

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS IN NATO SERVICE

Thomas Burnie

In his book “War Without Battles – Canada’s NATO Brigade in Germany 1951-1993”, Sean Maloney opens with the remarks that over 100,000 Canadian soldiers and their dependents¹ served in Germany on a rotational basis in support of NATO.² His book chronicles that contribution in its various forms and activities while in that theatre of operations. However, this article will offer the personal reflections of one person with NATO operational tours in the Cold War between 1961 and 1977 as a soldier and an officer with Armoured regiments based in Iserlohn when the Brigade was part of the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) and in Lahr when the Brigade was part of the Central Army Group (CENTAG). Direct NATO experience culminated in 1986-87 as a NDHQ staff officer in NATO plans.

With the dawn of the Berlin Wall on 13 August 1961, young Trooper Tom Burnie of the Lord Strathcona’s Horse had just started summer block leave in Calgary and warned for deployment to Egypt upon completion of leave to replace a fatal casualty. On 7 September, the government announced the strengthening of the Germany based brigade by 1106 all ranks.³ Accordingly, after arriving by troop train in Quebec City, about 1,000 mostly single soldiers hastily embarked on a scheduled Atlantic crossing with previously booked civilian passengers. Tales about the crossing adventure that included a duty-free bar, however, will remain unspoken! Within six weeks of the wall outset, Trooper Burnie was in Germany as part of a 50-man reinforcement contingent posted to the 8th Canadian Hussars (8CH) bringing the unit up to war strength.

The 8CH, located in the city of Iserlohn, Westphalia occupied a self-contained pre-war German Army Barracks with an adjoining training area called Fort Beausejour. The Fort was the Canadian Brigade’s most south-western facility.⁴ Each squadron had its own building which included living quarters for all single Corporals and below as single men lived in. Garrison life was different from that in Canada starting with a five- and one-half-day work week. Regimental parades and unit line inspections occurred Saturday mornings – rain or shine. Beyond normal daily activity expected in an Armoured regiment, camp duties were quite significant in that fifty people were on duty every night. This ranged from the duty Field Officer to a 23-man armed guard (*a Sgt, Cpl, and 21 Troopers*), to duty drivers and cooks. The Guard manned seven posts and sentry duty was 2 hours ‘on’ and 4 hours ‘off’ all night. As a Trooper in the duty squadron, one could expect to be on night duty often and continue with your normal duty the next day. Single men wore a jacket and tie when out of uniform – whether in the messes or walking out – and inspected at the Guard Room when leaving the Fort for the local haunts. Most single men did not own cars – which in retrospect was probably a good thing! As well, single soldiers received only a portion of their pay with the remainder withheld until they went on their two-week block leaves. Favourite destinations were Amsterdam and Copenhagen.

¹ In today’s parlance we would use the term “families”.

² Sean Maloney, *War Without Battles Canada’s NATO Brigade in Germany, 1951-1953*, McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd, 1997, page XXXIII

³ Maloney, page 160

⁴ The Brigade decentralized over a broad area with the Headquarters near the Mohne Dam of WW 2 Dam Busters fame

