

## SECOND WORLD WAR

"A man doesn't fight or win a war alone.  
I can't forget these men." CHARLY FORBES, RETIRED MAJOR

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## AMID THE CHAOS, COURAGE

Story by MARK CARDWELL Special to The Gazette

**ST. FERRÉOL LES NEIGES** – Nicole Forbes can't wait for Remembrance Day to be over and done with.

That's because every November, in the days leading up to the annual honouring of Canada's war dead, her husband, Charly Forbes, who was decorated for acts of bravery in both the Second World War and the Korean War, is tormented by memories of those battles.

"It's the same thing every year," she said this week in the kitchen of the couple's home in this picturesque village next to the Mont Ste. Anne ski centre, 50 kilometres northeast of Quebec City. "As soon as we're into November, he relives it all. He has nightmares and he cries and he's in anguish until (Remembrance Day). Once it's over, he starts to calm down again."

To be sure, Forbes, 85, has his reasons to be in such emotional turmoil this time of year. A battlefield commander for 18 months – six in Europe and 12 in Korea – he was involved in several close-quarter firefights with enemy forces during which dozens of young Canadian men under his command were killed or wounded.

Of all those battles, none had more impact on Forbes's life – and his opinion of war – than the Allied attack on Walcheren Island in Holland in the early morning hours of Nov. 2, 1944.

A one-time island then joined to the Dutch mainland by a kilometre-long causeway, Walcheren was strategically located at the entrance to the Scheldt River, which led to the massive inland port of Antwerp. Defended by about 10,000 German troops and several naval guns that were capable of shelling Antwerp 60 kilometres away, the island became a vital strategic target for the advancing Allied

er, is more brutal: "It was a complete f-k-up."

Troubles began from the opening salvo of shells, which came down on the heads of the dozens of Calgary Highlanders who had been stranded in a bomb crater in the middle of the causeway since the previous day as a result of the second failed attack. To save themselves, the "Calgaries" ran back toward the mainland – and directly at the three Maisie platoons waiting to move forward.

Forbes, whose platoon was the first on the causeway, ordered his men to open fire when he suddenly saw armed men coming toward them in the pitch-black night. "It was only when a shell-burst lit the sky that I realized they were Canadian," Forbes said of the friendly-fire incident, which he mentions in his 1995 autobiography, *Fantassin*, and which Canadian historian Terry Copp also alludes to in his new book, *Cinderella Army*.

When asked how many casualties his platoon inflicted on the Calgaries, Forbes slowly shook his head and hunched his shoulders. "I have no idea," he said. "We never stopped to count. In the confusion of battle, you just keep going on your mission."

Rushing forward, Forbes's unit reached the island and continued on to a crossroads where they stopped, took a defensive position, and waited for a Scottish company to relieve them. When daylight came, however, Forbes realized they had gone 800 metres past the rendezvous point, and were now behind the German lines.

"There were no sounds except for the rain and big heavy guns on the other side of the island firing. 'Boom! Boom!' " recalled Forbes, who was with his eight men. "We just had to sit there, not knowing what the hell to do."

At around 11 a.m., he saw a company of about 50 Germans coming toward them along the road, which was flooded with icy sea water on both sides. "They were pulling out of their position near the causeway, but now they had to get past us because we'd gone too far," Forbes said. "I didn't have enough men with me to force them to surrender, so I made the decision to fight."

Hiding on the embankment, up to his chest in water, Forbes said he waited until the first German was only 10 feet away before he shot him with his revolver. "I was aiming for his chest but I was shaking so bad from the cold and fear that I missed and hit him in the shoulder," he remembered. "After that, all hell broke loose."

After a 10-minute firefight that ended in the death of about a dozen Germans and the capture of nine others, the two groups spent the rest of the day cowering on opposite sides of the road embankment, 50 metres apart, firing sporadically at one another.

When nightfall came, a Belgian runner appeared and helped the Canadians escape along a nearby dike back to the causeway. After seeing a Scottish soldier killed by a Canadian smokescreen canister that was fired to help cloak their retreat back over the causeway ("I saw the poor bugger's brains get blown right out of his head," he said), Forbes decided to simply "run like hell" back to the mainland.

