

D-DAY

50th Anniversary
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Survivor of invasion wrote tribute to his comrades-in-arms

War veteran Charlie Martin barely has time to say two words to a reporter before there's a knock at his Mississauga condo door.

In comes Jim Wilkins, who has driven from Downsview to buy four copies of Martin's newly-published book, *Battle Diary: From D-Day and Normandy to the Zuider Zee and VE*. Martin has the copies waiting on his dining room table.

"Did you sign them for me? Would you mind?" asks Wilkins, 71, who, like Martin, served in Europe with the Toronto-based Queen's Own Rifles during the Second World War.

As Martin inscribes the books, his wife, Vi, 70, apologizes for having no time to make tea for Wilkins.

"This has been a madhouse today," she says. Martin, a father of two and grandfather of six, has been the center of attention since his book's release last month by Dundurn Press in Toronto.

He has sold about 900 copies privately and another 1,500 have been distributed by the publisher to book stores across the country.

Battle Diary recalls Martin's experiences with his company during D-Day, Normandy and battles in Holland and Germany.

"I think the reason I wrote the book was to try and point out that these men (who fought) were very brave and heroic men.

"You had to see them carry their wounded comrades when they had been in a mine field or they had been machine gunned. This takes a lot of courage to go out and pick them up."

Martin, 75, a retired government agricultural officer, has vivid memories of the war, in particular the D-Day invasion.

Martin, one of the first to land on Juno Beach on D-Day, says he and others knew six months to a year in advance that some sort of major invasion was being planned in Europe. But they didn't know the general location until a week before, he says.

'It was a job to be done'

After a 24-hour delay due to bad weather, Martin says he and his A-company of 125 soldiers set out June 6, 1944 on a mission to capture half of the village of Bernieres-sur-Mer and all of another village, Anguerny, about 13 kilometres (8 miles) inland.

They landed in daylight at about 8:20 a.m. just off "Juno" beach in the English Channel. They were among about 1,000 Canadian soldiers in the first wave to scurry onto the 14-kilometre (9-mile) wide beach.

"It was wet and cold and stormy and the waves were about five or six feet high," recalls Martin, who was one of the Queen's Own's youngest sergeant-majors.

The men showed no emotion as they slipped off landing craft into one-foot-deep water and waded to shore.

"It was a job to be done. We had to do it. I mean, if the men were afraid, they didn't look afraid. They seemed quite calm. They were controlling their fear."

In his book, Martin recalls heavy machine gun fire breaking out as soon as their boat ramp went down. Mortars were falling all over as Martin shouted to his men, "Move! Fast! Don't stop for anything. Go! Go! Go!"

One man was wounded before reaching the beach. Martin himself was hit immediately in his left leg, but it was a minor injury and he kept going.

Some were killed as they climbed over the enemy's pillbox, a two-metre-high wall made of cement and steel, he says. Two others lost their lives as they pressed forward across rail tracks. By the time they

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Stories by BELINDA SUTTON

Battle Diary

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reached a mine field surrounded by barbed wire, about half the company was wounded or dead.

Martin cut the wire, enabling he and about 10 others to crawl through. They ran past the mine field under machine gun fire and were hidden from view as they stole through tall grass.

By nightfall the group had achieved their objectives and the men settled in for several nights at Anguerny.

But their advance came at a high price. By the end of D-Day, 63 members were dead and another 75 wounded from the Queen's Own A and B companies. Another 390 had died by the time the Queen's Own got to Germany on May 8, 1945.

"Your life expectancy was about four weeks. You would be killed or wounded."

Martin, five times wounded and twice decorated, says he decided to write his account five years ago when he returned to Juno beach to mark the 45th anniversary of D-Day.

"Nobody realized what good citizens these men were. Some had lost limbs and one was blinded. But they (survivors) all came back to be very good citizens. Two or three of them became members of parliament and many became executives in businesses."

He says he felt it was time someone wrote about who did the fighting and why.

