

## Pte Gaele Visser, 28-8-1921, +23-4- 1945

Service Number: B/156178

Age: 24

Force: Army

Unit: Algonquin Regiment, R.C.I.C.

Son of Rein Andries Visser and Janke Visser, of Millgrove, Ontario.

*Jordan Slump is a 13 year-old student from Troy, Ontario. In this speech, Jordan recounts the experiences of his great-uncle, Gaele Visser, a private with the Canadian Army who died fighting near Wilhelmshaven, Germany, on April 23, 1945.*


Most of you probably have a favourite hero! Your hero may be Spiderman, Superman, or even Dr. Phil! But today, I would like to introduce you to my hero! His name is Gaele Visser.

Honourable judges, parents, teachers, and fellow classmates, my speech is on my great-uncle, Private Gaele Visser. I will talk to you about his life and the role he had in the Second World War.

My uncle was born on August 28, 1921, in the town of Haskerhorne, Friesland, the Netherlands. In the 1930s my uncle and his family immigrated to Canada and made their home in the small town of Millgrove. Throughout his life my uncle was a very popular and gifted young man. He had great knowledge of the Bible and had a strong faith in God, which you could easily read in his letters sent home during the war. He was an active member of the church's young people society. He was a great brother, and a helpful and loving son. When he was in the army his mom said "Gaele is not a man to kill, he is so soft." Which was true! My Aunt Jennie told me that once he even asked and tried to be transferred to First Aid so that he wouldn't have to shoot and kill the enemy. He always stuck up for the smaller or "least person." He would always help if there was a need. He was a great inspiration to everyone and was full of good humour. He was a political-minded citizen of Canada and he loved his country and fellow citizens. He was also very smart in school and he graduated from the local Dundas high school. He learned French, and German at school, making him very valuable to his officers and the major of his regiment! He was brought along as an interpreter many times on reconnaissance missions for he knew German, Dutch, and French. During school he also took correspondent courses from Guelph Agricultural College.

Before the war he was employed by Woodhall Dairy in Hamilton.

He had many hobbies as a young man some of which were:

- Singing with a guitar or together with a mouth organ (he owned several guitars). He was often on the entertainment program of his church with his musical instruments.
  - Taking violin lessons.
  - Hockey was one of his favourite sports. He loved listening to "Hockey Night in Canada!" On Saturday nights he would press his ear up close to the radio (his dad didn't like the noise of it). But once a team scored he would jump up, clap hands and then his mom, while knitting by the lamplight, would say "*Hei jonge dohlist me skrille.*" Which meant "Hey child, you shock me!"
  - Another sport he enjoyed was baseball.
  - He loved skating! He even found a pair of old skates over in Holland while they were fighting, and put them on and skated for over an hour on the canals!
  - He liked tobogganing on the hills  Ancaster.
  - Trekking in the woods.
  - He loved excursions with his sister Gert down "Devil's Elbow," in Ancaster.
  - He liked to walk in the stream that ran from the water falls on their property.
  - He liked to ride the tractor and plow the fields.
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- He filled the silo.
- Did threshing with the neighbours.
- And he loved eating his favourite pies!

In 1942 my uncle signed up with the army because it felt like the honourable thing to do! Many of the young men from the local Christian Reformed Churches had already signed up, some of whom he knew quite well. He was also encouraged by the news media to sign up and go overseas with the Armed Forces. He was patriotic and was willing to fight for his country.

For my uncle it was not a hard decision to sign up at the time. It was harder for him and his family when the time came for him to finally go overseas and fight! He had been in many different training camps such as Camp Niagra, and Camp Sussex. However, he was still able to come home for short visits to his family and friends. Before he went overseas, he went and visited his sister in the U.S. where she was attending school. Apparently all the girls fell smack in love with him! Finally the day came for him to leave. My aunt and grandpa took him to the Hamilton Central Railway Station, never to see him again.

My uncle first joined the Dufferin Haldimand Rifles in 1942, where he was promoted from Private to Lieutenant Corporal, but he didn't like having such a responsibility so he got transferred **to the Algonquin Regiment** in the same year. This regiment had a brave motto, which was "Ne-Ka-Ne-Tah" which meant "We Lead – You Follow."

While training and fighting with this regiment my uncle did many things! He exercised, did obstacle courses (in which some men even lost their lives), cleaned rifles, (one 19 year old lost his life when his buddy was cleaning his rifle and thought the gun's chamber was empty but it wasn't. The gun went off, and the 19-year-old got the full blast in his face.) They cleaned vehicles, artillery, and other equipment. He polished his boots and buttons, cleaned his clothes, and sewed buttons onto his uniform. He would sometimes get pulled out of bed in the middle of the night to go on excursions. He would practice marksmanship with his rifle at short and long range. He'd climb trees, dig trenches and foxholes, live in the forests, build huts from trees and sleep in them at night. They would practice imaginary confrontations with the enemy. When his regiment was sneaking up on the Germans, instead of starting up the jeeps, trucks or anything else used to attack the enemy, they would use sheer force and just push it into position. He did sentry duty (I believe mostly at Camp Niagra) in which he usually had the 6:00 p.m. to 3:00 a.m. shift which he said he didn't mind. He also went on many reconnaissance missions to interpret for his commanding officer.

