

Nijmegen Presentation Script

By Frank B. Edwards

Student orientation program
Canadian War Museum, Ottawa, 2004

The animator is portraying a casual young army private. He should talk to the students in an informal, conversational manner. He has seen horrible things but is understated about it all. The questions he asks can be posed conversationally so they don't require answers if the audience is reticent. He can simply provide the scripted answer and continue the monologue.

[Animator wearing pants and boots – the basic elements of a battle dress but all rather anonymous in character – leaves doorway and crosses to painting.]

Good morning and welcome to the Canadian War Museum. My name is _____ and I am going to talk to you for about 20 minutes before you go into the exhibit area where you're going to see and hear stories about Canadians – many of them rather like you, not a lot older, who went off to war. This museum is the place where we remember ordinary Canadians who had to do extraordinary things in wartime – and that means the soldiers fighting today in Afghanistan or 70 years ago when your great grandparents went off to fight in the Second World War or even longer ago. A lot of Canadians have gone off to war, and there are a lot of stories.

In a few minutes, you're going to head off to hear and see some of those stories in the museum galleries. Before you go, I'm going to tell you just one of those stories. While I'm getting ready, I want you all to take a close look at this painting. It's from the Second World War and it's called "Infantry, near Nijmegen" [pronounced nI-MEE-Gen]. It was painted by a Canadian artist named Alex Colville. Do you see anyone familiar in this painting? [No.]

Let's take a closer look. What are the men wearing? *[Helmets. Belts. Coats. As the elements are named, or the interpreter prompts the students, he should pull the costume elements out of a box or bag and put them on with the following comments as appropriate.]*

Let's look at this painting closely. You see they're all wearing a jerkin, just like this one *[putting on the jerkin]* – a sort of sleeveless leather coat that was supposed to keep people dry and warm in winter. It wasn't too bad actually, but it was pretty hard for them to stay warm no matter what they were wearing because they spent the whole winter living outside.

Yes, they're all wearing helmets. *[Putting on the helmet.]* Helmets couldn't stop a bullet, but they did a pretty good job protecting heads from flying objects when something blew up. And believe me, in those days there were lots of things blowing up.

[Putting on the webbing.] No do you see anyone familiar? [*“You...”*] That ‘s right. I’m in the picture. That’s me, the third guy back in the line, but it’s pretty hard to find me because Charlie Angus’s bren gun is blocking my face. That gun was so heavy that he used to carry it across his shoulders, and if I wasn’t careful I’d end up getting whacked in the face with it.

[Stands erect, facing groups, snaps to attention and gives a formal salute – it is parade-square perfect but done with irony.]

So here I am, Private Jonathan Rundle, all dressed for another day on the job, slogging through mud and water with the Royal Winnipeg Rifles.

[Stands at ease and continues.]

My friends called me Johnny. Where do you think we were? [*A field.*] Yes, but it was no ordinary field. Look at al the water. Check out the weather? [*Cold. Gloomy.*] This painting shows us in Holland in the middle of the winter, 1945. Man, it was cold.

Have you figured out yet what we were doing there? Obviously, we weren’t out for a Sunday picnic? [*Walking. Marching.*]

Right. Those guys and I were in the Canadian army during the Second World War. Canada and most of the world was at war, and our job was to fight Germany until it surrendered. We had started in France the previous summer and had spent the better part of a year fighting our way across Europe.

Where do you think we were going that day? [*Suggestions.*] Right. You can tell we’re about to go into some sort of battle by looking at our equipment. What sort of gear do we have? [*Rifles, machine guns.*]

Now take another look and tell me what kind of army equipment we didn’t have. [No tanks. No trucks.] You’re right, there are no vehicles – just guys on foot. And that’s what we were – foot soldiers. That’s what ‘infantry’ means. Believe me, we did a lot of walking that winter.

[Continues...]