

Service, Loss, Sadness

The following story relates to events of my Mom's life, who suffered from a sadness based on numerous losses. One of these losses related to her closest brother, who was killed in action in World War II. Their story is told in a series of flashbacks, dated for ease of reader comprehension. The work is fictional, based loosely on actual events. Some names have been changed, but the essence of the story mirrors reality. A visit to the Canadian War Cemetery in Groesbeek, the Netherlands and the writing of these vignettes has been part of a process of healing and letting go.

Brian Baetz, Dundas, Ontario; July 22, 2017

December 1925; Dyers Bay, Ontario

The little girl hid under the stairs of the farmhouse, two kittens in her arms. She heard her older brother, just one year her senior, make his way down the stair treads. Hide and seek was one of their favorite games, and they would laugh uproariously when one found the other. He started to tiptoe down the last steps, sensing her close by. He turned towards the fireplace and came within a few feet of her hiding in the shadows. The kittens, in on the game, leapt at the same time from her arms and landed stealthily at his feet. This caught the boy off guard, allowing her to reach out and playfully tickle him from the back, prompting peals of laughter from the two children.

"Quiet!!" This was bellowed from the kitchen, where ham was being fried by the family patriarch.

June 1930; Dyers Bay, Ontario

The one-room schoolhouse contained about 25 children, ranging in age from 5 to 15 or so. The schoolmarm was a severe woman, with a penchant for order and harsh discipline. She had given all the grade groups their work for the day, but there was an awful amount of fidgeting and giggling going on here and there. It might have been the good weather outdoors, or the fact they were near Summer vacation, but something was definitely in the air. A boy smiled at his sister who sat across the aisle and she whispered something back. A bit of laughter ensued from the back of the room.

"Quiet!" Bellowed the schoolmarm. "Noses to your work."

The boy bent over at his desk, touching his nose to his papers and moving it slowly from side to side. This would have evaded notice if his sister hadn't snorted loudly at the sight of him, and the teacher got a view of his actions through the array of seated students.

"Bert... on your feet." This was spat out one word at a time.

"Yes'm." He stood compliantly, nodding to the teacher.

"I order you to go to the edge of the schoolyard and cut out five birch switches. Half-inch diameter, or better. Bring them back in. I will use them to give you 20 lashes at lunch time while the other children play in the yard. This will be with your trousers down. And if I might add, you won't feel much like sitting for the rest of the day. Go now."

The boy gulped hard and went off into the yard. His sister sat silently, her eyes moistening.

March 1943; St. Catherines, Ontario

"So you want to serve your country?"

"Well, maybe. I came down to check it out I guess. If you give me a clean bill of health, I might sign up."

"Alright, fill out this form and get into this gown. The wee nurse will be around to take your pulse and stick a greased finger up your arse. Don't flinch, most of the chaps like it! She's a bit of a looker, and I think she enjoys doing it. Then some reflex checking from the Miss and I'll come back and test your hearing and vision, and lastly we'll have a look at any problem areas. With all of that looking good, you'll get your stamp. Off you go, and I'll see you in a bit."

Ninety minutes later the young man with wavy hair sat on the edge of the examination table, his chest and lungs being listened to the reviewing doctor and his stethoscope. "Hmmm, looks like that pleurisy from a few months back has cleared up well. But both I and the cute nurse noticed that you are presenting a hernia in your lower decks. How long has that been present?"

"Oh, a while now. Thought it might just go away. But it kind of takes the pep out of me on bad days." The young man said this in a low voice.

"Dreadfully sorry, old chap. A hernia means no lifting, and a soldier has to do quite a bit of lifting out at the front. But being a machine operator down at Thompson Products is still very much a contribution to the effort." The doctor smiled amiably and left the consult room.

The young man put on his clothes, feeling considerable relief. The memory of the pixie nurse with her rubber-gloved, eager fingers and cooing voice was something he would hold for some time.

March, 1943; St. Catharines, Ontario

The young man had a bouquet of flowers behind his back, and he mounted the stairs of the boarding house for young ladies with a spring in his step. He pressed the buzzer and waited expectantly, whistling a tune between his teeth.

A young lady opened the door, smiling broadly and flipping her luxuriant hair behind one shoulder. "Ah, a gallant knight arrives! Might it be my lucky day, or are you here for another damsel?"

"Oh, Patricia, you would be a fine catch for any red blooded male in Canada. But my loyalties are to Grinelda. Is she in?" He smiled broadly at the lovely young woman.

"Absolutely, she's waiting for you in the sitting room. Go right on in." She waved him through, with just the slightest hint of regret and longing on her face.

An attractive young lady sat on the edge of a love seat, dressed to the nines and in a way that discreetly displayed her enviable figure.

"Ah, there's my sweet bumpkins! How 'bout a kiss?" He opened his arms broadly. The young woman stood up and held him stiffly, giving him a short peck on the lips.