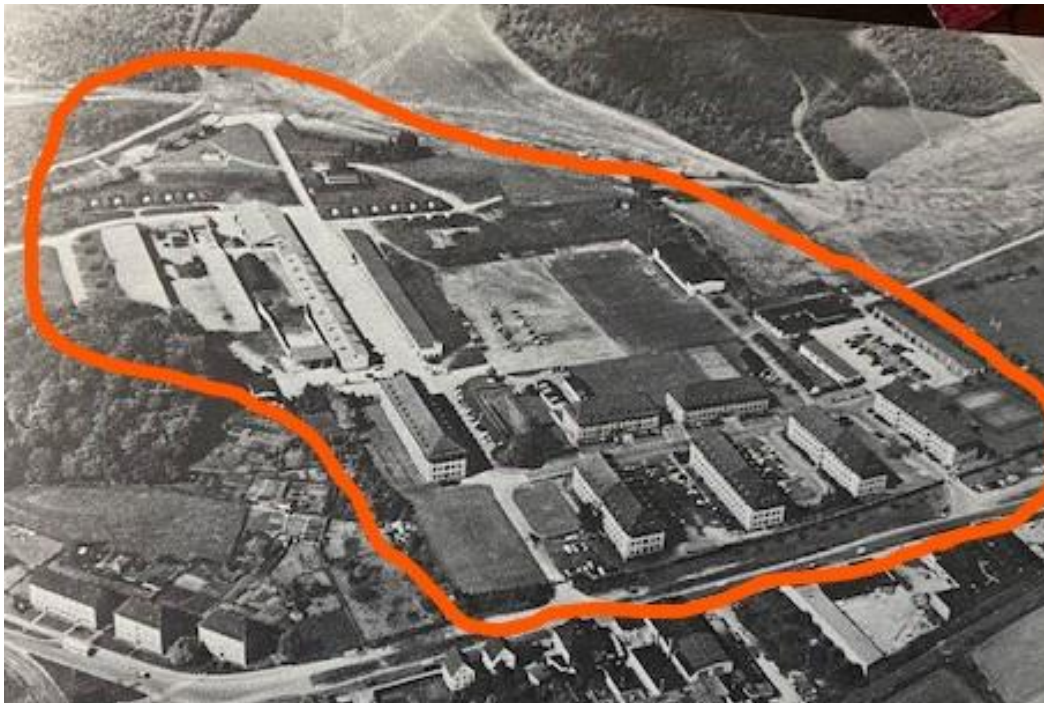


Photo 1 – Fort Beausejour



Photo 2 - 8CH mounted parade in Fort Beausejour October 1961



Photo 3 – the tank park in Fort Beausejour October 1961

Iserlohn was also home for components of a British Army Brigade with a Coldstream Guards battalion on one side of the city and a Rifle Regiment battalion within a 15-minute walk from the Fort. Neighborhood haunts frequented by the single soldiers were very territorial by unit and 8CH soldiers were easy to identify because of their standard of civilian dress. At times unhappy events did occur if one wandered into different territory. Given the geo-political environment, soldiers received constant warnings about local companions who may ask too many questions about the unit and its activities among other things that could go awry.

