

Peewees on Parade: Wartime Memories of a Young (and Small) Soldier

by John A. Galipeau as told to Pattie Whitehouse

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John Galipeau, a corporal in the South Alberta Regiment of the Canadian Armoured Corps, spent the winter of 1944 with his regiment in the Netherlands. Here he describes the conditions he found and their effect on him:

As we were in the area for an extended period, we became well acquainted with the local people. Children were always hanging around, and we spoiled them with candy, gum and chocolate. Having them around reminded us that civilization still existed. We picked up quite a bit of the language from them.

We could see first hand what the villagers were suffering. They had absolutely nothing: no meat, no food, no clothing. They scavenged what they could and lived on potatoes, tulip bulbs and beets. We saw little children with their bellies distended from malnutrition. It was heartrending, but there was little we could do. Interim military governments were set up to help restore the essentials of living, but the combat troops had to concentrate on liberating the country.

During one of our stops in a small town, our cooks took over a kitchen in an empty café and cooked hot meals for us. Because of the inadequacies of the field kitchen equipment and the conditions under which the cooks had to work, the meals were pretty crude. We might have quite fatty roast beef and potatoes in their skins, along with carrots or peas. We ate out of two mess tins that fit into one another and drank from a tin cup. At meal time you went into the café and the cooks would dish out a mess of pottage into one dish and dessert, some kind of cake or pudding or tinned fruit, into the other, and you had your tea in your enamel mug. The food was not great, and there would be leftovers. The facilities for washing dishes were not very good. They set out three large pots of water: one was soapy, one contained disinfectant, one was clear water. To make washing your dishes easier, when you finished eating, you threw whatever hot tea you had left into the half eaten potatoes and bits of greasy meat in your mess tin and you dumped it into the slop pit that had been dug behind the kitchen. When you got to the slop heap, there would be anywhere from six to ten



children, six, seven, eight, nine years old, reaching into your tin to try and pull out a bit of food before you threw it all away.

I don't know what the others thought, but I felt ashamed at having to push these children away so I could throw my leftover scraps in the slop pit. We knew that we couldn't feed them all. There were so many of them and so few of us, and the little extra food we had wasn't going to make any real difference. We realized, too, that if we didn't eat and keep ourselves in condition, they would never be free of German domination. I was trying to leave the children a little dignity when I pushed them away, but underneath I was hurting. To me, it isn't the people who were bombed and shot and killed, the healthy young men trying to destroy one another, that embody the ravages and horrors of war. It's these children standing around the slop pit trying to snatch our leftovers before we threw them out. That image will be with me till the day I die.