**Canada readies for 70th anniversary of D-Day**

Toronto Sun | May 2014

Europe will pause Friday to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the D-Day landings.

They will remember those who made the supreme sacrifice on June 6, 1944 fighting in the largest Allied operation of the Second World War.

This country’s contribution to the first day of the liberation of Europe started in 1943 when the planning for D-Day began at the Quebec Conference in Canada. What followed remains a signal example of the results that can be achieved when the feat of arms meets uncommon Canadian valour.

Just before sunrise on D-Day, 230 heavy bombers from RCAF No. 6 Group attacked German shore batteries with 860 tons of bombs. As they did, more than 450 Canadians parachuted inland and engaged the enemy.

In the hours that followed RCAF fighter squadrons provided top cover for the invasion beaches. At sea stood a mixed fleet of 109 Canadian destroyers, frigates, corvettes and landing craft that carried troops as well as providing anti-submarine escort and naval gunfire support.

Then there were the ground forces. Almost 14,000 Canadians landed on Juno Beach. They came from the Third Canadian Infantry Division, commanded by Maj.-Gen. R. F. Keller and the Second Canadian Armoured Brigade led by Brig. R.A. Wyman.

The men represented a nation and its far-flung communities, from the North Nova Scotia Highlanders to the Canadian Scottish from Victoria, the Royal Winnipeg Rifles and Fort Garry Horse — to name just a few.

They hit the sand and shingle fighting hard. The cost was immense. Canada would suffer more than any division in the British Army Group during the Battle of Normandy and in the first 24 hours alone there were more than 1,000 Canadian casualties, of which 359 were fatal.

By D-Day plus one the Canadians were the only troops to capture all their initial objectives and made further progress inland than any Allied fighting force.

The battle for Europe had begun.

Canadian High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, Gordon Campbell, is in no doubt about the importance of the Canada-U.K. bond:

“On June 6, when Canadian and British dignitaries, veterans, families, and serving members of our armed forces stand shoulder to shoulder in Normandy to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the D-Day landings, we will be revisiting a key moment in our shared history,” Campbell said in London. “When the Canadian 3rd Division landed on Juno Beach, it did so alongside the Royal Navy’s No. 48 (Royal Marine) Commando.

“When 17,000 Allied airborne troops dropped into France, among them were some of the best of both Canada and the United Kingdom.

“It is one of the finest examples of the shared history, mutual respect, common values and trust that truly helps define who we are, as friends and allies.”

Campbell noted that those links have remained strong.

“Be it in the Balkans or combating terrorists in Afghanistan, our bond has not only endured, but been strengthened — so much so that William Hague, the U.K.’s Foreign Secretary, likens us to “first cousins.”

“History has taught us that for Canada, this capable and committed like-mindedness starts here in the United Kingdom. It is a bond in which both Canada and our British friends take great pride.”

The Canadian government helped our remaining veterans reach Normandy ceremonies in France.

Veterans Affairs Canada offered up to $2,000 per eligible veteran to support their travel plans. All Canadian D-Day servicemen were eligible to apply for the travel assistance and around 180 took up the offer.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper will join them after attending the G-7 Brussels Summit.

“D-Day is one of the most defining moments in Canada’s proud military history,” Harper said when announcing his trip. “Seventy years later, it will be my honour to travel to France to pay tribute to the brave men and women who fought and died for us on the battlefields to liberate Europe and the world from Nazi oppression.”

Canadians perished in their hundreds on the blood-soaked beaches of Normandy.

Almost 7,000 eventually died in the push through France to Belgium, Holland and into the German heartland itself. All in the name of freedom.

Many of them teenagers, they were the very best this young country could offer.

They fought tyranny, they fought oppression, they fought for the basic human rights Canadians have always held dear as a wonderful privilege commensurate with being part of a nation as envied as this.

All that, after having lived through the unalloyed misery of the Great Depression.

We may never see their like again

Which event did more to shape Canada in the eyes of its people and those around the world: the Battle of Vimy Ridge or D-Day? Explain.

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