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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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INTERVIEWEE: PHILIP LABELLE

INTERVIEWER: QUILLER GRAHAM

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Philip Labelle

Interviewed 30 October 2000

By Quiller Graham

INTERVIEWER: Canadian War Museum Oral History Program interview with Philip A. Labelle, recorded on 30 October 2000 in Ottawa, Ontario. Interviewed by Quiller Graham. Tape one, side one.

LABELLE: My name is Philip Arthur Labelle. I was born in January 19, 1924 in Hawksbury, Ontario. My mother was a schoolteacher. My father was a veteran of the First World War. He enlisted in Montreal at the age of 16, or 15 I believe, with the Royal 22nd Regiment. His parents – his mother was Irish. Her name was Malloy. She came from Southeastern Ontario from the village of Fournier. His father came from Montreal. His mother was Irish as well, so he grew up in a family where English was the first language. Consequently, when he joined the Royal 22nd Regiment he was out of sorts to some extent because it was a French regiment. So having served with them, he learned how to speak French in his regiment. He went overseas and was wounded at the Battle of Courcelette. After which, he was hospitalized and became a drill instructor in England.

Upon return to Canada, he worked for his godfather in L'Orignal, Ontario. A small village just west of Hawksbury. His godfather ran a small store and also published the smallest English weekly newspaper in Canada, called the Prestcott-Russell Advocate. My father became his devil's printer, was taught by his godfather how to write well and also to help to publish the newspaper. He did this for about three years, following which he joined the Ontario Provincial Police Force as a Constable. He worked with my maternal grandfather who was also a Provincial Policeman who was employed during the prohibition years to tour the then, Liquor Control Board of Ontario to ensure that bootlegging was kept to a minimum. So he and my father worked together in this venture, amongst other things. My father was promoted to the rank of Sergeant in 1932 and appointed High Constable for the United Counties of Stormont-Dundas and Glengarry in Cornwall, Ontario as a Detachment Head. He was there until 1938, at which time he was moved to Ottawa and became the High Constable for Carleton County. At that time, he had a detachment of some six constables. I believe now that there are about 150 in the area doing what he did at that time with six constables.

I started my military career at a very tender age. When I was about seven years of age and I was going to Primary school, I was a Cadet in the Cadet Corps that the Primary school had at the time. I have a picture of myself in uniform to prove it. I then became a member of the Cadet Corps in the Cornwall Collegiate Institute, which was affiliated with the Stormont-Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders. When I came to Ottawa in 1938,

I had no military affiliation, but because the war started, and my friends were involved one way or another and we were looking forward to participating in the war together, along with one of my neighbours, who was a very close friend, I joined the Pipe Band of the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa in 1940. And I stayed with the Cameron Highlanders until 1943 when I went on Active Service. Having joined the Cameron Highlanders in 1940, of course, the war was on at that time and most of my peers, who were perhaps a little bit older, were going on Active Service. Unfortunately, I couldn't do that because of my age. So, I remained with the Militia until it was time for me to be able to go on Active Service.

My militia training was pretty limited in scope, really. It consisted primarily of really doing recruiting drives on weekends at County Fairs, and what have you. Appearing in uniform to play for them. And we did have a two-week period during the summer where we went to Connaught Ranges where we were taught drill and weapons training. At that time, we were training initially with the Ross rifle and then with the new Mark IV rifle. I think we had one Lewis gun at that time. The Cameron Highlanders were a machine gun battalion, so they had a Lewis gun. And we finally got our hands on a Bren gun to train with. It was the lone Bren gun available for us to use. They were very, very hard to come by. Most of them, having been issued to the units that were overseas.

We didn't do very much travelling, other than as I say, county fairs where we played to entertain the troops and perhaps to recruit some people. But I did have one interesting trip. When the Pipe Band was invited to participate in two parades, one of them in Boston which was most enjoyable. The other one in New York city, where as a young man I got to enjoy living in the McCalvin Hotel at the corner of 42nd Street and Broadway, visiting Radio City Music Hall and Coney Island. It was a tremendous experience for a young fellow.

In April 1943, I had reached the age where I could go on Active Service, so I quit my job and enlisted in the Active Service Force. I underwent a physical as well as the, then, M test to be evaluated. And I was selected to be an officer candidate. As a consequence of being selected to be an officer candidate, I was posted to Three Rivers to an Officer Selection and Appraisal Center where we did rigorous military training, was subjected to batteries of tests to determine our suitability to be officers. And I must say the tests were very strenuous, because out of a platoon of 30 people that I was with, only two of us were subsequently commissioned. And strangely enough, both of us became CANLOAN Officers.

