

Grandpa's Memories of the Second World War

Story by Philip Nash

Transcription by Colin Hume (age 14 1/2)

Training and Recruiting

I didn't do square-bashing or anything like that, I was a wireless operator. I used Morse code, so I got sheets and had to memorize the alphabet and short forms like "end message" or "repeat". I also learned how to service faulty radio equipment. I went to the Dominion Provincial Youth Training School in Moose Jaw, which was set up toward the end of the Depression to give young people training so they could take jobs, however, the rule was that you had to go into the armed forces after you finished training. I began training in October 1940, after my 20th birthday. I started late, so I had to catch up. At the end of training, I had to be able to send and receive Morse code at 30 words per minute. The course ended in mid-March 1941, and the next day I took a train with 16 or 18 other people to the recruiting depot at Regina.

We were sworn in, received our official numbers, railway tickets, and meal tickets. Then we traveled to Toronto as if we were paying passengers, enjoying good meals in the dining cars and with berths to sleep in. We were transported to the air force manning depot in the former exhibition buildings. We attended a clothing parade where we were handed our uniforms, and underwent medical inspections, which took a few days.

Typhoid Fever

At the medical inspections we were inoculated, and one shot was a combination of tetanus and typhoid fever. The parades contained hundreds of people in a long snake with their shirtsleeves rolled up, hands on hips, elbows stuck out, shuffling along. The doctors (dart players!) wore white coats and had needles. The toughest looking airmen fainted and were dragged out of the line. They were laid on the ground, given their shots, and left there to recover. My typhoid shot went straight into a vein, and I found out that was the case because the needle should have left a red mark but didn't, so I got sick with typhoid fever. I was kept in bed for a few days, drank a huge amount of water, swallowed some pills, finally got better, ate, packed up, and by the strangest luck passed my final medical exam. I boarded a train back to Moose Jaw that night with my uniform. We had to pay for our own tickets, and some didn't have enough money to go home. Then the RCAF moved everyone onto another train with old rush seats, on which we had to pay for our own food as well.

When I arrived home, I suffered a relapse and was sick for 4 days, and returned to the train without having had a very good time. Fortunately for all of the people on the train, my parents and the parents of many other soldiers packed huge boxes of food which everyone shared. We arrived in Toronto, stayed there for a day or two, and then boarded a troop train bound for Halifax. In the dining cars of this train, we pushed all of the tables together into huge tables for dinner. It was our last meal in Canada, and we were allowed anything on the train – chicken, roast beef, you name it, we could eat it.

Goodbye Canada!

We arrived in Halifax at night, and were lined up in a pay parade, where we were paid in English money. The reason for this was that the canteen on the British boat we were boarding would take only English money. The boat was the HMAMC¹ *Circasia*, a passenger liner left over from the First World War to which had been added a reinforced deck and four 6-inch guns. We were packed into the baggage hold. We had hammocks to sleep in, which were sandwiched together very tightly. When one moved, an entire row moved with it. Also, they flipped over when we tried to get into them and dumped us onto the floor. Fortunately, they were good to sleep in because when the ship rocked, it went around them while they stayed in one place. The next morning, we went to the mess deck and ate at 12-person tables stocked with bread, sausages and gravy. Each person ate a meager meal of 1 slice of dried bread, 2 dried sausages, and a spoonful of gravy, but I later found out that it was worse in Iceland, where we were headed. Everyone had various duties to attend to at meal times, too.

Hidden Escorts

After we left Halifax harbor, our convoy formed. About 40 ships made up this convoy. We could sail at only 4 miles per hour because the few old steamers were incapable of moving any faster, and they couldn't be left behind. They weren't supposed to trail smoke, but most did, and their smoke could be seen for miles behind -- a perfect beacon for the U-boat wolfpacks in the Atlantic. A Canadian submarine accompanied us on a training mission, destroyers sailed right along with us, and fighters flew over us for protection from enemy subs. Some days later, someone in the convoy sighted smoke in the distance. We attempted to contact the vessel but received no reply. When the destroyers challenged it, they

¹ His Majesty's Armed Merchant Cruiser

found that it was an old tramp freighter without wireless equipment or operator. We encountered 3 Norwegian merchant ships heading to North America on their own. They didn't know about the sub that was coming with us on its training mission until they saw it. Depth charges flew everywhere and the sub was forced to crash-dive.

The convoy took a route through the Denmark Strait because of reports of U-boats in its vicinity. One night (the sun shines all day where we were), I woke up to a loud crash. The lights went out and there was no sound of motors. I wriggled out of my hammock to investigate but got caught on a nail, and by the time I freed myself the lights came back on. The next day, I found that they were having bearing trouble in the engines. The crashing I had heard was the destroyers trying to hit a U-boat. We joined up with 2 other convoys. It was a beautiful sight to see, a wonderful spectacle. Destroyers and corvettes came from Britain as escorts. There were ships in all directions for miles and miles.

Iceland and Insanity

When we entered the harbor in Reykjavik we went ashore in a fish packing boat and were sent off to a transit camp built on a hillside where the bunks made the bunks on the Circasia look royal. We were barracked in some Quonset huts with no beds to sleep in. Fortunately, sleeping bags were provided, but even so, my backbone got rubbed raw on that hard ground. The food was horrible. It was delivered to us on plates that were very greasy. Huge stacks of bread were piled high on the tables to keep them out of the water on the floor that was let in by the mess hall doors being on the top side of the building. We received greasy knives, forks, and spoons with fold-up handles. When we were finished our meals we had to wash our own meal apparatus in troughs outside, which were filled with cold,

grey water. Everyone refused to wash their plates in the stuff, dumped out the water, and scoured their plates and utensils in the sand by the shore.

