

**CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM**

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

**INTERVIEW CONTROL NUMBER: 31D 3 CORBETT**

**INTERVIEWEE: Colonel (Retired) Harold Lester Corbett, OMM, CD**

**INTERVIEWER: David W. Edgecombe**

**DATE OF INTERVIEW: 10 June 2003**

**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Ottawa, ON**

**TRANSCRIBED BY: P. Vellan**

**Transcription of Interview Number 31D 3 CORBETT**

**Colonel (Retired) Harold Lester Corbett, OMM, CD**

**Interviewed 10 June 2003**

**By David W. Edgecombe**

Canadian War Museum Oral History Program Interview with Colonel (Retired) Harold Lester Corbett, OMM, CD recorded on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2003 at Ottawa, Ontario. Interviewed by David W. Edgecombe. Tape one, Side one.

CORBETT: My name is Les Corbett. I was born in Pembroke, Ontario in 1944.

INTERVIEWER: Les, would you give us a brief overview of your career in the military.

CORBETT: Well, my career actually began as part of a military family. I was born into a [military] family. My father was a gunner and ... I led my early days as a 'service brat', roaming from base to base. In fact, my future wife was also a 'service brat' so we've been in the military all our lives, at least until I took my retirement in 1996. We found the nomadic lifestyle and the military lifestyle was one that we loved and enjoyed and it was certainly something that we had passed on to our son, who is also serving.

From a military employment point of view, I enrolled in CMR in 1962, having been in cadet corps at Rigby College in St. Catharines, and having served in the militia in both St. Catharines and here in Ottawa. [I] graduated from RMC in '67 and was commissioned in the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps. As a newly commissioned officer I was posted to 2 Transport Company in Petawawa and commanded a transport platoon. Served as part of the brigade there until 1970 when I moved to CFB Borden as part of the training establishment for the integration of the Logistics classification, where they brought together all the members of the previous Ordnance Corps and Pay Corps, along with our colleagues from the Air Force and the Navy. Very interesting three years, but very challenging as the old corps and the new branch had to meld.

From there, I went to Europe for my first tour, arriving in 1973. [I] served in 4 Service Battalion, first as the Transportation Staff Officer and then eventually as a battalion logistics officer, up until the point in 1976 when I was posted to Headquarters CFE. In fact, during those days, [I] worked on what was called the war establishment and concept of operations for Europe, or the acronym WECOPE which, in fact, was a plan to establish the second line and third line support organizations in order to ensure that when the brigade and the air division deployed, that the national support facilities would be in place to do that.

On completion of my tour in Europe in 1977, I came back to National Defence Headquarters for my first time. And it was, in fact, the first time I had served in the finance part of the Logistics world. When I went to Director of Financial Services as a staff officer, [I was] responsible for the foreign military training, NATO activities and programs and basically managed the team that looked after recoveries from our NATO allies for various training

activities and programs that we were supporting. It was also during that time, I became involved in the NATO Airborne early warning program, which required me to attend meetings and work with our NATO colleagues on a number of project enhancements that were being put in place at the time. I made many, many trips back to Europe in that capacity while I attended working groups and planning sessions.

In 1982, then I moved to... Sorry, ... in 1981, I went to Staff College, completion of Staff College, moved back to Petawawa as DCO of the service battalion and then subsequently was promoted. For the second time, [I went] back to the Director of Financial Services, back to foreign and military training, this time as a section head, as I had been promoted lieutenant-colonel at the time. I stayed there until 1985 when I was selected for command and went to 1 Service Battalion in Calgary where I commanded the battalion from '85 to '87. In '87 I moved to, once again -- as they said, having done well in Staff College, they decided I'd have to do it again -- so they sent me back to Staff College, this time in directing staff. I ended up being a member of the staff there until 1990 when I was promoted full colonel and back to NDHQ, this time as the Director of Financial Services responsible for not only for the financial aspects of foreign and military activities but for the operation of the Defence Department's financial systems.

That leads me to 1992 when I was selected as the Commander to actually lead the team to conduct the closure of the Canadian bases in Europe, which we'll obviously talk about in a few more minutes. Following that, I returned in '94 and working in the ADM Materiel world, was responsible for the ADM Materiel inputs to the Management Command and Control reengineering activity that was conducted to refocus the department and the Canadian Forces to try and leverage the modern management practices and to re-engineer all of the command and control processes. That led to a re-engineering of the Materiel group. I was eventually appointed as the first Controller for ADM Mat. That was the job I left in 1996 when I retired from the Canadian Forces and went to work in the private sector with a facilities management company that subsequently managed the contract for the operations of support services at Goose Bay.

INTERVIEWER: Les, I'd like to focus on the CFE closures, particularly in your time as Commander of CFE Lahr. The closure of Europe really came out of the 26 February '92 budget where they had said, "No," to the stationed task force and announced that Lahr and Baden would be closed out by 1994. Clearly they decided that a logistics, financial type was the absolute ideal guy to do this painful exercise. What briefings did you have prior to assuming command in Lahr?

CORBETT: Yes, it's very interesting actually because it was my logistics and financial background. I recall early in the fall of '91, I was on a trip to NATO. I had phased through Lahr and I met Major-General Brian Smith who was the Commander of Headquarters CFE at the time. In a discussion, he mentioned that the closure announcement had created a fair amount of planning activities. And he was realizing that what he needed was somebody who was familiar with, not only the logistics, but the potential difficulties of dealing with the Allies, and in fact dealing with the Germans. And he thought that perhaps somebody of my background could do it. Subsequently, I came back to Ottawa, indicated to my career manager that this might be a possibility, and he indicated that for an Army guy to become the Commander of Lahr was a long shot. But, as it turned out, it worked because I had two

follow on conversations with General Smith and had to provide him with some information that he thought was valuable. Eventually, in May of '92, my appointment was confirmed.

