

My name is Jeff Whelan, I live in St. Albert, Alberta and I am currently in Grade 10 attending Vimy Ridge Academy. I am an Air Cadet with the 395 Sq of Edmonton and through Cadets and School my dream is to someday serve as a pilot in the military. In March, I was informed by *Encounters With Canada* that I had been chosen by Veterans Affairs Canada to participate in an overseas pilgrimage to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Canada's participation in the liberation of the Netherlands towards the end of the Second World War. I was chosen to represent my province at the overseas events as a result of my attendance at the 2004 Canada Remembers theme week at *Encounters With Canada's* Terry Fox Canadian Youth Center in Ottawa, Ontario. I was to be one of thirteen Canadian youth, representing each province and territory, that would accompany a delegation of Canadian veterans on this overseas journey.

As part of my overseas experience I was asked to research a Canadian soldier from my home province who had served and died in the Netherlands. While in the Netherlands I would make a presentation on the life of my soldier at the foot of his grave in one of the Canadian War Cemeteries that would be part of the pilgrimage itinerary. This is the story of Private George William Barker, Army, Member of the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, who was born in 1924, and was killed in action on April 11, 1945 IJssel River Holland.

Today I would like to give "Voice" to a fallen soldier, Private George William Barker of Edmonton Alberta. George William Barker was the son of John Henry and Rose Louise Barker, of Edmonton. This is my story about Private Barker and my efforts to get to know him through research and contacts within the Seaforth Highlanders Regiment of Canada. Through my efforts, I had found that Private Barker is a remembered soldier, but yet, a forgotten hero.

My search began when I had received contact numbers for Seaforth veterans from Jim Johnson, the phone numbers of men in the same regiment that George William Barker had fought and served in. This contact list was four men who were from the same regiment as Private Barker. With these contacts I received the name of one person who knew of Private Barker and had a starting point for my research. My hope was to find many people who could tell me all the information I thought I would need to bring a "Voice" to Private Barker.

I sent e-mails to Legions and received replies back that they did not have information regarding Private Barker. I contacted 67 people in the Edmonton area with the last name of Barker. The answers from my telephone campaign were, "Not related", "Don't know him", "Not part of our family" or "I just don't know of a George William Barker". I contacted the Edmonton Public School Archives and had help from a fantastic person named Marie who spent two days going through yearbooks and school records looking for any reference to George William Barker, but was unable to find any reference to him.

A frightening pattern started to develop, time it seems, the sixty years that have passed, had diminished the memory of a very brave soldier, George William Barker, who had paid the ultimate sacrifice and died serving his country and the cause of freedom.

My luck changed when I got a call from Mr. Jack Rossiter. Mr. Rossiter, who lives in British Columbia, was a Comrade in Arms of Private Barker, a fellow Seaforth Highlander and fought in the same battles and the Campaign to Liberate Holland.

This is my story about George William Barker and my feelings and thoughts about this very brave soldier, a remembered hero.

Private George William Barker had joined the Second World War crusade as part of the 1st Canadian Infantry Division, 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade, with the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada. The Seaforth Highlanders have a long history of bravery and fighting for the cause of Justice and Freedom. From all accounts, Private Barker's first action during the war was the Italian Campaign. After he had enlisted with the 72<sup>nd</sup> Seaforth Highlanders, he would have been shipped to Italy in 1943, where he had landed at Pachino Beach in July of that year. One of the first comments that I heard about Private Barker was that of surprise, surprise that he had survived as long as he had, considering how deadly the battles were that he fought in. Barker was a strong, brave fighter, who survived many battles, as he became one of the few in his division to make it to northern Europe to join in the fighting there.

Mr. Jack Rossiter was a member of the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada at that time of the war, and served with the regiment at the same time as Private Barker. Today, he is a part of the Seaforth Highlanders Association and proved to be a great deal of help to me in bringing Private Barker's "Voice" to life. Mr. Rossiter told me that he didn't know Private Barker personally, but then explained that many of the men did not get to meet each other or be on a personal footing; too many of them were overcome by the war.

Private Barker actually joined the Seaforths in April of 1944, and arrived with the regiment just south of a town named "Crecchio", as a reinforcement. The regiment was sending out "fighting patrols" into enemy lines during night operations. This was the beginning of a series of escalating actions. Mr. Rossiter gives a very vivid account of the "hot and deadly" battles that were fought by Private Barker.

Private Barker and the Seaforth Highlanders had seen action in many locations throughout Italy and Holland. They trained and fought on a continuous basis, in 1944 and 1945 there seemed to be little time for rest or escape from the horrors of war.

Private Barker and his regiment moved out of a rest period in a small town named Agata, just 22 miles outside of Naples, where they then commenced to attack on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1944, the Hitler Line; which was a well fortified German position defending the "Liri Valley". Lasting from May 23<sup>rd</sup> to May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1944, the battle caused about 210 casualties, but Private Barker continued on.

The next battle was the attack on the Gothic Line which ran between Pisa and Rimini; the regiment had received more reinforcements for this attack. It carried through the 19<sup>th</sup>, August 1944, until 3<sup>rd</sup>, September, 1944. The Gothic Line in Italy was composed of a bunch of hills. "[The Germans] had pill boxes and from the pill boxes they would start shooting with their machine guns at night time. The pill boxes were concrete forts for hiding, which allowed the Germans to shoot at the allies without being seen. The German use of the pill boxes along with familiarity of the region during this two-month battle proved dangerous. The Seaforths and Private Barker moved west to the Arno River to engage in battle. Mr. Rossiter describes a "rest" period for the Seaforths: *"There was swimming in the Adriatic; this wasn't too restful, as German bombers had constantly attacked the regiment during night times"*.

