

Lest I Forget: My Family and the Second World War

When the first Nazi tanks crossed into Poland on September 1st, 1939, the pristine countryside of Cape Breton Island felt no tremors. The high school students on the island, including my grandparents and great aunts and uncles, had no way of knowing that a declaration of war would soon follow, or that it would alter the course of history, and the direction of their lives. They had no way of knowing that their generation would fight the most horrendous battles ever known, or that each one of them would be called upon to sacrifice something or someone for the cause of freedom. What they had no way of knowing, we must never forget.

My maternal grandmother, Florence Cecelia Williams, was fourteen in 1939 and was a student at Holy Angels, a Catholic high school for girls. Florence was the youngest of eleven children. Two of her brothers, Jim and John, enlisted at the news that Canada had declared war. She was not scared for them, initially. She was, in her own words, “not too concerned” about the fighting. All that she knew of the war was that young men, like her brothers, would get to travel in Europe at no expense.

As the months passed, however, Florence began to see the harsh reality of war. The fun of the weekly trip to the grocery store became marred by rationing. The family received a fixed number of food stamps, a number that kept them from starving but did not allow for treats. Sugar and tea became particularly scarce, to the great disappointment of her parents, proud Irish tea drinkers.

“The province of Nova Scotia has been designated as an area liable to enemy attack. Protect yourself and your community...” read a 1939 government flyer called *Air Raid Precautions- Instructions*.¹ As a safety measure, blackouts stole away the evenings even in East Bay, the back-of-beyond village where the Williams lived. Families had to cover their windows and were restricted to two lamps. Some nights, an order went out on the radio to turn off even those two. Although Florence remembers the blackouts as a great excuse for uncompleted homework, they also meant no evening games or books and the terrible fear that enemy aircraft circled overhead.

In school, Florence and all other Cape Breton students were made to memorize the symbols and uniforms of the many different fighting groups. Moreover, that had to be able to identify every kind of military aircraft, by sight and sound. A student could not graduate without scoring an acceptable grade on a test of these subjects. The fear that Canada might soon become a battle ground was alive in educators and students alike.

By the time of her high school graduation, Florence had come to believe that the war would go on for years and years. She wanted to serve her country where she could be of the most help and save the most lives. She knew that the Allied armies needed the gentle care of good nurses so, she went to nursing school in Antigonish and signed an agreement to head for Europe as soon as she had completed her degree. Mercifully, 1945 brought the end of the war. Her

¹ Wilson, Budge *Too Young to Fight: Memories from our Youth during WWII*, Toronto, Ontario, 1999

considerable skills stayed in Cape Breton and tended the wounds of returned soldiers.

Each of Florence's siblings had a unique perspective on the war. Joe, the youngest son of the Williams family, would not let his youth keep him from a meaningful contribution. Because he could not join the Canadian Armed Forces, he worked on a huge farm that produced much of their provisions. Everyone contributed what they had, and Joe's greatest wealth was his juvenile energy and strong back.

Mary-Elizabeth, the second youngest daughter, had become a nun, Sister Frances Joseph, in 1938. Nuns made a tremendous contribution to the war effort, one which historians all too often overlook. Sisters served in field hospitals, rallied supplies for the soldiers, and cared for "War Guests" - British children sent to Canada to keep them safe from the frequent bombing raids punishing England.² Sister Frances Joseph moved to Alberta so she could teach and look after such children. When I think back on the tenderness and concern she showed me when I was a child, I know how much comfort she must have brought to the those displaced little ones.

The role of women in the Canadian workplace was forever changed during WWII. Two of Florence's future sister-in-laws, Mamie and Clara, moved to Ontario during the war to work in munitions factories. Their labour was dirty, unrefined and thankless but necessary to the Allied victory.

² Little, Jean *Too Young to Fight: Memories from our Youth during WWII*, Toronto, Ontario, 1999

Midway into the war, Florence's brother Vince became old enough to enlist. His send-off was much more sorrow-filled than that which his older brothers had received. By then the death toll on the front had climbed to an unthinkable level and the family knew he might never be seen again. None of the Williams boys were seriously injured in action, however, a fact which Florence attributes wholly to prayer and the awesome mercy of God.

All of the fighting boys sent letters home to East Bay. Florence recalls that the sharp scissors of censorship snipped much of the meaning from the correspondence. Loose lips sank ships, after all. Butchered though they were, the letters from the field were treasured dearly. Perhaps it was just seeing the familiar handwriting that meant so much, handwriting that showed that the writer was still alive, or, at least, had been when the letter was sent a month before.

Young ladies, like Florence, were expected to write to all the boys they knew overseas, whether they liked them or not. Florence's letters of affection and admiration brought smiles to many boys on many distant battlefields. Several of the young men she wrote to were injured, others died. One man, Adrian Bates, returned to Cape Breton at war's end and married Florence. Adrian is my grandfather, and a great WWII hero.