"Roses for a rose." He brought the bouquet out with a flourish.

"Berty, what happened at the medical examination?" She traced his lapels with a manicured fingernail.

"Oh, had a complete physical, and a good going over." He grinned effusively.

"Cute nurse?" This was said with the scrunching up of her nose.

"Just male medical personnel, I'm afraid." He turned a bit pink.

"And the results were?" She raised her eyebrows expectantly.

"Great news, I think. I'm over that darned pleurisy, but the doc confirmed I have a bit of a hernia to contend with. So no active service for me, either stay on at Thompson or find a desk job in Toronto or Halifax, I suppose. But that will mean we can make some plans, no?" He leaned in for another kiss.

She took half a step back. "Yes....yes. But in a way, that's a shame. Because real men fight, don't they?" This was said coldly, with an acid tongue. The young suitor felt the blood drain from his face.

October, 1943; Toronto, Ontario

"Okay, pants off, I'll need to examine your unmentionables." The doctor tapped his clipboard with a worn pencil.

"Yes, sir. I'm here to see what can be done for this hernia of mine. I got rejected by the Army Review because of it. I was happy about all this at the start, but after some consideration over quite a few months, I've come around to the notion that I'd like to serve. So can anything be done for me, Doc?". The young man seemed nervous.

"My, that is a significant hernia. But I've seen worse. We could schedule you in for surgery in under a month, and with another month to heal and recover you should be good to pass a re-test." The doctor was confident in his tone, but something was being held back.

"Okay, okay, so let's schedule the repair surgery. Yup, I've thought this through." The young man rushed his words.

"Are you really sure?" The doctor peered over the rims of his spectacles.

"Sorry?"

"Listen, I see a lot of young men these days. Many want some excitement, many want to go off to war. But you seem like a gentle soul, and you're a good looking kid. I suspect your mother would be just as happy to have you ride a desk down in Halifax. And lots of young ladies in that town would love to be on your arm on a Friday night! And no chance of becoming cannon fodder! So before you jump in, boots and all, are you really sure?" A few seconds of silence went by. The young man's eyelid twitched.

"Errh, it's a bit complicated. But I'll get back home. So, yes, I'm sure. Let's do the paperwork for the surgery."

"Right you are, we'll book you four weeks from this Thursday."

February, 1944; Warton, Ontario

The young man walked into the sitting room of the seniors' home, seeing his mother sitting with three other women. He was clutching an official-looking letter and bearing a confused amalgam of emotions on his countenance.

"Hi Ma, how are you doing? Ladies..." They all admired the handsome young man and his mother rose to give him a hug.

"How are things, my boy?" She stroked his cheek fondly.

"Good. I guess. Just got my notice letter, Ma." He held up the envelope.

"Notice? For what?" The older woman raised one eyebrow.

"I will be serving in the Army. For my country. I've been placed in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the Princess Louise's. Nice ring to it don't you think? War is almost over, so I'll be back before you know it. To get married, start a family. And you can come and live with us, look after the grandkids." This all came out in a frenetic tumble.

"Oh my...oh my." The woman looked a bit unsteady on her feet.

"Don't worry, Ma, everything will be all right." He smiled a bit too eagerly.

"But I thought you had a wee hernia, and that the Army had said no to you." A tear started to roll down one cheek.

"Had that taken care of. We have to stand up to Hitler, he's a heinous monster. But I'll stay out of harm's way, and I'll write home every Sunday. Oh Ma, don't cry now, everything will be perfectly fine..."

The other three ladies discreetly floated away for tea, leaving the mother and son in a tight embrace.

September, 1944; Toronto, ON

He was wearing his uniform, complete with the dress beret. His curly hair barely fit underneath the confines of the headwear, but he got so many adoring looks from young women on the train up from Hamilton that he just couldn't bear to take it off.

His sister was waiting for him at Union Station, having come in by streetcar from the Sunnyside area just west of downtown. She looked lovely as always, wearing a full length coat that had taken the better part of a year's savings from work as a domestic in some of the finer mansions of Toronto. They had always been close, so today would be tough as he was shipping out soon and this would be the last day he would see her for some while.

"I'm surprised the girls would let you off the train!" She came up and gave him a big hug.

"Oh, I don't know, a man in uniform seems like a dime a dozen these days." He put both hands on her cheeks and gave her a soft kiss on the forehead.

"I've got big plans for today, as it might be some time before we meet again." She smiled sadly.

"What's on the agenda?" He gave her a reassuring smile.

"First off, photos at a studio on Yonge Street. Have to have something of you in uniform while you are away. Then a bite of lunch at a little diner I know on College, and then we can catch the 2:10 showing of the White Cliffs of Dover. We should get there early as there will be lineups, it's very popular with all the servicemen and their families. Something for them to hold in their memories, until you all return home and we can go out for dessert and dancing..." Some kind of foreboding waved through her and she teared up.

