



Comrade Bill Hale (left) placing a wreath at Remembrance ceremonies in Gananoque

REFLECTIONS OF WAR

Christmas at the Front

By: Lorraine Payette

During WWII, it depended entirely on where you were stationed as to how you spent Christmas. Canadian soldiers found themselves all over Europe, some fighting with the Canadian forces, others with the Americans, British or other military troops. Every experience was different, but every one of them held a simple thought in mind – the dream of being home, safe with friends, family and loved ones – the very same dream that kept them out there fighting to protect their homes and all generations to come.

For those stationed in Holland, Christmas was relatively quiet. Lieutenant Jack Scott of the first Canadian Army, recorded several radio shows with Canadian troops

which gave those at home an idea of just what their soldiers were experiencing, how they felt, their dreams and what they most wanted. The shows tended to view situations through a rosy light, and were designed to keep up the morale of friends and families, as well as the members of the forces themselves. He spoke with Private Frank Barley of Port Arthur about cooking Christmas dinner on a “Number Three petrol burner”, described as being “like five small ovens laid end to end, and at one end there’s a burner that shoots out a flame under pressure.”

Dinner would be uncomplicated, with 50 men getting to enjoy a Christmas dinner in relative quiet and comfort.

“Pretty well our whole Christmas dinner will be out of cans this time,” said Barley. “It isn’t possible to get fresh frozen poultry up to us here. We’ll get it in tins pre-cooked. That’ll save a lot of cooks a lot of work... (the mince pie and Christmas pudding is) in cans too, just like our regular ration issue. Only our actual cooking here will be some celery soup, which we make with powdered milk. Then we have creamed potatoes and buttered carrots and a crust for the mince pie. Oh, yeah, and some gravy for the turkey meat.”¹

Not all Canadian soldiers were as fortunate, however. Bill Hale of Royal Canadian Legion Branch 92 in Gananoque served at St. Vith in Belgium with the American forces during the Battle of the

1 <http://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/1944-christmas-dinner-at-the-war-front>

Bulge. His father, Dr. William Hale, also of Gananoque, had served during WWI and Bill continued the family tradition of standing up in time of need. Christmas found him living in a foxhole, cold and tired, after the loss of their position on December 21. However, unlike Holland with its high water table, Belgian foxholes were dry and more comfortable.

"I was with the US Seventh Armoured Division on half-tracks," said Hale. "Initially, we were anti-aircraft, but by Christmas time we had come down from Holland to be at St. Vith. Christmas was a little tough because food didn't come up the way you thought it would come. You got it two days later, and there were a few days like that because things weren't doing too well. Eventually it worked out – we got kicked out, but 30 days later we went in and recovered what we had lost.

"We didn't celebrate because we were told not to sing. If somebody was singing, it was the enemy, not the local boys."

They found themselves dealing with a lot of snow, and would wrap sheets over their uniforms to create camouflage. They tried painting the vehicles white as well, but it was too cold for the paint to stick to them. Different stories ran rampant, and you couldn't be sure if the man you were talking to was friend or foe, as many had their insignia tags ripped off of their uniforms. A single mistake in conversation could mean the death of many, and no one could be trusted as the enemy moved through wearing the uniforms of friendly forces.

Christmas dinner was nothing out of the ordinary.

"Basically, it was ham – ten-pound ham in a tin," said Hale. "I can remember they took a bayonet, jabbed it through and worked it so the top would fold off. There was a little bit of grease involved on the weapon and so forth, but when you got hungry enough, you dug into the ham. The basic thing you learned was, to get into it while you can because you don't know when there will be more."

"There was no celebration. Everybody had their own thoughts, missing home and what they did in their younger years – it was tough. The mail did not arrive then. It caught up about the month of January the following year, and rumours were everywhere. You had to take everything with a grain of salt."



Top: Bill Hale, member of Branch 92 of the Royal Canadian Legion, remembering Christmas at the front during the Battle of the Bulge

Left: Dr. William Hale of Gananoque, WWI



But wherever you were, the troops had certain things they wanted more than anything else. Perhaps highest on the list of Christmas wishes was pictures of "pin-up gals". Not just any pin-ups, though – these were special.

"Of course, the pin-up gals we want most are the ones we're married to," said Corporal Bob Christie in a radio interview from 1944. "Why don't all our mothers,

wives and sweethearts go and get a darn good picture. That's sure to score."²

Things today are different but the same. The forces still want to be home with families and loved ones, and those pin-ups will always be in demand.

Remember them, what they sacrifice and that what they do makes it possible for us to continue to celebrate Christmas in freedom and love. **LH**

2 <http://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/what-soldiers-want-for-christmas>