

# Canadian Battlefield Tours give 'personalized' account

**JOHN MACNEIL**  
Independent editor

Tracking military history has gone from hobby to business and passion for former Stettler resident Gary McKay, the founder of Canadian Battlefield Tours.

"It basically started off following my father's (war) service, and then it's like one of the military historians told me that once you get the bug, it never goes away," said McKay, a former Stettler mayor and auctioneer who has lived in Calgary for the past two decades, working in real estate.

For the past 15 years, he has also studied war history extensively. His visits to Normandy inspired his fledgling business, which takes participants on tours of key European battlefield sites.

"Everybody is aware of Normandy, but very few people in Canada have an understanding of the battles that took place after Normandy," said the 62-year-old McKay.

"This includes clearing the Channel Ports and the ensuing major battle for the Breskens Pocket/Scheldt Estuary. That was absolutely critical to the allies to open up the port of Antwerp.

"Some people that served in both Normandy and Breskens Pocket said that that battle was every bit as vicious as anything they faced in Normandy. And the same applies to the Battle of the Rhine in Germany."

McKay heads to Europe in December to determine the tour destinations and other travel details.

"The tours will appeal to anybody, particularly to people who have relatives that fought in (the Second World War), as my late father Charlie did," McKay said.

"Thanks to (movies) Saving Private Ryan and Band of Brothers, it can appeal to anybody, but I suspect there's going to be more of an interest from people my age that had relatives — father or uncle — that fought there."

If that relative would like to retrace the veteran's travels and visit places like the channel ports and battlefields, McKay's tours are designed to give participants a tangible account of where war took Canadians.

Beginning next spring, the tours will touch the coasts of France and Belgium and proceed into Holland and Germany.

"I'm fortunate enough that my family have Irish passports, so we can live and work over there," said McKay, whose family continues to run the Stettler Auction Mart.

"The business will be based in Calgary, and we'll be spending up to six months a year (in Europe)."

McKay promises there's even more than war history in store for those who sign up for the Canadian Battlefield Tours.

"People are going to see some of the most beautiful country they've ever seen," he said. "And because my tours are specifically designed for two to four people — maybe up to six — I or someone that's working with me will be driving

them around and showing them all these places to actually see where these battles took place. They'll see museums, they'll see Commonwealth war grave cemeteries — they're just beautiful cemeteries.

"There'll be free time, too, for them to do whatever they want to do."

As a small tour operator, McKay believes his company will be able to reach small and remote roads that bigger bus tours can't cover.

"Unlike the larger British-based tour operators, where you usually load up a bus of up to 50 people and drive, mine is going to be more personalized," he said.

"Basically, I'm following the route taken by 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions, as well as my own father's battery (and that of) a Stettler relative who served with the North Nova Scotia Highlanders. My tours are heavily influenced by the firsthand accounts of authors George Blackburn, Terry Copp and General Denis Whitaker.

"My tours build on a military historian's point of view, and then also takes into account the frontline soldier. So it'll be much more of an intimate, personal experience."

McKay said he would also be willing to accommodate larger groups on request, and he's already had interest from school representatives.

His longer-term plans include tours of First World War battlefields.

Also in the works is a tour that's expected to be of particular interest to



Charlie McKay (left), Bill Cameron, Morres Turville and Willard Stenberg served Canada together during the Second World War. McKay, Turville and Stenberg are from Stettler. McKay's son, Gary, has traced the soldiers' steps in Canadian Battlefield Tours.

Stettler and area people whose family members who fought in Dieppe, France, in the Second World War.

"Forty-one people from the area served with the Calgary Tanks who were involved in the disastrous raid on Dieppe and were taken prisoner," McKay said.

"An old friend of mine,

Vern Richardson, kept a meticulous diary of the time that he served in prison camp and the death march that they were forced on. I've spent the past three or four months reconstructing that route, based on his diary.

"And I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the great help of my dear friends, Jack

