

## “The Little Coat,” a Hand-Made Gift of Love



Sussie's coat.

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It was 1941, in the small town of Olds, Alberta. The fate of young 15-year-old Bob Elliott was sealed—he would lie about his age, be recruited by the Canadian Army and follow his brothers to war. By 1944, Bob was helping to defend the Allied line in Holland. The Netherlands was under German occupation, and the young Canadian was shocked by the aggression of war, and the misery, poverty, fear and suffering of the civilian population.

Sussie Cretier was a 10-year-old Dutch girl living in the Netherlands at that time. Her father, Willem, was a mechanic involved in the Dutch Resistance and had been passing information to the Allies. Unfortunately, the Germans discovered him in the winter of 1944. Sussie and her brothers didn't understand their father's role in the war, but they were old enough to recognize the fear on their mother's face as they watched the Germans hunt for their father. Her family was also hiding a young Jewish girl, which put their family in even more danger. They had to flee or risk being executed. The family fortunately escaped to Alphen, with only the clothes on their backs.

The family befriended many of the Canadian soldiers stationed there, including the 19-year-old Albertan, Bob Elliott. Sussie became enamoured with the Canadian soldiers who had come to defend her country. She bonded with the soldiers of the Fort Garry Horse regiment. They gave her a beret covered with their regimental badges, and also sewed military stripes on the sleeves of a ragged old coat. Bob, and his fellow soldiers, found her presence (along with her singing and laughter) a welcome remedy to the difficult reality they faced.

In exchange for her joyful company, the Canadians often sent Sussie home with chocolate and chewing gum—treats at the time, since her family (like most of the population) lived in poor conditions, and were hungry and cold.

For Christmas, the soldiers made a special gift for Sussie. They had a double-breasted winter coat sewn for her from a grey army blanket. The soldiers plucked buttons from their own jackets to adorn the gift. They also found her a new pair of shoes, a sweater, a scarf and trousers. She opened her gift on a cold Christmas morning, and when she saw it, she excitedly shed her old worn-out coat to proudly don this new military jacket, a symbol of the devotion and loyalty of her Canadian friends.

When the war ended, everyone returned to their respective homes, and life began anew. Bob returned to Canada, but he kept in touch with the Cretier family over the years. In 1981, he paid them a visit. Upon reuniting, Sussie and Bob fell in love and were soon married!

Bob brought Sussie home to Edmonton, where they lived. They shared their time between Canada and Holland, and the little Dutch girl became a proud Canadian citizen.

The couple later donated the coat to the Canadian War Museum. It represents a story of friendship and love that spans decades, and the enduring bond forged between Canada and the Netherlands during the Second World War. After enduring the years of occupation and persecution during the war, the little coat became a touching reminder of hope for Sussie, and of the Canadian soldiers who liberated Holland.