

THE WALLET THAT PUT A FACE ON AN UNKNOWN FATHER

by Pete McMartin, Vancouver Sun, November 9, 2006

The wallet, now about 70 years old, was made in a high school craft class. It is worn with age, and the hole where the German sniper's bullet went through it is small and puckered. That bullet went through the wallet and into the heart of Sgt. Alfred Hawkins of the Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Regiment of the Canadian Army, killing him. He was 24, and died on April 4, 1945, in the very last weeks of the war. He fell in a farmyard in Leesten, Holland, and he left behind his new English bride pregnant with his only son, and his wallet. His son would be named Peter, who would grow up in Canada. His wallet would disappear from the field of battle.

Fifty years later, through a series of the most improbable coincidences, Sgt. Hawkins' wallet would be reunited with the son he never saw.



Peter Hawkins shows the wallet and ID card with his dad's picture that brought tears to his eyes in Holland. In that wallet, the son would discover not only his father, but something of himself, too - his past.

In 1995, Peter Hawkins went to the Netherlands for the 50th anniversary of its liberation by Canadian troops. He hoped to find out something about his father. "I had always heard my dad had been killed in the war," Hawkins said, "but I didn't know where, when, how or the circumstances. Over the years, I'd ask my mother, but she didn't know much - or she didn't want to say much - and she never talked about him. She'd say something like, 'Oh, he was killed in Germany,' which turned out to be wrong, but that's about all."

He went with his brother-in-law, Michael Molson, who had surprised Hawkins with two airline tickets to the Netherlands. Before they went, Hawkins, who lives in the Ocean Park neighbourhood of Surrey, found out through the Canadian War Graves Commission that his father had been buried in the Canadian War Cemetery at Holten, some 30 km from where he had been killed. Going there, they found his father's grave. It was in the very last row.

"While we were standing there," Hawkins said, "four elderly gentlemen came up to us - four Canadian vets - and they asked if I was Peter Hawkins, because they said I looked like my father, and they said, 'We fought with your dad!' and that they'd been looking for me for a long time."

They told Hawkins that just the day before, they had been to a small town nearby that had commemorated a memorial to 18 Canadians who had fought and died in a battle near there in the last days of the war, and that one of the names on the memorial was his father's.

The next day, Hawkins and his brother-in-law drove to the town and found the memorial out in the country. While they were standing there, a Dutch woman rode by on a bike and noticed them looking at the names. She asked, in broken English, their interest in the memorial. "When I told them one of the men on the memorial had been my father, she insisted - no, she made us - come with her to another village nearby called Warnsveld."

There, the woman introduced them to a minister by the name of Hendrik Dykman. Dykman had been born in the Netherlands, but after the war had immigrated to Ontario, where he became a United Church minister. Dykman had grown up near Leesten, and his home was largely destroyed in the battle that took Alfred Hawkins' life.

But it would be Hawkins' regiment that would liberate Leesten, and out of gratitude, Dykman made himself an expert in the regiment's history. It was also he, in 1994, who was instrumental in getting the memorial to the fallen Canadians erected outside the village.



Knowing this, the woman on the bike took Peter Hawkins to see him.

Dykman, who was staying with friends in Warnsveld, had come for the 50th anniversary, too. After he and Hawkins talked, Dykman asked him to wait a while, because he had someone he wanted Hawkins to meet. Dykman made a phone call. A few minutes later, an older white-haired man arrived from a nearby village. He was a retired farmer whose last name, Dykman remembered, was Tempelman-Plat. Dykman had met Tempelman-Plat in 1994, a year earlier, when the memorial to the Canadian soldiers had been erected, and Tempelman-Plat, who knew of Dykman's interest in Canadian war memorabilia, had introduced himself because he had something to show him.

It was a wallet. The wallet had a bullet hole in it. In the wallet was the ID card of a Canadian soldier by the name of Sgt. Alfred Hawkins. Tempelman-Plat told Dykman that, as a young boy in 1945, he had gone to the site of the battle of Leesten after it was over, and there, on an abandoned farmhouse kitchen table, he had found the wallet with the ID card in it. Probably, Dykman figured, the wallet had been left there after the body of Sgt. Hawkins had been removed from the battlefield. Tempelman-Plat had kept it all these years.

Was it worth keeping, Tempelman-Plat asked Dykman?

It was precious and irreplaceable, Dykman told him. Keep it, but give me a Xeroxed copy.

A year later, in 1995 when Peter Hawkins showed up in Warnsveld, Dykman knew just whom to call. When Tempelman-Plat showed up, Hawkins said, it was an emotional meeting.

"He said he had something he had been keeping for 50 years," Hawkins said, "and he gave me the wallet. I couldn't believe it - it was like something out of The Twilight Zone! Something out of the f***ing Twilight Zone! I had tears in my eyes and he had tears in his eyes."

For the first time, Hawkins saw his father's ID card - "Born, 1921; height, 5'10 1/2"; weight, 144 lbs.; hair, brown; eyes, blue; scar below left knee."

And there on the ID card was a picture of his father - a young man with neatly parted hair, his pleasant face filled with an expectant look. He had the face of an innocent, a face filled with the future.

That moment impressed upon Hawkins exactly what his father's sacrifice had meant to him - his own safety and well-being, his own freedom.

But it would also lead to much more. Through that chance meeting with Dykman, who led him to more gaps in his past, and through another set of improbable coincidences too lengthy to go into here, Hawkins would learn he had a half-brother in, of all places, Tasmania. His mother, now dead, had given birth to a child before she met his father in England, Hawkins would discover, and she had given that child up for adoption. The child was placed in an orphanage, and later sent to Tasmania after the war. (Hawkins would end up meeting his half-brother in 2003. Good guy, Hawkins said. They look nothing alike.)

As for his mother, Hawkins said, she met his father in 1942, when he arrived in Britain, and they married on Christmas Day, 1943. She was pregnant when Alfred shipped out for D-Day in June. They had been married less than six months.

After the war, Peter would find out, his mother came to Canada to meet the Hawkins family, and she eventually married Alfred Hawkins' youngest brother. It was not a good match. The uncle resented Peter Hawkins, and Peter Hawkins hated his stepfather, and he fled the family, ending up in Vancouver, putting thousands of miles between his family and his past. Here, he became a copy runner for The Vancouver Sun, and then went into the construction business.

His father's wallet brought him full circle, and here he was, the improbable product of war, death and chance.

"But the past is the past," Alfred Hawkins' son said, "and I am who I am now."