Following the assessment at OSAC, the Officer Selection and Appraisal Center in Three Rivers, I was sent to St Jerome as an officer candidate to undertake basic training, which I completed following my stay in Three Rivers. On completion of my basic training course at St Jerome, I was posted to the Officer Training Center in Brockville where I took officer training and graduated as a Second Lieutenant in October of 1943. As a new Second Lieutenant, it was necessary for me to do Advanced Officer Infantry training, so I went to the A11 Infantry Training Center in Camp Borden where I joined another 30-35 officers who had just completed there commissioning training. And we were subjected to

all sorts of indignities. We were brought down to earth again from have just been commissioned. We were treated like private soldiers. We were made to grovel in the dirt. We did battle training exercises day-in and day-out. We doubled with full marching order on day-in and day-out until we were exhausted. Finally at the end of the 30 days, we completed this training and we were given our second pip. And after I received my second pip as a full Lieutenant, I was posted to Barriefield just outside of Kingston, where there was an Ordnance Training Center and I was given a platoon of recruits to train. And I was there until late January of 1944, when I heard about the CANLOAN scheme, whereby, I was aware that we had a surplus of infantry officers in Canada and the British Army apparently had a tremendous shortage of junior Infantry Officers. And I felt that there was a very strong possibility that I would never get to see action.

As I was keen to see action, I volunteered to go on the CANLOAN scheme. As a consequence, I was posted to the A10 Infantry Training Center in Camp Borden where I was grouped with a number of other volunteers, one of which, incidentally, was a fellow by the name of Charles Scott Brown, who had completed his officer training with me in Brockville. And we wound up sharing beds in Camp Borden. Finally, we were grouped together as a draft and sent off onto to Sussex, New Brunswick to the special Officer's Training Center, which was then being run there as a concentration point for both training and for proceeding overseas for CANLOANOfficers. And this organization was run by Brigadier Milton Greg VC, at the time, who had been running a Battle Training School out in Vernon up to that point.

In Sussex, we were grouped again into platoons of junior officers and were subjected to training which was very, very similar to what we had just had going through our second pip training at A11 Training Center in Camp Borden. Very, very arduous training. Some field firing exercises, route marching, drill and I must say it was great to have been discovered by Brigadier Gregg, who found out that I had been a newspaper reporter and he invited me to be the editor of a commemorative newsletter for CANLOAN Officers to be published in Sussex. This took me off the arduous training and gave me a break from the iteration of training that we had gone through. And I put this publication together, in which we included the histories of some of the regiments to which we would be going, some local news and some jokes. These were subsequently distributed to all the CANLOAN officers who had gone through Sussex. We were then grouped together in a very large draft. I think my draft was the largest one to sail to England and we went by rail from Sussex to Halifax and went directly onboard the EMPRESS OF SCOTLAND to sail for England.

INTERVIEWER: This is in early May of 1944?

LABELLE: This is in early May of 1944. We had no incidents during our sail across the Atlantic. We were escorted out for a few hundred miles and then we went on our completely until we approached a few hundred miles from the English Coast at which time we were picked up by warships to provide protection for us. And we arrived in Liverpool at night. We stayed aboard until the following morning until we were received by administrative groups who then asked us which units we wanted to go to. At this

time, my friend, Charlie Scott Brown who had come from the 48 Highlanders Militia, had selected his affiliated regiment which was the Gordon Highlanders. I asked to go to the Cameron Highlanders, the Imperial Cameron Highlanders, because I had served in the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa, but I was told that there were no spaces available in the Cameron Highlanders because they had already had their quota of Canadian officers. As a consequence, I volunteered to go with the Gordon Highlanders.

We then left Liverpool by rail and went directly Headquarters of the 15th Scottish Division where we were greeted by the Divisional staff, including the Divisional Commander, who told us that we would probably learn to eat porridge with salt on it instead of sugar because we were in a Scottish Division now and that's the way it was played. So, this was very interesting. After we received our introduction to the GOC and his staff, we were then dispatched to the units with which we were going to serve. And Scott Brown and I reported to the 2nd Battalion of the Gordon Highlanders down in the southeast England in an area out in the countryside not too far from Brighton.

