

Charlottetown Veteran Relates War Experiences

By Julie VEINOT

A soft-spoken man who now lives in Charlottetown, surrounded by pictures of war battles and certificates, silver platters engraved with honours, Colonel Donald Thompson remembers his war experiences fondly.

In fact, the military has taken up all of his 80 years.

When he was in school in Saint John, he signed up for the cadet corp, which gave him his first taste of organization and service. While still in high school, he organized the Saint John High School Rifle Club.

In 1936, four members of the rifle club, including Thompson, joined the reserve army. Thompson became part of the Seventh Machine Gun Company, which was amalgamated with the Saint John Fusiliers MG. At that time, Thompson was still only 14 years old - to join he had to create a phony birth date so he could meet the 17 age minimum.

He passed with flying colours.

Still in high school, he went to Camp Sussex for military training each summer. With pay in hand, he would travel to the New Brunswick Rifle Association annual competition in Sussex. After winning there, he won a place to represent the province at the annual competition of the Dominion of Canada Rifle Association near Ottawa. There was an entry fee for each match he entered. Winners could afford to eat dinner in a restaurant with the prize money.

Losers had to eat hot dogs.

Late in the summer of 1939, Thompson enlisted in the Canadian



Canadian troops landing at Juno Beach on D-Day

Active Service Force; he was the twenty-first person in the regiment to enlist for overseas service. In 1942, he left Halifax for the United Kingdom. When he arrived, he joined the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa, the regiment in which he would service during the fighting.

At night they would go to a pub called Three Feathers, drink, then race their wheelchairs through the blackout-dark streets of London.

Still a young man in the war, Thompson had always loved getting care-packages from home, but noticed many soldiers were receiving nothing. In a letter to his mother back in Saint John, he wrote the names of the men who had no mail. His mother took the names of the soldiers to people in her hometown, who then did up packages to send to the soldiers - sometimes there were even cigarettes and other things appreciated while in Europe.

Sometimes his family would take in soldiers who were in New Brunswick - it strikes Thompson as wonderful, having his family take in strangers. By the same token he would receive invitations from the European residents to join them in their homes. In a January 1944 letter to his mother,

Thompson wrote, "I know that on this last leave at Campbell's [house] and also at Major Wood's at Glasgow we must have eaten their meat ration for at least a week but they are so nice and generous and want only to make us happy because they also have boys in the service."

When he was 21 years old, he led a 13 Platoon of the Camerons ashore in France.

It was the beaches of Normandy. It was D-Day.

Previous to the landing, he had been in charge of loading a landing ship tank. "I had never been onboard one before," he remembers. He also remembers what the onboard priest did before they landed - he draped a flag over the back of one of the tanks and held a communion service there.

For two days, Thompson fought in France. He was rounding the corner of a building one day when he heard footsteps on the other side.

Heart pounding, pistol cocked, he neared the corner. Each day, there was a new password among the men so they could identify themselves. When Thompson came face to face with a stun gun, he heard someone say, "Punch."

He said, "Judy."

Of all the passwords he used during the war, he remembers Punch Judy the best of them all, as he came

face-to-face with another Allied soldier that day.

While in the French countryside, he met many of the people that lived there - in fact, years later, when he returned to France, he found himself the recipient of gifts and hospitality from people who never forgot the Canadians.

"The attitude of those people is something you never forget," he says, adding these were people who at one time had the freedom we today enjoy. Then it was taken away from them - and when the Canadians came to fight, that elusive freedom came back to them.

"We just take it for granted," he says. We can come and go at any hour of the night. Can vote for anyone. Can go shopping anywhere.

In the countryside of France, two days into fighting, he was wounded in the ankle, an injury that still plagues him today.

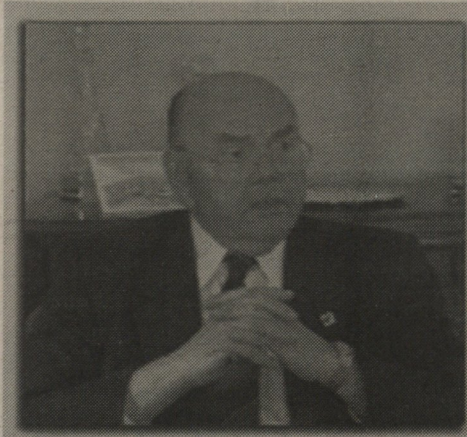
It was six days before he made it to a hospital. Thompson recalls the doctor saying that when he came into the hospital, the doctor was going to flip a coin to decide whether or not he would amputate his injured leg. When the doctor rifled through his pocket for a coin, he couldn't find one, so he decided not to amputate.

"I was glad he was broke," laughs Thompson.

For two days, Thompson fought in France. He was rounding the corner of a building one day when he heard footsteps on the other side.

While in hospital in London, Thompson forged friendships with soldiers he had fun with - even while they were still recuperating.

At night they would go to a pub called Three Feathers, drink, then race their wheelchairs through the blackout-dark streets of London. Several of them, even though they were weighed down with casts, took a boat out, never thinking of what might



Colonel Donald Thompson