

Trip to Holland uncovers an unlikely connection

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When my mother-in-law found out that we (my wife and I) were on our way to France for a conference, she informed us that her father, Henry George Johnston, was killed in the Second World War.

She said he was buried somewhere in Germany and asked that if we were anywhere near the cemetery he was buried in, if we could go visit, as no one from her family had ever been to see his grave.

We proceeded to go online in Canada through the Canadian War Archives and found that he was indeed buried in the Canadian War Cemetery in Groesbeek, Holland.

Aug. 23

The Canadian War Cemetery at Groesbeek is a very well-kept memorial to Canadian soldiers, with over 1,200 interred there.

We found Henry's name on the book at the front gate, but it did not list his grave number. Dennise and I proceeded to walk from grave to grave looking for Henry's headstone. After doing so for about 30 minutes, an elderly Dutch man by the name of Jan Schreven approached Dennise and offered his assistance.

After showing him the information we had obtained from the Canadian War Archives, he said that it appeared to him that Henry was missing in action, and as such he would not have had a grave, but rather would be memorialized on a wall for those MIA.

Indeed, we found Henry's name on this wall. It was an emotional moment, and we left a family photo and a basket of flowers.

With two hours to spare before our train went back to Amsterdam, Jan suggested we travel with him to the Groesbeek War Memorial, to see if we could find out any more info on Henry.

Just a few miles from the war cemetery, and in the town of Groesbeek, the Canadian War Museum is an amazing collection of documents and memorabilia from the Second World War. The curator of the museum, Mr. Jaap van der Woude, was very helpful, and after touring us around the museum for an hour or so, he promised to contact a friend of his, Marius Heideveld, who is considered an expert on Canada's contribution to the liberation of Holland.

Marius is the chairman of the VOGM Foundation. This non-profit foundation does wonders for not letting the contributions of Canadian soldiers during the liberation of Holland be forgotten. They were instrumental in our quest for information on Henry George Johnston.

The next morning, I woke to find four emails from Heideveld. He was very interested in helping with our quest for information and said that based on the date of Henry's death, he was likely involved in Operation Blackcock.

This brought on more questions, and we exchanged multiple emails over the next week. The day that we left France to travel back to Canada, Marius informed me that he became aware of a man named Bill Miller who lived in northeast Calgary. Bill was an avid expert on Canada's contribution to Operation Blackcock, and this seemed the best source for more information. Marius gave me Bill's contact info and we flew home.

Sept. 4

I was back at work, and had a few busy days, so I did not get a chance to call Bill Miller. Finally, on Tuesday, Sept. 4, I took a break at lunch hour and called Bill.

I started the conversation by saying who I was, stating that I was not a telemarketer (hoping that he would not just hang up on a crazy person), and then proceeded to explain the above events to him.

After talking for five minutes or so, I said, "I don't mean to bother you, but I am looking for any information you might have on a trooper named Henry George Johnston."

I am sure I heard Bill gasp, fall off his chair and drop the phone, only to hear him say "What did you say?" I repeated myself, wondering if I swore by accident.

Bill's response was "I can't believe this, because I have been looking for the family of Henry George Johnston for 15 years. My father was best friends with Henry throughout the war and was standing beside him when Henry was killed."

Needless to say, we had a very interesting conversation.

It turns out that Bill's father (Bill Sr.) was the driver of an Armored Personnel Carrier and Henry was his gunner and radio operator. They belonged to a secret unit called the Canadian Kangaroos.

After the disasters of D-Day, the Canadian army decided it needed a better way of getting infantry to the front lines than traditional

"charge" where many men died before getting to the front. A brilliant idea was concocted to remodel old Ram tanks into Armored Personnel Carriers.

The turret gun was removed and the remaining space was filled with infantry and they were safely delivered to the front. In addition, injured could be removed from the front to the hospital, and supplies could be delivered to the front.

On Jan. 17, 1945, Bill and Henry were en route from Sustern, Holland to Dieteren, when their company stopped for a rest break. The Germans found them, opened fire, and Henry was directly hit with a mortar shell.

Chaos ensued, with other men diving for cover under their APCs. After the shelling ceased, Bill's commanding officer ordered him to pick up the remains of Henry, put them in a blanket, and deliver them to the regimental hospital for proper burial. Later it was decided that Henry's remains were too small for burial, so he was listed as MIA.

Two days later, Bill was back in battle, delivering infantry and supplies to the front lines. His tank was hit with a German 88-millimetre shell, splitting the entire tank in half, along with the 2,000 pounds of ammunition that he was transporting.

Bill was blown out of his tank, spent the night in a Dutch forest in -25C weather, only to be found alive the next morning. He was transported to a Belgian hospital where he spent three months recovering from his wounds.

Bill Jr. proceeded to tell me that his father was so touched by Henry, and affected by his death, that for the entire rest of the war, he carried a photo of Henry leaning on his tank in his breast pocket.