My friend, Charlie Scott Brown and I were then set off to join our unit, the 2nd Battalion of the Gordon Highlanders in southeast England. They were in the field, out in the countryside under canvas. We were introduced to the commanding Officer and the officers of the battalion and we were sent to the companies for which we were to serve for a period of familiarization for two weeks. And I took over a platoon in the company I was to serve in, which was at that time, commanded by a Sergeant. And we finished our two weeks training and familiarization with them. We did field firing exercises, route marching and drill and got to know the men that we were going to serve with. It was all very, very interesting. And we were looking forward to going over to France at this stage of the game and made to bide out time until it was time to go. So after our two-week familiarization period, some of the Canadian officers who had gone to the unit stayed with the unit. But Brown and I--Scott Brown and I-- were sent to a reinforcement unit, Number 32 Reinforcement Holding Unit, which was located in the Maidstone area, where we sat on our heels until we were ready to be dispatched to France. We went through the same normal high jinks again. We had an Adjutant at the Reinforcement Holding Unit who felt that we should be fit. So he wanted us up at 5:00 in the morning to do calisthenics. We weren't very keen about that. So we allowed as though we weren't going to do it. We sulked and got it called off.

In the event, during the time that I was at the Reinforcement Holding Unit, I asked for and got a 48-hour leave to visit London. I went to London and the morning after I went into a tailor shop to have the badges of the Gordons stitched onto my Battle Dress, I was told by the tailor that the landings had taken place in France and the invasion was on. And I looked at him in disbelief because I thought I should be there. So I promptly got him to finish putting the badges onto my jacket and hopped onto the next available train and got back to the Reinforcement Holding Unit and was promptly sent off along with the Reinforcement Group to a concentration area behind barbed wire where no one could get in or out until we were ready to sail. And we were there only for about 20 hours or so and then boarded a ship to sail across to France.

We crossed the Channel at night. There was no enemy activity. There was a lot of activity in that there were convoys rolling back and forth between France and England and back and forth and so on that we could see. And it was quite a spectacle when we got to be able to see the coast of France that you almost couldn't see the coast because of the number of ships there were. They almost covered the horizon. We couldn't believe the spectacle that it presented.

But then we landed and we had to march to an area where we were led into a field where our holding unit was to be and we selected places where we could set up our cots and wait the next series of orders that we were going to get. We wound up getting small tents to live under at that stage and my friend, Scott Brown, and I shared the tent in this area until we were called to join our units. And we spent about two and half weeks in this particular area waiting to be called and, during this time, we literally did very little except eat and make tea. But we did avail ourselves of the opportunity of going to see the first town in Normandy that had been cleared and it was the town of Bayeux. We managed to hitch rides there with the vehicles that were running back and forth and we managed to go into Bayeux to see what it was all about and we got ourselves back to the Reinforcement Holding Unit until we were called to go forward.

And I was called to go to the 2nd Gordons and Scott Brown, my friend, who was sharing the tent with me, went to the 57th Gordon and the 51st Highland Division. So the Reinforcement Unit was fulfilling the role of sending off reinforcements to those who needed them. And I joined the 2nd Battalion of the Gordons after they had completed their first action in which they had suffered 17 officer casualties. And it was interesting to note that after their first action when they were reinforced, they had a total of 14 CANLOAN officers in that Battalion which represented a very, very large proportionate of officers as there were only 36 to start with.

The battalion was just leaving it's defensive position and I was required to do a reconnaissance of the area to which they were meant to go to rest and refit. And I went forward as a guide to the company that I was to be with to lead them back to the rest area, which I did. On the following day, it was discovered that there were 14 Canadian officers in the Battalion. This was a considerable number of Canadians in one battalion since our complement was for 36 in total. And 44 Brigade had had a battering and had lost a lot of officers in the battle that it had participated in. So, six of us were transferred from the 2nd Battalion of the Gordons to go to 44 Brigade to reinforce battalions in that brigade. As a consequence, I wound up being transferred to the 6th Battalion of the Royal Scots Fusiliers.

INTERVIEWER: And that was in early July of 1944.

LABELLE: Early July of 1944.

INTERVIEWER: And you took over a position there from the Americans, I believe?

LABELLE: Yeah my first--the first location that I went to with the 6 Battalion Royal Scots Fusiliers I was commanding a Platoon in A Company of the battalion. We took over a defensive position from the American troops from the 10th American Infantry Division which they had occupied, since D-Day actually, in the Caumont area. And we occupied this defensive position for a total of about a week before we were moved from there for the next action we were to take place in, or to participate in, rather.