The early briefings were -- other than the two discussions with Major-General Smith, and prior to departing -- I actually had a half day session with the planning staff in the VCDS's branch, looking at primarily the financial--the costs of the operations in Europe, and the impacts of the closing of the bases. Because, in fact although there was a definite savings to be had in the future, the incremental costs of the closure was of some concern at the time.

The key thing to remember is that Headquarters CFE was doing the majority of the planning. The guidelines had been issued by NDHQ. General Smith and his staff had done the initial plan--they had identified the plan. The major operational units would be closing, and the details of how they would actually establish the processes and the controls and the mechanisms to slowly wind down all of the facilities, the materiel accounts, the equipment accounts and so on, had not actually been worked out at the time that I moved over and took over command of the base.

INTERVIEWER: What were the command and control relationships in effect at the time, vis a vis 4 Brigade, the air division, Headquarters CFE and NDHQ?

CORBETT: On arrival in 1992, the former command and control processes were still in place. Headquarters CFE still commanded the operational units. CFE was in command of the Canadian Forces and Major-General Smith as the Commander, was directing operations in Europe. When General Smith left in July of '92, Headquarters CFE continued to operate. Brigadier-General Claude Thibault became the Commander of CFE and although there was a decrease in the Headquarters CFE staff that summer, they retained the necessary people to continue with the planning and to continue to direct the activities of the operational units.

It had been decided that the two units would be declared non-operational -- that is, the two formations I should say, 1 Canadian Air Division and 4 CMBG -- would be declared non-operational in the fall of 1992. And that in fact happened, I believe, for the brigade in October and for the Air Division in mid to late November. I forget the exact dates. The formations though, maintained their contacts with the Allied organizations that they were affiliated with, and continued to provide sort of operational plans coordination until about the end of '92 when the operational staff in NDHQ picked up that challenge. ...

At the base level, of course, Lahr continued to be a base of Canadian Forces Europe until Canadian Forces Europe closed out in the summer of '93. It was at that time that it was decided that Lahr would become a unit of ADM Mat and Baden, on closure of the base. And the Air Division, was designated to become a detachment of Lahr, which, in fact, happened in August of '93. So, it was a natural progression. It worked. I've often said that one of the ... major reasons for success in the closure was that we managed to close our Command Headquarters first. That allowed us to, in fact, repatriate a lot of the, in fact all, virtually all of the responsibilities for coordination with NATO, with the Allied formations and so on. So, it really left me, as the Commander of Lahr with a single task and that is the task of closing down the facilities and, in fact, repatriating what amounted to a community of about sixteen thousand dependents, when you count both Lahr and the Baden detachment, and all of the related support activities and facilities. So...

INTERVIEWER: ... At the time, what were the relations with Allied and NATO commands and what was their attitude as you viewed it ... towards Ottawa's position?

CORBETT: It was very clear that all of the Allies were facing the same kind of political situations. In fact, in many ways what we were doing in Lahr, although it had a very significant effect on ourselves. Because with the Air Division and the Brigade, it represented basically twenty five percent of our operational capabilities. In the case of the Americans, the British and in fact the Germans, they were closing down organizations that represented four to five, six times the challenge in terms of number of personnel, facilities and the bases that supported them. So they all very clearly understood that these were political decisions and from a military professional point of view, they respected the fact that we were getting on with doing the job in the professional manner that we were because they were faced with exactly the same challenges.

It was one of the pleasant things, if I can say this about that period of time, was the very, very positive way that our Allies treated us and the ceremonies and the farewells that they hosted to recognize the contribution that the Canadians had made there in the forty years that we had been in Baden and the almost thirty years that we'd been in Lahr. So, it was a very challenging and interesting time. But all of the Allies and all of the military organizations fully recognized the reasons why we were in fact withdrawing.

INTERVIEWER: What sort of difficulties did, having to support units in Yugoslavia in terms of the national support element, affect your closeout activities?

CORBETT: It was an ongoing requirement through that first year of '92. Of course, Lahr had been the staging base for the initial deployments into Kosovo, and was the main support activity for the deployed forces. It provided actually a bit of an opportunity, because we had, as a result of the closure and the draw down of the Brigade throughout '93, there was a fair amount of furnishings and equipment and items that were needed to establish the camps that were being established in the former Yugoslavia. So, I can remember on many occasions, calls from the CQs and from the log staffs on the contingents looking for another twenty-five or thirty bedroom sets for the quarters, lockers. A lot of the NPF activities that had been going on, on the base were able to provide things that the deployed troops could use. So, it worked out over that fall and early spring of '92-'93 that we were able to continue that support, and in fact, augment it to a certain extent.

The NDHQ plan, of course, had been that we would transition all of those ongoing support activities back to Canadian based units, primarily the Canadian support group in Montreal, [and] the movements support unit as well. And the depot systems picked up where we, in fact, left off and the transition was, although somewhat complicated, worked fairly well. We were able to establish the drawdowns on our accounts for the items that were coming out of Yugoslavia. They still maintained first call on any stocks in Lahr or Baden. And then eventually as our stocks dwindled down, the supply line simply switched over to support through Italy to a small support facility that was established in Italy. We basically slowly slipped out of the chain--the channel of communications.

INTERVIEWER: You were also supporting the troops that we had in the Gulf at that time?