Because of Bill Sr. and his friendship with Henry George Johnston, Bill Jr. started searching for family of Henry, and this led him to become a war historian, specializing in the Canadian Kangaroos.

Bill Sr. felt such attachment to Henry that in 2005, 60 years after leaving Holland from his war wounds, Bill Sr. and Jr. travelled back to the Canadian War Cemetery in Groesbeek just to take a photo of the memorial wall that held Henry's name, the same wall in the same cemetery that Dennise and I found a few weeks earlier.

As a final word, Bill informs me that Bill Sr. is still alive and in an old folk's home in Camrose, Alta.

Sept. 5

I got a call from Bill Jr. He is apologetic because he was so shocked by my call of the day previous, that he forgot to mention that in 2007, because he felt Canadians were not appreciating Remembrance Day, he wrote an editorial in the Calgary Herald about Henry George Johnston, his relationship with Bill Sr., and the events surrounding Henry's death. He forwarded photos of Bill Sr. at Groesbeek, Henry leaning on his tank and a copy of the article on to me. We decided that our families needed to meet.

Sept. 16

Bill and his wife, Melanie, his sister Janice and her husband Dave came to our home for a barbecue.

All four of Henry's children were in attendance, as well as three of his granddaughters and several of his great-grandchildren.

No one remembered Henry, as he was shipped overseas when the children were very young. Henry's children brought whatever photos



Henry George "Archie" Johnson in uniform.

Photo Submitted

they had of their father; things that were given to them when their mother passed away in 1983.

Just as I saw Bill and his wife drive up the road, I saw a photo on the table of Henry with his troop. I wondered if Bill is in the photo, and sure enough, when I turned the photo over, the names on the back included Bill Sr.

What a neat coincidence.

I walked across the lawn, introduced myself to Bill Jr., and it seems we have known each other for longer than a week, and after some small talk, I told him that I just found a really neat photo of Henry's troop, and it included Bill Sr.

Bill Jr. stopped in his tracks, and when I showed him the photo, it was obviously an emotional time for him. He was lost for words for a few minutes and I thought maybe I did something wrong. Then he explained that when he started looking for us 15 years earlier, he did so hoping that we would have a photo of Bill Sr. in uniform. After looking at more photos that day, we indeed found another photo of Bill Sr. with an unknown soldier.

Henry George (who we now found out was nicknamed "Archie") thought enough of Bill Sr. that he took a photo of his friend in 1944 and sent it home to his wife in Grimsby, Alta. Bill showed us two boxes full of war memorabilia, explained about the Canadian Kangaroos and the significant contribution they made to the ending of the Second World War and gave us copies of Henry's complete service record, which Bill Jr. had actually compiled 15 years ago, in anticipation of meeting Henry's family.

It turns out that the Canadian Kangaroos were a short-lived regiment, only existing from August 1944 to June 1945. At the completion of the war, the unit was disbanded, and since it really did not have any home base, all was forgotten.

Bill Jr.'s efforts starting 15 years ago led to the Canadian government officially recognizing the efforts of the Canadian Kangaroos

in a ceremony on Sept 11, 2011 in St. Thomas, Ont. at the home of the Elgin Regiment. Finally, the Canadian Kangaroos have a home!

As we talked more with Bill Jr., he told me that on Sept. 3 (the day before I called him the first time), he was doing some soul searching. Frustration was setting in, because he had spent 15 years looking for family of his father's friend, but had gotten nowhere.

He made a decision to donate his war memorabilia and documents to the Regimental War Museum, and move on with things.

At noon the next day, he got a call from the very family that he had spent 15 years looking for. Then within 30 seconds of meeting the family, he was given a photo of his father that he has been looking for, for those same 15 years.

Sept. 23, 2012

Dennise and I travelled to Camrose to visit Bill Sr. at the home of his daughter Janice. This marked the first time any of Henry's family had ever spoken to anyone who actually knew Henry, other than his wife, who became very emotional whenever talking about him.

Bill is 90 years old, but when asked about Henry, he recalls "Archie" as having red hair, playing a banjo in the barracks for the men, and being a quiet, reserved fellow.

Bill Sr. recalled a story about a British commander asking him what "That piece of junk can do?" referring to Bill's APC, and Bill said "He showed that Brit what a Canadian APC could do!"

When asked details about battles, or about Henry that he could not remember, Bill Sr. simply replied "That was a long time ago".

On the way home that day, we drive by the Royal Canadian Legion in Olds near our hometown. They have a Sherman tank on display there, something we have driven by numerous times over the years. This time we noticed something very different. The name on the side of the tank simply reads "Archie."



Photo Submitted

Bill Miller Sr. standing in front of a memorial wall with Henry Johnston's name inscribed. He was Trooper Johnston's Kangaroo tank driver and closest friend. Miller was ordered to pick up the remains of Trooper Johnston when he was killed. Miller is still alive today.