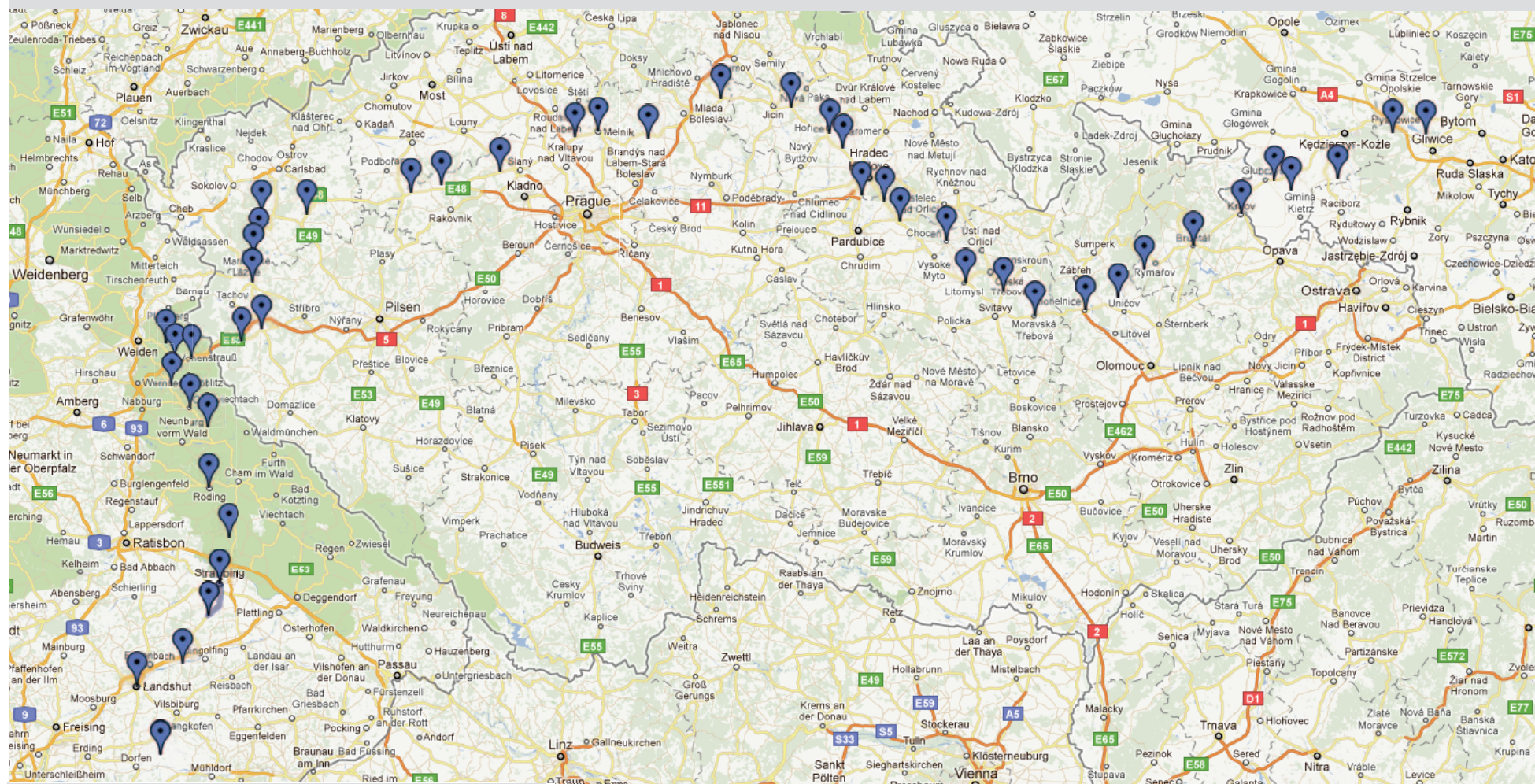
and Madeleine Chapman of Stettler, and particularly Vern Richardson's children, Bob and Kathy, for providing his diary, which made this route reconstruction possible."

Further information is available on the company's website: [www.canadianbattlefieldtours.ca](http://www.canadianbattlefieldtours.ca), or by phoning 1-800-840-3276.

## Canadian Battlefield Tours

[www.canadianbattlefieldtours.ca](http://www.canadianbattlefieldtours.ca)

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**DIEPPE PRISONERS' DEATH MARCH: Tracing the steps of Jack Chapman, Jim Horne and Vern Richardson.**

- Laband-Labędy Gliwice, Poland
- Rauden-Rudno Poland
- Alt Weiler-Błazejowice Poland
- Zinnatal-Suńków Poland
- Grobitz-Grobniki Poland
- Jagensdorf-Krnov Czech Republic
- Spilensdorf-Bruntál Czech Republic
- Bergstadt-Horní Město Czech Republic
- Trubnitz-Troubelice Czech Republic
- Mohelnice Czech Republic
- Gros Poidt-Moravská Třebová Czech Republic
- Abtsdorf-Opatov Czech Republic
- Leitomischl-Litomyšl Czech Republic
- Chotzen-Choceň Czech Republic
- Holitz-Holice Czech Republic
- Vischka-Býšť Czech Republic
- Opatowitz-Opatovice nad Labem Czech Republic
- Klemitz-Stracov-Klenice Czech Republic
- Unter Gutswasser-Dobra Voda u Hulic Czech Republic
- Aulibitz-Úlibice Czech Republic
- Wobrub-Obruby Czech Republic
- Ober Sleinow-Kropáčova Vrutice Czech Republic
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- Furwitz-Hořovičky Czech Republic
- Deutch Klima-Kojsovice Czech Republic
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- Wilkowitz-Vlkovice Czech Republic
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