CORBETT: That's correct, but that had become a fairly small demand. ... A lot of the support was acquired locally. It was primarily military equipment, materiel, uniforms, parts for that type of stuff, for the military unique stuff, that was being used. There wasn't a high demand for camp storage and facilities support at that time. So, that transition, I think was in fact done fairly early. I think it was late October, early November of '92 when we started to pass off ... the responsibility for that chain of command.

INTERVIEWER: A number of Canadians over the years had retired and settled in Lahr/Baden area and, of course, the Germans made their livelihood off our bases. What were the local attitudes from both groups when the closure was announced?

CORBETT: It certainly was probably the most difficult time that Lahr had experienced since the war. Baden had a different environment. Baden, of course, is a large, much more urban area. There's a far more significant German population in the area. It has a large industrial capability. Lahr, on the other hand, [is] very much a rural area supporting the local farming and wine communities. The Canadian Forces contribution to the City of Lahr represented between twenty-eight and thirty percent of the overall economy. I've often, in the years since, had the opportunity to talk to some of our friends and former administrators, and it has not surprised me that the difficulties that they faced upon our departure were far more significant than, in fact, ours.

The loss of the economic boom that the Canadians represented was severely compounded, because as a result of clearing the PMQs and the large numbers of accommodation, the German government had identified that there was not a local demand. And the flow of immigrants, former German nationals who ... were in the East of Germany and the former Soviet Bloc, ... many of them wanted to return to Germany and Lahr was identified as a relocation area. And in fact, a lot of the housing areas that the Canadians had occupied were very, very quickly taken over by the relocation organizations and it wasn't long before there were about twenty thousand immigrants who had been relocated into Lahr and they were a completely different breed.

Many of them had no skills, no training. They had no income. A large number of them--their German connections were three or four generations past and many of them only had a rudimentary ability to speak German. So it had a very, very significant social and economic impact on the local area. They've done reasonably well, though, in recent years. I've kept in touch, and a lot of the facilities in the airfield have now been taken up by small businesses and entrepreneurs and the city is beginning to regenerate. But, this is almost ten years later.

INTERVIEWER: What local agencies were involved in the closure?

CORBETT: ... There was a very, very broad range of local agencies, from the various German administration organizations in that the way the Germans handled the transition, particularly of the facilities. The facilities belonged to Germany and were allocated to the German Ministry of Defence. When it was identified that those facilities were no longer required for German defence purposes, the federal government did a survey and found that there were no other government agencies, even at the state level, that were particularly interested. And therefore, through their processes, the facilities were in fact handed down to the municipalities.

Certainly at the outset, because of the large number of facilities that were being turned over by the Americans and the British and even the Germans themselves, there were no federal or state programs to provide funding or assistance to the municipalities. These facilities were simply passed down and allocated to them and it was theirs to manage or to try and sell or whatever they could do with it. So those organizations played a key role in the transition and the planning and the coordination of the facilities handovers.

One of the things that I will mention at this point is that Canada, unlike our American and British friends, took a very professional and, I think, a very proper approach in that we made the commitment very early on that we would return all of the facilities in first class usable condition. We maintained all of the infrastructure, all of the supporting engineering works in a first class standard. When we handed them over to the German administrative organizations, all of the PMQs had been inspected. They all were in move-in condition, at least from a Canadian point of view. And that was ... significantly different than in fact was the case in some of the American and British garrisons, where once the announcements were made, there was very little maintenance done. Simple things such as mowing the grass or keeping the grounds clean and tidy were left. So it was an advantage, and it was felt that it was the least we could do in terms of leaving the facilities in the best possible condition when we actually did leave.

A number of other organizations...obviously the city. I can't say too much about how well the city managed the closure. Despite the fact that they knew there was going to be very devastating social and economic consequences, they maintained a very positive and very supportive attitude to all of the Canadians, to ourselves as being in the command structure, as well as to all of the soldiers and their families. They opened their hearts in a lot of ways, because it was their feeling that we had become part of their family and that we had become part of the overall community to the extent that they wanted to make sure that our departure, ... although sad, was recognized as an occasion that they wanted to celebrate and recognize.

So, ... the municipal organizations were very positive, continuing support from social clubs. The German/Canadian Friendship Club which was a large organization at one time, had virtually hundreds, seven, eight hundred members, continued to operate. ... In fact, to this day they operate out of a facility that the Lord Mayor at the time, Werner Dietz, fought long and hard with the German facilities administration to create a facility. And the town post office was turned into what was called Canada House. It continues to operate. It's a center for Canadian newspapers, Canadian literature, videotapes. The Canadian Square Dancing Club and its continuation operates there as does the German/Canadian Friendship Club. So, there are a lot of continuing efforts. At the time we left, there were about two hundred and fifty retired Canadian Forces individuals and their families who had established their roots there, and they in fact were the nucleus of the continuation of the Royal Canadian Legion, which still has a small operation there. So, a broad range of organizations and entities that in fact supported us in those last years.

INTERVIEWER: Let's shift the discussion a little bit to some of the disposal activities. Really, right up to the closure announcement, we had finally been fulfilling our obligations to bring our munitions holdings up to the NATO requirement for thirty days and had been renting facilities all over the place to put this stuff and shipping it.

CORBETT: And shipping it.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do with it?

CORBETT: Well, in fact, the majority of it was in fact shipped home. We had, as you say, quite a significant stockpile. We did manage to sell through NATO exchange agreements, some commodities to our British and American colleagues who were not looking for additional munitions but in fact who had some munitions that they needed to stockpile for their strategic programs. But, most of the munitions were in fact packed up, containerized and shipped back.

