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THE VIEW FROM HERE

By Dawson Winchester

We Lose Two More Canadian War Heroes

The Last Post played for two more Canadian military heroes on Aug. 3, 2005. Both veterans of the Second World War, the death of one was widely noted and heralded across our land. The passing of the other, except for family and friends, went almost unnoticed.

And the rapidly shrinking ranks of those who fought for King and country six decades ago in the epic battle against the evil forces of fascism is further diminished. Too soon all of these brave men and women will be gone from our midst.

The two heroes we lost on the same day last week were Ernest Alvia (Smokey) Smith and Jack A. Poolton. Smith was 91, born just weeks before the start of the Great War in 1914. Poolton was 87, born just weeks before the 1918 armistice in that same “war to end all wars.” Smith was a Victoria Cross recipient. Poolton was not.

Smokey Smith was a war hero in the truest sense of the word. As Canada’s last surviving Victoria Cross winner he holds a special place in the hearts

and minds of most Canadians. He was an icon to veterans, members of the present day military and citizens from all walks of life.

In a touching obituary to Smith, Sun columnist Earl McRae writes of an interview with the VC recipient that best illustrates why he was known as a soldier's soldier. In part, McRae writes:

“I asked him about the action that got him the VC. He answered reluctantly and absent of braggadocio.

“I was no gawdamn hero. I was just an ordinary soldier doing my job. I didn't want to die that night. Did I feel fear? Only a f-- idiot wouldn't feel fear. Hell, I'm no better than any other soldier who fought. I'm proud of the VC, but, geezus krise, it's not like I was out to get it. I did what I did and apparently you get the VC for that.”

Smith's story has been told many times in the media since his death. But I would like here to mention the death of another hero, Jack Poolton, who left us on the same day. This is not intended to diminish the feats of Smith. Rather it is done as a tribute to Poolton and all members of our armed forces, past and present, who have shown and continue to show exceptional courage in the service of their country.

Five years ago I wrote a column about Poolton, who, as a 24-year old private in “D” Company of the Royal Regiment of Canada was under merciless enemy fire on the beach at Puys, France. He was a survivor and unsung hero of the ill-fated Dieppe raid during the dark early years of World War Two.

Private Poolton was one of the last three Royals to drop their weapons and surrender to the Germans on Blue Beach. What he lived through in that grim moment of defeat and surrender on Aug. 19, 1942, the subsequent years as a prisoner of war, his many escape attempts, the forced death march he endured as the war drew to a close, and his eventual liberation by soldiers of the U.S. Ninth Army, is a truly fascinating story.

It is a factual, first-hand account of Canadian military history, written not by a war correspondent or journalist, but by a soldier who lived the experience for three years and was haunted by the memory for the next 50 years and more.

After the war ended Poolton returned to Canada and a half century after the fact was finally able to put his story into words. Published in 1998 by Dundurn Press, Toronto, “Destined to Survive: A Dieppe Veteran’s Story” is a gripping account of war as seen through the eyes of a foot soldier in an infantry regiment. It is an honest book. It is a story of determination, human spirit, and the will to survive under appalling circumstances.

How Poolton came to join the army is a saga in itself. In Sept. 1939 the native of Kapuskasing was working in the wheat harvest in Saskatchewan when war broke out. He tried to enlist in Saskatoon, but when he heard locals were being given priority he decided to head home to Ontario.

Along the way he stopped in Winnipeg and tried again to enlist. Again unsuccessful, he returned to Kapuskasing. In April 1940 he took the last money he had to buy a train ticket to Toronto. After a 12-hour train journey

he went directly from Union Station to the CNE grounds where he joined the Royal Regiment of Canada. It was April 20, 1940 and for the foreseeable future this unemployed young man would be earning \$1.30 a day while serving his country in the army.

Little did he know what suffering he would endure for that pittance. Nor probably would he have cared even had he known what was to come. Such was the patriotism of hundreds of thousands of young Canadian men of that era.

I first met Jack Poolton through my son John, head of History and Contemporary Studies at Park Street Collegiate in Orillia. Until advancing age curtailed his activities, Poolton was a frequent visitor to John's classes at Park Street, where he was able to offer students a learning experience that not many Canadian high school students will ever have.

I believe Poolton's book should be required reading in all Canadian high schools. I'm sure Smokey Smith would agree. (There is a copy in the St. Thomas Library.)

Books like Poolton's can help us remember, as remember we must: "At the going down of the sun and in the morning, WE WILL REMEMBER THEM!"

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