Adrian was fifteen in 1939 and much more concerned with coal trucks than with German tanks. Like most men in Whitney Pier, his father was employed by the Dominion Coal Company. Adrian would go often with his

father to work and to help move the coal from the mine to the storehouse. As the first several years of the war passed, however, the joy was stripped from such work. The sight of mothers weeping over telegrams weighed heavily upon him and the conscription posters appealed to his strong patriotism. He enlisted before his nineteenth birthday, forging documents to appear old enough to fight. In 1944 he left Whitney Pier for CFB Borden and ultimately for the bloodied fields of Europe.

As soon as he arrived at the Carpiquet Airfield in France, Adrian came to understand the brutality of war. Each landed soldier had a pair of straps fastened to their shoulders and was sent out to scour the nearby countryside for wounded men. Mostly, they found stiff corpses and let them lie. If they did find someone still clinging to life, they strapped them tight and hurried for the field hospital. It was a race against death. Many of the wounded who did survive the journey died in the crowded, understaffed hospital. Adrian, who had no experience with medicine, spent some of his first nights in France injecting penicillin, trying desperately to restore vitality to the ill.

Surrounded by amputations and blood transfusions, Adrian undoubtedly thought of his older brother, Art. Art could not come to war because of a limp, the relic of a bike accident. He would have lost the leg, and possibly his life, except for a timely gift from a young, Black man who shared his rare blood type. At that time, there was still significant racial separation in Canada and, if not for the accident, Adrian and the man might never have spoken. As it happened, they

met again in France and spoke as brothers. The Black man died on the front.

Many historians point to the sacrifices made by African-Canadians and members of other minority racial groups to the war effort as significant to the suppression of racism in this country.

It was also while in France that Adrian fought in one of the first and most bloody battles of his career- the massacre at Falaise gap. The number of Germans killed was in the thousands. Such was the carnage that mass graves were dug, and bulldozers were brought in to collect the bodies. Falaise was just a foretaste of the indescribable atrocities Adrian would witness while in Europe.

Because of his experience driving coal trucks, Adrian worked as a driver for the duration of his military service. After France was liberated, he drove the troops into Belgium, where he worked with the 17th Field Ambulance service. It was during that time that British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery and future American President Dwight D. Eisenhower held a groundbreaking counsel-of-war on the Belgian front. The three dignitaries were to take a tour of the allied camp and it was my grandfather who was chosen to drive them. Riding along in his two-stretcher ambulance, Adrian describes the three as “just soldiers, same as everybody else... but big shots.”

After Belgium, Adrian served in the almost exclusively Canadian force that liberated Holland. He remembers vividly being in Ravenstein and receiving word that the Germans had landed in Holland and all troops were required to

return to the headquarters at the Nijmegen Bridge. Having no car, he resolved to walk and hitchhike to the barracks. About half way, a man in a Canadian uniform came barrelling down the road on a motorcycle. Adrian put out his thumb. The motorcyclist stopped and Adrian asked if him whether he was going to the bridge. He nodded and they drove together down the dusty avenue. Adrian noticed that his driver had a West Nova Scotia lapel and became instantly aware that something was amiss. The West Nova Scotia troop was in Italy. Adrian asked to be let off as soon as they approached the nearest gate of the Nijmegen barracks. He smiled goodbye at the motorcyclist but ran with all his might to find his commanding officer. The next morning he came across his driver behind steel bars in the POW compound.

Adrian loves to tell of how he caught the German spy, but the thought of the Nijmegen Bridge also brings to mind great sadness. It was there that he had arranged to meet his first cousin and fellow soldier, Albert. Albert never made it. He lost his life stepping on a landmine. Adrian returned to the area in 1985 on the 40th Anniversary of the Liberation of the Netherlands and met Albert once more, one small name on one white stake in a field of crosses and tulips.

In 1945, Adrian crossed the Siegfried line into Germany. He remembers a ditty that his troop sang as they laundered their soiled uniforms. "Gonna' hang out my washing on the Siegfried line, have you any dirty washing mother dear?" The sanitation was very poor on the front. Dirty clothes were washed in dirtier water by filthy men.

Adrian was in Oldenburg, Germany, on guard duty, on May 8th, 1945 when the Peace was signed. When he returned to the barracks there was no time for celebration. He signed up on the spot for service in Japan. After a few days in England, he received word of the A-bomb attacks in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and of the Japanese surrender.

Still, he did not return to Canada. He worked in the reconstruction effort, driving dangerous surplus ammo from London to the Salzburg plains where it was destroyed. On one such mission, he rendezvoused with the ATS Ladies Convoy. One lady pointed with a smile to a rusty vehicle and said, "The princess is under that truck!" And so she was. Her Royal Majesty Elizabeth II, not yet Queen, was greasing the underbelly of an ammo truck. In Adrian's words, "Somebody had to do it."

The phrase "somebody had to do it" captures the essence of the dutiful labour and meaningful sacrifices of my family during the Second World War. Somebody had to stop the advancing enemy- Jim, John, Vince and Adrian did it. Somebody had to nurse the returning soldiers- Florence did it. Somebody had to grow the crops- Joe did it. Somebody had to care for the War Guests- Sister Frances Joseph did it. Somebody had to work in the munitions factories- Mamie and Clara did it. Each person, young and old, male and female, contributed the best that was in them to the cause of the Allied victory. Together they shaped the course of history, and pushed the last tanks from Poland. Lest we forget.