

Canadian war time efforts honoured at Juno Beach Centre

Raymond Huycke's name among those on the walls

By Paul Futhey
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The walls of the newly constructed Juno Beach Centre bear the names of thousands of Canadians.

People visiting the site, located at Courseulles-sur-Mer, France, can see the inscribed bricks in honour of those who served their country in the Second World War. These bricks coat the panels of the centre's various kiosks and acknowledge the deeds of air force, navy, army and other personnel. Local municipalities' contributions, too, are noted, generally in honour of all who served from a particular area.

Among those bricks is one which bears the name of Raymond H. Huycke, a company sergeant major.

Huycke, 83, is a long-time Nobleton resident, who moved into the village in 1953. His granddaughter, Laurie Cole, and her husband, Dan, of Bolton, spear-headed the move to honour his time spent in the service. Huycke was touched by the

gesture. "I was really taken aback, for sure," he said.

The centre was officially opened last Friday with several Canadian dignitaries in attendance, including Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and Governor General Adrienne Clarkson. It is meant to be a memorial, a museum and a learning centre to honour the extensive Canadian contribution during World War Two. It is located on five acres of oceanfront property near the site of a major turning point in the conflict: Normandy. That day, D-Day, was June 6, 1944, and witnessed the opening of the second front.

Huycke, who spent five years in Europe as a member of the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment (also known as the 'Hasty Ps') saw action in Sicily and Italy. He recalls exact dates of his experiences with ease. He enlisted Feb. 2, 1940; he sailed to England May 10, 1940; he first saw action July 10, 1943; he was captured by the Germans on Dec. 5, 1944 and saw freedom May 5, 1945, three

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Thirty-one battle honours for Regiment: more than any other Canadian Regiment

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days before the war in Europe was declared over. A picture of Huycke and his youngest daughter, Carol, at the regiment memorial in Belleville, occupies a prominent spot in his living room along with photos of his family, which now includes two great-grandchildren.

He was a young man, all of 20-years-old, from small town Ontario, when he enlisted with the Regiment and went off to Quebec City for basic training. He said he wanted to enlist as early as September, 1939, but agreed to postpone acting on his intentions in order to care for an ailing family member.

His first three years in Europe, save for a brief foray into France, were spent in Great Britain, training and marching. He calls them "wonderful years."

When it came time for combat, Huycke's Regiment was part of the first infantry division of the first infantry brigade, and along with American and British forces, they took an Italian airfield at Pachino Beach on July 10, 1943. It was shortly after Huycke, then a Platoon Sergeant, was promoted to Company Sergeant Major.

He was captured by the Germans in late 1944 and transported to Germany by train. During the journey the boxcar in front of the one holding him and other prisoners was demolished by an Allied plane. It was five days before they moved again.

While he was in captivity for several months, the feeling the tide had turned in favour of the Allied forces was still very much prevalent, he said. "I think the writing was on the wall at that stage of the game," he added.

Aside from a two-hour interrogation once he got to the prison camp (Huycke revealed nothing but name rank and serial number), the problems facing Huycke and his fellow prisoners had more to do with finding enough to eat.

"The main problem was food," he said. "The roads had been bombed, the rail lines had ben bombed and the Red Cross couldn't get through."

The prison food consisted mainly of tiny potatoes, bread, ersatz tea and watery soup. Once in a while this humble nourishment would be supplemented with cheese or salami, he said.

In Huycke's array of keepsakes he owns from that time is a map he found at an airfield where he took his first plane ride after being freed. Also, there is a collection of 23 small playing cards. Each has a name printed in block letters on its face: Smith on the seven of spades; Hermandes, from Trinidad and Tobago, on the ace of clubs; Broadworth, the two of diamonds; and Huycke, the four of clubs. They were the names of fellow POWs. Huycke was in charge of distributing food and the cards were used to ensure a completely random and fair distribution of food, especially the

bread.

"They didn't have any argument after that," he said.

In recent years, Huycke has had the opportunity to revisit the site of his exploits.

He recounts with pride, in 1985, when he was selected to represent his Regiment in Italy. The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment had 31 battle honours in World War Two – more than any other Canadian Regiment.

Most importantly, going back gave him an opportunity to pay respects to those comrades who never make the return trip to Canada. A particularly painful recollection involved the death of his company commander, Major A. R. Campbell. Campbell died on Christmas Day, 1943.

"First of all, to think we left so many of our young men over there," he said. "One day you're going along laughing and smiling and then the next day that smile is gone."

For every brick purchased for the Juno Beach Centre, a replica wooden tile is available. Huycke now has his to keep. He can add it to his other possessions — the map, the cards and a letter signed by his aunt and friends of the family, written to him before he left for Europe. It spoke of the "regret mingled with pride" at his upcoming sojourn.

"We realize the great sacrifice which our boys in uniform make that our freedom and liberty may be preserved," it said.