"Oh Sis, I'll be back before you know it. It will be like an extended vacation, and I'll be back a bit older and a lot wiser."

"Oh Bert, do you really have to go? I mean, really?" Tears slowly coursed down each cheek, with irregular velocities.

Late September, 1944: Riviere du Loup, Quebec

The train rocked gently on its rails, making its way through beautiful scenery unfolding in the morning light. Uniformed men sat cheek by jowl, most still sleeping but others gradually stirring. The young fellow with the mop of curly hair was painfully homesick, but determined not to let it show. He was going off to war, but only in a superficial sense. His heart and soul wanted to be back in Ontario, with his family and his girlfriend.

"Best to get up and into the WC for a shave and a dump while the coast is still clear." The young man opposite him was handsome and swarthy, with a hearty bit of stubble looking for a razor's edge.

"Good advice, I'll get my shaving kit. Where are you from?" He smiled at the other chap.

*“Ontario. Farm country. This war service is my ticket out of the fields. Can’t wait to get over there.”
The swarthy chap’s eyes danced.*

“Me too. At least for the province and farm part. But my reasons for being here are complicated. And as I get in deeper, I’m thinking I should have stayed home. Could have done so, honourably, on medical grounds.” He frowned, casting a shadow over his handsome features.

“Listen, we might get split up in Halifax, as I’m in the RCAF and you’re Army. But before that we can watch each other’s back. Some of the guys on this rig drink, gamble, and chase women. To do that, they need money, and lots of it. Clean-living farm boys don’t need their pay packets lifted, so we’ll keep an eye out for each other. Sound OK?”

“Much obliged, friend. Now let’s take your advice and go get washed up.”

Early October, 1944; onboard the Queen Elizabeth

The fog horn sounded deep and long. They were only about two hours out of Halifax and it already seemed like a long voyage. The time in the city had been fun, as it was full of young people either going off to war or supporting this departure. He saw one young lady after another on the street, catching his eye and giving him a warm smile. Wearing the uniform and beret had dividends, no question. But it made him wistful about his choice. He could be riding a desk, and going out dancing in the evenings with all of these young ladies.

He was first in to a bunk chamber that slept four men. Very snug quarters. He claimed the lowest bunk, easiest to get up from if he needed to take a leak in the night. Two roomies stumbled in a few moments later with their packs. They were obviously a few sheets to the wind. The Halifax bars had been a momentary temptation to him, but he caught himself as he believed he needed to stay in full control if he was going to make it home. He spoke to them in a friendly way, and they spoke back to him in an equally warm, guttural French. It could be a long trip, he thought.

But then the fourth roomie came in. Calm energy, tall and upright. He shook hands with the two French fellows, then came over to the lower bunk.

“Steve. Steve Hnatiw. From out Manitoba way.” They shook hands firmly. He felt that feeling, the one where you think you know this person. But you don’t. But maybe you do.

Late October, 1944; on a train, westward from London

“Next stop, Ascot Station.”

The train started slowly, going past English homes with vegetables growing in the backyards. He had a 48 hour furlough, so he had decided to leave base and get out into a town that would allow him to experience something close to what he had left in Canada. A town on the smallish side, near enough to working fields and woodlots that he could get out and walk and get his thoughts straight. London was

too big and too depressing, with its focus on survival. It had been a brutal time for most Londoners, and would only get worse. So the countryside seemed like a much more attractive furlough destination.

He got off in Cholsey, a small town that did remind him of home. He walked away from the station, hoping to find a rooming-house that would have a spare bed for a one-evening lodger. Two blocks away, he came across a tea house. Stepping inside, he was struck by the warmth and aromas of fresh baking, and the vibrant hello from the young lady who was tending the shop. In less than five minutes he was well into a pot of proper British tea and a heavenly scone with clotted cream and boysenberry jam on the side.

“So you’re in the service.” She smiled at him and arched her eyebrows a bit.

“Yes, Ma’am. Canadian Army. Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, Princess Louise’s. He now realized she was the spitting image of Patricia, his girlfriend’s roommate back home.

“And what are you doing in this little hamlet?” Her voice took on a playful tone.

“Just wanted to get out and see the countryside. Anything that reminds me of home. Would you be able to recommend a place to stay in Cholsey?” He said this earnestly.

She shot a sideways look to the back kitchen, where a clatter of dishes emanated from. Her eyes twinkled a bit, and she replied in a low voice.” We’re closing up in fifteen minutes, and I have a wee flat just three blocks away. I hope you don’t think I’m too forward, but it’s war time. My fiancé was killed six months ago, high over Germany by anti-aircraft fire. So I’m a war widow, I suppose you could call me, one who is slinging tea and scones until this thing is over and I can meet someone else. But in the meantime, I might simply enjoy the company of a lovely Canadian soldier. What do you say?” Her eyes flashed and she curtsied mischievously.

