

A LIFELONG FRIENDSHIP

Oft-times friendships made during a war last a lifetime. Sadly, comrades were killed and some would say the relationships ended with those deaths. This is a story about the friendship between Rifleman Francis William Welburn and Rifleman Digby Delbert Smith.

Francis was from Winnipegosis and Digby was from Winnipeg. Their friendship began shortly after they enlisted. They landed on D-Day, even stopping to write their names on a German pillbox. Francis was in "B" Coy and Digby was in a Support Coy.

They always had the idea if they were separated something bad would happen. When one of them was chosen to go on patrol they were upset and were later greatly relieved the patrol was cancelled at the last minute when the Germans launched an offensive.



Rifleman Francis Welburn



Rifleman Digby Smith

The War Diaries of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles for April 20, 1945 report the weather was cold with rain. By 08:45 hrs the Battalion HQ had moved from Groningen to Ten Post at location 238228. A reconnaissance troop reported being mortared and at 14:30 hrs. "B" Coy had reached their first objective, 336287, and took seven POW's.

"D" Coy was approaching Loppersum from the south/west and "B" Coy was approaching the same town from

the north. With the help of artillery and mortars, the town was taken at 16:35 hrs.

It was reported that casualties were very light and 65 enemy POW's had been captured and sent to the 'cage'. There was no record of the type of casualties or the number. We know now that one of the casualties was Rifleman Francis Welburn. He was only 20 years of age.

Sources tell of Digby holding Francis' body after he was killed. Francis is buried at Holten Canadian War Cemetery in the Netherlands.



Welburn, Rifleman Francis W. of Winnipegosis (L 105672). Royal Winnipeg Rifles. He died 20 April 1945 at the age of

20 and is commemorated at the Holten Canadian War Cemetery in Holland. He was the son of Charles and Winnifred Welburn of Winnipegosis, Manitoba. His younger sister recalls (23 June 1997):

We were born at the farm home at Rokeby, Saskatchewan, a few miles from Yorkton. My family moved to the Camperville – Winnipegosis area in 1937. Although it's many years since

By April, 23, 1945, the Rifles were at Appingedam. The war diary states the weather was cool and clear. "B" Coy was still firing on a brickyard at 05:20 hrs. Five minutes later they were being shelled from the brickyard. They requested high explosives and smoke from 3-inch mortars. By 07:05 hrs "B" Coy was pinned down by enemy fire; minutes later one sub-unit withdrew. At 09:30 hrs "B" Coy reported their forward sub-units had reached their objective.

Appingedam was cleared north of the canal and about 100 enemy POW's were captured. Moderate casualties were reported.

he has been gone, it is very painful to me. I was fourteen years old at the time and remember very vividly the day we received the sad word. He was so alive in all the letters, relating the bad times of war.

He was wounded in February, 1945 but was back till ... he was killed in action. He talked so optimistic about coming home in all his letters. He had a girl friend whom he loved dearly and mentioned her fondly in all of his letters. Her name was Margaret ... from Gull Lake, Saskatchewan. She also lost her brother just shortly before Francis was taken, so it was a bad time for her too.

Welburn Lake (64 O/10), west of Nejanilini Lake was named after him in 1975.

"H" hour for a "B" Coy attack was 14:00 hrs. At 12:15 hrs, "B" Coy was on the move and by 14:27 hrs they reported the enemy on the roof of a factory. The enemy fired down on one section which was trapped in a factory south of the canal.

At 17:45 hrs the battalion was told that artillery fire was available to all Coys. At 19:30 hrs "D" Coy was relieved by the Perth Regiment. By 22:15 hrs all Coys were relieved. The Battalion transport was marshalled and ready to leave at 01:30 hrs on April 24, 1945. Second in command arrived with Kangaroo Personnel Carriers; loaded the men; moving off at 02:00 hrs.

Digby Smith, still mourning the death of his friend, was wounded on April 23, 1945. It is not known what time Digby was wounded or when he was evacuated to receive medical assistance. Digby survived the war and returned to his family in Winnipeg but he never forgot his good friend,

Digby told his wife, Hazel, that when he died he wanted half of his ashes buried at Francis Welburn's grave and the remainder of his ashes buried in Brookside Cemetery in Winnipeg. He wrote this request in his Last Will and Testament.



*Grave of Rifleman Francis William Welburn
Holten Canadian War Cemetery
Grave: III.F.15*

Digby died in the summer of 1982. As he had requested, Hazel began the process to obtain permission for his ashes to be buried at the grave of Rifleman Francis Welburn. As this was a special and rather odd request, it was not until the autumn of 1982 when the authorities reluctantly granted their approval. The authorities considered this a '*special exception*' because Digby had added this request in his Last Will and Testament. This decision was not to be disclosed publicly.

On a cold and windy day, December 4, 1982, Hazel Smith, a good friend, a member of local City Hall, and a Canadian Consul representative quietly and privately buried Digby's ashes. Until recently, this secret had been kept for many years.



Together Again

*Hazel Smith
December 4, 1982
Burial of Digby's ashes
at the grave of his best friend,
Rifleman Francis Welburn*



*In 1994 Hazel Smith and her son, Sid, visited the grave of Francis Welburn (and the ashes of Digby)
On that day they were joined by schoolchildren who placed flowers at the grave.*

Our thanks to: Gerry Woodman for gathering the information and photos for this article; Henk Vincent and Joan Meijer, from the Netherlands; and Sid Smith, son of Digby, for sharing the photos and for allowing us to tell the story about this wonderful friendship and the burial of the ashes that was kept secret for many years.

May 2015 – update: photos of flowers placed on Francis grave and Digby's ashes by Joan Meijer