That was in fact over the two years. I haven't actually gone back and researched the numbers, but over two years, I believe there were something in the neighbourhood of sixty thousand container loads of materiel, some six hundred and fifty trains, and in the neighbourhood of about a hundred and thirty shiploads of materiel that were, in fact, repatriated. And that doesn't count the almost, at some stages, almost daily Herc lifts out of our own airfield over the period that it operated. Once again, if you sort of try and visualize an Air Division, a Brigade trying to pack itself up and move itself back, particularly in an environment that we were in, where although they had all of their operational scales and they were prepared to deploy on an operational scale, they had over the years, acquired some significant amounts of unit property and additional furnishings and materiel which became part of their holdings. All of those in fact were also shipped back as part of the redeployment. It was phased. Both the Air Division and the Brigade were responsible for their internal planning. The staffs had identified what the through-put capability was for the equipment preparation line which we had.

All the equipment that was being shipped back had to be fully inspected for ... The heavy equipment obviously by sea transport had to be prepared for shipping. So there was a process that all of them went through. All of the ancillary equipment went through a full servicing and conditioning, so that we knew that everything that was coming back was in fact in fully serviceable condition.

And as they started to move the families back, we actually identified that one of the potential bottlenecks was ending up with significant numbers of members and their families to be moving back, with a fairly limited furniture and effects movement capability. So one of the major planning factors was the number of families per day that the local movers could in fact handle as we went through the process. And so, I actually forget, but I think it worked out to something in the neighbourhood of thirty-six or forty families a day were able to move. And we kept it at that because although the industry could have met a much bigger peak, it was within the planning cycle; it was reasonable to be able to work with those numbers of families moving back.

INTERVIEWER: Did we dispose of the married quarters furnished, or did that stuff come home?

CORBETT: Well, in fact, very interesting story. The married quarters had obviously as you say, were fully furnished. Let me...I'll speak first about those people living on the economy because it leads to a decision that was quite significant. A large number of people had been living on the economy. Traditionally what happened was, a serviceman moving over to Europe for whom there was no married quarter would find a house on the economy, often one

that was actually occupied by a Canadian who was repatriating that year and so, ... the incoming individual would take over that apartment or accommodation. And, in most cases, he would purchase from the outgoing Canadian the furniture that ... the individual had purchased himself.

It was quickly recognized that with no new people coming in, the roughly twenty-two, twenty-three hundred people living on the economy, had a problem. And this was identified and we approached NDHQ. In fact, a fairly significant increase in the rate allowances for return shipments was approved for people living on the economy. That then led to the obvious question, "Well, what about the people in married quarters?" And it was agreed that people in married quarters could, if they needed it, have the additional weight entitlement. Therefore, it became their option that once the Department of Supply and Services disposal team had conditioned and put value on the furniture in the married quarters, the incumbents could in fact purchase it at the specified price and if they wanted to, then they could repatriate it. So there were a fair number of young families who had established themselves over there, who didn't have a lot of furniture back here in Canada, who purchased their furniture up to their weight entitlement or if over their weight entitlement ... they paid the excess. They shipped back the furniture.

The remaining furniture, which I might add was probably about eighty percent of it because there wasn't a significant amount of the furniture that was actually brought back, as far as I know. But the remaining furniture was actually, once again conditioned and priced by the disposal team -- DSS disposal team -- and we conducted for about five and a half months, from November through May, November of '93 to May of '94, what was called the largest flea market in southern Germany. We had a very slick process where PMQs were being cleared out at the rate of forty a week. All these units of furniture were being brought down to the airfield and along with all of the furnishings from the quarters, the office furnishings, the mess hall furnishings -- and this included complete dishes, pots and pans, etc. -- were all cycled down and put on display. And each Thursday morning, I believe it was, we would open the gates and hundreds of locals would flow in and we ran the flea market. And in fact over the period of that five months, we disposed of virtually all of the furnishings and generated a return to the Canadian government which I believe it was in the neighbourhood of eight to ten million marks.

INTERVIEWER: When we left France in 1964, the French government insisted that any furnishings that were disposed of locally on the economy would ... be subject to customs duty as if they had just come into the country. As a result, significant amounts of PMQ furnishings burnt on the airfield at Grostenquin, among others. None of that? The Germans didn't play that game?

CORBETT: Not at all. We had discussions. There were German custom people who worked in concert with our disposal people but all of the lower value items, and I don't remember what the dollar value was -- I would suggest it was probably in the orderhood of single items of five thousand marks or less -- were disposed of directly ... into the economy. All of the higher value items -- and this would include all our European powered vehicles, a number of unique equipment sets, power sets, generator sets, etc., that were uniquely European which were disposed of -- were disposed of through the tender process. And in the tender process, for the closure and for prior activities, all of those materials were in fact

categorized as to whether they had been locally purchased and where they had been brought in from and the customs and duties were, in fact, levied where appropriate.

But we had nothing but full cooperation from the German customs people. In fact, it was fairly critical because our own customs people had established a fairly large closure team there as well, and one of the things that we had a very strict control on was to avoid any of the Canadian personnel trying to take advantage of our customs breaks. And, in fact, we did have a few instances where people in their last months were purchasing duty-free goods on the economy and then trying to take advantage of the closure, and selling them without taking account of the customs and duty requirements. The...

INTERVIEWER: Sorry...

CORBETT: Sorry. No. I was just going to say, the other aspects of disposal that are certainly interesting to look at, and that is the question of non-public funds materiel. That, once again, was something that in my past experience, or my prior experience, I had seen a number of bases and stations closed. I'd seen the old Corps facilities closed and there didn't seem to be a regularized process for the handling of non-public goods and furnishings. However, the Director of Non-Public Funds had a very good team and they, in fact, had had some recent experience with some other closures. They put in place a full review prior to the closure of all the NPF assets. It actually was quite an undertaking. Although there had been NPF inventories, they had not been valued for many years and they had not been perhaps kept as accurate as they should have been. The NPF teams came over and conducted a complete inventory.