Despite intensive German machine-gun fire, the Maisies returned with only a single injury – a private who had been struck with an inches-long piece of shrapnel that Forbes himself pulled out from between two vertebrae in the man's back. "Doctors told me later that I shouldn't have done that," Forbes recalled. "But the guy was paralyzed before and was fine after I removed it."

Despite being cold, tired and hungry, Forbes said the worst cut came



Charly Forbes at his home in November 2002: Since retiring as a major in 1965, Forbes has become a painter and sculptor – on the wall above the fireplace is a self-portrait.

*The assaults on the causeway "were basically suicidal attacks. There was no cover and the Germans swept it with gunfire."*

CANADIAN HISTORIAN JACK GRANATSTEIN

forces. Canadian troops from two regiments – Montreal's Black Watch and the Calgary Highlanders – were sent across the causeway on Oct. 31 and Nov. 1.

"They were basically suicidal attacks," Canadian historian Jack Granatstein said of the assaults on the causeway. "There was no cover and the Germans swept it with gunfire."

When the first two Canadian attacks failed (the Highlanders were the hardest hit, with 17 men killed and 46 wounded, including Major George Hees, the future Canadian defence minister), a call went out to Montreal's Régiment de Maisonneuve, which was camped nearby, to prepare for a third strike.

A graduate of the Royal Military College in Kingston, Forbes was a lieutenant with the "Maisies" and the officer in charge of 18 Platoon, D Company. Of the 40 soldiers that were in his platoon when it first saw action in Caen, France, July 18 – just three months earlier – only eight remained.

"We were beaten up, absolutely exhausted," recalled Forbes, who was then hunkered down with his men in an abandoned Dutch farmhouse, where they burned furniture, doors and window frames in an effort to keep warm. "But the boys were in good spirits because we were supposed to go on leave for the first time since Caen at six o'clock the next morning."

Those plans abruptly changed, however, when 18 Platoon and two others – a combined force of only 42 men – were ordered to move forward and lead a third attack over the causeway at 4 a.m. Nov. 2 under the cover of a Canadian artillery barrage fired from five miles away.

According to various historical accounts, the assault was poorly planned. Forbes's assessment, howev-



Charly Forbes (right) in a snapshot taking during the Second World War.

later when he learned his battalion had gone on leave as scheduled.

"The bastards left while we were out there out on that island fighting," Forbes said, his voice choking with emotion. "It broke my heart to realize that they didn't give a s-t about us."

For Forbes, for whom the war ended a few weeks later when a bomb blew up a Jeep he was riding in, killing the driver and inflicting an injury around his right eye that required plastic surgery to repair, the slight "drove me out my mind."

After returning in 1946 to his hometown of Matane, where he founded a Legion branch for returning vets, he decided to re-enlist in the military as a paratrooper. "I was lonely (and) I was mentally disturbed," he said. "I didn't know what to do with my life, so I decided to go back to what I knew,

which was being a soldier."

A founding member of the 2nd Battalion of the Royal 22nd Regiment, he served with distinction in Korea, winning a citation for his actions during the four-day battle for Hill 355 where, as the commander of a mortar brigade, he fired more than 15,000 mortar bombs.

"The Chinese attacked by the thousands in human waves," Forbes recalled of the battle, which left 73 Canadians dead or wounded in a force of 800. "We fought for our lives."

In 1960, he was awarded Holland's Military Knighthood of William's Order, the Dutch equivalent of the Victoria Cross, for his actions on Walcheren Island.

One of only nine Canadians to receive the honour (including four posthumously), and one of only two

still living (the other is Wilford Kirk of Langenburg, Sask.), Forbes has been invited to Holland every five years since for a special ceremony hosted by the Dutch royal family.