He gulped and turned red. But something told him he wouldn’t be walking too many rural byways this weekend.

Late October, 1944; outside of London

It had been a hard day of training, both mentally and physically. He was a tall man, in good shape, but not overly strong. Wearing a full pack, crawling through obstacles for hours on end literally sucked his remaining strength. Some of the other lads seemed energized by it all, others were stoic, and a few others like him were becoming dispirited. They were soon going off to war, but the internal reaction to this certainly covered a wide emotional spectrum across the regiment.

After an early supper of semi-recognizable food items, he went out on the parade grounds where he found his friend from the Prairies sitting quietly off to one side.

“Hey, Ontario. You look lost in thought.” Steve said this in a kindly manner.

“Very astute of you, Manitoba. If the truth be told, I am completely whipped. I was so fatigued out there that my rifle shooting at the targets was abysmal. Not much of a soldier, I’m afraid.” This was confided with a grim grin.

“Neither am I, to be completely honest. Farm boys like us should be back home growing food, and going into town on a Saturday night to keep the ladies happy. But we’re here, and I think we should make the best of it. A positive attitude may mean the difference of getting home in one piece.” Steve arched his eyebrows playfully.

“Hmmm, home. I thought I wanted to get back home, and marry my girlfriend and start a family. But...well, I’ve been mulling it over in my mind non-stop. She can be a bit mean at times...and she kind of guilted me into getting signed up. And...well, I’ve been keeping a lid on this. But on one of my furloughs I met a wonderful English girl. She’s a war widow. My God, what a woman! Kind, smart, beautiful in all ways. When this is all over, I don’t think I’ll be going home. I’ll stay here in bloody Blimey, and marry her. And start that family. I’m still not sure, but that’s where I’m heading at the present moment. Ol’ Grinelda in Canada will have no shortage of suitors.”

Steve paused for a moment before responding. “Whoever is your missus will be a very lucky lady. But let’s get trained properly so we can see the end of this thing in style. And now let’s get some rest.”

November 1, 1944; Cholsey, England

It was the last furlough before they would mobilize to the Continent. They didn’t know that for sure, but there were all kinds of hints being dropped that it was imminent. Some of the more brazen lads had taken to standing outside the mess hall and chanting ‘Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go’, followed by a splutter of coughing and laughing. But this chilled him to the core, as he did not want to go fight, he just wanted to go someplace he could call home.

So he had trained to Cholsey, and had met his tearoom war widow at the station. Forty eight hours of passion can wear out the most erstwhile suitor, so he had begged her to come out with him and walk the byways and footpaths towards North Moreton. The afternoon was lovely, bright and sunny. And this was an apt description for his walking companion as well.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to kidnap you, and tie you up to the bedpost until your commanding officer has written you off as a deserter!” She playfully jimmied one of his arms behind his back and gently pushed her chin into his shoulder.

“Ha, it wouldn’t take much to go along with that plan.” He spun out of her grip, and then drew her close. There was something about her eyes, and he himself started to tear up. Blinking a bit, he looked away

and pursed his lips before continuing. "I've signed on for this, against the odds. But it doesn't mean I'll be going back home after all of this is over."

"What are you saying, Bert? I thought you had a Canadian girl waiting anxiously for your return. And a lucky young lady she will be!" The English woman said this genuinely, charmingly.

"War, or at least the preparation for war, has given me a lot of time to think. My girl back home is beautiful, but somewhere deep inside her lies a mean core. And I'm not sure I want to be around that for the rest of my life."

"What are you saying to me, kind sir?" She gushed this out, tripping on her words.

"That you are truly beautiful, inside and out. And after this is all over, I will find you at the tearoom. And it will be a 48 hour furlough, permanently."

November 3, 1944; Southern England

They were up hours before the dawn. All of the preparations had been made, and now it was simply execution. By the end of the day, a flotilla of crafts would have made their way across the Channel, and many men in jeeps would have found their way onto the Continent. This is what they had come for, and this is what they had dreamt about for weeks. By the end of the day, many of them would no longer be alive. Rising above the French beaches, in a flotilla of souls moving upward to their celestial destinies.

He cinched up his belt, adjusted his pack, and said a prayer. He joined his regiment mates in the queues that would see them assigned to a specific vehicle. Most men were quiet on this momentous day, pondering their role and what it all meant. He started to cry, just a bit, and then caught himself. This is not what he wanted to do, even less so each passing day. But he would go forth, with a goal to get past it and start a new life based on love, peace and commitment. The line moved forward, slowly.

November 4, 1944, later in the day; near Beny-sur-Mer, France

The crossing of the Channel had been surreal. The excitement on the boats had been palpable, almost too much to bear for his sensitive disposition. The only thing that kept him together was the calming presence of Steve, who said very little but kept giving him a tight-lipped smile and a raise of the eyebrows that cumulatively told him that it would all work out in the end.

