

# “We Will never forget Poyntzpass”

Following the liberation of Belgium in 1944, many young Belgian men were recruited to help in the war-effort. These young men, mostly still in their teens, were brought to various parts of the United Kingdom to be trained before returning to Europe or the Far East. One group of young Belgians was stationed at Acton House Camp, Poyntzpass.

For these young men, who had endured the humiliation and hardship of German occupation, Poyntzpass seemed almost like ‘Shangri La.’

Many of them became friendly with the locals and nearly every family in the district ‘adopted’ one or two who called regularly with the hospitable locals. One of these young soldiers, Francois Brichot, recalled his time in Poyntzpass. Francois became very friendly with Fred and Agnes Hanlon and family and has kept in touch over the years.



Francois Brichot in 1945.

“More than 50 years ago, early in March 1945, I jumped from an old Bedford lorry at Acton House Camp in Poyntzpass. Ten minutes later I was in hut ‘Cube 34’ which would be my home for the next six months. We did not realise that those six months would be some of the nicest and most influential of our lives. We already had one army blanket and we received a second one. Still in civilian clothes of ‘ersatz cloth’ and threadbare shoes we were eagerly looking forward to getting our uniforms and shoes so we could feel like real soldiers.

The first night was very cold and many of our comrades caught a cold. I had kept the wrapping paper from the blankets and with one piece between the two blankets I slept like an angel. I was one of the few without a cough and sleepy eyes.

The next evening we were allowed to go down to the village. I spoke a few words of English. We already had a few pounds and were looking for some biscuits or something to eat. I went into a grocer’s shop opposite the church. The outcome of this first visit would have a big influence on me for the rest of my life.

A charming lady, Mrs Hanlon, asked after a few moments, “Where do you come from?”

“From Belgium.”

“Where are you staying?”

“At the camp at Acton House.”

“Would you like a cup of tea?”

“With pleasure!”

We went into her living room. Three little girls looked at that strange fellow who spoke a strange language. At that moment the shop bell rang and I was left alone with the three little girls. When Mrs. Hanlon came back we were singing ‘Ba-Ba Black Sheep’ in chorus.

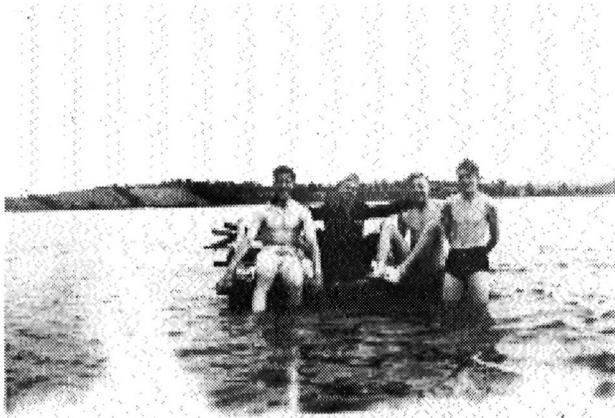
I had already found a family, three little sisters and one Irish mother. After more than fifty years I am still their “big brother” and still enjoy their kind Irish hospitality ... but that’s a different story.



*On manoeuvres.*

After a few days we received our equipment. The uniforms were second hand but as proud as a peacock I went to the village.

Later a retired officer whom I had met before gave me a brand-new uniform so I was the best-dressed private in the camp and the only one with two uniforms. Then the military instruction began, marches, drill with and without rifles. The days were tiring but we all felt very happy. After four years of starvation and humiliation, under the German occupation, we felt free again. There was no bombing, no alerts. We were free to talk about anything and everything without fear. We were breathing freely.



*A dip in Lough Shark.*

Then came the 8th May, VE-Day parade in Banbridge. We were received like real veterans, parading in our old uniforms. (Except me in a brand new one!)

After three days of celebration the instruction started again at Acton. We didn't know then that our four brigades were intended to join the Allied Forces in the Far East - Burma to be more precise. We had speed marches, manoeuvres in the Mourne

Mountains, shooting, etc. etc. We quickly began to feel like real soldiers, proud to wear the badge of 'The 4th Infantry Brigade The Steenstraete Grenadiers'.



*All the nice girls love a soldier !*

July 21 was the first Belgian National Day after liberation. A big parade took place in Banbridge. Later that afternoon there was a procession of floats representing the universities and different towns of Belgium and in the evening a fireworks display. We then had two days leave. On 28th July we were again in the Mourne Mountains and were having instructions in using the 'Piat 2-inch mortar' and being the last company it was our task to use up all the remaining ammunition of our allocation. After three days we marched back to Poyntzpass. This included a 30 km. speed-march. Although exhausted we still had enough energy to hire a taxi and travel to Warrenpoint to dance the night away.



*All that remains of Acton House Army Camp.*

On 15th August came VJ-Day. Now the war was over and everyone was so happy but in the first few days of September we left Acton House. We did not realise that there we had spent the best six months of our lives. During the next six months we were based at Aswell Camp near Oakham in Rutlandshire. We received brand new uniforms and weapons. We visited Nottingham and Leicester and I paid several visits to my aunt who lived in Huddersfield.



*Belgian Infantry Brigade Emblem.*

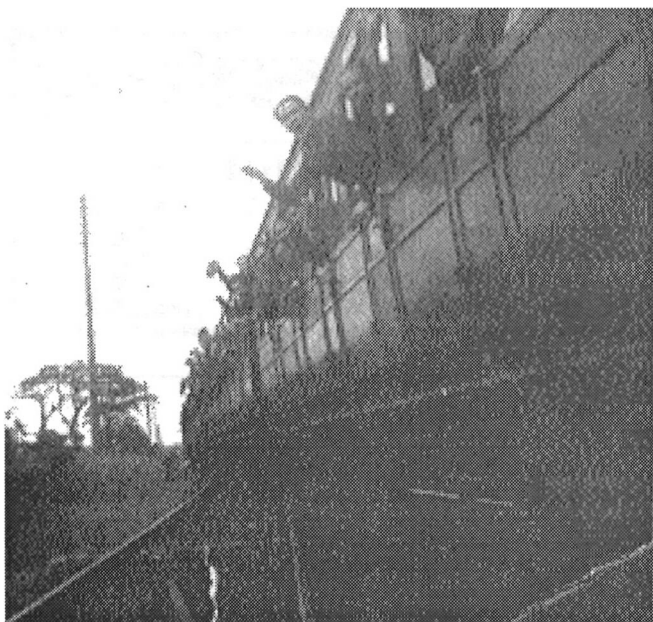


*Francois Brichot today*

At the end of October we left Aswell and returned to Bruges in Belgium, where we spent a welcome 15 days leave. My mother hardly recognised me. I had gained 12 kilos in weight and grown 4 cms! In December half of the Brigade, who were university students, were de-mobbed. The rest left Bruges for service in Germany. A new life had begun but we would never forget Poyntzpass."

**Francois Brichot**

*When he returned to the continent Francois Brichot served for a year in West Germany before returning to his native Belgium. Now retired after a career as a commercial traveller Francois and his wife Rene recently celebrated their Golden Wedding Anniversary.*



*Belgian soldiers leaving Poyntzpass station.*