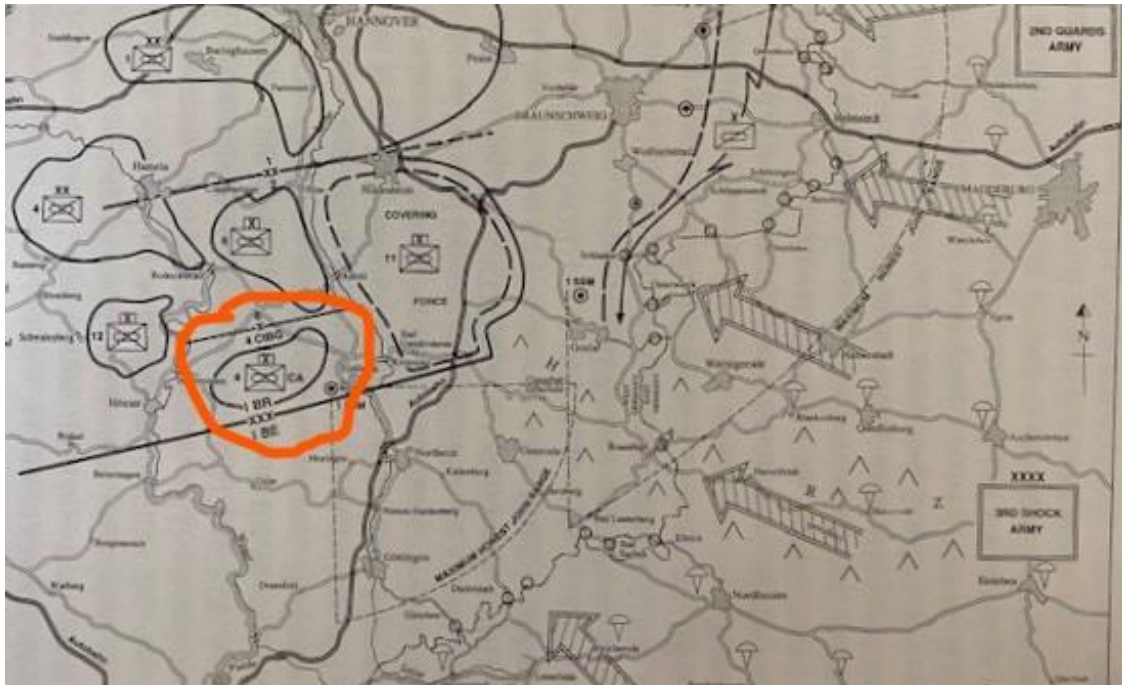
While families lived in the married quarters located in an adjacent city of Hemer, a significant percentage of mostly junior married soldiers lived in the local economy – often in small towns. Without telephones, German language skills and limited personal transportation, support came from regimental resources such as providing drivers and trucks daily to deliver groceries purchased from the then Maple Leaf Services (MLS) store to families living on the economy. The MLS offered Canadian staples (*and duty-free products*) at a much lower cost than local German stores. It would be remiss not to mention that regimental wives supplied much of the mutual support to those without cars, particularly when the husbands were away on deployments.

Field deployments were noteworthy events. Tanks and crews moved to deployment areas by train while the remainder moved by vehicle convoy. As part of the 1 British Corps in the Northern Army Group (NORTHAG), the Canadian Brigade was the right forward brigade facing the former East German border. Unit contact was primarily with the British Army and sometimes with the Belgique Army who were on the Canadian South flank. When preparing for train moves, tank crews interacted closely and rode with the British tank transporter units. Transporter crews were Polish Army veterans who routinely consumed strong cigarettes and equally strong sausages – somewhat alien to the average Canadian soldiers' tame sense of smell. Troops had continual warnings to be watchful for the Soviet SOXMIS⁵ missions who may be tailing the unit and gathering intelligence. Soldiers were to be vigilant about protecting sensitive information and aware of concurrent Canadian and British counterintelligence activities in the unit areas. Tank Gun Camps were at the Bergen-Hohne ranges adjacent to the infamous Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Although initially employed on arrival as a driver in unit transport, I became a Lance Corporal and sent to the Regimental Police. In the field, this entailed chasing tanks and convoys up and down the highways and through towns on a motorcycle. While sounding fun as a young man, the north German weather quickly dampened those ideas.



Photo 4 – loading tank for return to Iserlohn, circa 1962

⁵ The Soviet Military Liaison Missions arose from reciprocal agreements formed immediately after the Second World War between the Western allied nations (U.S., UK and France) and the USSR. The agreements between the allied nations and the Soviet Union permitted the deployment of small numbers of military intelligence personnel — together with associated support staff — in each other's territory in Germany, ostensibly for the purposes of monitoring and furthering better relationships between the Soviet and Western occupation forces.



Map 1 - Canadian Brigade deployment against Soviet threat in East Germany



Photo 5 - On exercise In the Luneburger Heide forest South of Hamburg near Bergen-Hohne, circa 1962



Photo 6 - Visiting Bergen-Belsen, circa 1962

Maloney's book outlines the everchanging international situation but the most obvious during this tour, from the soldiers' perspective, was the Cuban crisis in October 1962. The 8CH was in the process of rotating back to Canada with the Fort Garry Horse (FGH) replacing them. This crisis, requiring concurrent activities by incoming and outgoing members of both units to increase the state of war readiness, exacerbated the situation at the local level. The implications on families as part of the changeover compounded this condition. Without the world of modern community and personal communications as we know it today, rumours and concerns were rampant during that period. The local Canadian Army radio station broadcast delayed CBC tapes when they arrived by plane from Canada and the British Forces News Network normally did not deliver Canadian news.