Then we convened a disposal board that included representatives from all of the Commands across the Canadian Forces. The board identified the process by which NPF items would be handled. In February of '94, we had representatives from every base and station in Canada come over for a period of about three weeks. And we virtually went through a prioritization and distribution exercise that identified the needs of every base and station and identified who would get the assets that were in Lahr. The assets in Lahr at the time represented a very significant part of the overall NPF asset inventory of the Canadian Forces. I'm very pleased to say that all of that materiel, virtually all of it came back and was re-distributed for use by other units across the system.

INTERVIEWER: This was the common NPF materiel as opposed to the regimental assets?

CORBETT: That's correct. Sorry. The unit memorabilia and regimental assets were, in fact, redistributed under the direction of the units themselves. As you know, most of the units were actually disbanded although in many cases, there were regimental organizations. The numbers in the order of battle were decreased and we ended up with much smaller organizations, but all of the unit NPF was repatriated to their regimental home stations or as they directed it. I guess in total there were about four and a half to five million dollars worth of assets, non-public fund assets that were re-distributed.

Probably the most significant NPF asset though that has left a legacy is that the CANEX operation in Europe ... [which] was certainly by far the biggest in the Canadian Forces. And in conducting the closure, as is the case in many retail operations, as you sell your final stock and you no longer replace it, the value of the NPF accounts in Lahr, for both Lahr and Baden,

was growing. We ended up, in fact, repatriating about sixty million Marks of NPF funds which were put back into, under the management of the NPF board of directors and in fact, I understand continue to be managed as a bit of a reserve and are used for the support of NPF projects to this very day. It was quite a loss to the NPF system when the CANEX in Europe closed. However, I understand that there is a very successful operation by CANEX in Geilenkirchen in support of the NATO Airborne Early Warning training base there. And although it doesn't have nearly the cash flow that the original CANEX in Europe did, it still contributes significantly on an annual basis, to the overall NPF funds available.

INTERVIEWER: Could we go back a little bit and talk about facilities? There was some significant environmental cleanup and environmental problems that you had to face. How did you deal with those?

CORBETT: ... There had been a number of environmental surveys conducted on the bases, both in Baden and Lahr over the years, as recently (I shouldn't say recently)... As we were looking at the closure, the most recent ones had been done in 1988-89 and had been done under contract with a German firm, which was accredited to the German government. That survey as we were getting into the final year of closure, into late '93 (yes, I guess it was late '93), was tested by a follow on survey and in fact it was discovered that there were, or had been some further expansion of ... some of the environmental problems. So what we ... did is we created an environmental review team. We had both German and Canadian representatives on it and they re-did the total baseline survey which was for the most part completed by the time we closed the base itself in '94. Although ... that survey, along with some of the activities that Defence Construction Limited had instituted with respect to the facility's cataloguing and tracking the facility's conditions and values for--residual value considerations--the environmental review was actually not completed, I believe, until the late fall of '94. That review has led to a statement of claim by the German government and we are currently, I think still in the same situation, that the... It will be a government-to-government decision that, depending on the use the land actually is designated for, may or may not become an issue in the future.

[Canadian War Museum Oral History Program Interview with Colonel H.L. Corbett, recorded in Ottawa on June 10, 2003. End of Tape 1, Side 1]

Canadian War Museum Oral History Program Interview with Colonel H.L. Corbett. Tape 1, Side 2.

CORBETT: Okay, go ahead.

INTERVIEWER: Les, as I understand it, the facilities disposal area was left to Defence Construction Canada largely. What was your role in that process?

CORBETT: Yes, you're absolutely right there. The engineering organization that had been in Europe was structured and organized to manage and maintain the facilities that had been allocated to us over the years. When it came to closure and we were faced with trying to identify what the actual value of any Canadian improvements to the facilities and establish, if

you will, the basis for potential future claims, we recognized that we did not have available to us a ready source of information. As well, in the sort of allocation of responsibilities, NDHQ maintained the responsibility for the overall conditioning and return of the facilities and structures to the German administration.

It was agreed that Defense Construction Limited would establish a team that would conduct a complete review of all of the engineering documentation and in concert with all of the condition surveys, would identify where we had in fact put significant capital improvements into any of the plant or the infrastructure. It was a very, very significant effort. The team was established in Lahr. Well, actually there had been a DCL representative in Lahr all along. It was expanded to include a number of additional people.

They'd conducted a complete review of all of the engineering documentation, which was a very, very significant undertaking. I remember visiting them on a number of occasions and the building that they had had a large storage area in the basement and I actually looked upon it as one of the biggest archives of documentation that we had. However, they conducted the review, created a very useful database and that database formed the underlying valued negotiator discussions that took place as each of the facilities was surveyed by the German authorities. And, in fact, we handed them back to them with each building being annotated as to ... as I say, value added that Canada had put into them.

The actual...the whole plan for the facilities return was a plan in itself. Once we had identified the sequence of closures for the units, the Headquarters, we identified what the flow would be from a PMQ point of view, we actually created a mini-withdrawal activity that saw us starting with the outlying areas. As we were able to, we would move people or units and remaining elements onto the airfield and, slowly but surely, we were able to simply close in onto ourselves as the final days arrived. That allowed us to develop a fairly extensive schedule for, as I say, the conditioning and handover and it just simply was, as we decreased in size, our footprint became smaller and smaller.