He had friends here in Canada with whom he often spoke with and played with, in the churches here. But, once he went overseas, he had to find new friends to talk and socialize with. For him and his Christian friends, Salvation Army Canteens were wonderful places of comfort and fellowship! My uncle would go there with his fellow "Christian Commandos" (a name given to soldiers who were Christian. It was also the name of a group that was put together to support the Christian soldiers. It sent tracts overseas for the soldiers to read, encourage them, and help them grow in their faith.) While overseas from 1943-45, my uncle was always assigned to an officer, who was usually non-Christian. This always gave him an opportunity to witness for the Lord!

During the war, any letters that were written to the folks back home were censored of any military intelligence (precise location, what happened during a battle, information of any upcoming battles, etc.). And so Gael's family could never pinpoint exactly which town he was in, usually just the general area and country. However my uncle's father (my great-grandfather) had served in World War One, so he always had an idea of where Gael was because my uncle would describe the land. Once, near the end of the war, my uncle wrote:

"I have it on good authority that my letter will not be censored, so I will write you . . ." and then something followed. With this letter my great-grandfather could almost pinpoint where Gael was fighting. He later marked everything on a map of Europe in order to follow his movement. However, near the end of the war the letters were not censored as much and so, a couple of stories made it back home.

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Here are some excerpts from his letters:

**On Active Service with the Canadian Forces**  
**L Macleod's Road**  
**Thursday, November 4, 1943**

Dear Jennie,

" . . . Last Sunday afternoon we had a tragedy in one of our neighbouring posts. A sentry, on the beat, according to his version, stumbled and falling discharged his rifle accidentally. However, yesterday under continuous pressure by cross-questioning at the court of inquiry he admitted to have unlawfully loaded his rifle and while changing his rifle from one shoulder to the other, he jerked the rifle down over his head and thus his thumb came into contact with the trigger thus firing the rifle. The bullet then travelled over two hundred yards missing six telephone poles, through a fence and over the highway. Then about ten yards from the highway, a hut for guards to sleep in is situated. Into it the bullet passed. Only one man was present in the hut sleeping at that time. However, it appeared that his time had arrived. No harm would have befallen him had not an iron bar supporting the bed post been in the way of the bullet. On that bar the bullet deflected and while it could just as reasonably have taken an upward course, it took the downward course striking the lad on the head blowing a gaping wound in the side of his head taking some of the brains along in its course. He died on the operating table in the Hamilton Military Hospital. And so again proof that one has not to go on the battle field necessarily to be killed. Sunday night I attended Evangelistic centre church services. Guess you still recall the times we used to have them on the radio at home with Rev and Mrs. Street singing with guitar accompaniment. He had a very fine sermon in 2 Corinthians 4:3-4. Very fitting after what happened on post." ...

Till later Goodbye and Love Gaelle

"Keep in touch with the folks at home"

**On Active Service with the Canadian Forces**  
**Holland**  
**April 1945**

Dear Jennie,

We're in peat-bog country, where it's difficult to move army tanks. The farms here are occupied with machine guns, bazooka fire, slit trenches, and enemy occupants of the worst fanatical sort. I had a narrow escape! Had to take some "Jerries" (Germans) to the rear of the line for safety, I almost got hit by a sniper. The sniper apparently took a pot-shot at me, but his shot got one of the lads I was escorting. With his last breath he forced out the words "Heil Hitler." With great effort he raised his hand in salute. It's scary! What an eternity to meet.

Love Gaelle

"Keep in touch with the folks at home"

**On Active Service with the Canadian Forces**  
**Germany**  
**April 13, 1945**

Dear Jennie,

" . . . A short while ago we liberated a concentration camp, which, from 1933, was rumoured to be the scene of the greatest holocaust. Because so many prisoners had been moved, escaped, or killed, that by the time we got there, all we found were sick people and Veterans of World War One, who were supervisors dressed in their old battle uniforms from WWI. The prisoners all suffered from tuberculosis and other diseases I will not mention. There was a field nearby that had mounds. One foot stuck out and I tried to run but my officer checked me."

Love Gaelle

On April 16, 1945, my uncle wrote one of his last letters home to his family. It ended with a great sentence which stated that his trust in God was still strong as ever after three years of service in the army! Here is that letter:

**On Active Service with the Canadian Forces  
Germany  
April 16, 1945**

Dear Jennie

" . . . I am back deep in enemy territory. The country is very flat. Please let me know if you received my Victory bond. If I get a pass, I'll go to England. I should get time off in two weeks. If Friesland has been liberated, I'll go there. Dad, a farmer in Almelo, Gelderland told me he sent his milk to the same person you used to go to. The disadvantage of fighting in a canal is that the German side has the higher wall and they can shoot down at us. We move along blood-soaked ditches at night. The soil is soggy, and it's hard to move. If God wills, I'll write a little more next time. Until then, under his wings my soul shall abide."

Love, Gaelle

On April 23, 1945, my uncle Gaelle and his officer were in the vece-division near Wilhelmshaven, Germany. On that day my uncle entered into a building in front of his officer, and in that doorway, he was gunned down. It was one week before his fellow soldiers would stop fighting, and two weeks before Germany would fully surrender.

My uncle's body was first buried in Germany for a while with fellow soldiers but later he was moved to the Netherlands. His body now lays in the Holten Cemetery, in Overijssel, the Netherlands, surrounded by fellow Canadian soldiers. On May 4, 2002, a ceremony was held in Holten Cemetery to remember those who died for the Netherlands. On that day, a Frisian mayor observed my uncle's death by placing a wreath on his grave. He was payed homage because he was a fallen native son of the Netherlands.

Now you have learned more about the life of a Canadian soldier serving in the Second World War. And now you, like me, can more appreciate, the sacrifices made for the freedom of others. And so you can see, Private Gaelle Visser truly was a hero! My hero!

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