Perhaps I should have mentioned that some rather interesting events took place that slipped my mind for a few moments. About the time that I was with the 2nd Gordons when I had joined them and led out into their rest and refit area. The area selected for their rest and refit was a small village in Normandy called Brettville L'Orgeilleuse It wasn't a very large village, but it had some houses, including a pub. And I had picked a room to live in above the pub on the Main Street of Brettville L'Orgeilleuse .And the area behind it had been used by a REME Workshop to remove bodies and ammunition from tanks that had been hit by the enemy in action. And they were stacking ammunition in one place and they were stacking bodies and having them buried from this particular location. And whilst I was upstairs in this room above the pub, washing myself down in the first time in a couple of weeks in my little field bathtub, an enemy shell landed on a pile of ammunition which had been stacked from the tanks that were damaged and ignited them. And shrapnel started flying all over the place, including the room that I was in. And I wound up downstairs with no clothes on at this stage of the game trying to avoid the melee of shrapnel that was flying all around me. That was one event.

The other event that I recall very distinctly, which was a most unfortunate one, was that I witnessed the initiation of bombing of the enemy in a Normandy area when, unfortunately, because of miscalculation, the bombing by the RAF and the United States Air Force hit our own troops, the forward lines of our own troops. And we suffered a great number of casualties as a result. I was elated to see that they were dropping the bombs on the enemy, but then in about 20 minutes, I was also watching a very large number of ambulances who were evacuating our own people who had been hit during this bombardment. So this wasn't a terribly happy moment. In addition to that, because we weren't that far away from the enemy, we were subjected to a fair amount of counter battery fire from the enemy. Our commanding officer, because of the bloody nose that the 2nd Gordons had suffered in its first battle, in order to bring up morale and to remind them that there were a formed unit worthy of the name of Gordons, he decided to hold a parade, so that the men would get back some of their discipline and know that they were still part of a formed unit. And, regrettably, we were shelled during the period that we were on parade, and we suffered some casualties.

The rest of the time was dedicated to doing some small unit training because of the large number of tanks which had been counter attacking our Division, it was decided to do small unit training for infantry attack cooperation with the PIAT rocket launcher so that we became more adept at using it in order to defence ourselves against enemy tanks. Now, we did all of this during that week to week and half period before we went off to the Caumont area. Before I describe what happened in Caumont, perhaps I should spend a moment to describe to you what the PIAT is. It is the acronym for Projector Infantry

Anti-Tank, which is the weapon with which we in the British Army, and the Canadian Army, were equipped as a short distance anti-tank weapon for close-in fighting with tanks. And it was a monster of a weapon really. It was a weapon with a very large spring and a spigot. And you placed the PIAT bomb on the spigot after you managed with great effort straining with your feet and arms working at their absolute best to cock the weapon. And the weapon was capable of firing a distance of about 30 to 50 yards at best. So you had to be quite close to a tank to fire it. And it was a hollow shaped charge which wasn't all that great against the armour that we were up against. At that time we were up against Panther tanks and Tiger tanks which had very, very thick armour and it was sloped armour as well, so that one had to be very, very accurate and very close to a tank to be able to cause any damage at all.

To go back to Caumont, Caumont was a relatively quiet area for us. In fact, one might even call it a rest area. We took over a defensive position from the American 10th Infantry Divison and I believe that that was the extent of the depth of their bridgehead in that particular area and they had not seen fit to exploit at that particular point. Therefore, the positions that we took over were the ones that, I believe, they had reached on D-Day itself. And we took over their positions and, I say, it was quiet. We received a fair amount of shellfire and mortar fire from time to time. And the Americans told us they didn't bother resounding because they didn't want to give away their positions. But from the position that I was in at the time, I could see the church steeple at the end of the road which ran through the position that I occupied, which was about 4 to 500 yards away. And from time to time, we were fired on by machine guns from that area.