"It's a good 'gong,'" Granatstein said about the Dutch honour, which is considered a knighthood in Holland. Granatstein added that, at a ceremony he attended to mark the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Holland by the Canadians – an event Forbes also attended – "Forbes was treated like we would treat a VC vet by the Dutch royal family."

Since retiring as a major in 1965, Forbes has enjoyed a successful second career as a painter and sculptor. Many of his works, including wood busts of soldiers, mariners and famous aboriginal chiefs like Sitting Bull, as well portraits of soldiers and paintings of landscapes and war scenes, adorn the shelves and walls of his home.

A high-profile member of the local veterans' community and a popular after-dinner speaker at social events, he also continues to receive military honours. The honorary head of Royal Canadian Legion Branch 265 in Val Bélair – a unit with more than 300 members that bears his name: the Lt.-Col. J. Charles Forbes branch – Forbes became the 10th soldier to be inducted into the VC room at Quebec City's chic Garrison Club a year ago this month. Six weeks ago, he received France's Legion of Honour in a ceremony at the French consulate in Montreal.

Today, he planned to be at the cenotaph across from the National Assembly in Quebec City for the 11 o'clock Remembrance Day ceremony, then head to Branch 265 "to be with the boys," he said.

Throughout the day, however, he said his thoughts will be focussed on the soldiers he fought with in Europe and Korea so long ago. "A man doesn't fight or win a war alone," said Forbes, his voice breaking. "I can't forget these men. I shared my life with them and fought with them and they never let me down. If I couldn't remember, I wouldn't cry. But I can't forget and they're always present (on Remembrance Day)."

"People say I'm a hero," Forbes added. "I just wish I could share these honours with them."



**B+** "It puts a whole new spin on things. ... I guess every generation has its own heroes." CAPT. BRYAN FLEMMING

# TODAY'S VETERANS

## WAR DEAD Recent casualties resonate on Nov. 11

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Too many images of Canada's young men making the ultimate sacrifice, however, could have negative repercussions on this year's events, Granatstein said.

"It's not beyond the realm of reality that people might demonstrate against the war on Remembrance Day," he said, something that to his recollection has never happened.

The obsessive media coverage of every soldier that dies in combat is creating a disproportionate opposition to the Afghan engagement, he said.

"Had we provided TV coverage of every body arriving - we didn't even bring them back in those wars, we buried them over there - we wouldn't have lasted a month in wartime. The public simply couldn't withstand that repeated shock."

More than 3,600 men died in the battle for Vimy Ridge in three days, he noted.

Different this year is also the fact there are recent dead to be remembered, and members of our military still actively involved and at risk overseas. The ceremonies are reflecting that.

"There is no empirical evidence, but the feeling is that there is more resonance this year," said Veterans Affairs Canada spokesperson Janice Summerby.

A service held at the Senate this week included soldiers wounded in Afghanistan, as well as the wives of men stationed overseas.

"It was very emotional. You could see everyone was very affected," Summerby said. At another service in Ottawa, military personnel asked the audience "to save some room in their thoughts for the people serving in Afghanistan."

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In front of the IGA supermarket at Alexis Nihon Plaza, Shirley Brambell has been handing out poppies for two weeks, raising funds for the vets of Westmount's Royal Montreal Regiment. Sales are strong this year. From the proceeds, the legion gives \$5,000 a year to the Ste. Anne's Hospital in Ste. Anne de Bellevue, the last health facility reserved solely for the care of veterans in Canada, housing about 500 men and women.

Vets still at home get help with payments for heating oil, or college bursaries for the grandkids.

Not many donors mention the Afghanistan war, other than to say "Bring our boys home," Brambell said. Its the World Wars that still resonate with most. Many people, many of them very young, take the time to thank the veterans that accompany

*At a service in Ottawa, military personnel asked the audience "to save some room in their thoughts for the people serving in Afghanistan."*

her, medals weighing down their navy blue jackets.

She has new company these days, however. The members at her legion have dwindled from 400 about 10 years ago to 96 now, and it's hard to find volunteers to man the four booths they set up on their Westmount territory, including one at Dawson College.

