In Europe, they took me to visit cemeteries. And I find it very stressful to be in those cemeteries, to see the friends that I knew.

My name is Pierre Gauthier. I was born in Montreal in 1925, on January 4. I enrolled in the Army in 1941. I was aware of what was going on in Europe, naturally, the war. Conscription had been passed and I knew that I would be called up. So, I decided to go before being called up. I went to Longueuil where the recruitment centre was to enlist. I signed all my papers. Then they sent me to Borden, in northern Ontario. I completed my infantry training there in the winter of ’41 and ’42.

I had never left the city of Montreal before and I had never travelled much. It was pretty exciting to be on a big boat with 3,000 or 4,000 other soldiers. Everyone smoked in those days and we had plenty of cigarettes. We slept in hammocks 3 or 4 hammocks high. The trip took 5 days. I found the crossing of the Atlantic tiresome. It was exciting to be on a boat, but there wasn’t much to look at!

The first two years that I spent with my regiment in England, our primary role was to defend England since the English were anticipating a German invasion. We underwent entire weeks of training. And that training was very dangerous because they were simulating real war. They would shoot bullets above our heads, they exploded bombs close to us, and things like that. They called them “schemes”, and my regiment participated in two or three schemes. It would be the Canadians against the Americans, the Americans against the Canadians, in different places. One of my friends from my section, in my platoon, was seriously injured next to me during an exercise, and that affected me deeply. He fell on a grenade and he lost his right arm.

Padre Huard was a captain, but he was also a soldier like us. We were all soldiers. Before going into combat, he would walk between us. He expected us to all be practicing Catholics, and we were pretty religious because religion was very prominent at that time. And it was funny to see a priest walking among us, looking us in the eyes and saying, “Did you receive communion? Have you confessed? Because tomorrow morning, you are going to die, my friend.”

We eventually realized that the landing in Normandy was going to be quite stressful and dangerous. And then we got on these boats – it was totally dark out – and we crossed the English Channel. There were hundreds of boats near us and it was an odd experience, eh? Very eerie. Once we were close to Normandy, they lowered some little boats in the water and we disembarked from the larger vessel. They secured rope nets to the larger boat so that we could get into the landing craft. We had our packs with us and our weapons. A lot of the guys who jumped into the little boat broke limbs and some fell in the water. It was a very dangerous experience. We couldn’t see the beach because it was dark. When we got closer to the shore, when the ramp went down, we had to get into the water. It took a lot of… a lot of guts to get off the landing crafts and walk through the water - the water went up to here, eh? Landing with 50 or 60 other soldiers that you know, that you trained with, to see them injured and to see them die beside you, it’s very upsetting. And I wasn’t able to help them, I wasn’t able to do anything. Our primary objective was to advance, so you had to forget those guys. You have to live through something like that to know what it’s like. If you have never experienced it, you cannot imagine what it is like… to make good friends and to see them wounded and die next to you.

The first city that we liberated was Bernières-sur-Mer. We had a Canadian patch on our shoulders, and we were proud of that. Very proud to be Canadian. That way, when we stopped somewhere, people would come out of their homes to welcome us. Women and children came up to us. They gave us flowers, they gave us bottles of wine and things like that. The women kissed us – that was fun! And the kids – every time an infantry soldier stopped in a village, he was surrounded by kids.

We were walking along a road toward Northern France, and then on our left, on the horizon, we saw the Vimy towers, but we didn’t know what they were. We looked at the towers and said, “What are those towers over there?” and someone said “It’s Vimy Ridge!” Vimy was a huge battle that happened during the First World War. It was surprising to see that.

Carpiquet was a horrendous battle. We were dealing with German troops that were completely out of their minds. We had to kill them. They were youth, children really, children that were 14, 15, 16 years old. They were Waffen-SS. We had to kill them because they refused to surrender. I actually wear a medal - it’s right here - that was given to me just for Carpiquet. They gave it to me just for that because it was such an intense fight. It was dreadful.

My regiment was in Belgium and we were advancing through the country. We liberated three or four little cities or villages, and once we were in the north of Belgium, we ran into some big problems. The fighting became so intense that it was scary. Then it started to rain, and it rained for two weeks without stopping. So, we were walking in mud up to here and we were also being shot at, making it even more difficult to dig a hole, which you couldn’t really because there was so much mud. Then we took part in the Battle of the Scheldt – The Scheldt Estuary – it was frightening, and we lost lots of our guys there. I would say that a third of the regiment died at the Scheldt, it was awful. They put us on these boats, little boats, and we crossed the entrance to the port, which was wide, probably 3 or 4 miles wide. And there were these islands on the other side that we had to liberate. We landed on the island, the largest one, and we were lucky because the Germans, their weapons, and their cannons were not facing in our direction, they were facing the other islands. So, when we landed, we were looking at the Germans who were looking in the other direction, so that helped us. We were about to liberate the island when the rest of the Canadian brigade succeeded in liberating it, and then opened the port of Antwerp – *Antwerpen*.

Finally, one night at about 10:00 pm, we came upon a place with a horde of children on the side of the road. My officer was with me and he said, “Gauthier, ask the kids where we are,” because we were always lost. We had a hard time reading our military maps and we were lost 90% of the time. So, I started to ask the kids where we were. They began to respond, and I could not understand what they were saying. After that, the officer said, “What? Why don’t you understand them?” I said, “Because we have arrived in Holland. These are Dutch children!”

I was wounded and sent back to England. The first thing they did was put me on a table in the operating room. Then the surgeon, a colonel in the Canadian Army Medical Corps, I remember him looking at me, looking at his big blue eyes, and he said, “Don’t worry, soldier. We’re going to look after you.”

In England, we went out dancing to meet women. One evening, I went to the dance hall – I think it was in Aldershot, eh? – and I danced with lovely girls. And then Hellen and two or three of her friends in the ATS [Auxiliary Territorial Service], the English Army, entered the dance hall to dance with some Canadian soldiers. So, I saw these women and I said, “They’re cute!” And like that, when the music stopped, I crossed the hall and I asked Hellen to dance with me. We danced together and that’s where it all began, the relationship with Hellen.

(Hellen speaking)

I was in the Army, the ATS, and I was 19. I worked in a bakery, and we loaded trucks. And we went with the trucks all around to the camps, different camps, and we delivered bread. And I was a happy girl, I enjoyed it.

(Pierre speaking)

I mean, if you were a Canadian soldier and you met her at a dance hall, you’d want to marry her, wouldn’t you?

I am 93 years old and I am still a soldier. I keep myself presentable, I wash my face, I polish my boots. It’s something that you never lose in life. Hellen is the same. She’s just like me. Training is engrained in your brain and stays with you all your life. All your life. So, I am still a soldier, you know?