When they had been fifty metres offshore of the beach, things really started to bog down. Planes hung low in the sky, strafing the beach and near-shore with aggressive fire. He had been assigned to a jeep that had been modified to haul provisions for the mess tent. He and Steve and four other men huddled in the back with the provisions while the driver zigged and zagged, to avoid the heaviest fire from above and the obstacles of stalled vehicles and fallen bodies on the beach. The driver gunned the vehicle when

they came onto dry land, and drove like a madman in case the strafing was done on a wider swath. They all sat in stunned silence, looking out intermittently at the back of the frenetic driver's head.

Twenty minutes later they came up to a fork in the road, where a British military policeman stood nonchalantly, directing traffic.

"We were told to go to Caen." The Canadian driver spat this out, but with some degree of uncertainty.

"Change of plans, squire. Caen may not yet be a safe place to be." The accent on the officer was downright plummy. "We're marshalling our resources in the nearby village." He pointed towards a distant church. "Keep yon spire in sight and you can't go wrong. Actually, not a bad way to lead one's life." He lit a pipe and waved the truck on.

Late November, 1944—Battle of the lower Maas, Southern Holland

The land was flat, reclaimed from the sea. The polders would have been fertile agricultural land under any other scenario than war, and both he and Steve kept their sanity by recalling stories to each other of the fields of their youth. There were ditches everywhere, and plenty of mud. He couldn't remember the last time his feet were dry. Blisters had turned into swollen masses of spongy flesh, and this made the putting on of boots every morning an excruciating ordeal.

The regiment was making progress, moving slowly North and East towards the outlet of the Lower Maas River. There were reports of German soldiers laying low in the polders, cut off from their forces, and trying to take down as many of the Allied soldiers as possible before they themselves got picked off. But things stayed quiet and they trudged along. Orders were given by a field sergeant, and somebody somewhere was giving him the orders.

When they came within a few kilometres of the Leopold Canal, they could hear heavy machine gun fire. He winced at this and looked over at Steve who gave him a grim smile. They were given orders to drop low and keep rifles at hand. He did as he was told, but looked at the weapon in his hands as if it were some foreign object. And it was, in truth. He had never liked to hunt deer on the Bruce Peninsula, even if it kept his family in meat during a lean Winter. But to shoot a man? He had plenty to ponder before they were given the order to advance.

December 15, 1944; Waalwijk, The Netherlands

The days had passed in a blur. Making camp, eating bad rations, taking orders passed down the chain of command from some new general. Canadian and Polish troops were in this part of southern Holland, getting ready to make a major push on pockets held by German forces so that they would be shunted back into Germany. But it wasn't easy, and orders seemed to be issued unconvincingly and with no apparent logic. And to make matters worse, Winter was settling in. Not the harsh Canadian Winter they were used to, but a grey and damp blanketing of wind and fog that did little to lift anyone's spirits.

They had a two hour furlough each afternoon, and one day they walked a bit further into town to see if they might be able to find a bakery or restaurant to get something hot to eat and drink. The streets were largely deserted, with the odd young person walking with purpose, giving them a curt nod or a wan smile. The Dutch looked gaunt to their Canadian eye, and no wonder with the pervasive shortage of food.

They saw an inn a half block away, with fresh flowers in the window and its front door open on its upper half. They peeked through the door and saw a young man wiping glasses at the bar.

"Halloo!" He raised his hand in greeting to the two servicemen and beamed out a warm smile.

"Do you speak English, young sir?" Steve said this hopefully.

"Yes, yes, I do. Not well, but I like to practice when I can. Are you Englishmen?" The young Dutch man adjusted his glasses nervously.

"No sir, we're not Limies. Canadians, through and through." Bert put this forward shyly.

"Even better, my friends." He advanced to the door and opened the bottom section in a sweeping gesture. "What can I get you?"

"Tea. And anything you might have to eat. My name's Steve, and this handsome chap is Bert." He offered his broad Prairie farmboy hand for a firm handshake.

"Leo. It is my pleasure to have your acquaintance." It was a formal introduction, but the trio felt that knowing that they had been compatriots for some time, and were being brought together now for significant reasons.

December 20 , 1944; Waalwijk, The Netherlands

They had returned every day after that, for a cup of hot tea and any baked goods that made their way out of the mysterious back kitchen of the inn. The young Dutch man brightened noticeably when he saw the two Canadian servicemen at the door of his father's establishment, and would signal them to sit by the fire and remove their damp uniform jackets. After a week of this he suggested they could go up a flight of stairs to a banquet room on the second floor, where they could speak privately and a bit more freely. The young man's sister, Adri, would spell him during these times at the bar. She was a quiet young woman, who smiled at the two Canadians but kept conversation to a minimum.