Returning to the Strathcona's in December 1962, an unexpected opportunity presented itself in the fall of 1964 to take part in the inaugural reinforcement flyover to augment the FGH in Germany with twelve tank crews for the fall NATO exercises. The other option was to stand by for a possible UN deployment, which seemed remote. The flyover added more valuable field experience during a wide-ranging exercise throughout northern Germany. While not overly exciting to the reader, this was the first-time soldiers wore combat uniforms rather than black coveralls, bush dress and assorted war surplus clothing that soldiers purchased privately. For the soldier, it was entry into the post second war era for field clothing. Finally, as downside to that deployment and as a single soldier, I missed participating in an operational tour to Cyprus

in Ferret Scout cars with armoured reconnaissance as the mission happened very quickly while the Germany Flyover was happening



Photo 7 – Strathcona's in new field uniforms crewing Fort Gary Horse tank, Germany 1964

In late 1965, the Strathcona's replaced the FGH; hence, the start of a second tour at Fort Beausejour. Like the 8Ch experience, regimental garrison routine was similar, but field deployments seemed more frequent. Equipment improvements since the 8CH tour were significant. The fifty-four tanks had increased combat capability with upgrades such as larger guns, more armour (*now approaching fifty-five tons*), infra-red and other improvements. As well, there was the introduction of the American M113 family of light track vehicles, so more qualification training for everyone. My first year was in tank crews and the second year as a member of the regimental headquarters command post team. A rare opportunity to attend a four-month Centurion Tank Gunnery Instructor course in England occurred before the third and final year as a Centurion tank commander and as a tank gunnery instructor.

Family living conditions had little advancement since the 8CH days. Being a newly married junior NCO just before the rotation to Germany, getting on the list for married accommodation before the date of marriage was impossible. As the Iserlohn area was not replete with married quarters, the regimental housing staff arranged accommodation in the local economy – a two

room apartment with a cold stove, no hot water, and a shared bathroom – that is what was available. (*Welcome to the exciting life of an army wife!*) On the positive side, it was within five minutes walking distance from the MLS for grocery shopping. After moving three times for better accommodation, the last abode was about two hundred metres from the train station in the City of Hemer. This was good! I could go home briefly after loading the tank while waiting for the train to depart. However, on the negative side, a local German tank battalion frequently rolled by the apartment at all hours on its way to, or from the train station. This was not conducive to good sleep but provided me with greater empathy for the German population when we rolled through their villages, towns, and farms at all hours in our tanks. During this tour, our son was born in the British Military Hospital Iserlohn. Like other children born in Germany of Canadian parents, the new-born received a German birth certificate and other documents issued by the Canadian Government. This documentation approach was problematic in later years when our son applied for a passport and when my wife applied for certain government benefits.



