

"The Untold Story of Lance Corporal Antonio Barbaro," by Alice van Bekkum

Who was ANTONIO BARBARO?

A good looking young man he was...

Loved by his family, liked by the girls and appreciated by his friends.

Antonio George John are the names his parents gave him. He was the youngest of seven brothers and one sister. Both his parents were Italian immigrants; they first met each other in Canada and got married.

His usual name was Tony; he was a talented, promising Technical High School student. Where he shined in baseball, football and hockey. Tony liked to drive a motorcycle.

His penmanship, recently found on a letter to his brother Mike was outstanding. Tony's also talented niece, Deb inherited his draught box which she still cherishes until today.

Anthony Barbaro, a retired Mounted Policeman, is named after his uncle. He wrote to me: "Although I never had the honour of meeting Uncle Tony I want you to know that he came from a very loving family, and we honour his memory. Uncle Tony's death was a very difficult subject for my grandparents, who spoke very little English and they did not speak much of their youngest son, because it was very difficult for them. Nor did his brothers and sister. The few times that I asked my Dad, Sam Barbaro, who also served overseas in the War, about the circumstance of his brother's death he would only say that he drowned in Holland and would fill up with tears and walk away."

As a fifteen year old boy Tony played trumpet in the Giovanni Italiani a l'Estero Band. Which was organized through the Roman Catholic Church for the young externally Italians. A fellow member of the band was Salvatore Palone, who is still alive today. He met Tony in London while on leave, six weeks before he drowned. He calls Tony a really nice guy who was always smiling and happy.

Sal gave his picture of the Band to Kelly Egan, a reporter of the Ottawa Citizen, who published that photo of Tony and traced the relatives. Which finally ended up into the unveiling of this monument today.

Since Tony joined the Army in August 1942 he was attached to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Field Company of the Royal Canadian Engineers. At the end of that year he was sent to a draughtsman course in Saint John New Brunswick.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Field Company was embarked for the UK in July 1943. At different locations the soldiers were trained in building bridges. In March 1944 Tony met his brother Sam, who was a Sergeant at the Overseas Records in London. One year later Sam received the message of his brother's death...

Tony drowned close to this place of the monument, only twenty-two years old. His mother received a letter from his Padre, who said: "He generously gave the only life belts in the boat to his companions. As his Roman Catholic Padre I dare say he was one of the best of my flock. He sacrificed his life to give his companions a better chance to live."

Antonio Barbaro gave his life like many other soldiers, on behalf of our freedom.

Loved by his family in Canada and from now on remembered in The Netherlands.

Thank you speech by Win (Barbaro) Mackenzie - on behalf of the Barbaro family.

Mr. Mayor Gradisen, Canadian Defence Attache Colonel Hogan, Veterans Donald Sommerville and John Meeusen, The Village of Mook, Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls of Adalbert School.

My sister Deb, my niece Cassie and I are honoured to be here today as representatives of the Barbaro family.

There are not sufficient words to adequately express our gratitude to you, Mr. Mayor, the Committee members and the people of the Community of Mook (and Middelar) for all the thought and work that went into establishing this monument for our Uncle Tony. We are deeply humbled that our Uncle would be so remembered. It is unfortunate that his parents and siblings have all past on - we know that they would have shared these feelings.

The description declaring Antonio "to be an ICON of the soldiers and inhabitants who fell in and around this village on the Maas during WWII" is such an honour. To be declared as an icon of the inhabitants who also fell, is a recognition and symbol of the very special relationship that exists between the peoples of Canada and the Netherlands.

So many families, both Dutch and Canadian, suffered the loss of a loved one who fought in the war and, together with those Dutch non-combatants whose lives were also taken, should always be honoured and forever remembered.

We recognize that many people were involved in bringing us to this momentous day and we thank each and every one of you. Special thank you to John. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the force that brought us here, Alice van Bekkum - her undeniable curiosity, energy and just plain 'wanting to know' led her to pursue the story of our Uncle Tony. Her relentless investigative work took her to a reporter with our local newspaper in Ottawa which led to a printed story that included an interview with our youngest brother Tony, named after our Uncle and a proud retired member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Following publication of the story, her continuing pursuit of knowledge about this young soldier, our Uncle Tony, now involved us, his family, and provided us with a new perspective on a part of life that he and the people of the Netherlands endured during WWII.

Because of you, Alice, we have learned so much more about our Uncle and with each new piece of information, he became ever so real in our lives. The many e-mails from Alice with various information about our Uncle and this commemoration have been shared with many members of the Barbaro family, of which we are numerous and they too are in awe.