I have forgotten how many days we were there, but it must have been three or four days at least. And then we left from there, by route march, and I thought we marched forever. We must have marched for 12 to 18 hours because we were exhausted when we got to yet another rest area where we stayed for about a day. After which, we moved into an area where we were, I believe, on the fringe of the American spearhead of their Patton spearhead of his 3rd US Army. And I think that we were on his flank and probably providing flank protection for that major thrust that he was making at the time. And because we were so tired, I remember having to put into position, a flank protection along a hedgerow and I spent most of the time that we were there, crawling back and forth from one end of the hedgerow to the other trying to keep my soldiers awake because they were falling asleep even though we were being machine gunned at the time. And machine gun fire was being fired above their heads through the hedgerow which was only about three feet above their heads and they were still sleeping. While I was roaming back and forth on my face, keeping the soldiers awake, I was reminded that perhaps, because I was able to do it at that stage of the game, that obviously all the physical training I had been subjected to, both in Camp Borden and also in Camp Sussex, had been worthwhile. Because I was able to carry on even under those circumstances.

From there, I recall, that we were linked up with a squadron of armour from the Guards Independent Armoured Brigade and we traveled on the tanks for several miles to a new area. And I had no idea really where we were at the time because, while I had maps, we were moving too fast to be able to locate where we were. We were traveling on top of a

tank. In any event, at the platoon level, the map wasn't really of all that much use to us because perhaps the company commander was looking at his map and certainly the commanding officer of the battalion and his intelligence officer were using the maps. But the maps were not really of much use to us at that stage because we really didn't know what was on our left. A couple of hundred yards away on our right, the same distance, we were looking for the enemy to do something about the enemy and the maps really were of no value to us. So, we just went where we were told and did what we were told and that was the extent of it.

But we got to a certain place where we had run into the enemy and my company put in an attack against a position from a ravine. There was a small hill up to an area which had been occupied by Germans and my platoon was a reserve platoon. The other two platoons of my company attacked ahead of me. And I moved up as they progressed. And all of the sudden, while we were in our approach behind the two forward platoons, my platoon was fired on. And I guess the people who were firing the machine gun realized that I was the leader because I was waving my hands to tell people to move to the right and to the left, what have you, and they opened up fire on me. And they were fairly accurate because they put a round through my water bottle which was slung underneath my small pack on my back and I thought I had been wounded because my water bottle drenched my back and the soldier who was beside me on my right was also hit in his pouch, which he wore around his belt. And he thought that he had been wounded as well, but the bullet that hit him wound up in a small water sterilization kit which was in a tin in his pouch. So neither one of us was wounded, but we came awfully close to being wounded. In the event, while we were recovering from having been surprised this way, one of the tanks supporting us spotted the fire coming towards us and opened up with their machine guns and silenced the machine gun. At which point, I took the machine gun crew prisoner. There were three of them and the NCO in charge spoke English beautifully. And I asked him why he had opened fire at us when he realized that he was being overrun and he suggested to me that he was doing it for the same reason that I was attacking him. It was his job. There was nothing that I could say about that. Quite clearly he was right. In discussion with him, I found out that he had been a schoolteacher in English. And this was why he spoke English so well. So, as soon as we passed through the position, I had the three of them escorted back and handed over to people behind us who took them to a prisoner of war cage.

From this location we went onto an area, which I suppose was a smaller concentration area in preparation for an attack on Estry. Estry was alleged to have been, in our briefing, it was occupied by second-rate troops and we shouldn't have too much of a problem. However, we were told that a brigade attack had been launched the day previously to take Estry and had failed and that we should be able to take it without too much trouble. At my company commander's orders group, he informed me that I would be the reserve platoon again and that I was to travel with him, with company headquarters, and that he would decided where I would be committed as the attack progressed. We progressed up to a crossroads and I was informed that my platoon which was behind some two to three hundred yards had run into trouble. They had been hit by a batch of Moaning Minnies--

those are mortars. And that I had lost about ten to eleven men so that my platoon was reduced in size to about a dozen people.