I often thought about ... early on my arrival in Lahr, there were many, many people who were sort of the mind that they ... wanted to be the last there, of course, because everybody wanted to continue to enjoy living in Europe. But the image that a lot of these people had was that, on their last day as the last person, they'd check into CANEX, picks up their duty free purchases, go over to the AMU and fly out on the last flight. And it became fairly obvious early on that we were going to end up with a nucleus of activity centered around the airfield in the final days. So as you look at the facilities closure, we actually were able to track, as the units, as the Brigade and the Air Division left, ... that decreased significantly the overall population.

And when the airfield closed on the first of October in 1993, that was probably the most significant event in the closure activity, because people finally realized that there would be no more flights; that from here on, all of the support, all of the flow air support and flow would be done through the commercial facilities at Frankfurt and Stuttgart. But we closed out; I mean in the summer of '93 when Headquarters CFE closed, we were able to close down the karserne for the most part. We actually kept the hospital open which was another interesting story in itself, which I'll return to in a minute.

But we closed the karserne, which involved closing the main CANEX and we created a small CANEX at the airfield, which carried the full range of goods. But of course it was now in the final year. We were only...we were about seven hundred people in the closure organization, and, of course, that was dropping month by month by month. So the facility closure plan tracked completely with the decrease in personnel. And one of the commitments that I made when I arrived there was that we would maintain full functionality for all of the support services, for all of the families up 'til the very, very last minute.

And so it meant we went from ... three chapels to two chapels to one chapel. We went from the large CANEXs with the convenience stores to a small ... retail outlet on the airfield. When we closed the Black Forest Officers' Mess in the summer of '93, we moved into a combined building, a combined mess facility on the airfield. We took the warrant officers' and sergeants' mess and actually divided it into two ... two pieces: the officers on one side, the warrant officers and sergeants on the other. [They] shared a bar through a little bit of minor construction. But we were able to operate that facility up until I think it was late March in '94 when we finally ended up. By the early April '94, most of the retail, messes and institutes, activities were in fact closing out. So the facilities plan tracked with the diminution of the overall population base and that all just sort of allowed us to fade quietly away into the sunset.

I mentioned the hospital and I just wanted to return to that because in 19...I believe it was 1989, the funds were finally available and the clearances received from the German government to build a new hospital because the hospital facility that had been in Lahr and that had served us so well, had become very problematic. The approval for the hospital was quick in coming.

However, it became a very difficult project because the land on which it was being build had been an old tannery. In preparing for the foundation, they identified that there had been a very significant environmental pollution incident over the years. I guess it was more than an incident. It was an accumulation. The construction of the hospital was in fact delayed for about two years while that was resolved. And finally construction started in ... early '91, almost concurrent with the announcement that we would be pulling out. The construction though was finished in the summer ... of '92 and in fact although there was some discussion as to whether or not we should actually occupy it, the medical staffs and in fact, at that time, the Commander said that we had built it to serve the Canadians and that if it was there and the Canadians were there, then we would in fact use it.

INTERVIEWER: Just as an interjection...I was Director General Quartering of the day and we did go through some significant discussions with the Surgeon General, with Major-General Smith, with Colonel Gowdy who was the Senior Medical Officer...

CORBETT: Senior Medical Officer, right.

INTERVIEWER: Gowdy, almost on his knees, pleading that the old facility had walls falling in and even if we only occupied for a year, they had to go somewhere or they couldn't run anything better than a medical inspection room. So, reluctantly, because we thought we might get more money for it if we didn't open...

CORBETT: Right.

INTERVIEWER: We allowed it to open and in the end, I'm told, that although we got fewer Marks for it than it cost us, the Canadian dollar had strengthened and so [in] effect we made money...

CORBETT: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: ...on the residual value exercise.

CORBETT: On the residual value. In fact, we did, and I think ...that one of the advantages we had that because it was actually operating, albeit on a limited scale as a medical facility, when we were looking to find a future buyer, at least when the potential buyers came, there was a medical activity going on. We were using it. It was fully outfitted. It had been proven and it has...as you said, it has since been turned over to a German to become a German heart institute and is one of, I understand, one of the three most successful heart institutes now in Germany. And there was, yes, a very solid residual value claim, which resulted in a net return to Canada.

INTERVIEWER: Can I ask a question about this residual value exercise? Because as I recall, we were to establish residual value which the Germans would agree to and that would be used, not in the near term at least, to return cash to Canada, but to be used to offset any environmental impacts, any costs that were being left behind when Canada came home.

CORBETT: There are, in fact, two reasons for the residual value. The potential for a residual value claim as an offset to the environment was certainly discussed and I believe it would certainly be a matter of negotiation were it agreed between the two governments to pursue negotiations. The other aspect of residual value was that if at any time because of this cascading of responsibility that I mentioned earlier, the municipalities who end up becoming the de facto owner, if in fact there were to be commercial buyers or commercial interests generated in any of these facilities that in the negotiations to establish a commercial price; the Canadian residual value claim could be considered and there might in fact be some follow on revenue generated that would accrue to Canada.

In Baden, I believe that there had been some follow on claims and there had been some payments. I don't believe that's the same case in Lahr, because the demand just has not been there. In fact, although most of the facilities on the airfield are occupied, they are still—the properties are still under the ownership and control of the municipality, and in many cases, I understand, the occupants are paying minimal rent. Their responsibility is more to maintain and keep the buildings in good condition. So the potential for generating some residual value as a result of commercial sales is probably quite limited.

INTERVIEWER: All that said, ten years after the fact that there was no money accrued to Canada?

CORBETT: Not that I'm aware of at this time.

INTERVIEWER: And no liability?

CORBETT: And no liability. There has been, as I understand it, there has been no final agreement on the environmental issue. As I said that would be a government-to-government discussion. Although I suspect like many other instances of similar nature, it will probably just remain as a potential claim on the books and perhaps never [be] followed up.

