
Brigadier-General Denis Whitaker Honoured by Belgians

Shelagh Whitaker

A wartime liaison between a Canadian infantryman and a Belgian resistance fighter culminated 54 years later with the recent presentation of Belgium's most distinguished decoration, Commander of the Order of the Crown.

Brigadier-General Denis Whitaker of Oakville, Ontario, one of Canada's most highly decorated veterans of the Second World War, was awarded the medal in Kalmthout, a village near Antwerp, by a special proclamation by Belgium's King Albert. The decoration is equivalent to Canada's Order of Canada and was awarded "for eminent services rendered."

Whitaker, as commander of the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry (RHLI), is credited with

the liberation of the port of Antwerp in September 1944. This is recognized as a critical battle in opening the port for Allied logistical supply in its drive towards Germany. In a unique partnership, members of the Belgian Resistance fought alongside the Canadians in a six-week battle to drive the Germans from the Antwerp docks and clear access to the Scheldt River.

Captain Eugene Colson, codenamed "Harry," had formed a resistance force of some 600 dockworkers in Antwerp's dock area, in 1942. Their mandate was to protect the docks from German sabotage when the Allies liberated the city. The British 11th Armoured Division rolled into Antwerp on 5 September but was ordered out after two days to fight at Arnhem. This left the docks wide open to enemy sabotage. Armed



Above: The ceremony in Kalmthout, Belgium which marked the dedication of memorial to those involved in the the fighting to liberate Antwerp. Eugene Colson stands at the left (in beret) behind the statue of the Belgian resistance fighter.

Left: Brigadier-General Whitaker in Normandy, June 1998.



with rifles and machine guns against enemy tanks and 88 mm guns, "Harry" and his boys fought off German attack for ten days until the arrival of Whitaker's RHLI.

"When I arrived in Antwerp for the first time I established the RHLI headquarters in the Ford Motor car factory located close to the docks. I hadn't been there 10 minutes when a hawk-nosed Belgian dock-worker arrived at my headquarters. Over a tot of good Canadian rum we developed a good working relationship." For the next two weeks, Belgians and Canadians fought together until they finally drove the Germans from the docks.

When 2nd Canadian Division moved north into Holland to fight the battle of the Scheldt, many of the Belgian resistance, including Colson,

volunteered to fight along side them. These Belgian patriots fought without uniforms and without pay, In the months of September and October, 87 of their number were killed and 114 were wounded.

Forty years elapsed before the two men met again. Whitaker was in Antwerp researching his book on the liberation of Antwerp [*Tug of War*] and rediscovered his wartime compatriot. Since then, the people of Antwerp have officially hosted Canadian veterans on several occasions. In 1995 Colson was presented with the Meritorious Service Medal by the Governor General of Canada to recognize his contributions to Canadian veterans during and after the war.

The recent decoration, Commander of the Order of the Crown, and the unveiling of a monument depicting a Canadian infantryman and a Belgian resistance fighter recognise 2nd Canadian Division's contributions to the freedom of Antwerp.

Whitaker, 83, earned two DSOs (Distinguished Service Order) fighting in Dieppe and in Germany. In recent years he was also made an Officer of the French Legion of Honour as well as a member of the Order of Canada.