For the last two years, the legion has enlisted the help of soldiers from the Royal Montreal Regiment.

As the burden of remembrance is passed from failing hands to a new generation, Canada's commitment to peacekeeping ensures there will always be new casualties to be honoured.

"Canada has books of remembrance that list war dead. They're titled in the Service of Canada," said Summerby of Veterans Affairs. "It includes Canadian Forces members since Korea who have given their lives due to service, from anything from peacekeeping to training exercises."

In addition to the Afghanistan casualties, about 116 Canadian soldiers have died in UN-backed peacekeeping missions since they began in 1948.

"But it's an open book," Summerby said. "We have a calligrapher in our office this week (to inscribe new names.)"

"It's an open book."

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# NEW HEROES TO HONOUR

Story by MARK CARDWELL Special to The Gazette and ALAN HUSTAK The Gazette

TODAY, CAPT. BRYAN FLEMMING, who returned from Kandahar in August, is on parade with his armoured regiment at the Valcartier military base. This year, he said, Nov. 11 would be something special. "Before, Remembrance Day ceremonies have always been the classic, where you remember the sacrifices made by a lot of old guys. I used to stand there and think of my grandfather, who was a Second World War vet.

"But now, hey, here I am, a modern combat veteran at age 24. Now I can really relate to how vets from the Second World War and other conflicts from years ago were feeling when they got back. It's not just about them anymore. It's about our generation, too.



Cpl. Kyle Scott in the Black Watch Armoury in Montreal. Scott was a pallbearer in Kandahar for Cpl. Jason Patrick Warren, who was killed by a suicide bomber in Afghanistan on July 22.

"It puts a whole new spin on things. Now, I'll be thinking about my own experiences and the friends I lost, like Nichola (Goddard) and others. I guess every generation has its own heroes."

Flemming, 24, grew up in Charlottetown and is a graduate of the Royal Military College in Kingston. He was a close friend of another RMC graduate, Capt. Goddard, 26, of Calgary, who was killed May 17 in a Taliban ambush during a battle in Panjwairi region.

"We were involved in a lot of fighting," he said of his eight-month tour in Afghanistan. He is now a reconnaissance officer with the 12 RBC (Régiment blindé du Canada) stationed at Valcartier near Quebec City.

Flemming is one of a new generation of battle-scarred troops who, like veterans of previous wars, have had experiences as different as the missions they serve.

Cpl. Kyle Scott, a reservist with Montreal's Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) of Canada, has flown supplies to Afghanistan three times - twice to Kabul and once to Kandahar, but he's modest about his accomplishments.

"I haven't been shot at or returned fire," Scott said. "You sometimes worry that you can be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Once or twice I heard a bang that made me sit down on the ground. You worry about that at first, but after the first few times, you get more relaxed."

Scott, 31, came to Canada from New Zealand 10 years ago, and had previous military experience in the reserves there.

"I think of my grandfather, who served in the Second World War as a veteran. I don't really see myself as a veteran," he said. "What I do doesn't really hit home the same way."

Scott remains upbeat about Canada's role in Afghanistan in spite of mounting public skepticism. According to a recent Ipsos Reid survey, a slight majority of Canadians now say the troops should be brought home as soon as possible. A CBC poll made public this week indicates 58 per cent of Canadians don't think the mission in Afghanistan can succeed.

Scott refused to be drawn into the debate. "I've been there three times, and I haven't wanted for anything on any of my particular missions," he said. "I have my job to do. It's for the politicians and the generals to talk about policy. I know there is a risk, but I have a job to do."

His toughest assignment so far, he said, has been to carry the coffin of one of his colleagues, Cpl. Jason Patrick Warren, during the ramp ceremony in Kandahar. Warren was killed in action July 22, one of 42 Canadians killed since 2002 in Afghanistan.

"Being a pallbearer was a sobering experience," Scott said. "It was for someone I knew. It happened the first week I was there. It made me aware this is a serious place."

