

Who says Canada doesn't have any bona fide heroes?

A couple of weeks ago I met a genuine Canadian hero. His name is Jack Poolton, and he lives quietly in retirement in Orillia, Ontario. He does not consider himself to be a hero, but when you hear his story you know that he really and truly is.

Fifty-eight years before we met, on August 19, 1942, as a 24-year-old private in "D" Company of the Royal Regiment of Canada, Jack Poolton was under merciless enemy fire on the beach at Puys, France. He is a survivor and an unsung hero of the ill-fated Dieppe raid during the dark early years of World War Two.

Not many survived that disastrous raid on Dieppe. And now, almost six decades later, time has taken its inevitable toll on those who did live through that questionable misadventure of the Allied military. While some are still with us we should remember them in our prayers; not forgetting all those who served King and country in the horrific struggle that was World War Two.

Jack 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 moment of defeat and surrender on an August day in 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 United States Ninth Army, is a 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 fifty-three years.

After World War Two, 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.

In a preface to the book, his daughter Jayne Poolton-Turvey explains some of the difficulties her father endured in attempting to settle down and fit back into society. “He knew during his time as a POW that when and if he returned home, the occupation he chose would have to be something that would hold his interest and not be boring.”

So Poolton, on his return, tried several things that didn’t work out. He even thought of rejoining the army. At the time Veteran’s Affairs was

offering a mechanics course and he decided to take it. It proved to be a good decision as the work offered him the variety he felt he needed.

All was not rosy, however. He suffered with a duodenal ulcer, headaches, and depression. He knew he was living with a terrible handicap, but he was not aware of the cause of his medical problems.

In his daughter's words, "Not known until recently, when a study was done on Dieppe POWs and their return home, most ex-prisoners of war were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, a serious mental illness that none of these men were ever treated for. This would include nightmares, flashbacks, and various other stress symptoms."

In spite of all these war related medical problems, and surviving a fractured neck in a 1971 auto accident, Poolton worked successfully at his trade as a mechanic until his retirement at age 65.

"Destined to Survive" begins in 1939 with twenty-one-year-old Kapuskasing, Ontario native Poolton in Watson, Saskatchewan, where he had found work on a farm harvesting wheat. When the Second World War broke out in September that year he tried to enlist in Saskatoon. When he heard that locals were being given priority for enlistment he decided to head home to Ontario.

But on the way he stopped in Winnipeg and tried to sign up there. Again unable to enlist, 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 rail journey

he arrived in Toronto and went directly to the CNE grounds where he joined the Royal Regiment of Canada. It was April 20, 1940 and for the foreseeable future he would be earning \$1.30 a day for 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 tens of thousands of young Canadian men in that era.

I first heard of Jack Poolton from my eldest son John, who is head of History and Contemporary Studies at Park Street Collegiate in Orillia. For quite some time he has been welcoming the Dieppe veteran into his classroom a couple of times a year in order to give students a first-hand, in-person relationship with a foot soldier who was actually on the beach at Dieppe on August 19, 1942.

It is a classroom experience that not many Canadian high school students will ever have. And that's a pity. Because to be in the presence of a man like Jack Poolton is an invaluable lesson to our young. To be able to talk to and question a man who faced death, imprisonment, near starvation, and finally liberation in the service of his nation, is to be witness to a page of Canada's history itself.

One of the most poignant passages of the book contains a letter Poolton wrote to his mother while on a troop carrier approaching the French coast, to be mailed only if he failed to return from the operation. Excerpts from the letter are evidence of the maturity and bravery of the 24-year-old soldier: "We are finally going to see action, and at present are heading for Dieppe, a

German held port on the French coast. We are to capture and hold for four hours and then withdraw and embark for England. There are hundreds of ships taking part in this operation. Everyone is calm, almost the same as when on manoeuvres, but eager to come to grips with the enemy. I only hope that we are as good as our fathers were in the Great War. I feel very proud of my regiment and have confidence in the officers and men. I hope they have confidence in me. I am the two-inch-mortar man for 16 platoon. I keep thinking that this is just another manoeuvre except we are preparing all our weapons for action and will be firing them in anger tomorrow. The English Channel is very calm tonight, just like a mill pond.”

The letter concludes, “I know that your thoughts and prayers will be with me tomorrow on August 19th. God Bless You All, Your Loving Son, Jack”

The foreword to “Destined to Survive,” written by William C. Stark, CD, LCol (ret’d), 48th Highlanders of Canada, concludes with these words: “One must salute this soldier, and all others who sacrificed so much to preserve the freedom we take for granted. This book should be required reading in our classrooms.”

When I met Jack Poolton last month he told me that even after he had written the book he did not want to have it published. His family and others convinced him that he should agree to publication.

I, for one, am thankful that he took their good advice. Poolton’s book offers readers a new and different look at soldiers, prisoners, and war. And

it most certainly should be required reading in high school classrooms in Canada.