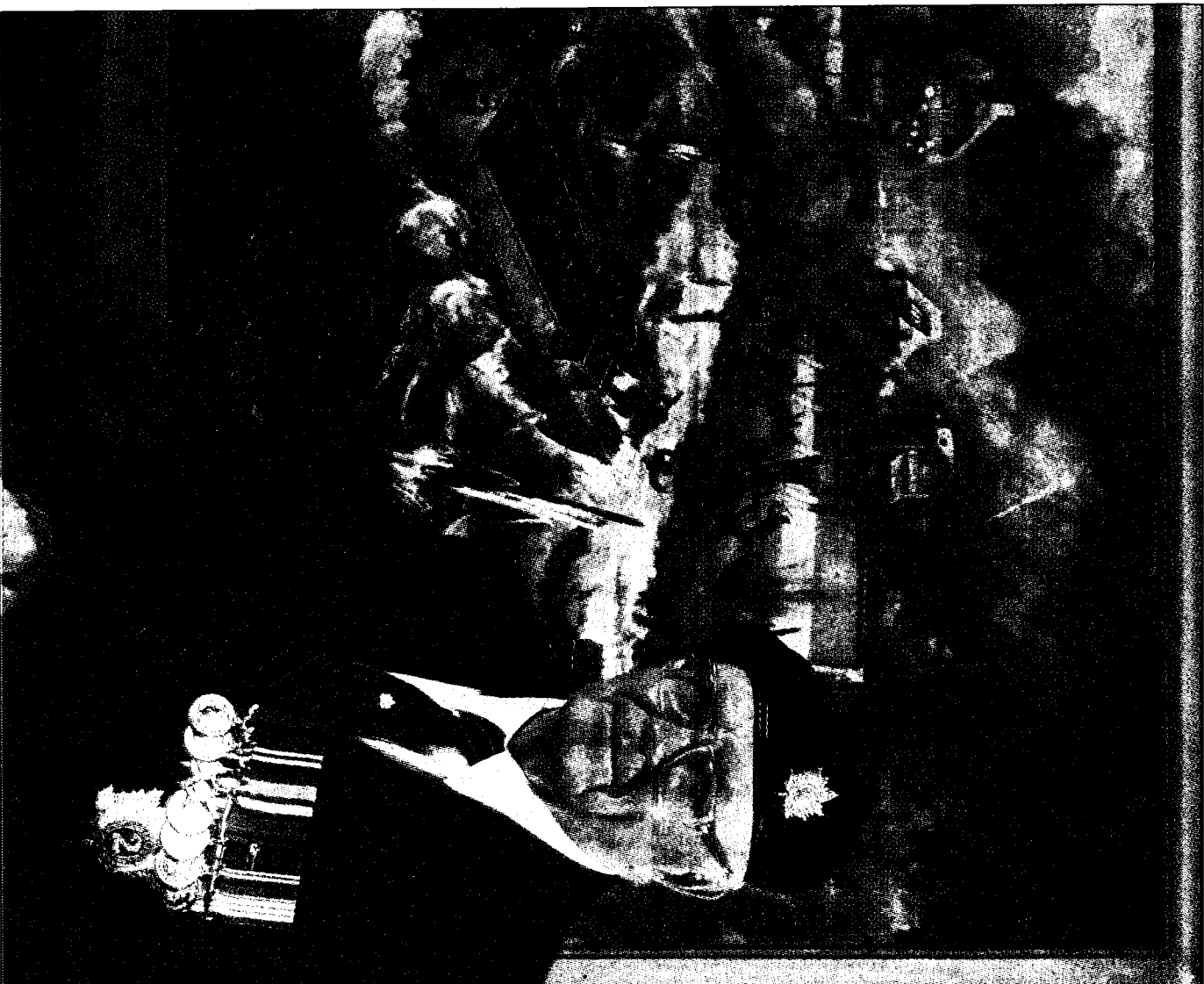
When Martin began writing his story about 18 months ago, he intended it for people traveling to France for the 50th anniversary of D-Day. But after sending several copies of his manuscript to friends, a publisher happened to read it and soon contacted him.

Martin says writing the book wasn't too emotional, but talking about it at special events brings back strong feelings.

"It becomes very emotional because I remember all these men who died and I can still see them right where they fell because I was always up in the front line."

In hindsight, Martin says preventing the war would have been better than fighting.

"But then again, the price was not too high for our freedom. If these men hadn't fought and died many of us would be in concentration camps or gas chambers or just plain dead."



Charles Martin, who was a Company Sergeant-Major with The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada, was among the first Canadians to storm Juno beach on June 6, 1944. He wrote a book about his exploits, *Battle Diary: From D-Day and Normandy to the Zuider Zee and VE*, whose cover is decorated by the painting he is posing in front of. It is *D-Day Assault: Bernieres-sur-Mer, 6 June 1944*, by Captain Orville Fisher.

Photo by Peter Bregg/Maclean's