INTERVIEWER: ...Again, as I recall the fuel plume that was a real major problem on Lahr...

CORBETT: On Lahr...

INTERVIEWER: ... has proven to be French aviation 'av gas' which we never used and the diesel plume at the kaserne could be traced back to Wehrmacht days .

CORBETT: Days. Right. Yes. And it's quite amazing. We see how the technology allows us to track that. As I understand the challenge that will be in the actual negotiation to try and identify what, if any incremental requirements or incremental, I believe, environmental issues were generated by the units, the Canadian units, when they were resident in some of those facilities. So, it would be a very difficult issue to resolve, I'm sure.

INTERVIEWER: When we were moving south from the Soest area in the '70s...

CORBETT: In '67?

INTERVIEWER: early '70's?

CORBETT: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: ...the Brigade and I guess the Forces in Europe were supported by the financial advisor of the Canadian Defence Liaison Staff, London. Did you have anybody like that working as your intermediary with the federal German government?

CORBETT: Yes. We did. In fact we were supported by the Canadian Embassy and the Financial Advisor in Bonn. They provided the overall policy direction, if you will, from a government point of view and were the convening authority for most of the meetings related to the major issues of facilities and environment and customs and all of those issues that there was a link ... to any level of government actually, within Germany. So in working many of those cases we actually had one of the Financial Advisor reps, Henry Korn, who I think over the last year, year and a half, probably spent at least half of his time working with the staff in Lahr and ensuring that that coordination was done and that all of the appropriate legislative and regulative conditions were met. Because obviously it was a fairly significant requirement to make sure that as we completed the detailed work at the, if you will, ...tactical level to make sure that things were handed over, there had to be oversight on the more strategic and legal level of issues. So, that was coordinated by Bonn. They also actually had a very, very busy time as a result of a significant increase in the number of German nationals who had long, long time connections with Canada. For the last eighteen months, Bonn had to augment their immigration staff.

As a small story, shortly after my arrival, I was asked at a reception by Lord Mayor Dietz if I would join him and meet a couple and he indicated that it was because they wanted to

immigrate to Canada. And prior to even meeting the couple, I said, “Well, actually, I have nothing to do with those kinds of issues.” He said, “No, I think you’ll be very interested in meeting this couple.” So, I went and met this couple, an elderly couple, perhaps in their seventies. And they had had five daughters and all five daughters had married Canadian servicemen. And over the years their daughters and their families had been posted back and forth, and they’d had a long term, sort of opportunity to have at least some of the grandchildren in the area. But with the closure of Europe, their entire next generation was now going to be in Canada. And in fact, they did approach Bonn and they did get immigrant status, and they are, far as I know, still living just south of Alliston. That’s an indication of sort of the kind of thing that the Bonn office was called upon, quite regularly, to intercede and provide service and support to us.

INTERVIEWER: So far you’ve described what seems to be a seamlessly smooth operation. There must have been some problems. What were they?

CORBETT: Well, it’s very interesting because in preparing for this, I thought about problems and I thought about, you know, what were the kinds of things that caused us, you know, the headaches. And I have to say that there were very, very few. I would say ... there are three reasons for that.

The first one very clearly was a lot of your problems in these kinds of activities are generated by people. One of the things that was very clear to me and to my staff as we were preparing for the, particularly the final year, was that we needed to be sure that we weren’t going to have people remaining who had administrative, medical, personal issues that might cause some difficulties. As well, obviously we were going from, with Baden/Lahr Headquarters CFE representing at that time about twenty-two hundred support staff, we were going down to a closure organization of just under seven hundred. And I had no lack of volunteers to stay.

So, we put together a very formal screening process. We identified the trades and ranks and structures and then we virtually had the Command structure review all of the people in their organizations. So that when we actually came to the final year, we knew that the people that were staying were those that could manage as the facilities closed, as all of the services started to be packed up, that they were not likely to be causing us some difficulties. And I have to say, there were certainly people who had minor disciplinary records and so on, and for the most part they were screened out. So the people issues, I think, were managed very well by that screening process and by having a team that was committed and you know, very, very professional in their closure, in their commitment to closure.

The other thing that I think contributed very, very significantly to it was, when we closed down Headquarters CFE in Lahr, Baden became a detachment of Lahr, and Lahr became a unit of ADM Mat. In the initial plan, it was envisaged that ADM Mat who at the time was Major-General Bob Fischer, would in fact be the Commander of the Command. And it became very, very, very quickly obvious to me as I was doing the final finding before Headquarters CFE closed, that there were a myriad of things that the Commander of CFE had to have the authority to do. And we needed to have a structure whereby those things that needed to be done with that requisite level of authority could be handled as efficiently as possible.

In a discussion with General Fischer in late May of '93, he agreed that the best way, from his point of view, was to assign me the powers of the Commander of the Command. I was given the powers of the Commander of the Command which allowed me to look after all of the write-offs, all the administrative issues, and deal with most of the disciplinary issues that would have to be dealt with. And as it turned out, in that final year, there were only three instances that I even had to call General Fischer for guidance or assistance, and those three were instances related to personnel matters ... that to be handled, that could have or might have involved me because of the close contact that I had with the closure team. Despite the fact having the powers of a Commander, I would have been...I probably would not have been in a position to deal with the incidents if they had been elevated to that level. So, the clear delegation of that authority was very, very useful.

And, I think finally, having the team that I had. I kept a very, very capable team and they managed their functional areas and their command areas extremely well.