When we got to this crossroads, I was ordered to capture an area some 150 to 200 yards ahead of us. This was in hedgerow country, of course, so I looked through the hedgerow to see what I had to go through with my platoon. And I pinpointed two machine gun emplacements about 100 yards apart at the other end of the square surrounded by the hedgerow, and a tank. So that I was hard put to accept that fact that I could take out a tank and two machine guns with about 11 men. And I must say, I said my prayers and was prepared to die at this stage of the game, because I had no option. I had been ordered to take the area and that was it. Fortunately, at the last minute the company commander's runner came along and said, "Don't bother going forward, we've been told to stay put." And I heaved a sigh of relief and found a slit trench for myself and the rest of my platoon as well and we occupied the area around the crossroads. This area, I found out after the war when I read military history, I found that our attack coincided with a German attack called Operation Lute which was a corps attack. We had obviously come face to face in our attack against them. And theirs was a far stronger attack than ours. We had the Guards Independent Armoured Brigade had provided a squadron in our support and every one of their tanks were brewed up. They lost the whole lot. So we were shelled and mortared incessantly during this period. I had taken over a slit trench which had some [over]head cover over it and when you talk about sniping, you normally refer to rifles. In this case, we were being sniped at by 88 mm, either the equipment themselves, the artillery equipment, or from tanks. But there were literally picking out our slit trenches and firing at us. And my slit trench was hit. Fortunately for me, it hit my slit trench where the overhead cover was and most of the blast and shrapnel went into my runner who was in the slit trench with me and wounded him so severely that he didn't make it. I had a piece of shrapnel in my back and I was knocked out and concussed for an hour or so and I was taken back to our Regimental Aid post where a medical officer examined what had happened to me, put a bandage on me and sent me back to my company and we carried on there for the next two or three days. During this period of time, we had consistent shelling and mortaring and I felt very, very badly because some ten feet away from where my slip trench was, was an English Second Lieutenant in battle order who had been killed. And we couldn't bury him in daytime because we were exposing ourselves. And we buried him at night and unfortunately because of the consistent mortaring, and shelling that was taking place, he was being disinterred. And we had to rebury him three times before we got him under ground so that he wouldn't be completely dismembered. It was a very, very sad state of affairs and very difficult to live with.

From Estry we were to a rest area. By this time, my platoon, of course, only has about myself and six men in it. So, while we were awaiting reinforcements, the men in my platoon were parceled in with the other two platoons in the company and I was given a new job. I was appointed Second-in-Command of the battalion's Carrier Platoon. The Carrier Platoon is commanded by a Captain and I was appointed the Second-in-Command, the 2 i/c. The Carrier Platoon consisted of three sections of four carriers, each of which had a Bren gun. The crew consisted of a driver, a Bren gunner and his Number

Two, who fed him the magazines for the Bren gun when they were required. And this platoon provided the commanding officer of a battalion with considerable flexibility because he could reinforce the machine gun capability of a platoon or a company quite easily by just sending off a section, or two sections, of Bren Carriers to reinforce their fire and this is what they were used for. And quite frequently, he also used them for flank protection and/or to clear specific areas which weren't too heavily occupied by the enemy. And this was a new appointment for me because I was equipped with a motorcycle so that I could escort the Platoon up and down the roads and what have you and didn't have to do any marching anymore.

INTERVIEWER: Interview with Philip Labelle, tape one side one complete.

INTERVIEWER: Interview with Philip Labelle, tape one, side two.

LABELLE: The first thing we did after I had joined the Carrier Platoon was to proceed to Falaise Gap which was had been cleared by the Canadians at that point to the Seine River where our Brigade crossed the Seine and established a bridgehead through which our Battalion passed. I regret to say that one of my compatriots, who was brother CANLOAN officer, who served in A Company of the Scots Fusiliers with me, was severely wounded when crossing the Seine and died of wounds in hospital, unfortunately. We began what we called the "long run up" at this point after we broke out of our bridgehead across the Seine and I went through the first city that I had seen in France since I had landed in Normandy. This was the city of Lille. We had no opposition whatever up to that point, and we proceeded through Lille and carried on through towards Rouen.

And I remember having to take a section of our platoon with me to examine a castle on a very, very high hill near Rouen to make sure that it was clear, that there were no enemy observation posts there which could bring down fire on our troops as we were proceeding along the roads to the north. Fortunately, there were no Germans there that I could consider it clear and we proceeded north. And at this point, I was escorting our Carrier Platoon towards Belgium. I have forgotten now at what point we were. But, as I was checking to make sure that all of our carriers were in convoy and proceeding north, another convoy was attempting to overtake us. And unfortunately, a jeep and I collided and crushed my right foot against my motorcycle and my motorcycle was damaged to the point where it couldn't be used and I couldn't walk, obviously because of the damage to my right foot. So, I was picked up by an ambulance and because all of our troops were on the move towards the north, I remained in the ambulance for a period of 36 hours before they could deposit me at a casualty clearing station where I stayed for two to three days where the doctors x-rayed my ankle and got me to exercise so it was usable without hurting too much. And I elected to make my way up to my unit, which by this time was in Belgium. So, I hitched a ride in an ambulance and proceeded along the First World War battlefields, though the Menin Gate to a city called Mechelen(?) and we were there for a period of a few days where I was showed Belgium hospitality by being accommodated in a rather wealthy cigar manufacturer's home. From Mechelen(?) we were sent off to take over a bridgehead on the Albert Canal where we stayed for a couple