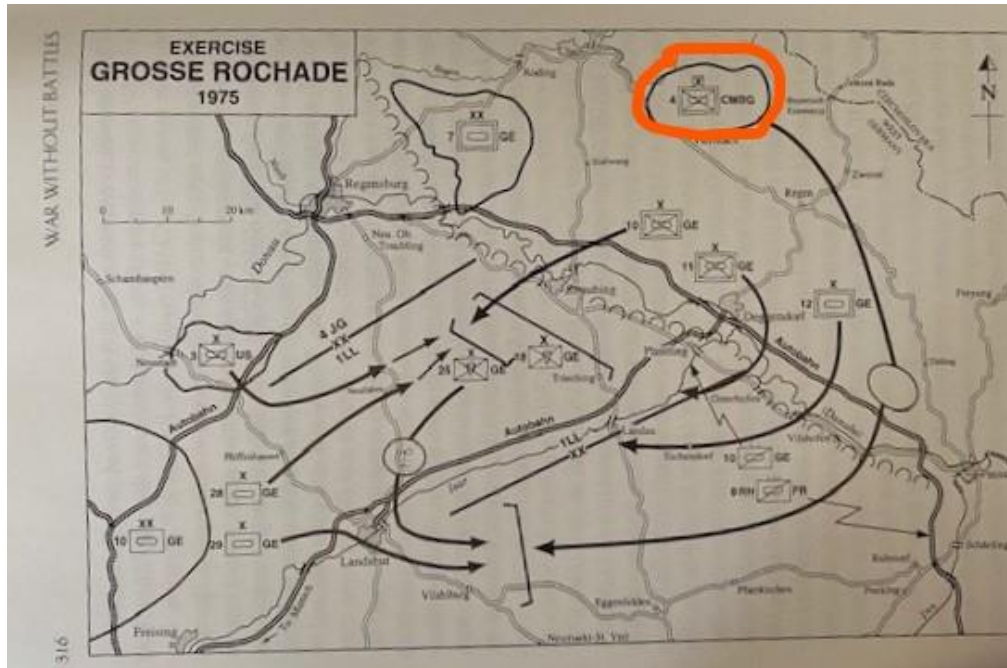
Photo 8 – Maneuvering through village

Posted again to Germany in 1974, the third tour was different operationally and domestically. The much-reduced brigade, centered in Lahr, was in a scenic area on the Rhine in South Germany. Ensnared on an operating military airfield in protective shelters for fighter aircraft was not the best place for an armoured regiment to reside. However, daily garrison life in The Royal Canadian Dragoons (the RCD) – with a reduced combat capability of thirty-two tanks from fifty-four tanks with the move from Iserlohn – was like any other armoured regiment, but with

considerably less stress on garrison duties. Demands for direct regimental support to families was very much reduced. Most single soldiers had cars, better paid, and took advantage of broader opportunities to see Europe.

Operationally, the regiment was part of the Central Army Group (CENTAG) reserve and operated facing the former Czechoslovakia. The unit worked primarily with German and American formations. As a tank troop leader, field exercises in southern Germany were not much different than in the North, except we were much more conscious in avoiding damage to civilian property when working in the exercise areas. We continued to deploy by tank train to the operating areas – sometimes rail moves did not go well! Moving from a tank squadron to Headquarters Squadron appointments presented me with different views of organizing, moving, and supporting an Armoured Regiment in the field.

In January 1977, the regiment began receiving Leopard tanks on loan from Germany, so conversion to loaned equipment was rapid for operational reasons. Appointed as the Regimental Gunnery Officer, my focus shifted quickly to leading a training cadre to convert crews to using the Leopard Tank weapons systems and be operational within three months. To their credit, the cadre NCOs achieved this feat with a few German Army publications and no English reference material to create courses and lesson plans. Concurrently my task was also to train and lead a team of four tank troops in a NATO tank gunnery competition of six nations in April 1977. Canada introduced this competition entitled ‘Canadian Army Trophy’ (CAT) to NATO in 1963 to foster excellence, camaraderie, and competition among armoured forces in Western Europe. The Strathcona’s won in 1967 but later Canada withdrew for various technical and financial reasons. So, it was somewhat of a surprise when Canada re-entered in 1977, and more surprising that the RCD won with borrowed tanks within just under four months of receiving the first loaned tank.



Map 2 – Canadian Brigade deployed along Czech border acting as the aggressor force against German and American units.

