

A friendship forged in blood and sacrifice

SOMERVILLE, Donald

By Rick Drennan

rdrennan@mississauga.net

MN Dec. 31, 2015

The world shuddered in 2015.

Terrorist attacks left many feeling there was no place safe from evil.

But hope springs eternal, as it did 70 years ago, in 1945.

The Second World War came to an end and VE (Victory) Day was met with a loud sigh after millions of lives were lost in the great conflagration. The war's end hammered home the notion that good eventually overcomes evil.

Holland, once caught in the maw of war, rolled out the welcome mat to its beloved liberators, the Canadian armed forces, in May of this year.

The Dutch streets were filled with generations paying homage to the war veterans able to attend.

One of them was Mississauga's Donald Somerville, 93, a former member of the Royal Canadian Engineers of the 23rd Field Company, and a resident of Applewood.

Somerville, still robust, and still recovering from an operation to remove a cancerous tumour, welcomed one more chance to visit his Dutch friends.

But he had something else to be thankful for.

Because of the dogged investigative skills of a Dutch woman named Alice van Bekkum, a post-war baby boomer (born 1948) and resident of Holland, he is now good friends with a fellow soldier and fellow Mississaugan Boleslaw (Bolek) Ostrowski, a member of the 1st Independent Polish Parachute Brigade.

Both survived the infamous battle of Arnhem (part of Operation Market Garden), and both were at the 70th anniversary of that pivotal moment in history.

Ostrowski is a spry 96, and, like Somerville, still walks without assistance. They're sharp of mind too, and can instantly recall the stirring events that dominated their young lives when the world was teetering on the brink.



Second World War veterans, Donald Somerville (left) and Bolek Ostrowski, now in their 90s, were brought together by an intermediary doing research in Holland, who found that the two men were living in almost the same neighbourhood in Mississauga. Staff photo by Rob Beintema

The two men live only minutes apart in Mississauga, but how they found each other through their Dutch intermediary is the plotline in a post-war novel.

Van Bekkum wasn't yet born when the Canadians liberated Holland, but over the years, she grew obsessed with keeping their names alive. That's the goal of the 'Faces to Graves Foundation,' working with the Canadian War Cemetery in Groesbeek.

She hoped to find more details about two soldiers found together, Magnusson and Gajewnik. That search led in a perfect linear line to Somerville, and then Ostrowski. Somerville was one of Magnusson's best friends; Ostrowski was close to the fallen Polish paratrooper.

Neither Ostrowski nor Somerville knew the other had participated in the Battle for Arnhem or that they lived only minutes apart in Mississauga.

Van Bekkum helped close that loop in their lives.

It's early afternoon at the Somerville residence on Courtland Cres. in Applewood, a tidy little bungalow now occupied by the long-time widower. Ostrowski has joined him to pose for a few pictures, and talk about their war careers. The conversation soon settles on Arnhem.

The assault inspired Cornelius Ryan's book *A Bridge Too Far*, and the 1977 Hollywood movie of the same name. Arnhem was once a beehive of activity. Three rivers – the Rhine, Waal and Meuse – cut across the area like fingers on a glove. It was an entryway into Germany for the Allied forces. This proud and ancient city was in the way of war.

Operation Market Garden was an attempt to end the European war in 1944. It misfired.

It's impossible to imagine the untold horrors that took place in

Arnhem in September of 1944. Ryan tried. Somerville still has all his papers. Ostrowski wrote about it in his book, *A Polish Paratrooper's Memoir*.

He said: "I have lived a thousand years."

It must feel like that some days.

Somerville was with Canadian forces that travelled along the "Road to Hell" to get to the Arnhem war theatre. Ostrowski was a paratrooper dropped directly into battle, one of the great air assaults in the war.

But the Germans were tough and dug in and positioned perfectly, and as the battle raged, so many of the Allies died. The loss of colleagues is etched in the faces of survivors like Somerville and Ostrowski.

When the war ended, Ostrowski rejected a return to communist Poland, and both men hopped-scotched their way to Mississauga.

The widowers are forever unit-

ed in a bond that was forged on the smithy of war.

Each Christmas Eve, Dutch children go to the war cemeteries and place candles on the graves of our fallen soldiers.

At this year's VE anniversary, flowers were placed there as well.

Helicopters dropped thousands of poppies from the air, too, to celebrate their liberators, the Canucks.

Arnhem was shredded by war. All that was left standing was the old church. It was as if only God's house had dodged a bullet.

By 1945 the Canadians helped their Allies capture the big prize. In the process, they captured forever the hearts of the Dutch.

Our Mississauga soldiers are still rock stars over there, and their presence today helps many of us bridge the yawning divide between 1945 and 2015.

These men are living reminders that good always overcomes evil.