of days and then the battalion moved to Gheel, just to the north of the (Esco?) Canal where a bridgehead had been established. And the three battalions and the brigade had elements in this bridgehead which was only about 300 yards by 300 yards facing the Herman Goehring Division, which was counterattacking the bridgehead about six times a day. In addition to this, the bridgehead was within range of the Belgium Artillery Range at (Turnout?) and the Germans' weapons were all lined up, firing on the bridgehead as well, trying to kill everybody who was in it.

We managed to hold onto that bridgehead. My platoon commander, unfortunately, was wounded just before he crossed the canal to go into the bridgehead. His driver was killed and I took over the platoon at this time. I went across the bridgehead and the sections of the Platoon were all distributed within the rifle companies within the bridgehead to support their firepower to be able to fight off the counterattacks which they were encountering. It was during this time that the Airborne operation to take Arnhem took place and we could see the aircraft towing gliders, going over our heads and some of them being shot down from where we were in this bridgehead. So, we were witness to that as well, wondering how far we would be able to get as a result of this particular operation at that time.

Just to provide some indication of how intense the fighting was in this bridgehead, one of my Bren gunners who had fired so much ammunition and killed so many Germans, he literally turned white during the course of the action. His hair, which was brown, turned completely white during the course of this action. We suffered a number of wounded. From the (Esco?) canal, where we were relieved by the 2nd Battalion of the Argyle & Sutherland Highlanders, on the 21st of September we moved into Holland and we reached Eindhoven on the 22nd. Eindhoven had been cleared by this time by the Americans who had landed in that area, and I felt like a visitor, a tourist, because it was the second biggest city that I had been in Europe at this time and Eindhoven is the home of the Phillips Electrical, one of the largest electrical manufacturers in the world. So, when I saw the plant, I checked to see if I could visit it. And sure enough, I was made very, very welcome by some of the employees of Eindhoven who showed me the plant and told me that they were forced, of course, to make radio equipment for the Germans, being a manufacturer of radios and what have you. And they explained to me how they managed to sabotage them in such a way as not to be found and not be shot for sabotage. It was all very, very interesting.

And from there, we moved onto Best(?), where I took over a flanking position after the area had been captured and we went into the defence. When I was taking over this position, I came upon a Bren Carrier close to the area which I had selected for my platoon headquarters and recognized it as being a carrier from the 8th Battalion's Royal Scots in our brigade. And when I got close to it, I saw that there were two people in the carrier. And when I looked more closely, I found out that one of them was one of my friends, a CANLOAN officer by the name of Ron Lee, who was the anti-tank platoon commander of the 8th Battalion of the Royal Scots. He was dead, as was his driver. I selected a firing post from my headquarters and I arranged to have he and his driver buried in a small garden in front of the farmhouse. While I was arranging this, I was talking to one of my

soldiers to tell him precisely what I wanted to be done for the burial, and I regret to say that as I was speaking to him, he had his back to the door, the door was open and a mortar bomb landed by the doorway and he collapsed in front of me from wounds to his back. He died. I therefore had three people to bury on this occasion.

I was very very saddened by having found my friend Ron Lee. He had been with me in Sussex. We had sailed together to England. We had been together at the Reinforcement Holding Unit prior to going to France. In fact, we had crossed together with 32 Reinforcement Holding Unit to France and we were together during that two-week period roughly before we proceeded to our respective units when I had last seen him, previously. And strange things happen. Because some three years ago, his son contacted me through Veteran's Affairs because he had never been able to find out how his father had died and he had been very, very interested in knowing his father's military history and what had happened to him, when he managed to get his hands on the CANLOAN book, *Code Word CANLOAN*, where he read that I had found his father and buried him. And having been able to communicate with me I was able to tell him precisely what had happened. He was very, very grateful for the information I was able to provide for him, because he was only a youngster of six or seven at the time that his father was killed. Ron Lee has a sister who lives in Pembroke, who now comes each 11th of November to join us at the CANLOAN Cenotaph which bears her father's name and it sort closes the loop on my association with Ron Lee now that his family knows what happened to him, knows that his memory is honoured on our memorial and can come to share the honour which he deserves on the 11th of November of each year.