After reading the first half of the notes mailed to me by Mr. Jack Rossiter, I realized that Private Barker was in and out of rest and battle at a constant rate. Partially explaining to me why then he might not have had the chance to meet many fellow comrades.

Mr. Rossiter goes on to describe further battles that Private Barker took part in. 15<sup>th</sup>, Sep. 1944 crossing the Marano River to San Martino heavy mortar and shell fire, driven back by machine gun fire and shelling. The regiment had approximately 100 casualties. Allied air support was called in and bombers attacked the village. San Fortunato Ridge and San Lorenzo in Monte on the 19<sup>th</sup> Sep. night attack faced heavy machine gun fire. Tank position was taken. The regiment suffered 145 casualties. Oct 14<sup>th</sup>, 44 attack across Savio River. Heavy rains turned the area into mud. The river was ice cold and chest deep with heavy defenses (machine gun, mortar's, shelling and counters attacks). The river was bridged on Oct 23<sup>rd</sup>, and food and ammo arrived. On Oct 25<sup>th</sup>, heavy rains washed out all of the regiment's bridges, fighting continued to Oct 29<sup>th</sup>, Seaforth's moved to Riccione for rest and rebuilding. On Dec. 10<sup>th</sup>, the regiment attacked and established a bridgehead. Seaforths moved on and on Dec 14<sup>th</sup>, 44, moved to cross the Naviglio River. Seaforths moved to attack again on December 21 to clear a path to the Senio River. When this action was over, a static front was established, and due to extreme cold and heavy concentration of enemy. The 1st and 5th Canadian Divisions move to Europe. The move was made, and it was determined Holland would be the next objective.

The Seaforths moved into the Reichswald forest in Germany on Apr 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1945. Then on to Cleve and Emmerich on their way to across the Ijssel River in Holland. The Regiment crossed the river in 40 ton craft called Buffalo, under cover of a smoke screen that the Germans had confused for fog. This took the Germans by surprise and the Seaforths reached the shore before the shelling and mortar fire could begin, but begin it did, one shell landed on the far east side of the river while an Anti Tank Platoon was loading a buffalo, three men were heavily wounded. A platoon from D company came under heavy machine gun fire, and a number were wounded. This action took place April 11th, 1945, and it is very certain that this is where George William Barker had died.

On Wednesday, April 11th, 1945, a soldier in the 1st Battalion stationed in the Netherlands, wrote in a war diary of C Company being sent forward to investigate a bridge leading into a nearby town. The company had spotted two Germans at the bottom of the bridge, fired upon them and then withdrew. Few other accounts of battles on April 11th 1945 are written.

George William Barker had made it through all these months, never seeing home and fought in his final battle in April, 1945, almost an entire year from when he first arrived with the infantry unit in Italy.

Private George William Barker was likely a determined Canadian soldier who made all of his best efforts to stay alive, but yet through his lengthy journey in Europe, he was defeated and never came to see home or family again. I'm sure many of us are taught that any man or woman that serves their country is a hero in such a way that they protect their present and build our future. When such a person is killed, those left behind are the ones that must make sure that they are not forgotten. Thanks to veterans like Mr. Rossiter, Private George William Barker is still remembered.

As I read through the many historic website accounts of the Liberation of Holland, documents like "A soldiers diary of Operation Plunder April 1945", and Mr. Rossiter's notes, I can't help but feel a deep respect, wonder and admiration of Private George William Barker. He enlisted in the Army to fight in a war in 1943 where there were news accounts of horrific battles and mounting casualties. Yet he joined to serve and knew that the risk was great that he might not return to his home to enjoy a life of freedom away from the war.

No matter the risk, or the thought that he might not return to just a normal life, Private Barker, like so many young men during this war, enlisted anyway. From July of 1943 until his tragic death under enemy fire in April of 1945, he must have known that the end could come at any moment, in any battle, or that he might not see his family again. I can only try to imagine how Private Barker must have dealt with the constant feelings of fallen comrades, fright, confusion, and the gore of long battles. Yet through all that came at Barker, he trudged on, never giving up, until his final resting at the Ijssel River, here, in the Netherlands.

Such determination and bravery can earn any soldier the name of a hero, be they living or dead. I consider Private Barker as one of these soldiers. A forgotten soldier, maybe, but always a remembered hero.

Private Barker came from Edmonton Alberta, where I go to school and live. I have most likely been to many of the same places that Private Barker has been to in Edmonton, playing along the river, walking along the many walking paths, picnics in the parks, and cheering for the Hometown team Edmonton Eskimos.

On Remembrance Day, our family honours the service of my Great Grandfather who fought in France during the First World War and my Grandfather who helped defend Canada's home front during the Second World War. We also pay tribute to all those who have sacrificed their lives so that others could live free. I will add another name to hold close, that of Private George William Barker, killed in action April 11th 1945, at the Ijssel River in Holland, serving to help liberate the people of the Netherlands.

I hope to find a living relative and pass this story on, until then I will not forget his service and sacrifice and I will remain his voice so that others can learn what I have learned.

I hope that in my life I can display the courage of a soldier like George William Barker. His heart, his convictions, these can be remembered and understood through his actions on the battlefield. This is why those who died in war must never be forgotten, or who's time in life should never be taken for granted. So whether by service number, by name, or for so few by memory, George William Barker will be remembered, and we will always be thankful.

Jeff Whalen - Youth Delegate  
60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Netherlands Pilgrimage  
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