Leo more than made up for this. As he got to know Steve and Bert more, he opened up and shared all manner of tales from his earlier years. This was an opportunity to practice his English, but he also truly admired the two Canadians. He was not much more than a gangly boy, and in his eyes they were real men. Soldiers, who had come to free his country. And good men, he could tell by the way they treated him and his sister. He did not have that many friends, and he worked at the inn from morning until night, but these were people he could call friends. And he wondered, just a bit shyly, if he might be able

to visit them after this cursed war was over. Just the thought of that cheered him, as many folks in the town had grown depressed and felt this conflict would continue forever.

"Just a few more days until Christmas. My mother makes an awfully good Christmas dinner. Turkey, stuffing, cranberries, potatoes, beans, carrots and plum pudding to end it." Bert was feeling nostalgic. "We're a temperance household so no brandy, but lots of homemade eggnog and soft cider."

"Ah, my Mom is also a great cook. We eat well out on the Prairies, growing and raising pretty much everything. Winters are cold and long, but Christmas is a bright spot to keep us going. Us Ukes do it on a different day, but it's still a big deal." Steve smiled broadly.

"Christmas is also big in Holland, or at least it used to be." Leo paused and frowned. "Will you have extra furlough time on Christmas Day?"

"Yep, we will take a full 24 hour break from shelling the heck out of Jerry down by the river. Twenty four hours of shivering in our tents, but at least it will be quiet." Steve issued a sideways grin.

"Nonsense. You will rest here in the upper room by the fire. And we will share our goose with our new Canadian friends. Momma and Adri are good cooks, you will have proof of this soon enough." Leo took off his spectacles for wiping, his eyes moistening.

Thursday, January 25, 1945; Waalwijk, The Netherlands

"Sit my friends, I'll boil water for tea. We haven't seen you two gentlemen for a bit, and I was starting to worry." Leo looked over his glasses at the two servicemen as they clambered onto stout-legged barstools.

"It's been rough down by the river. The Germans are holed up on an island out in the Maas, do you know it?" Steve had a weary tone to his voice.

"Yes, really just one island north of Waalwijk. But it's quite long and flat." The young Dutchman knew the area well, but it had mainly been of interest to cows before the war started.

"Kapelsche Veer. I may be mangling the Dutch pronunciation, but that's the little bit of real estate that the bastards have established a bridgehead on. They're perched up on a little rise in the land, and replace their paratroopers every few days or so with fresh men from the other side of the river." Bert was morose in facial expression and tone of voice.

"That land is so flat, that anyone coming at them from any direction will be seen quickly." Leo had a furrow in his brow.

"Yep, you are right, young friend. So we will probably try to go in under cover of darkness and hope for fog as well." Steve accepted a steaming cup of tea with a half-smile.

"How will your men get across the river?" Leo knew the Maas was narrow but quite deep.

“Canoes. I’ve been helping to waterproof a flotilla of Peterborough canoes for the last few days. Cold and muddy work. Makes farming up on the Bruce Peninsula seem like a piece of cake.” Bert took a hefty pull from his mug.

“When do you men go in?” Leo said this softly.

“Whenever General Volles flips a coin, but we hear it could be as early as late tonight.” Steve was all business.

“Leo, this might be our last visit for a while. If we are successful, we’ll probably keep pushing them back all the way to Germany. If we’re not successful...who the hell knows? But what needs to be said, is that we appreciate your friendship. Your family’s kindness has made this little campout on the Maas somewhat bearable.” Bert looked the young man in the eyes, fondly.

“But you’ll come back to visit us when the war is over, surely? I would like to show you more of Holland.” The young man reached out and clasped both of their hands.

“Sure, kid. We’ll be back to check in on you. You can count on it.” Steve looked over at Bert, and nodded towards the door.

Monday, January 29, 1945-Carboly Plant, Front Street, Toronto, Ontario

The days were getting a bit longer each day, but the amount of ambient daylight penetrating to her diamond drill workstation was minimal at best. The young woman had several high wattage work lamps that she would reposition throughout the day as her tasks flowed from one to the next. Almost all of the workers in the plant were women, pressed into service while the men were away at the front. They all worked hard, as they realized their work was important as part of the overall effort to bring the boys back home after peace was declared. The work was precise and demanding, but her early training as a seamstress put her in good stead and she wielded a measurement caliper as handily as a cloth measuring tape.

But today she couldn’t get her brother out of her mind. She remembered biting back tears as he boarded the troop train at Union Station, and kept holding in mind the vision of seeing him step down off a similar train not too far down the road. What was his life like over there? He wasn’t a good letter writer, and was always vague about what conditions they were facing as they put their boots on the ground.

She looked out and saw a bit of sleet hitting the tops of streetcars as they rolled down Front Street. What was it like to live in a tent in the middle of Winter? And to be so far away from family and friends made it all the worse. She went back to her work, biting her lip and thinking hard.

