

A Crowning Achievement – The Script – November 5th, 2023

Choir piped in to '*Passchendaele*' by piper Dennis Kerr

Setting the Scene:

Good afternoon everyone. A very warm welcome to the North Lakeshore Chorus presentation of 'A Crowning Achievement,' a musical tribute to the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment, affectionately known as the Hasty P's, on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the Allied invasion of Sicily on July 10th, 1943. My name is Michael Korn. I am the producer of this concert and will be your MC.

Before we start, just a gentle reminder to switch off any electronic devices or put them to vibrate. If you should need a washroom, the church has three; namely, one at the back of the church in the Tower, one through these doors down the stairs and one through these doors up the stairs.

The pipe piece that you just heard was not 'The Gael' as listed, but Passchendaele. It was played for us by Dennis Kerr, Pipe Major of the Napanee Pipe Band, who very kindly stepped in for us at very short notice as Garret Rodgers was unable to play for us.

1939 was to be a momentous year for Canada and indeed for the world. In May 1939 King George VI and his wife Queen Elizabeth came on a Royal visit to Canada, the first ever by a reigning monarch. Thousands across the country lined up to catch a glimpse of the Royal couple. Loyalty to the Crown still very much defined who Canadians were, especially in English Canada. Ties to the United Kingdom and the British Empire were very strong and acted as a buffer to the influence of the much more densely populated neighbour to the south.

Canada's contribution to the war effort during the Great War, which lasted from 1914 – 1918 had been on an unprecedented scale with 60,000 war dead and well over 100,000 wounded. Canadian soldiers had developed a reputation as a fierce fighting force and were respected the world over. Sadly, the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, which was to bring about a peace to end all wars, only served to sow the seeds for what was to become a second global war.

On August 4th, 1914, when the British Government, in the name of the King, declared war on Germany, the entire British Empire, of which Canada was such an integral part, was also at war with Germany too. The Statute of Westminster of December 11th, 1931 changed all this, and so, Canada did not declare war on Germany after its invasion of Poland until September 10th, 1939, a full week after the United Kingdom had done so on September 3rd.

In Picton, the Armouries building, constructed prior to the start of the First World War, was the headquarters of the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment, a regiment formed on March 12th, 1920 with the amalgamation of what had been the 16th Battalion Volunteer Militia and the 49th Regiment Hastings Rifles. After the order for mobilization was issued on September 1st, 1939, men flocked to join the army and fight for King and Country. Almost overnight, Picton's population increased by over 1,000 and the town soon became accustomed to military drills and training.

In 1939 'O Canada' which had actually been written by Calixa Lavallée in 1880 for St. Jean Baptiste Day in Quebec, was finally coming into its own as a national song in English Canada after having been played frequently during the Royal visit. God Save the King was still the national anthem and the Maple Leaf Forever, a close second, at least in English Canada. Please stand as you are able for the singing of O Canada and God Save the King, the words to which can be found in your programmes.

O Canada

God Save the King

Please be seated and enjoy The Maple Leaf Forever and Song for the land.

The Maple Leaf Forever

Song for the Land

The Regiment leaves for Overseas:

After several months of training the men of the Hasty P's were ready to leave for overseas. The Regiment left Picton on December 17th, 1939, but because of Government censorship, the event could not be reported in The Picton Gazette newspaper until January 5th, 1940 by which time the troops had safely arrived in

England. The local newspaper estimated that between ten and thirty thousand people had crammed into Picton on that day to say their goodbyes.

There had been a church parade at the Armouries Sunday morning, with the men being given the afternoon off. Over 800 men left Picton on two trains that evening bound for Halifax, Nova Scotia – one at 8.45 pm, the other just a couple of hours later. The Regimental Band marched the soldiers from the Armouries to Picton railway station, which is now the site of Evans Lumber on both occasions. Railway crossings and stations at Bloomfield, Wellington, Consecon, Trenton and Belleville were jammed with relatives and friends, hoping to catch a glimpse of a loved one that they might never see again.

The long ocean voyage to England was fairly uneventful, although there was a brief scare until what looked like a U-Boat from a distance, actually proved to be the body of a dead whale. Two horrible storms caused a great number of soldiers to be seasick and Christmas dinner was not the same without loved ones back home.

Upon arriving in England there were speeches from Anthony Eden, the Dominions Secretary, Major-General Andrew McNaughton, the Canadian Commander and Vincent Massey, the Canadian High Commissioner to the Court of St. James. There was also a very warm welcome given to the soldiers when they arrived at the Aldershot Camp. Years of training in the United Kingdom were ahead for members of the Regiment before they were finally deployed in a theatre of war.

Farewell to Nova Scotia

Wish Me Luck as You Wave Me Goodbye

Now is the Hour

Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy

The Regiment in Sicily:

In January of 1943, the war had been raging for over three years and victory for the Allies still seemed very illusive. Canadian soldiers had been deployed in Hong Kong where they had become Japanese prisoners of war and had to endure terrible conditions and at the failed raid on Dieppe on August 19th, 1942. Of

almost 5,000 Canadian soldiers deployed, 3,367 ended up as casualties including 1,946 prisoners of war and 916 Canadian lives lost.

