

BY ECSOUTHWARD

The Dutch remember their heroes.

Forty years have passed since Bob Upcott risked his life and flew over German-occupied territory to drop off cargoes of desperately-needed food. Nevertheless, Windsor's emergency planning director and his wife, Madge, are being flown to Amsterdam this spring as guests of The Netherlands.

The government in The Hague set up a special foundation called 40 Years Food and Freedom which has invited a select group of fliers who will arrive a week before another 1,500 Canadians travel at their own expense to help the Dutch mark the fourth decade since Liberation.

The 40 Years Foundation invited the Upcotts, along with four other Canadian veterans and their wives, to join war-time flyers from Australia, New Zealand, Poland, the U.S., and Great Britain who took part in special forces food drops called Operation Manna.

A number of trips and receptions are planned, including two occasions that will include His Royal Highness, Prince Bernhard. These fliers will also hear a special address Dr. R. Lubbers, the Dutch prime minister, will deliver at Rotterdam. Then there's The Hague Day, Queen Beatrix's Birthday, and the Dutch Armed Forces Day.

The Upcotts and their companions will visit drop zones at Schipol and Amsterdam, Valkenburg and Soesterburg, Duindigt and The Hague. While there, they will also have a chance to tour Holland's world-famous tulip farms.

Officers and NCOs of the Dutch National Reserves will be on duty around the clock to cater to the needs of this select group during the week leading up to the arrival of the 1,500 who have paid for seats on charters arranged by the We Do Remember Committee, representing Canadians who saw action on Dutch soil 40 years ago.

Late in the afternoon of May 5, 1945 in the town of Wageningen, Lt.-Gen. Charles Foulkes, commander of the First Canadian Corps, dictated the terms of surrender to Col.-Gen. Johannes Blaskowitz, who led the German forces occupying Holland. That meeting took place in the lobby of a small hotel called The World, triggering an outpouring of emotion never before witnessed among the Dutch, a people repudiated for their reserve.

Seven days earlier, two Lancaster bombers of 101 Squadron Royal Air Force, each loaded with about 3,000 kg (7,000 lb) of food, flew in at nine to 15 metres (30 to 50 ft) above ground level to determine the feasibility of airlifting food supplies to the starving still under Nazi occupation. Wary of German radar, the big bombers skimmed trees, telephone poles and the occasional smokestack to reach their destination, a hospital area north of The Hague.

DUTCH TREAT



RCAF PILOT Bob Upcott in a March, 1945 photo

One of these bombers was piloted by a young Bob Upcott of the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), the other by an Australian, named Collett. They were looking for a red cross pegged out on the ground that suddenly appeared in front of a five-storey hospital.

German troops and vehicles were still deployed in the streets nearby while, on the hospital roof, eight nurses in white uniforms held up the biggest Union Jack Bob Upcott had ever seen.

The pilots throttled back and opened the bomb-bay doors. Sacks of food tumbled out as the Lancaster engines roared to full power in a climb over the hospital. Upcott and Collett banked to the left, setting the course for home base back in England. That drop marked the beginning of Operation Manna.

The winter of 1945 had been extremely cold, there was little food left for Holland's tables and clothing was in short supply. The Dutch were surviving on hope that spring. After five years, the war was ending.



THE 101ST SQUADRON Lancaster bomber piloted by Bob Upcott during Operation Manna, the food drop over German-occupied Holland in the spring of 1945

For Captain Robert F. Upcott, D.F.M., C.D., now in his 60s, the memory of that first flight remains vivid, as are his recollections of other sorties over enemy territory. He was a member of the RAF Special Duties Squadron, a highly-secret unit selected to make the flights that dropped agents into countries throughout occupied Europe as well as carry out other covert operations. Each member of the squadron possessed special qualifications, including communication and language skills.

"We were waiting for the weather to break," Bob says. "and we waited two days. The weather on the Continent was clear, but the rain and fog in our area of England was below the minimum and flying was cancelled. One good thing about it was that, when standing in readiness for ops (operations), the aircrews were allowed real eggs and bacon, and we did our best to clean the mess out of eggs."

"On the third day, the flight was on, and we took off for Holland. Burlap bags containing the food were stacked in the bomb bays.

The bags were laid on the bomb bay doors and, when opened, the bags fell out.

"We flew over the North Sea at under fifty feet. This kept us below the visible range of the German radar and, we hoped, out of sight of enemy fighters. Low level is tricky flying because it is difficult to see and maintain the horizon," Bob says.

"My bomb aimer contacted me once, requesting a bit more height, because the water was blurring the nose and he had difficulty seeing from time to time.

"The waves were a bit high that day and you had to be careful and not allow the tips of the propellers to hit the water. This causes big trouble in that the unbalanced prop will shake the engine right out of the mounts.

"My partner had this very thing happen during that flight, but he continued on with the engine running a little bit rough.

"When we got back, we examined the prop on the outer starboard engine and all three blade tips were bent backwards so perfectly they retained a semblance of balance.

"We crossed the coastline and turned north ... to bring us to our drop area just north of The Hague.

"We flew our aircraft side by side with everyone watching for obstacles which could pop up awfully fast...

"We saw the big red cross pegged out in front of the hospital, and throttled back to slow our speed while we dropped the burlap food bags.

"I'll never forget the nurses standing on the roof of that hospital, waving like mad..."

Bob says he saw German troops on the streets that day, "and my bomb aimer told me later there was a tank alongside the hospital that kept its gun on us all the time — traversing his turret — but he didn't fire. They were hungry, too."

"That was the initial trip to find out if it was possible to deliver the food, and to find out what the Germans would do. There were still areas under German control which had not yet been captured, but as the days went by, the food deliveries were increased and, after the surrender, it was sent in huge quantities" by trucks, he says.

Several Windsor veterans of the Essex Scottish will also travel to Holland this spring, among them Captain James Elliott and his wife, Nick Schaffer, Chris Christianson, Roy Tobin and Charles Clinansmith, a veteran of the Royal Canadian Engineers, all members of Riverside Branch 255 of the Royal Canadian Legion, will also make the trip.

Forty years later, a new Holland has emerged from the ruins of bombed cities, blown bridges and devastated families. Hundreds of Dutch homes responded to newspaper requests by offering beds and breakfast to the 1,500 Canadians expected to arrive in Holland shortly to celebrate Bevrijding (Liberation) 1945. The Dutch don't forget...



BOB UPCOTT today, with the Lancaster nestled peacefully among the roses in Windsor's Jackson Park. The bomber he flew during the 1945 operation carried 545 kg (1,200 lb) of radio equipment that allowed the Allies to listen in on German Luftwaffe communications. They intercepted the Nazi orders, issuing new ones to the enemy that directed them away from the bombing targets.