Tuesday, January 30, 1945; Kapelsche Veer, The Netherlands

He was cold, cold to the bone. His boots had been soaked for hours now, as they had slogged through mud one inch at a time. Progress was being directed through hand signals from an earnest sergeant, intent on keeping his men safe. Steve was somewhere in the back, and the

overall plan was to provide support for the large tank that rolled twenty yards ahead of the group.

It had been quiet so far, eerily quiet. But after a few more moments the tank got mired in the mud. The hatch opened up and men started to pile out and clamber down the side of the tank. And at that exact same time, copious machine gun fire started to rain down around the tank. Bert looked ahead and saw two boys crumple and fall into the mud on the rear side of the tank. It seemed surreal as this was the closest to combat he had been so far.

And within seconds he heard bullets zinging past him and hitting the mud ten yards behind him. Then he heard a sharp intake of breath and a soft groan, and he saw Randolph and Norman fall on either side of him. Shock came to him quickly, preventing him from quickly hitting the ground. He looked up at the crows nest on the hill, and swore he saw the bullet coming. A sharp pSteve of pain hit his chest, and then he felt himself floating above the fray. He no longer experienced the cold, but instead felt light and happy. He could see somebody that looked a lot like him, slumped down in the mud. He drifted back and saw Steve lying flat in a bit of a shallow depression in the ground.

‘Stay down, my friend. Lay there until dark if you have to. But stay down, if you want to get back to that farm in Manitoba.’ He drifted upwards, joining the other seven souls that day who no longer felt the mud and cold of that God-forsaken island in the middle of the Maas River.

April 21, 1945; Kusten Canal, near the Dutch-German border

Steve shifted uneasily, lying flat on the moist ground east of the canal. He had been pretty much numbed out since Bert had been killed almost three months back. About a week after it had happened, in a lull in subsequent action, he had arranged for a telegram to be sent to Leo via the telegraph station in central Waalwijk. It read succinctly:

‘Leo—dreadful news. Bert fell at Kapelsche Veer. Sad as hell. We struggle on. Very best to you and your family. Steve.’

He knew the young man would be devastated to receive this news, but better to know than not. He was a rough-hewn boy from the Prairies, where life and death cohabitated on a razor’s edge.

They had come across the canal in small boats at night and had established a bridgehead on the eastern side. Over the last few days they had picked off a few German snipers holed up in buildings or behind hummocks of soil. These were sick bastards, he thought. They knew the end of the war was near, but they were still trying to take out as many Allied troops as they could. So he and a few others had been assigned to lay low and shoot only if they had a clear shot.

After a few hours, a volley rang out from the top of an old tower. Nobody got hit, and three or four Argylls got up on their knees and shot numerous rounds into the tower. But it was a decoy trap, as numerous German snipers started to shoot in a coordinated fashion from behind trees, hitting the Canadians squarely in their chest. Steve saw this coming and immediately shot out the lights in one of them as he lingered outside the protective plane of the tree.

But this exposed Steve, and a shot rang out in his direction from the original tower source. He had half a second of reaction time, due to a muffled shout, and attempted to get down and drop out of the line of fire. But the bullet made its deadly passage, hitting Steve in the middle of his forehead. His body fell to its knees, and slumped over in the wet grass.

He saw this happen from a vantage point ten yards above his physical body. He felt no pain, and certainly had no desire to clamber back into his now-prone form. Just off to his right was Bert, wearing a grim countenance and shaking his head slowly.

‘Very sorry, Steve. I saw that guy in the tower get back on his feet and yelled out at you to hit the deck. Lots of noise swirling around out there. Too little, too late, I’m afraid. I’m not going home, but I had really hoped you might make it back to your folks out West.’

February 12, 1945; Wiarton, Ontario

The old lady sat in the common room of the retirement home up on the hill, with great views out the front window of a grey and icy Colpoy Bay. Only one or two other souls were there that morning, dozing off in their easy chairs with a half-read book or their knitting. The postman came in the front door, bearing a half dozen letters and a few small packages. He knew all of the home’s residents by name and would hand-deliver mail directly if he saw the recipient in the front room. But today he held back, swallowing hard as the telegraph envelope shook unsteadily in his hand.

“Elvira...telegram for you.” He smiled thinly.

“Eh, mail? Not much of that these days.” She stuck out a frail hand expectantly.

“I’ve delivered more of these than I like over the last little while. It’s got to end soon.” His voice trailed off.

She opened the envelope and took out a crisp piece of buff-coloured vellum. The impact of the first line was equivalent to a major body blow.

‘We deeply regret to inform you....’

The old lady slumped in her chair, tears rimming her glasses. How would she be able to tell this horrific news to her daughter?

VE Day, May 7, 1945; Toronto, Ontario

The news had come in fast on the ticker tapes, and people in the Carboloy plant were simply jumping for joy. There would be no need for war work anymore, they could now go back to their lives and start families and dream big dreams.