At the Casablanca Conference Britain and the United States agreed to an invasion of Sicily in either spring or summer to pull German resources away from northern Europe and a much anticipated Allied offensive. In March, Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King, pressed Winston Churchill for Canadian participation in fighting in North Africa. By the end of April, the green light had been given for a force to go to Sicily.

However, there were many logistical problems that needed to be ironed out and it was imperative that the Germans were convinced that an invasion would take place anywhere other than Sicily. Finally, things were full steam ahead and Canadian convoys left Scotland between June 19th and July 1st, 1943, with only senior officers in the know as to where the ships were headed.

Sadly, 64 Canadians on three ships carrying 562 vehicles and 32 heavy guns died when their ships were torpedoed. 160,000 Allied soldiers managed to land at various locations across the southern coast of Sicily, of which 25,000 were Canadian.

The Hasty P's landed at Pachino on July 10th, an event now celebrated annually at the Belleville Armouries with a spaghetti dinner. They had no motorized vehicles to assist them in their advance. It was thought that the island was defended by some 200,000 Italian troops, 32,000 German soldiers and 30,000 Luftwaffe ground crews.

The Regiment did not encounter much resistance in Pachino and were soon able to move further inland. July 14th and 15th saw the Regiment ambushed by soldiers of the 4th Göring Luftwaffe Regiment. A few days later, Lieutenant-Colonel Sutcliffe, the Regiment's C.O. and his Intelligence Officer, Captain Battle Cockin, were both killed while preparing for an assault on Mount Assoro. Major Lord John Tweedsmuir, son of Canada's former Governor General immediately was appointed the new C.O. and a young Lieutenant Farley Mowat became the Intelligence Officer, responsible for keeping the daily war diary. The assault on Assoro went ahead as planned on July 20th. The Hasty P's managed to climb a 906 metre cliff in the dark and completely surprise the Germans from behind.

Canadian War Correspondent Ross Munro described Mount Assoro's capture as the "most daring and spectacular action of the Sicilian Campaign." It was indeed a Crowning Achievement. The fighting was not over though until August 17th, 1943. Thirty-three members of the Hasty P's would never come home and would forever be remembered in the beautiful Canadian War Cemetery in Agira.

Signore Della Cime, Lord of the Mountain Tops, is a popular Italian song of prayer, while Bella Ciao became a resistance anthem for the partigiano – the Italian Patriots. The lyrics tell of a soldier's wish to be buried in the mountains beneath a beautiful flower should he have to die for liberty.

Bella Ciao

Signore Della Cime

Please enjoy a short intermission and we will see you back in 10 minutes.

In Remembrance:

Welcome back to the Remembrance section of the programme. In 2019 several members of the North Lakeshore Chorus had the opportunity to travel to mainland Italy and Sicily to pay tribute to the Canadian soldiers who had fought in the Second World War. Mike Criscione, who was born in Sicily, was our flag bearer and had the honour of proudly carrying the Regimental Camp flag of the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment wherever we went. At every Canadian War Cemetery visited, the names of the Hasty P's buried there were read aloud.

Last Sunday, the Minister of this church, the Venerable Dr. Pearce blessed this flag. It is now hanging at the back of the church in a place of honour as a reminder of the links that the Regiment once had to this church.

Abide with Me

Drop, drop slow tears

Verleih Uns Frieden

Hector the Hero – played by Dennis Kerr on the pipes

Please join in with the singing of Abide with Me, words are in your programme.

I would now like to call upon the Venerable Dr. Pearce, incumbent of this Parish to read the names of the members of the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment buried in the Canadian War Cemetery in Agira. Could you please stand as you are able and remain standing for two minutes of silence and the playing of Flowers of the Forest, also known as the Piper's Lament.

Reading of the names of the Hasty P war dead in the Agira Cemetery, Sicily

Two Minutes of Silence

Flowers of the Forest – played by Dennis Kerr on the pipes

Please be seated as the Venerable Dr. Pearce leads us in a prayer for peace.

I Vow to Thee My Country

I'm Dreaming of Home

Piper – Choir – Piper: Highland Cathedral

Many of you will be aware that the D-Day landings in France took place on June 6th, 1944. Canadian soldiers landed at Juno Beach and today a museum stands there in their honour. Many soldiers, including those in the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment were not at Juno Beach; rather, they were still fighting their way up the Italian mainland. Lady Astor, the first woman to take her seat in the British House of Commons in 1919 as the MP for Plymouth Sutton once referred to the men in Italy as D- Day Dodgers. Rather than take this label as an insult, many wore the title with pride.

As we are almost at the end of our programme I would just like to take a few minutes to acknowledge all those who have worked so hard and diligently to make this concert a success. Tom and Heather have been an amazing and talented musical team and a delight to work with. A huge thank you to Dennis, our piper, for stepping in at the last moment. Thanks to Doug and Louise Gough who make my life so much easier and the members of St. Mary Magdalene Church who have been so kind and supportive. I really appreciate the Venerable Dr. Pearce for being here to lead us in prayer. The dedication and loyalty of the choir never ceases to amaze me – some have driven all the way from Toronto. Could everyone please take a well deserved bow. Finally, a big thank you to you the audience for coming out to support us.

D-Day Dodgers

Song for the Unsung Hero

Choir piped out to Scotland the Brave – Dennis Kerr, Piper