

Local Hero Remembered in Holland.

Have you ever wondered about the persons buried beneath the headstones in our cemeteries? What were their families like? What were their hobbies? Were they married?

One such person was Lieutenant Ernest Edwin Finley. He has a headstone in the Stevens Cemetery in Grand Bay -Westfield. His headstone says simply "Lieutenant E.E. Finley, Buried in Holland."

My husband, Bill Finley, is Ernest's nephew. We know from family history that Ernest was the son of Alice and Frank Finley, one of 7 children. He grew up in Fairville and summered in Ingleside (part of Grand Bay-Westfield). He loved to carve, and he carved many wooden pieces. He especially loved to carve small boats and even built a life sized sailboat. Ernest and his siblings spent many glorious hours sailing on the Saint John River.

With the dawning of World War II, three of the Finley boys signed up: Murray (Bill's dad) joined the Navy, Ralph joined the Air Force, and Ernest joined the Army. Ernest joined the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment (R.C.I.C.). Two of the boys came back, but sadly Ernest did not. Just prior to going overseas, he married his sweetheart, Audrey, with hopes that someday when he returned they would start a family together.

Of course, that was never to be. Ernest was killed outside the little village of Holten in the Netherlands on the 7th of April 1945, 2 brief months before the war ended. He was only 29 years old. From Casualty Records, we know that he was killed by a sniper. As a Lieutenant, he was in charge of a group of men and on that particular day insisted on going ahead of his men over a dangerous ridge, only to be killed by enemy gunfire.

Not long after Ernest's death, his parents received a translated letter from a Dutch man living in a village near the cemetery. It said that "although he did not know Finley, E.E., he knew he must have been a good man, and that he would take good care of his grave". The letter went on to say that "he would place flowers there on every special occasion".

It has always been a passion of mine and my husband's to visit Ernest's grave in Holland, and to try and track down and thank the family who cared for his grave. In May 2012, we realized at least part of our dream. We flew into Amsterdam, letter in hand, and took a 2 hour train ride to Holten, Holland.

The visitor centre at the cemetery was just 2 years old, and thanks to Bill's cousin (who had been to the cemetery 1 year earlier), there was a picture and brief history of Ernest. The centre and cemetery were very peaceful places and extremely well kept. We easily found Ernest's grave and placed Canadian coins on his headstone. We lingered for quite some time at the cemetery that day, overwhelmed by the numbers of young Canadians (1,355) who were buried there.

The visitor centre was manned by 2 Dutch volunteers, and although they made several phone calls to try and track down the Dutch family who had cared for Ernest's grave, it was to no avail. We learned that all of the Canadian War Cemeteries are now cared for by the Canadian War Commission, and it has been quite some time since there were individual caregivers.

Since we had a little time before our train, we wandered around the lovely town of Holten. In a quaint little gift shop, we met a wonderful Dutch lady who made us feel particularly proud to be Canadian that day. She told us that every Christmas Eve, the school children of the village hold a candle light procession into the Canadian Cemetery, and place small Canadian flags at graves chosen by each student. This has been a tradition since 1991. She told us that although none of the families knew any of these men directly, they recognized the fallen Canadians with dignity and honour every year. These were brave people who had liberated their country. She told us that it brings a tear to the eyes of many of the villagers who gather to watch the procession each year.

We left Holten that day with tears in our eyes. We were indeed proud to be Canadians, and especially proud of Ernest for fighting for his country.

Submitted by Sherry Finley