

This speech from John C Hatt, a former sergeant with the Canadian 104th Anti-Tank Battery was reproduced in The Petworth Society Magazine, no. 81, September 1995

The Petworth Tragedy

I am here today to represent the 7th Anti-Tank Association in memory of the children and teachers who died on that dreadful day in September, 1942. I was a member of the 104th Anti-Tank Battery, 7th Anti-Tank Regiment, when it was bivouacked in bell tents at Holland Wood on the outskirts of Petworth during the summer and fall months of that year.

To give you an account of the formation and partial history of the Regiment in England, volunteer enlistment in the 104th Anti-Tank Battery took place in my home town, Fredericton, New Brunswick, in July, 1940. The Battery sailed for Great Britain on the British liner, "Georgic", in April, 1941. This vessel had been converted into a troop ship and was sunk by the enemy some time later in the Mediterranean.

Shortly after arrival in England the 7th Anti-Tank Regiment was formed at Colchester, Essex, with the 104th Battery acting as the nucleus for the Regiment. The remaining officers and other ranks were selected from Canadian regiments serving in England at the time and additional personnel came from Canadian holding units near Aldershot. After a few months of training at Colchester the Regiment was sent to the Leatherhead, Horsley and Guildford areas for further training. Most of the men in the Regiment had little or no pre-war military training, however, being brought up on farms, or in lumbering, fishing and mining communities, were accustomed to the rugged existence needed to become a good soldier.

The next move was to Petworth for more field exercises and training. Members of the 7th Anti-Tank Association will never forget that fall day in September, 1942, when a lone enemy flyer sneaked across the Channel and dropped his bombs on the schoolhouse at Petworth. There was no place in the village or surrounding area where he could cause such sorrow and misery to the civilian population. I personally remember the raid as if it happened yesterday.

It was a cloudy day and I was on duty at Battery Headquarters and remember hearing a plane in the sky overhead. It was normal to hear and see our own aircraft flying around

Petworth, so I took little notice of this plane until the pilot made the run on his target. His engine became louder and louder and louder, and soon was in clear view at tree-top level and so close to my position I could see the pilot in the cockpit and the insignia and other markings on the plane. It wasn't difficult to determine he was one of the lone raiders we so often had heard about, and his line of attack was directly toward Petworth. It was only seconds later I heard the explosions from the stick of bombs dropped.

Within a short period of time the Regiment received word that the school was the target and immediate assistance was needed to dig out the dead and wounded. A detail of men was quickly gathered and sent to the site to help in the search for the children and teachers.

Besides assisting at the bombed school the 7th Anti-Tank Regiment was given the privilege to participate at the mass funeral for the thirty children and three teachers killed during this dastardly act. On Page Seven of "*A History of the 7th Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery*", it records the Petworth Tragedy and the privilege given to this Canadian Regiment by the inhabitants of Petworth for selecting the Regiment's vehicles as the means of transportation during the burial ceremony. Usually the troops were not enthusiastic when it came to cleaning trucks, but in this case the job was willingly completed and, at the burial service, the vehicles were shining like new. Reading from the Regimental history it was noted:-

"The stay at Petworth was marred somewhat by the sneak raid of one lone enemy plane which managed to skim right over the Regimental area and dropped its bombs on the school in Petworth killing 32 children and injuring many more. All ranks of the Regiment did a yeomans service in the rescue work at the site and the children were buried in a mass funeral using Regimental vehicles to transport the coffins."

The Petworth story has been told by veterans all across Canada. I have with me today a letter from a school teacher in far away Cayley, Alberta, Canada, whose young students had heard about "The Petworth Tragedy" from a former 7th Anti-Tank veteran who spoke to the school classes on Remembrance Day. The children of Cayley would like to correspond with the Petworth students of today who are interested in becoming everlasting pen pals.

My brother was also a member of the 7th Anti-Tank and in closing I would like to mention a Petworth story he tells on certain occasions:-

While attending the burial service at Petworth in 1942, he saw an elderly gentleman place a coin on one of the coffins. Later he had the opportunity to speak to this gentleman and in their conversation my brother was informed the coffin was that of his grandson. Each week it was his custom to give the young lad a small sum of money. The coin he placed on the coffin was this week's allowance.

Members of the 7th Anti-Tank Association all across Canada will always remember.

John C. Hatt
120 Fulton Avenue
Fredericton, N.B.
Canada, E3A 2B6

Former sergeant in the
104th Anti-Tank Battery.