

Val Bootle meets a Second World War veteran who was a true freedom fighter

THANKS to a Canadian cousin, architect Michael Bayley has been sent a medal for helping to liberate Holland from the Germans at a time which the Dutch say was the blackest in the entire Second World War.

“There are probably lots of other people in this area who are entitled to it too,” said Mr Bayley, who lives in Westmorland Road, Maidenhead. It is a special ‘medal of remembrance’ for veterans who fought in the Netherlands in 1944 and 1945.

A young Lieutenant with the Cheshire Regiment, who volunteered for service as soon as he reached the age of 18, after training Michael Bayley was sent first to Normandy in the wake of the D-Day invasion to ‘step into a dead man’s shoes’.

He took part in the Allied advance through Belgium and, at the Dutch border, was sent with a detachment to support Canadian forces who were suffering heavy losses. He spent the winter based in the Dutch town of Nijmegen, not far from Arnhem, fighting hard to advance across the River Rhine and into Germany.

“You remember the nice bits, but forget the worst,” he said. As well as his rifle, he carried a sketch book in order to make drawings of places like the Nijmegen mud flats which held the stinking carcasses of dead cattle and horses.

“They nicknamed us the Nijmegen Home Guard. We couldn’t advance into Holland because the Germans there threatened to open the dykes and flood the country,” said Mr Bayley.

The Dutch people were starving. In the words of one person who wrote a letter of thanks to the liberators which was sent to the veterans along with the medal: “Many of them eat a long time grass and other food for animals. You have helped us to come to the end of a dark period of terror by the Germans.”

“Many of your friends died in battle for our freedom. We never forget that fact,” he added.

In the winter of 1944-45 many people in the Netherlands stayed alive thanks to food dropped by the Canadian Air Force. And thereby hangs a tale.

Because he was involved in getting a medal for his father who flew in the food packages, Peter Stevenson, Mr Bayley’s fourth cousin in Canada, sent all the details to the Bayleys’ daughter Annabel.

Annabel, who lives in Wargrave, and Peter correspond by email. Although the Atlantic Ocean separates them, both used to work for the telecommunications giant Nortel.



MEDAL GURU: Michael Bayley with the medal presented to him for his part in the liberation of Holland. Ref:80009/1

Dutch show gratitude to local hero

Peter made contact initially with his English relatives via Slough Town Council, as his family had it on record that his grandmother’s family had come from the area.

“My grandfather’s great uncle was involved in the coaching trade. Isambard Kingdom Brunel’s Great Western Railway put him out of business, so he emigrated to Canada with his wife and young son to help

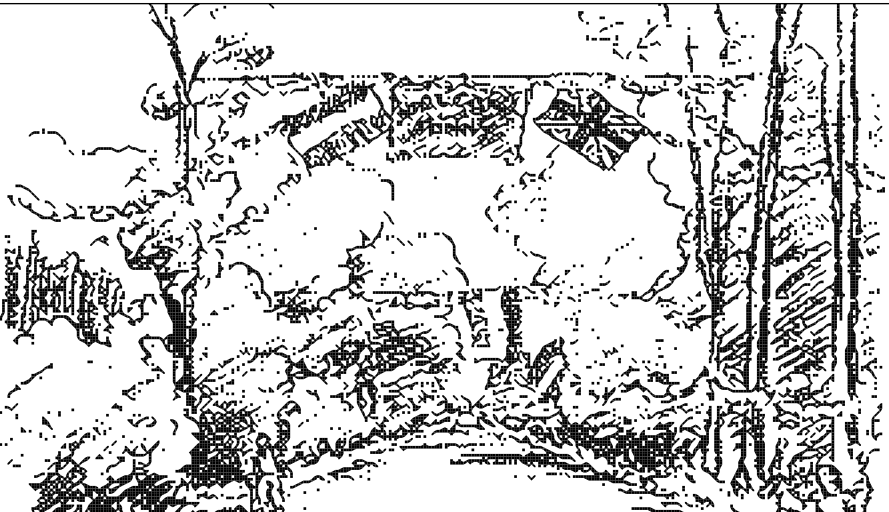
set up a trans-Canada coach route, from Quebec to Vancouver,” said Mr Bayley.

“I spent a lot of that winter on a flooded island in the Rhine shooting at Germans. Near the mouth, the Rhine is split up into a lot of little streams. Graves Bridge was across the first, the second was Nijmegen and the next at Arnhem,” he remembered.

The Allied troops ran a

sweepstake on which regiment would be the first to enter Berlin. But, for Mr Bayley, his war in Europe ended in the Ruhr when he was posted from Germany to the Far East. Ultimately he was sent to join the occupying forces in Palestine.

“It is nice to know the Dutch still remember after some 58 years and that family ties still work after some 160 years,” said Mr Bayley.



WELCOME TOMMY: The road into Doorn at the liberation, as sketched by Mr Bayley.

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LOOKOUT: One of Mr Bayley’s colleague surveys the terrain around the Maas near Lewarden.

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