She shut down her diamond drill press and slipped on her Spring coat. She had received a plaintive letter from her Mother about two months back, grimly telling her that her dear brother had lost his life somewhere over in Holland. Her eyes burned and her heart felt heavy every time she thought of poor Bert. Such a sweet soul, and one who had not wanted to go war one whit.

She walked down Front Street and turned up Bay Street. People were hanging out of windows, throwing confetti, dancing with strangers on the street. She plodded along, dodging merry-makers and clouds of confetti. Yes, it was great news that the war was over and no one else would lose their life in this bloody conflict. But the simple fact was her brother would not be coming home on a troop train, and that realization and its attendant grief were sinking in more and more as the revelry substantially increased.

September 11, 1945; Waalwijk, The Netherlands

"I know they were your friends, but you have been moping non-stop since late April." Adri tut-tutted towards Leo while she wiped glasses at the bar.

"But they were both like brothers. I feel as if I have a brother lying in the ground at Groesbeek and another at Holten. They gave their lives so Holland could be free again!" Leo slapped the bar with emphasis.

"But you have to move on. Those two men wouldn't want you to stay glum for the rest of your life, They were fun, charming even. Honour their sacrifice by being more like them." Adri said this sharply, and convincingly.

"But their families back in Canada do not know how much we loved them while they were here. And how much we think of them every day. I want them to know this, but how?"

An idea started to brew in Adri's mind. She wrote to the Canadian War Commission and got the names of the parents and their hometowns for both of the Canadian servicemen. And she penned a letter to the Lord Mayor of each town, explaining the situation and how they knew the young men and if they might be able to pass a letter and a Dutch address to the surviving next-of-kin.

One day in Late November, a letter arrived in the town hall of Wiarthon.

"Mail for the Lord Mayor, ha, would that be you?" The secretary cackled as she took in the morning mail.

Fifteen minutes later, the mayor came out of his office, his eyes rimmed red.

"I'm walking up the hill to the ladies' retirement home. I have some very special mail to deliver."

Across many years, Wiarton, ON; Groesbeek Cemetery, The Netherlands

So the Mayor's trek up the hill to the retirement home led to a pen-pal relationship between the bereaved mother and the Dutch family who had befriended Bert during his short time in and around Waalwijk. Knowing that someone local cared about him during those cold Winter months leading up to his death, made the grieving process a little bit easier to face.

A number of visits were arranged over the decades, with Leo and his wife coming to Canada to meet Bert's family and to see where he grew up on the little farm on the Escarpment above Dyers Bay. And a number of his family went over to Holland, to be warmly hosted and to make that trek to the cemetery near Groesbeek with its shocking array of well-maintained Canadian soldier gravestones.

The sister who had walked up Bay Street on VE-day, tears streaming down her face, always held a promise in her heart that she would get to the Netherlands one day. But time took its inevitable toll, and it became evident that trip would never be taken. Her body got creakier, in lock step with other faculties, and one cold day in January 2014 she slipped away while sleeping in her nursing home bed.

She might have been dreaming, but this was something more significant. She felt young again, and lithely stepped along the streets of an earlier-day Toronto. She was dressed in her best outfit, and excitedly walked through the doors of Union Station. Standing in the middle of the concourse was her beloved brother, decked out in his dress uniform and with his trademark mop of curls barely controlled by the confines of his beret.

"Bert, you've come home!!" She gushed this out and threw her arms around him.

"No, little Sis, you've come home. I never made it back to take you out dancing, very sorry about that. But no matter, there's lots of dancing going on up here!"

July, 2014; The Netherlands

He had thought a lot about his lost uncle over the years, the family member who had fallen in Holland during World War II. He had become acutely aware of the impact of the loss on his Mom over her life, and how this sorrow had blended with other losses and challenges to impact his entire original family.

He had always wanted to go to the Netherlands with his Mom to visit his Uncle's grave and meet the family who had been Bert's friends. So with her recent passing, he knew he had to make this sentimental journey on her behalf. He had always hated the idea of war, as it had robbed him of his vibrant uncle, and it had taken away a beloved brother from his Mom. And a visit to a war cemetery would be a hard pill to swallow. But go he would.

Dates and times were set, and Bert's Dutch family were welcoming and engaging and wonderful. Leo was gone, but his son still dutifully and thoughtfully tended the grave at Groesbeek. And Leo's granddaughter was being groomed to be the next generation of caretakers for the simple stone midway

down the rows of the manicured war cemetery. And as the nephew rested on bended knee and looked at the Maple Leaf carved into the soft grey stone, he reflected on duty and sacrifice and what good men and women did to stop evil in its tracks. He cried deeply for a time, but then he rose feeling much, much lighter. The weight of two generations of grief and sorrow had lifted, and an enduring image of a great and free country had taken its place.