We were in the camp for 10 days and I heard many stories about the camp commander who was “insane”, probably from war weariness and all the young energy getting on his nerves. This might have been one of the occurrences that contributed to him becoming insane: Two jokers got drunk at the canteen at about 11 o’clock one night, climbed the roof of one hut, poured water down the chimney, and made their escape. The inhabitants of that hut thought that another hut had done the deed and poured water down the other hut’s chimney. Pretty soon there was a water battle going on in the middle of the huts. The two jokers had dry beds to go to, which was not the least bit fair. I found out who they were after we arrived in England.

The “Perfect Storm”

For the final leg of the journey we piled into a little mailboat without enough hammocks to go around. I made a little nest for myself at the top of a pile of kit bags. A gigantic storm hit us on the way to the UK and it was very unpleasant! Every single person on the boat was sick from the rolling and pitching. One poor fellow awoke in an awful panic: he’d been lying on his back, totally exhausted from days of seasickness, and didn’t even wake when he vomited in that position. Of course, what goes up must also come down, so that when he finally came round his face and glasses were covered in dried vomit and he thought he was blind!

Fortunately, we didn’t capsize, and we made it to Britain. As we entered major population areas we saw the huge barrage balloons that the British had set up to block German bombers, and one wit commented, “That’s one way to keep the island from sinking!”

We landed at Gourock, a town near Glasgow in Scotland. From there we boarded a large passenger train and started our journey to London. We had to stop during the night due to an air raid on Newcastle, but we made it to London safely.

Here at Long Last!

Along with some of the other recruits, I was sent to Cranwell RAF College, a huge camp formed during the First World War. When I arrived there, I found my job description had been changed from “wireless operator” to “wireless electrical mechanic and radar mechanic”. It had something to do with what I was to do with the forces, as I found out.

RADAR stands for “radio, direction, and range”. That is what it does: it uses radio waves to find the direction from which something is coming and how far away it is. We were tested to see if we were suitable for the coming task. We were, but we all needed more training, so we were split up into groups of 25 and packed off to various technical colleges to get the required training. I was sent to Leeds with my group, stayed there for 4 or 5 months, and was sent back to Cranwell. They had lots of radar equipment already: big coastal stations for detecting bombers and small equipment for use in night fighters. The radar development areas were ultra-secret and I had to have a pass to gain admittance to the training areas. I was there for a few months and then was sent off to a Sunderland flying boat squadron on the west coast of Scotland. The RAF didn’t have enough people from Britain for its operations so a lot of the Canadian people were trained on radar.

Meet the “Flying Porcupine”

The Sunderland flying boat was the biggest airplane flying in its time. The Germans called it the “flying porcupine” because of its reputation for outgunning

anything that attacked it. During one conflict in Norway, 8 bombers attacked a lone Sunderland. The Sunderland shot down one bomber in flames, forced another to land immediately, and beat off the rest. The first time I went up in one of these planes, I was with a group checking the instruments when the flying crew entered, started the 4 huge engines, and took the plane into the air. It was my first experience of flying.

When I arrived at the base, the squadron had recently returned from the Mediterranean. During my first winter in Scotland, the weather was fearsome. The roads were covered with snow and the base staff were sent out to clear them. A short time after I arrived, a huge gale struck. One Sunderland moored in the harbor sank at its moorings and had to be retrieved because the equipment inside was in danger, and another was washed ashore. Everything turned out all right, though, because the planes were salvaged with the equipment in working order.

Air Force Antics

Our group of trainees were sent to Northern Ireland for a short time and then moved to the west coast of Scotland. At these places, we got lots of practice on servicing the Sunderlands. A rookie crew went over the Atlantic on a training mission. Perhaps the flight engineer fell asleep, but in any event the fuel tanks in one wing depleted more rapidly than the tanks in the other wing and the plane went down. The wireless operator informed the base, and was told to get the crew into rubber lifeboats and wait for help to arrive. Fortunately, the pilot managed to take off again and made it back to base. The plane came in with one of the floats partly detached and after the plane touched down in the harbor the gunner and wireless operator climbed out onto the side with the float intact to keep that wing down; if they hadn't, the wing on the side with the torn float would have hit the water and the plane would have sunk. It was an interesting distraction from our otherwise

dull routine. The pilot was later promoted for saving the plane and its crew but reprimanded for disobeying orders.

One time later, a civilian worker decided to take some aviation fuel out of a Sunderland for cleaning his work clothes. He was planning to take “about a bucketful”. When he opened the hatch and filled the bucket, the hatch jammed, and all of the fuel in the plane spilled out. The firemen on base had to clean up the mess, and the civilian spent a short time in a military prison.

Finale

Phil Nash was transferred to 423 Squadron, the first Canadian Sunderland squadron, and where he was promoted first to corporal, then to sergeant and finally to flight sergeant in charge of ground maintenance for both 422 and 423 Squadrons. Before the war ended he also met and married my grandmother. He was mentioned in despatches to the king for outstanding service. Eventually the war ended and he was able to return to Canada and his family to face a new set of challenges.

Coastal Command people were “unsung heroes” during the war. Their planes kept the U-boats from sinking more merchant ships than they actually did. At one point, Britain had supplies for one month left, and at the end of that time, they could have been starved out of the war. The airmen of Coastal Command forced the U-boats to stay submerged during overflights, making them harmless during that time. It saved many convoys, and possibly even Britain.

It was great fun doing a project on my grandfather’s stories of the war years because he has so many tales to tell that could not be heard anywhere else. Fortunately, he has survived this long so I may pass on some of his stories. I hope to be able to listen to record further memoirs as time allows. He is one of the brave people who fought for what our world is today.



From the Collection of Phil Nash

Members of 422 and 423 Radar Section
(Philip Nash is in the front row, 2nd from right)