plate shape. The first variant was the TMI-29 mine that appeared in the 1930's that were twice as powerful as any mine made up to then. It was 18" in diameter and carried 13.2 lbs. of TNT. The TMI-35 was a smaller mine that saw service until 1943. The TMI-35 mine was 13" in diameter and weighed 21 lbs. and was detonated by pressure placed on the lid that fired a central igniter. The TMI-43 mine was the last of this series to be introduced in WWII. It was similar to the Tmi-35 but it used Amatol explosives.

Riegel Mine - anti-tank

“Riegel” translates to “bar”

The Germans also used “Bar Mines” or Riegel mines to provide anti-tank barriers. This mine proved to be the most effective anti-tank mine of the war.

Schu Mine - Anti-personnel

The Schu Mine was a small wood box (to avoid detection) that measured about six-inch by six-inch that contained a detonator and a solid charge. Also called “Shoe Mine” or “Shoe Box “ mine, it was a favourite of the Germans.



Teller Anti-Tank Mine



Schu Anti-Personnel Mine



This is a colourful account of an ordinary young man "doing his bit" when drawn into WWII.

Bert Saunders enlisted in Victoria in 1940 and trained with the Royal Canadian Engineers in Canada and England before seeing action in France, Belgium, and Holland.

These years were full of dramatic and formative experiences and are vividly remembered 60 years later.

As written by Herbert Charles (Bert) Saunders in a notebook given for the purpose by his grandson Daniel. It was transcribed by daughter-in-law Laurel, edited by son Bruce, Daniel and Laurel. It was arranged for publication by grandson Paul for Christmas 2005, The Year Of The Veteran.