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As the body count mounts, the federal government has passed legislation to do more for soldiers returning home. A new Veterans Charter, which came into effect April 1, was an initiative of the previous Liberal government. It provides benefits to veterans that weren't available to peacekeepers who served with the United Nations forces in Bosnia or Somalia.

Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor said the charter is designed to deal with some of the new realities of conflict, "especially psychological horrors of soldiers being exposed to conflict zones, something that was never addressed adequately before."

But the charter comes too late for Simon Boies, a soldier from Quebec City with the Royal 22 Régiment (Canada), whose tour of duty ended before the charter took effect.

Boies, 21, volunteered to go to Bosnia but was instead deployed at the last minute to Afghanistan. He claims he wasn't properly trained for the mission, which required his driving a badly equipped vehicle through Taliban territory. "I thought I was going on a peace mission to Bosnia and I wound up in Afghanistan, in a dangerous area with no experience as a driver," he said. "It was a combat zone, not a peacekeeping mission."

He came back from Afghanistan suffering from post traumatic stress two years ago, but because his medical files mysteriously went missing, he wasn't able to claim his \$650 a month disability pension until February of this year.

Boies is one of two dozen veterans who are suing the federal government for \$100 million for stress-related damages. They say tampering with military medical records is commonplace in order to deny injured members their pensions and benefits.

"I am sick," he told an Ottawa news conference last week. "For now, I don't have any family. I am not able to work. I have lost my spouse and my daughter. Right now I live in a trailer. I have just enough money to survive, buy cigarettes and food."

CANADIAN PRESS CONTRIBUTED TO THIS REPORT

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## Black Watch soldier remembered by his high school

CANADIAN PRESS

QUEBEC CITY - Gina Farnell says she was surprised when she first learned one of her former students, Jason Patrick Warren, had become a soldier.

"As a teenager, he did not believe in following orders," the Quebec High School teacher told about 400 students and invited guests, including Warren's family, at a memorial service in his honour Friday.

A Quebec City native and reservist with Montreal's storied Black Watch Regiment, Warren, 29, was killed along with another Canadian soldier by a suicide bomber in Afghanistan on July 22.

Warren, his parents and two siblings - brother Stephen and sister Rachelle, who is a corporal in the Royal Canadian Dragoons Regiment and herself a veteran of two tours in Afghanistan - all attended Quebec High School.

Farnell, one of several speakers who took the podium at a moving ceremony that combined a Remembrance Day service with the unveiling of a metal

plaque in Warren's honour, said her initial surprise passed once she'd thought about how determined her one-time pupil had been.

"Once (Jason) believed in a cause, once convinced of its good, he could be very committed to seeing it through," she said. "If he chose to serve in the army, it is because he believed in it."

Warren's family and friends echoed those sentiments. "My son made the ultimate sacrifice in Afghanistan doing what he believed in, what he thought was right," said his father, Gerry.

An assembly-line worker in Ottawa who was raised in Quebec City and met his wife, Debbie, in the school cafeteria, he said he was feeling "proud of my son."

"Jason liked to celebrate life," said Warren, who wore a broad smile as he posed for pictures and TV interviews next to his son's picture in the 1993-94 graduating class picture in the school's main hall.

"He'd want me to stand here and smile today and be happy." The family wept quietly, however, during the

solemn ceremony. Warren's parents unveiled a small silver metal plaque in his honour as Black Watch Pipe Major Cameron Stevens played Lochaber No More, a traditional Scottish lament.

According to school principal Mark Sutherland, the plaque will hang in the school's main hallway near two other bronze memorials that are dedicated to the more than 500 former students of the school who served in the two world wars. Of the 275 who served in the Second World War, 35 were killed.

"Jason was the best," said Cpl. Stephen Moss, one of four Black Watch soldiers in attendance who were close friends of Warren.

"He was really keen to go (to Afghanistan). He really believed in the mission."

The impact of the ceremony wasn't lost on the school's students, who sat quietly on the gym floor throughout the hour-long service.

"I thought it was really cool, really well done," said Greg Gropp, 15. "(The ceremony) showed how real the war (in Afghanistan) is today."