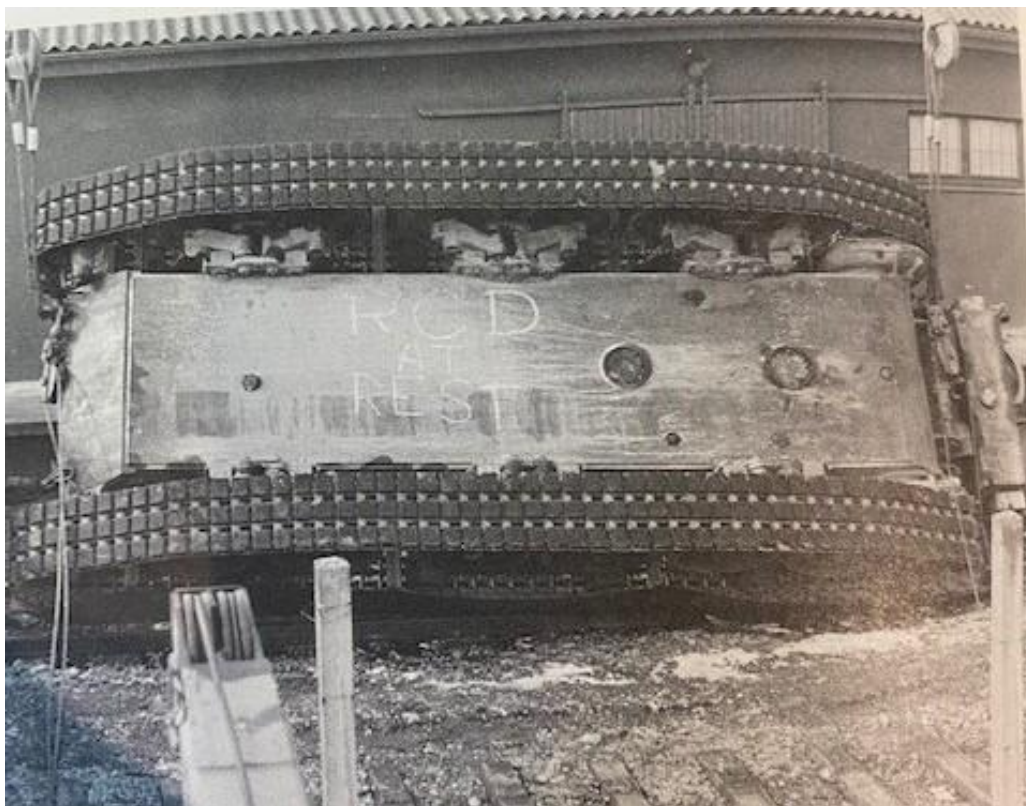


Photo 9 – Bad day unloading from the train

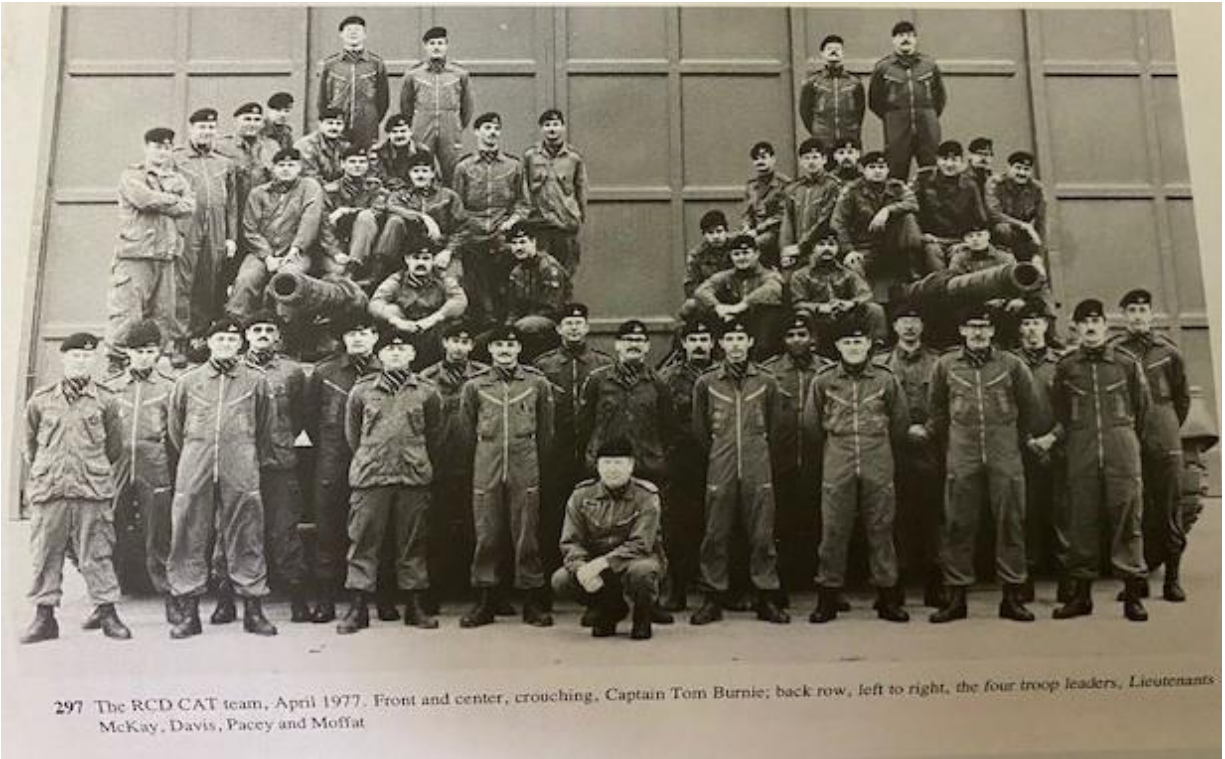


Photo 10 – CAT 77 Team

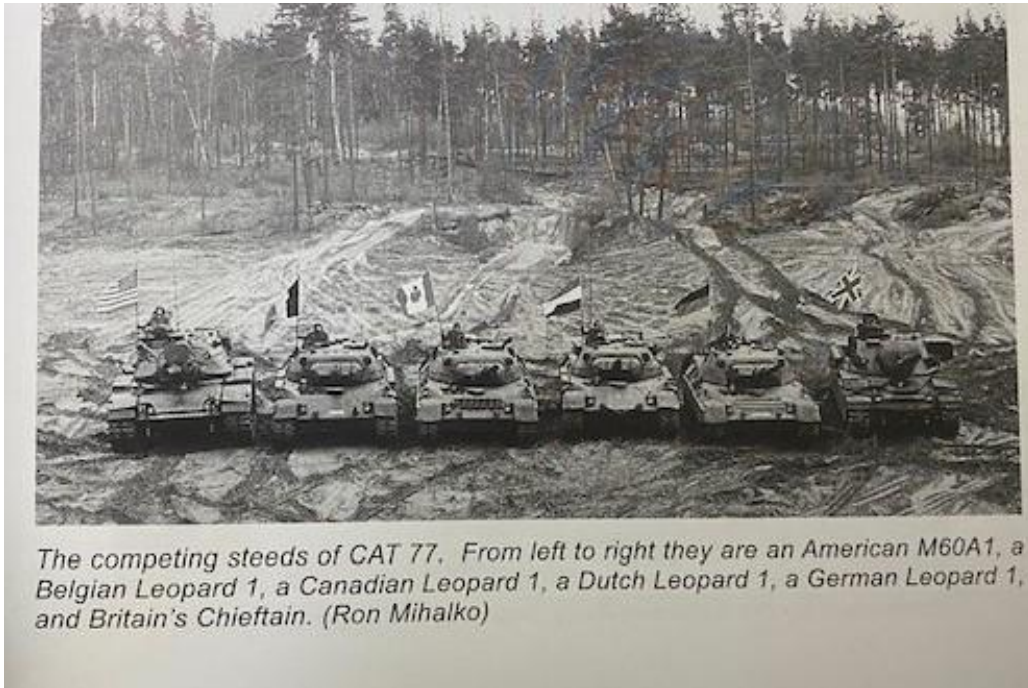


Photo 11 – CAT 77, Tanks of the participating nations



Photo 12 – The Commander-in-Chief CENTAG presenting the CAT trophy

Although still lacking telephones, family life was much improved. Like in northern Germany, many lived on the local economy, but they could afford vehicles, and received enhanced central support services. Unlike the Iserlohn experience, my family secured a modern ground floor apartment, with a private yard, about 15 minutes from the airfield. Not changed, however, was the need for families to be adaptable and problem solvers when the soldiers deployed.

The last significant touchpoint was as a staff officer in the NATO Plans section in NDHQ from 1985 to 1987 with a specific focus on North Norway and the Canadian Air-Sea Transportable Brigade Group (CAST) commitment. The highlight was my task as the command-and-control evaluator for Exercise Brave Lion in 1986 when the CAST Brigade deployed to North Norway with all its equipment. In the evaluator role, this presented an opportunity to interact firsthand with all the national and international tentacles involved with this large undertaking before and during the deployment. This included interaction with the Canadian Forces Europe staff in Lahr.