Our 'THANK YOU' to you Alice and to the many other persons who made all of this possible, seems so inadequate - please know our gratitude and that of the Barbaro family, is heartfelt - because of your interest in our Uncle, someone you never knew, we are here and we will be forever grateful.

Let us never forget the people of The Netherlands and Canada who sacrificed their lives in the cause of freedom. In the words of Kelly Egan, "Memory may be what you hold, but remembrance is what you do."

Thank you all.

Posted by [cassie robinson](#) at [2:45 PM](#) [2 comments](#):

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## We will never forget!

September 18th, 2014 is a date that will be remembered by us for a lifetime. It was a day filled with emotion and overwhelming feelings of gratitude.

This blog is dedicated to the memory of our Uncle Tony. We will try to share our experience with you in both words and pictures.

The day was sunny and warm and as we arrived at the ceremonial site in Mook on the shore of the river Maas where our uncle was drowned, we could not believe our eyes. Draped over the monument was a large banner picturing Antonio Barbaro. Local residents lined the street overlooking the river and the children from Adalbert Basisschool, roses in hand, were awaiting the beginning of the ceremony.

We were welcomed by many folks, including the Mayor of Mook, the Canadian Military Attache, the Master of Ceremonies, and many invited guests. Without Leen and Alice by our side to support us, I am not sure we would have ever been able to "hold it together."

The commemoration program was amazing. It was so professional, well organized and extremely thoughtful. No detail was left undone. Every speech was well rehearsed and aptly captured the history of Uncle Tony's contribution (Operation Berlin) and sacrifice during the war. Most poignantly, Alice spoke of Antonio - his personal story, of a young handsome man who loved to draw, play music and who was so loved by his family.

The monument was unveiled at the beginning of the program. It is a piece of an original 1944 Bailey Bridge - the type of bridge Uncle Tony and his comrades from the Canadian 23rd Field Engineers were repairing to support Operation Veritable. We could not take our eyes off this monument throughout the ceremony. It is a profound visual reminder of the importance of bridges in the liberation of Holland and of the engineers who built and maintained them.

Next, the unveiling of the commemorative plaque. Donald Somerville, a comrade of Uncle Tony and a member of the 23rd who is now 92 years old, Win, Cassie and I were called upon to unveil the plaque next to the monument. It was draped with the Canadian flag. When the flag was lifted the four of us were completely stunned by what we saw. The plaque is not only a work of art, skillfully crafted and detailed, it tells a beautiful story of a fine young soldier who gave his life so that his comrades would live. In that moment, we felt that Uncle Tony was with us. We were so moved and so proud of him that we were brought to tears. We have traveled many miles to be in that moment. We hardly knew our uncle, except for a few pictures and stories from our dad. But on this day, at that moment, we were overwhelmed with gratitude - both to the Dutch people who have really never forgotten him but for the chance to know him, be with him and to honour him as a family. In that moment, we wished that our entire Barbaro family could be with us to see and to feel what we now know. Words can hardly describe the experience.

Finally, we boarded the DUKW, which is an amphibian vehicle used in the war to go from land to water. We were taken down the Maas River along with a piper and Donald to lay a beautiful heart shaped wreath. Alice used vines from a neighbouring forest and had 22 roses placed on it - one for each year of Tony's age. Amid the sweet sound of the highland pipes, Win, Deb, Cassie and Donald, who saluted his comrade, placed the wreath in the Maas, at the tragic site where Tony drowned. And as the sun set, we watched the wreath float away. Our hearts were heavy but there was an unbelievable sense of peace and closure that is hard to describe.

When we could no longer see the wreath, we headed back to shore. And in the evening, coffee in hand, we reviewed the days' events with Alice and Leen. Of the commemoration to our Uncle Tony, we are humbled by the overwhelming generosity of the people of Mook and for their dedication to and respect for our Uncle Tony who they have made an icon of their village.

Alice and Leen have taken us to many 70th Anniversary of the Liberation of Holland events, including a visit to the Liberation Museum in Groesbeek. We have learned so much about Market Garden and the impact it had on the families of Holland, the allies who fought - those that sacrificed their lives and those who have lived. We are in awe of the great respect the Dutch have for the veterans of the war and have witnessed, first hand, their love and gratitude for all the sacrifices made.

We will never forget. We hope that our family members will visit Uncle Tony's grave in Groesbeek Cemetery and the monument and plaque in Mook. It is not good-bye and as Kelly Egan said in his article in the Ottawa Citizen November 10th, 2013: "Memory may be what you hold, but remembrance is what you do."