

Valkenburg knighted for preserving stories of fallen soldiers

By Josh Lewis

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Pieter Valkenburg started researching and finding photos of Canadian soldiers buried in the Netherlands to pay tribute to their sacrifice in liberating his home country during World War II.

Eleven years later, the Dutch have knighted their native son for his work, which followed a lengthy career in the Dutch foreign service and in the Royal Netherlands Air Force.

By royal decree of His Majesty Willem-Alexander, King of The Netherlands, he was appointed Knight of the Order of Orange-Nassau on July 2 in a ceremony at Fanningbank. Dutch ambassador to Canada Margriet Vonno presented his decoration.

He and his wife Daria, who retired to PEI in 2009 and live in North Tryon, have found photos of more than 430 Canadian soldiers to place at their graves. That includes several from eastern PEI. In multiple cases, stories in the Graphic have led to successfully finding photos.

"I think it was nice that my birth country also recognized the work we have been doing," he said. "I was humbled. I never expected this."

Although there is no sword on the shoulder like being knighted by the British sovereign, it is otherwise similar, he said.

"Theoretically people have to call me sir, but I don't like that," he said with a laugh.

He said Daria should also be commended for her work on the project and being essentially his PR person. Daria wrote a book about their 2017 war memorial tour in Europe, called No Soldier Buried Overseas Should Ever Be Forgotten, which is also their motto.

The project started in 2014 with searching for photos of Island soldiers buried in the Canadian War Cemetery in Holten, and the next year he began documenting the stories of 48 people listed on the Borden cenotaph. Their work has expanded further in scope since then.

Considering 7,600 Canadian soldiers are buried in the country, it is a never-ending project that he plans to continue until he passes away or is no longer able.

Pieter was born in 1944, not long before the liberation began. Both the Germans and the local population were low on food, which was compounded by the Germans stealing whatever they could get. He remembers his father going to farms

at night to try to get food while avoiding their occupiers.

"He told me from a young age I should never forget. This whole project is basically a thank you to Canada for liberating the country of my birth," he said.

It is a major event in Dutch history that is still commemorated today and passed down from each generation to the next.

"Everywhere you go, there is still great respect for the sacrifices the Canadians made," he said. "The Dutch will never forget their liberators. They take their little children to the cemeteries."

On Christmas Eve, children place candles by each grave, which illuminate them until Christmas morning.

This spring, the couple visited for five weeks for the 80th anniversary of the liberation. Pieter placed Canadian, provincial and in some cases Acadian flags at 383 graves in 14 cemeteries in the Netherlands and Belgium, including about 60 Islanders. Among them were Barney McGuigan of St Mary's Road, George 'Ivan' MacKinnon of Albion and James 'Frank' Mossey of Souris.

"It's a real honour for me to do," he said.

He said the town of Holten had more Canadian flags flying for the anniversary than he had ever seen in one place, including in Canada.

Long before coming to Canada, Pieter served in the Dutch air force. He was posted in West Germany with NATO for four years in the early 1970s, operating surface-to-air missiles to defend the country from any potential attacks by the Eastern Bloc countries.

As a sergeant, he operated missile-tracking radar, watching screens for any incoming threats, and if there were one, he would be guiding the missile to its target.

After that he worked in the Dutch Foreign Affairs ministry for five years before embarking on a 31-year career in the Dutch foreign service.

He had 10 postings all over the world including in India, Poland, Bolivia, Portugal, Suriname, Canada and the US.

The Valkenburgs have been recognized with many other awards and honours in recent years, including the Minister of Veterans Affairs Commendation last year.

"Pieter's work tells the stories and honours those who died, ensuring they will never be forgotten," that citation read.



Pieter Valkenburg is shown at Fanningbank after being knighted, flanked by Lieutenant-General Dr Wassim Salamoun on the left and Dutch ambassador to Canada Margriet Vonno on the right.

Evan Ceretti photo



Pieter Valkenburg kneels next to the grave of George 'Ivan' MacKinnon of Albion at the Canadian War Cemetery in Groesbeek earlier this year. MacKinnon was serving with the North Nova Scotia Highlanders when he was killed on December 4, 1944, during the defence of the Nijmegen Salient in The Netherlands at the age of 27.

Daria Valkenburg photo

New museum exhibit focuses on local doctor

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The Garden of the Gulf Museum is open for the season and one of its new exhibits has a connection to the Minnie McGee murders of 1912.

The exhibit focuses on Dr Roy Fraser, who was practising in the area when McGee poisoned her six children to death at their St Mary's Road home. He and another doctor investigated the case.

"They were the first ones who realized something was amiss," said Jayne Ings, who works at the museum. "It was Dr Fraser who figured out it was phosphorus poisoning."

He went on to testify at her trial. Sadly, he died in a snowstorm the next year, leaving his wife and three young children behind, Ings said.

Fraser's wife eventually became the assistant postmistress back when the museum was a post office, and his son was the postmaster for many years.

The exhibit also focuses on



This casket made by the Montague Furnishing Company is on display at the Garden of the Gulf Museum this year.

Submitted photo

the former Montague Furnishing Company, a major employer in the area that made caskets among other things.

The museum has one of those caskets on display, along with some of Fraser's personal items loaned from his family.

Another new exhibit loaned from the PEI Regimental Museum features Ethel Higginbotham, who served in the women's forces during World War II, Ings said.

Also on display is an 18th century military jacket belonging to Captain John MacDonald. The buttons on it say St John's Island, which was the British name for PEI. MacDonald's father fought at the Battle of Culloden in 1746 in Scotland.

Staff have perked up some of the old exhibits and given everything a refresh, Ings said.

"Hopefully our resident ghost up on the third floor will be happy," she said with a laugh.

The museum's genealogy centre is up and running at the art factory on Sullivan Drive.

Ings said the museum's biggest hurdle is more funding.



A new exhibit at the Garden of the Gulf Museum focuses on Dr Roy Fraser.

Submitted photo

They would like to be able to keep staff on during the off-season to organize artifacts.

The Garden of the Gulf Museum is open Tuesday to Saturday from 9 am to 5 pm, until Labour Day weekend. Other staff members are Ashley Chiasson, Breahanna Callaghan and Ophelia Nicholson.