Finally, from a personal perspective, the NATO experience was wide-ranging and rewarding. While various images come to mind, two key points emerge. First, the effects on families

deployed with their spouses to Europe offered wonderful opportunities on one hand while on the other it offered periods of tension, anxiety, and loneliness – particularly junior ranks families isolated in small German towns. Moreover, all stationed families had exposure to potential risk should there be an attack on NATO with little or no warning. Second, stationed soldiers of all ranks received excellent collective training and experiences while operating during varying degrees of Cold War tension. Regrettably, some soldiers (*and their affected families*) also suffered physical and mental injury or death while partaking in multiple periods of high tempo training. Public recognition of these consequences is not seen in the same light as similar consequences that have occurred during other operational deployments. Notwithstanding, the soldiers are just as injured or just as dead from their service to Canada – and their families just as impacted for the rest of their lives.

Thomas Burnie

Thomas Burnie's volunteerism spans 20 plus years following a Canadian Armed Forces career. As a self-employed Fellow Certified Management Consultant and Project Management Professional, he applies his knowledge and skill in leadership roles with various charities and non-profits. Past experience includes President of the Kiwanis Club and the Canadian Club of Medicine Hat, Director with the Kiwanis Club of Ottawa, Chair of the Kiwanis Club of Ottawa Medical Foundation, past Governance Chair in the Guild of the Royal Canadian Dragoons, and past Governance Chair of the Order of St. George. Currently he is a director with two charities: The Friends of the Canadian War Museum as a member of the Governance Committee, and the Knox Presbyterian Church of Ottawa Management Board. He has been nominated again as a Director in the Kiwanis Club of Ottawa.

Map and Photo Credits:

Map 1 – Maloney, page 204

Map 2 – Maloney, page 316

Photo 1 – A Pictorial History of the 8th Canadian Hussars (Princess Louise's) 1973, page 259

Photo 2 – Burnie private collection

Photo 3 – A Pictorial History of the 8th Canadian Hussars (Princess Louise's) 1973, page 270

Photo 4 – Burnie private collection

Photo 5 – Burnie private collection

Photo 6 – Burnie private collection

Photo 7 – Burnie private collection

Photo 8 – Maloney, page 258

Photo 9 - Brereton Greenhous, Dragoon, The Centennial History of the Royal Canadian Dragoons, 1883-1993, page, 476

Photo 10 – Greenhous, page 482

Photo 11 – Robert S. Cameron, PhD, The Canadian Army Trophy, Achieving Excellence in Tank Gunnery, Fort Benning, Georgia, page 43

Photo 12 – DND from Burnie Private Collection