

Canadian War Museum Award
During the Second World War, my family . . .

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The declaration of war on September 3rd 1939 had a profound impact on the lives of an entire generation. The promise that the preceding Great War would be the war to end all wars proved its genuine value, hollow. The entire world became the battlefield for a war more destructive than any man could have dared to imagine. The ensuing conflict resulted in the deaths of more than forty-five thousand Canadians¹ and fifty-two million people worldwide². Both populations and landscapes were devastated by the intense fighting and desperate struggle to eradicate the threat of Hitler and Nazism. As a growing nation, Canada was propelled to change dramatically and, in a sense, mature, just as it had done during World War I. It has been stated, “With Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo seeking to enslave the world, Canadians were forced to take up arms once more. They did so without joy, but with ample courage and resolution. And while the fires of war inflicted terrible sufferings on many Canadians, they also forged a stronger, surer, and more sovereign nation.”³ The contributions of each Canadian, whether it was at home or abroad, fostered this process of national development. I am able to proudly report that both of my grandfathers voluntarily enlisted in the Canadian Forces and served with distinction, as did most Canadian participants. By the war’s conclusion, Canada had the third largest navy, the fourth largest air force, and an army with six divisions.⁴ Everyone involved in the war effort should be recognized for their gallant contributions. Therefore, the accomplishments and sacrifices of my grandparents’ generation are immeasurable.

¹ Veterans Affairs Canada. [Canada and the Second World War 1939-1945.](#)

² The History Place. [Statistics of World War II.](#)

³ Granastein and Morton. [A Nation Forged in Fire.](#) Pg. 1

⁴ Veterans Affairs Canada. [Canada and the Second World War 1939-1945.](#)

As a typical young man, the allure of adventure stimulated my grandfather, Cyril Singer, to voluntarily enlist in the Canadian Armed Forces. Initially, he joined the army and spent one and a half years training. This, however, did not quell his insatiable desire to experience the daring life of a pilot. Consequently, a discharge from the army was secured and he enlisted with the air force, enrolling in their wireless operator program. He had been forced on to this path because recruitment for pilots had ceased, as the system was already overwhelmed by applicants. For him, what ensued was a multitude of aptitude, medical, and miscellaneous tests, which only confirmed his suitability for the role. After having been formally accepted and sworn into the air force, my grandfather was sent to Galt, modern-day Cambridge, Ontario. As part of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCTAP), he successfully completed a wireless course, while enjoying the life of a recruit billeted in the community. The BCTAP was one of Canada's main contributions to the Allied war effort, as it was administered by the Royal Canadian Air Force and was supposed to cost the Canadian government \$353 million.⁵ Wing Commander Fred H. Hitchins stated, "If the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton, the historian of the Second World War may, with some justification, record that the air battle of Europe was won on the fields of the BCTAP."⁶ The next step of his adventure involved a move to Lachine, Quebec. The journey there proved more interesting than the rest of his stay. After having disembarked from the train, he and his group were abandoned in a field in the darkness. Once finally "rescued" by air force trucks, the group was greeted by

⁵ Granastein and Morton. A Nation Forged in Fire. Pg. 12

⁶ Dunmore, Spencer. Pg. 13

mocking chants of “suckers!” at the base gates, which was a typical welcoming technique.⁷ His time at the base in Lachine involved inoculations, lectures on military procedures, and daily drilling. Next, he was dispatched to No. 1 Wireless School in Montreal, where he remained for six months. It was typical for wireless operator trainees to spend twenty weeks acquiring the skill of sending professional Morse code messages and understanding the complex frequencies and grids.⁸ After a brief period of being mistakenly marked as AWOL, when he had actually been sent to a civilian hospital for mumps treatment, he graduated from the course. His opportunity to get involved in the action finally commenced once he was shipped off to Newfoundland, where he used his newly acquired skills at the Cape Ray radar station. He is able to vividly recall the enjoyable times he spent with the local lighthouse keeper and residents going trout fishing and prematurely eating all the canteen food. Such stories make World War II seem more human. Although he had wanted to go to Burma, which in retrospective was not the best idea, his isolated posting at Cape Ray gave him a taste of the action he eagerly anticipated. From there, he was posted to Service Flying Training School No. 16 in Hagersville, Ontario,⁹ where he was a BCTAP instructor. After his stint there, he was transferred to No. 4 Wireless School in Guelph, Ontario,¹⁰ and was charged with the unenviable task of teaching a wild crew of Australians. Many Commonwealth countries, including Australia and New Zealand, sent air force trainees to participate in the BCTAP and the Australians had a reputation for loathing authority.¹¹ Nevertheless,

⁷ Dunmore, Spencer. Pg. 73

⁸ Dunmore, Spencer. Pg. 193

⁹ Granastein and Morton. A Nation Forged in Fire. Pg. 103

¹⁰ Granastein and Morton. A Nation Forged in Fire. Pg. 103

¹¹ Dunmore, Spencer. Pg. 229

my grandfather taught the course and made failed attempts to develop an Australian accent. At the war's conclusion, he was dispatched to Moncton, New Brunswick, and did odd jobs. Once given his discharge, he returned to Toronto. He has since been awarded for his service in the forms of the Volunteer Service Medal (which he referred to as "Spam"), the Victory Medal, and the Defence Medal. Consequently, my grandfather's war experience did not take him to the battlefields of Europe, but his efforts were nonetheless necessary and valuable.

