



Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls,

How special it is to be here together today... in the heart of Leeuwarden, on a day that—exactly 80 years ago—was also marked by freedom. A freedom that came after years of occupation, fear, and uncertainty. And a freedom that, in our case, was brought to us by soldiers from a faraway land—Canada.

Today, 80 years later, it is more important than ever for us to keep the stories of liberation alive. I’ve tried to contribute to that effort by writing a book about the liberation of Friesland. And I am honoured to symbolically present the first copy of that book to someone very special.

In my book, I describe what happened during the liberation of Friesland. Although it only took the Canadians a week to drive out the occupiers, there was certainly heavy fighting involved.

A Canadian commander famously said during the liberation: “*Friesland liberated herself.*” This quote is still often cited today—but sometimes also taken slightly out of context.

We must not forget that the Canadians had to fight hard in several places to defeat the occupiers. At least 12 Canadian soldiers lost their lives in combat, and more than 40 were wounded. The phrase “*Friesland liberated herself*” is really a tribute to how well the Frisian people supported the Canadians in driving out the enemy. And that support wasn’t incidental—it was structural.

I’d like to take you back to one of the many events I describe in the book. One that, to me, clearly shows how Frisian civilians managed to speed up the Canadian advance.

On Sunday, April 15, 1945, around 11 a.m., two patrols of the 7th Reconnaissance Regiment (17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars), arrived at Aldskou (Oudeschouw). These reconnaissance troops, riding in their fast armoured vehicles, were far ahead of the infantry, scouting for a viable route toward Leeuwarden, which was still under German control.

To their dismay, they couldn't go any further at Aldskou. The retreating occupiers had destroyed bridges all over Friesland to slow down the Canadians. A German demolition team had done its job well here too.

At that moment, Leeuwarden had not yet been liberated. We now know that, just hours later, the city would be freed by the Royal Canadian Dragoons under special circumstances. But that morning, nothing was certain. In fact, liberating Leeuwarden was still one of the Canadian infantry's main objectives. So, for the reconnaissance troops, it was crucial to push onward toward the capital as quickly as possible.

With the bridge destroyed, their progress seemed halted. That's when the Frisian resistance stepped in. In Aldskou, Akkrum, Jirnsum, and Terherne, the destruction of the bridges hadn't come as a surprise. The resistance had secretly gathered a large stockpile of timber in the days prior, ready to assist the Canadians when the time came.

That morning, a Canadian commander found himself face-to-face with a group of Frisians who tried to explain that they could rebuild the bridge. At first, the Canadians were sceptical—especially because it was unclear where the Germans were, and a counterattack was still possible. In fact, they even considered pulling back to Joure until engineers could arrive to construct a Bailey bridge.

But once it became clear the enemy was no longer nearby, the Canadians changed course. Dozens of civilians got to work—first removing the remains of the old bridge and then constructing a temporary one. And it had to be a solid bridge too—capable of supporting the armoured vehicles of the 7th Reconnaissance Regiment.

The Canadian commander on site didn't put all his hope in the temporary bridge, though. The heavier vehicles still couldn't get across, but—once again with the help of local civilians—several motorcycles were ferried across the water. This enabled the liberation of the next village: Jirnsum.

That event was described in the diary of Anneke Gritter-De Vries from Jirnsum:

“It was black with people. They had come from all around. And then came the four motorcycles. I'll never forget those four Canadians with their serious faces. No helmets, no guns, wearing sporty uniforms and an orange ribbon—they rode straight into danger. The first was Black with a black moustache, the second had red hair. He smiled briefly at the spontaneous cheering. ‘You are welcome,’ I tried to say, and I began to cry.”

Those motorcycles continued on, aiming to reach Leeuwarden as soon as possible.

The Canadian commander still had another plan. He sent Lieutenant Arthur Frederick Harris, along with several carriers—light armoured vehicles—to Grou. After being warmly welcomed and embraced by the people of Grou, the locals arranged a number

of flatboats (prams) for the Canadians. The vehicles were loaded onto the boats and ferried to Wergea by the people of Grou—yet another example of how Frisians went out of their way to support the Canadian advance.

Wergea was liberated at 3:00 p.m., becoming the only village in Friesland to be liberated entirely by water. Both Lieutenant Harris's patrol and the earlier motorcycle patrol arrived later that afternoon in Leeuwarden. And the rest of the squadron also entered Leeuwarden later that same day, using the temporary bridge the resistance had finished that afternoon.

So thanks to the help of the Frisians, the motorcycle patrol, Lieutenant Harris's group, and the rest of the squadron all made it to Leeuwarden on April 15.

By that time, Leeuwarden was already in a state of celebration, as the Royal Canadian Dragoons had just entered the city. Although the city was now technically liberated, the arrival of reinforcements from the 7th Reconnaissance Regiment should not be underestimated. The Dragoons still felt vulnerable in Leeuwarden, as a German counterattack was still a possibility. And they weren't equipped to defend the city alone. The arrival of the 7th Reconnaissance Regiment was therefore highly significant.

I just mentioned Lieutenant Arthur Frederick Harris—and that's no coincidence. The story I've just told was my inspiration to write this book in the first place.

I wanted to find out who had liberated my hometown of Wergea. But, to my surprise, that wasn't easy to discover. Entire libraries have been written about Normandy, the Scheldt, and Arnhem. But Friesland? The liberation of our province by the Canadians has been strikingly underrepresented in historical writing. But I wanted to know. And little by little—through archives, military diaries, and contacts with Canadian historians—the pieces of the puzzle came together.

Thanks to the Royal Canadian Hussars, I was able to get in touch with the daughters of the now-deceased Lieutenant Harris. They knew very little about their father's wartime experiences. Like so many of his generation, Arthur had never spoken about what he had been through. Nor had he ever felt the need to return to the battlefields of his past.

For his family, it was a revelation to learn where he had been and which towns and villages he had helped liberate. And for me, it was a moment of connection—because as I heard their stories about who he was, I was able to complete the final piece of my own puzzle.

And that's when it hit me: if this is true for Wergea, then it's likely true for many other places in Friesland as well. That was the moment I decided to write a book about the liberation of Friesland. And now—five years later—that book is here.

Presentation of the Book: “*Canadians in Friesland. The Week of Liberation, April 12–18, 1945*” By Edwin Meinsma, 15 april 2025 – Orange Room Leeuwarden City Hall

I hope—again, even if just a little—that my book contributes to keeping alive the memory of the commitment, courage, and the sacrifice of all those Canadian soldiers and resistance fighters.

And now, the moment has come to present the book. And who better to receive it than the daughter of Lieutenant Arthur Frederick Harris: Mrs. Patricia Wensman.