From Best, the next thing I remember is our attack on the City of Tilburg in Holland which wasn't too far from Best actually. On the, let me see, that would be on 27th of October and I remember that A Company, the company that I had commanded a platoon in, having attacked on the south of the city and I was ordered through with a Carrier Platoon to chase up the enemy at this point. And I remember leading the platoon in over a small bridge when we were overwhelmed by grateful Dutch women and children and a few adult males that were left behind as their conquering liberators. It was a magnificent experience. And we visited and were cheered and had flowers thrown at us. And the soldiers were overwhelmed with the reception that they were given.

But it was short lived. This happened early in the afternoon of the day that we attacked and that evening we were made to move out to replace an American division some forty or fifty kilometers away near the Maas who were in trouble. And we traveled by night to get there and I remember taking over what, I guess, was a company position from the Americans with a Carrier Platoon, at that time, on the flank of the battalion as we occupied defensive positions. This position was near Roermund in Holland, near the Maas River. I believe that we were there – well I was there for two to three days and on the second or third night that I was there, I have forgotten which, I had to go back to battalion headquarters for something. So, I got on my motorcycle to go back and on the way back obviously the sound of my motorcycle reached the Germans because they started firing their Moaning Minnies, their Nebelworthers and they landed very close to me. Enough for me to lose control of my motorcycle, ditch myself and break my wrist. I

managed to find my way to battalion headquarters and was evacuated to a British hospital. And I have forgotten the number of the hospital, but I believe it was 1 British General Hospital in Ghent.

During the period of time that I was with the British hospital in Ghent, the Commanding Officer of the hospital was visiting the Officer Ward one day after I had been there for several days and when he found out that he had me, and also a Canadian Padre as casualties in his hospital, he suggested that as there was a Canadian Field Hospital in Ghent, that that's perhaps where we should be to be with our own people. So he arranged for us to be transferred, which was a very kind suggestion on his part because it allowed me to be able to share Christmas and New Years with my own people in a Canadian hospital in Ghent.

An interesting development took place during the time that I was in hospital. First of all, when I went to my bed in the Officer Ward which had been allotted to me, the person in the bed next to me was my old friend Charles Scott Brown, who had been wounded for the third time and he was in hospital. So, I never did lose him. He was always there, someplace. But on New Year's Day, the Germans put on an air attack and they attacked all the allied airfields in the area. And I was standing talking to our Ward Nurse on the third floor of the hospital which had windows on both side. Having thought at this point that my war was over; I was watching a Spitfire chasing a Messerschmidt firing his cannons and machine guns at the Messerschmidt at third story level at the hospital. My war wasn't over. I thought for a minute that it was going to start all over again.

Following my stay in the Canadian General Hospital, I went back to a British Holding Unit in (Tournoud?) and after a few weeks, transferred back to the Canadian Army to a Holding Unit in England and returned to the Canadian Army. I was repatriated back to Canada in April of 1945, just before the war ended. In fact, I was on the high seas when President Roosevelt died and President Truman was appointed to replace [him], he being the Vice-President at the time. And I am happy to say that I was able to enjoy VE Day on Sparks Street in Ottawa with many of my friends who had served. It was a joyous occasion and I was so pleased that at least some of us managed to come back alive.

You may well wonder how I felt at this stage. Because the war had had, as you would expect, quite an influence on me. It had matured me very quickly as you might expect because of the responsibility that I had had and the horror that I witnessed in the time that I was in Northwest Europe. I realized that there were some things that I could have done far better as a junior Officer, than the way that I did them. Nonetheless, I was proud of my Service and what I had done and I believe that I had done what I had for the right reasons. But it was time to start thinking about my future.

And although I had some bad times in my service in Northwest Europe, I realized what a fine vocation soldiering was. I was offered a Regular Commission in the Canadian Army and saw fit to accept it and I decided it would be my vocation and that I would be the best officer that one could possibly have. That was my intention and I believe that I accomplished that. Consequently, I served as a regular officer for twenty-eight more

years in the Service and had some very, very good appointments and postings, which I enjoyed thoroughly. I am a soldier's soldier.

INTERVIEWER: Canadian War Museum Oral History Program, interview with Philip Labelle, interview ends.

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