My grandfather, Wilf Holland, joined the army as a volunteer in late 1941, as a twenty year old. He was initially stationed in the Horse Palace on the Exhibition Grounds in Toronto. His training continued at Camp Borden until July 1942, when he was transported by train to Halifax and shipped to Liverpool on a troop transport. Ironically, thirty years earlier his parents had left that same port in the hopes of beginning a new and prosperous life in Canada. The seven day crossing was unpleasant, since he had to sleep in the mess, and the ship was under the constant threat of German U-boats, which mercilessly patrolled the Atlantic Ocean. Upon arrival, his group was sent to Farmbury, Lancashire, and had initial difficulty ignoring the air raid sirens that routinely sounded. He spent the majority of the following two years in this area training, as well as doing guard duty. The experience was a bore and he enthusiastically left for Canadian Corps Headquarters when his unit was disbanded. After six months of further training, he volunteered to join Provost (or Provo) Corps, which was formed on June 15th 1940, as the military equivalent to a professional civilian police force¹². He relished at his good fortune upon being given a Harley Davidson motorcycle to patrol the streets of London, a

¹² Canadian Military Police Virtual Museum

task he continued to do until just before D-Day. On June 8th 1944, his Provo Corps unit, consisting of eleven motorcycles and one jeep, was sent to Normandy, but the barge he was on stalled and the motorcycles had to be carried to the shores in chest deep water. His unit was part of the initial waves of Normandy landings and by June 18th, the Allies had landed over 620 000 troops and almost 96 000 vehicles.¹³ Having landed in France, his unit was immediately put to work directing traffic, taking vehicles off barges, and reuniting incoming units. For three months, he led troops to positions on the front lines where the rest of their unit had already begun fighting. In one case, he and his partner were mistakenly given the wrong map reference for the location of a hospital unit and ended up sending them five miles closer to the front than they should have been. Another of his responsibilities was to do point duty along the dirt roads leading to contested areas. Then, he spent two weeks in a bombed out hotel in Caen, which had been decimated by intense fighting, before moving on to Falaise. It was his unit's responsibility to push vehicles forward and he often found himself right near the front lines. He also vividly recalls the "friendly-fire" bombings on the fields of Falaise, which he believes were largely unreported to the public, and remembers this event being the most frightening. I can understand his feeling because in the midst of such terror and destruction, one should be able to depend on your allies. He will also never forget bringing one of the injured men back to a first aid station and having to leave him lying on the ground outside because the station was overwhelmed by patients. To this day, he believes that the man never received any treatment and died where he was left, a sorrowful conclusion to reach. As his unit steadily progressed along the

¹³ Granastein and Morton. Bloody Victory. Pg. 71

French coast and into Belgium, he recalls an incident in Antwerp where he was blown off his motorcycle by the force of an incoming V2 rocket. These rockets were the first guided missiles and traveled faster than the speed of sound.¹⁴ During the Battle of the Bulge, he was stationed in Tilbury, Holland, where he was constantly on alert for Germans dressed as Canadians and speaking English. As the war ended in May 1945, he was attached to army headquarters in Holland. By December, he was sent back to England, where he remained until being sent home a few weeks later by way of New York City. His journey home was on the Queen Elizabeth; Winston Churchill and his wife were fellow passengers. He returned home in January 1946 and received his army discharge in March. Fifty years later, my grandfather, who had been a Lance Corporal, returned to Holland with my grandmother to participate in the fiftieth anniversary celebrations. On his visit, what hit him the hardest was the rows upon rows of graves, illustrating the human cost of the Second World War to both casualties and survivors.

Therefore, it is impossible to determine and categorize the full scope of what my grandparents' generation accomplished during World War II. So many lives were lost, but the ultimate was achieved: freedom and opportunity for future generations. The only possible way to repay these valiant heroes is to learn as much as possible about what they did. Words are not enough thanks. Many young men and women gave up their lives, but with each passing day the number of remaining war veterans dwindles. Both of my grandfathers enlisted out of a sense of duty and desire for adventure. Canada was just getting out of a Depression and many of their friends were joining. Both were young men in their twenties and still

¹⁴ Granastein and Morton. A Nation Forged in Fire. Pg. 111

possessed a degree of innocence. By the war's end, however, that had disappeared. In my grandfather Singer's case, English relatives had already died when he enlisted a mere six months into the war. Regardless as to their motivations, they contributed to the war effort. When I spoke to them both, what struck me the most was how they refused to accept any praise for what they accomplished. In my opinion, this is what makes war veterans true heroes; their unmitigated refusal to accept personal accolades and glory. They served, sacrificed, and won the war out of duty, not personal gain. My grandfather Holland has two hopes: that today's youth visit World War II cemeteries in Europe and that no such war scourges his children or his grandchildren's generations. I one day hope to fulfill those wishes by commemorating his, and so many others' achievements, at a soldier's graveyard and by finding employment in the field of international relations.

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