So that's to say why we had very, very few problems. If I were to look at problems in specific... what types of problems did we have? I think that one of the problems I mentioned earlier. We did have some instances where individuals tried to take advantage of their tax-free status. We had some very interesting and entrepreneurial young fellows, young soldiers, who had identified the fact that the old cars that were quite popular and had been around the base for many, many years, were going to go wanting for owners. So they were making, as it turned out, purchases of these old cars. And lo and behold, after three or four or five months, the cars were evidently being reported as stolen and disappearing. And we subsequently found that there was a small ... car park of ex-Canadian cars that was building up at the end of one of the entranceways to the Rhine River, as these fellows were dumping the cars and claiming against the various insurance companies that their cars had been stolen.

I had some minor issues with some local employees. The local employee situation... Actually, it's worth a couple of minutes. All of the ... German employees on the base, who were employed under the German federal legislation, although they were employees of the Government of Canada, they were members of the ... German federal union structure and they were managed by that structure. So as we came to do the closure, we were obligated under the union contracts to deal with their severance and all their ongoing pension, etc. And that was another issue in fact that Bonn provided the guidance and the support for.

There were, however, a number of locally engaged employees, many of whom who'd been there for twenty or twenty-five years. Some of them--in fact, John Scott who always bragged about...he was an ex-Brit -- he ... had ID card number 1. When they opened Lahr in the late '60s, because he happened to be the administrative officer that was first hired and one of his first duties was to issue ID cards. So John and many of them had been there for years.

We did had some issues with locally engaged employees whose contracts were with the Canadian government, some of them with CANEX, NPF. And quite honestly the terms and conditions of the contracts had not been...had never envisaged a closure scenario, had created a... and had not been updated over the period of time. So we ended up with some legal activities and actually some fairly significant claims by some of these people. So that was one of the lessons that we think we learned and that was certainly documented; that the handling of the civilian employees, particularly those that were not covered by the national

systems. And as far as I know, although several of them went on for quite a few years... I recall being asked to provide information as recently as 1998-99; I think most of those have now been resolved. So there were a few local labour issues.

But other than that, it was actually as seamless and as problem free as it seems. In fact, Admiral Anderson -- who at the time was the Canadian Milrep at NATO Headquarters, although I was designated as the senior Canadian for the closure activities of course, when it came to the major events and so on -- Admiral Anderson in many cases represented Canada. So we saw him quite often. Several years later, he made a comment to me that probably one of the reasons that the closure of Europe has been so easily and so quickly forgotten was because it was run without any major problems, any major incidents. It was just, you know, having, giving the task and put the right people in place. We packed it all up and sent it all home.

INTERVIEWER: Tricky job well done.

CORBETT: It was and it was a sad job, beyond doubt, because as we closed out and we saw the impacts on the locals and we looked at our own histories and futures, there was a lot of sadness. But I think certainly from my personal point of view, and I think the majority of my closure team would agree, that from a professional challenge point of view, from having a situation which is you know even in my military career, (although I've had some very good and very interesting (command?) jobs), having been given a job and the authority to do and the opportunity to get on with it was a tremendous professional challenge and personally, certainly a very, very, very satisfying period for me in my career.

INTERVIEWER: Well, Les, that pretty well covers what I had in mind for this interview. Have you any closing remarks?

CORBETT: I think that there's probably one thing that is worth saying. And that is that as we sit here and we think about the operations that are going on, that the support requirements that we have now for Canadian troops that are deployed, still in the middle East and the Balkans and potentially back into Afghanistan, the question of whether or not the decision at the time, was the right one and whether or not we should still have a similar sort of Canadian commitment in Europe. You know, one of the things that, although I went over there very much as a professional soldier being given a job to do, I was, in the initial instance, a bit of a nay-sayer. I really thought that it was important for Canada to maintain a significant military presence in Europe as part of NATO and that it was something that we were going to regret doing.

The one thing that ... brought me around to another way of thinking was when I arrived in Europe, I realized that the training activities, the opportunities that we had in the '70's, (late '70's?) even into the '80's... When we still had the Cold War scenario, we still had an obvious threat. We were working side by side with our Allies in significant exercises where we were able to, in fact, requisition huge parts of Germany and maneuver across them, because there was a commitment by the German population to allow that to happen because it was a significant part of their insuring that there was no war again across the German border.

When I arrived there though, I found that because of political restraints, environmental restraints, the training value had diminished significantly. We were not able to maneuver.

The 1 CAG pilots were restricted to flying hours, sort of between nine and three in the afternoon, other than for some very limited training times that were specified under advanced clearances. And so we found that the actual training value had decreased. The ability to work with the Allies had evolved into command post exercises and joint working groups. So we were really not getting the advantage that we had in the earlier days. And the costs were phenomenal. We were spending at that time upwards of twenty, twenty two percent of the budget to keep two formations in Europe. And I think that in those conditions that, although the political decision seemed at that time to be very abrupt and wasn't readily supported, I think in the fullness of time I've certainly been convinced that it was the right decision.

Should we ... have something now? I think that, yes, there definitely is a requirement. As we do need a support base, we need a facility that can expand and contract, as we need it to do the things that we must do to support any deployed forces. But I cannot imagine having a deployment of, you know an Air Division and a Brigade in those circumstance. So, despite the sadness and the difficulties of it, I do believe now that it was in fact the right decision at the time and that we did the job. We did it well and I think that in the intervening years, the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces have evolved to be able to continue to support the deployed operations, although in sort of more difficult circumstances. But certainly with the ability ... and the same level of professionalism that they had while we were there.

INTERVIEWER: Thanks very much, Les.

CORBETT: Thank you.

Interview with Colonel H.L. Corbett on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2003. Interview ends.

**TRANSCRIPT ENDS**